

West Africa

2.1. Introduction

From the Mano River wars to the successive Tuareg rebellions, West Africa²⁶ has been host to multiple conflicts over the past decades.²⁷ Prone to socio-political instability and post-electoral tensions, weak government structures have been regularly challenged by attempted and successful coups d'état,²⁸ with the latest example taking place in Mali in August 2020.²⁹ Economic hardship, unemployment and social inequalities, poor or deficient governance in peripheral regions, and subsequent grievances against central states, among other factors, have allowed for the seeds of further violence to be sown. More recently, particularly since the eruption of the Malian crisis in early 2012, the sub-region has attracted increased global attention due to the emergence of a myriad of non-state armed groups, including various al-Qaeda and Islamic State-affiliated terrorist organisations. From its first emergence in the early 2000s, terrorist violence has both intensified and continued to spread across West Africa, currently stretching from the Sahel to the Lake Chad Basin, while increasingly threatening to expand throughout coastal States of the Gulf of Guinea.³⁰

More specifically, the Sahel has been faced with the presence of two main terrorist networks. While all main al-Qaida-affiliated organisations, including al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), al-Mourabitoun, Ansar Dine, and the Katiba Macina, have regrouped in March 2017 under the umbrella of the *Jama'a Nusrat ul-Islam wa al-Muslimin* (JNIM) led by the former Tuareg rebel Iyad Ag Ghali, the region has also witnessed the emergence of an IS' affiliate created in 2015 under the name of the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS). Since then, the Sahel has recorded the most dramatic increase in terrorist violence on the continent, with attacks having multiplied sevenfold between mid-2017 and mid-2020.³¹ Once confined in Northern Mali, the terrorist threat has moreover spread to the central regions of the country, as well as neighbouring Niger and Burkina Faso, the latter having suffered from the largest increase (by 590 percent) in terrorist casualties globally between 2018 and 2019.³²

Further eastward, countries of the Lake Chad region have for their part been confronted with the rise

26 While West Africa refers to ECOWAS member states (Benin, Burkina Faso, Cabo Verde, Côte d'Ivoire, The Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea Bissau, Liberia, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Togo) and Mauritania, this report will place particular emphasis on the two areas which have been the most affected by terrorism in recent years, namely the Western Sahel (including Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger) and the Lake Chad Basin (Nigeria, Niger as well as Cameroon and Chad).

27 For more information on past conflicts in West Africa, see: Nancy Annan, "Violent Conflicts and Civil Strife in West Africa: Causes, Challenges and Prospects," *Stability: International Journal of Security and Development*, 3(1): 3, 2014, pp. 1-16. <https://www.stabilityjournal.org/articles/10.5334/sta.da/#>; Ilmari Käihkö, "Constructing war in West Africa (and beyond)," *Comparative Strategy*, 37: 5, 2018, pp.485-501. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/01495933.2018.1526587?needAccess=true>; Olivier Walther, "Wars and conflicts in the Sahara-Sahel", *West African Papers N°10*, OECD Publishing, September 2017. <https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/docserver/8bbc5813-en.pdf?expires=1604923535&id=id&accname=guest&checksum=D7B23D72087E86C3F2009A628E79AD80>.

28 For more detailed data on attempted and successful coups d'état in the region since the early days of the independence, see: Jonathan Powell and Clayton Thyne. 2011. Global Instances of Coups from 1950-Present. *Journal of Peace Research* 48(2):249-259. <https://www.jonathanmpowell.com/coup-detat-dataset.html#>.

29 Notable examples of past coups taking place in the region led to the fall of Burkinabe regime of Blaise Compaoré in 2015 and the Malian regime of Amadou Toumani Touré in Mali in 2012. For more information on the 2020 Mali's coup and its potential implications for the country and the broader region, see: Robert, A-C. "Au Mali, coup d'Etat dans un pays sans Etat," *Le Monde Diplomatique*, October 2020, pp.4-5. <https://www.monde-diplomatique.fr/2020/10/ROBERT/623gadd16>; Danielle Paquette, "Mali coup opens power vacuum as Islamist insurgency expands in West Africa," *The Washington Post*, August 19, 2020. https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/africa/mutinuous-soldiers-who-ousted-malis-president-say-new-election-is-coming-soon/2020/08/19/05eb7c10-e213-11ea-ade1-28daf1a5e919_story.html; Bisa Williams and John Goodman, "Mali's Coup Could Destabilize the Sahel: Why a Fraying Peace Deal Is the Country's Best Hope," *Foreign Affairs*, August 27, 2020. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/africa/2020-08-27/malis-coup-could-destabilize-sahel>.

30 International Crisis Group. *The Risk of Jihadist Contagion in West Africa*, Africa Briefing N°149, December 20, 2019. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/west-africa/c%C3%B4te-divoire/b149-lafrique-de-louest-face-au-risque-de-contagion-jihadiste>.

31 Africa Center for Strategic Studies. "African Militant Islamist Groups Set Record for Violent Activity," *Infographic*, July 21, 2020. <https://africacenter.org/spotlight/african-militant-islamist-groups-new-record-violent-activity/>.

32 Institute for Economics & Peace. *Global Terrorism Index 2020: Measuring the Impact of Terrorism*, Sydney, November 2020, p.4. <https://visionofhumanity.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/GTI-2020-web-1.pdf>.

of the Nigeria-based *Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati wal-Jihad*, known as Boko Haram.³³ Rebranding itself the Islamic State's West Africa Province (ISWAP) following Abubakar Shekau's pledge of allegiance to IS central, the group split into two factions in August 2016—with Abu Musab al-Barnawi becoming the new ISWAP leader, and Shekau founding its own splinter faction.³⁴ Ranked as the second most lethal terrorist group globally in 2019, casualties and incidents attributed to Boko Haram have both increased by more than 40 percent as compared to 2018.³⁵ While still conducting most of its attacks in Nigeria, Boko Haram also operates in neighbouring countries such as Cameroon, Niger, and to a lesser extent Chad, which have all recorded an increase in deaths caused by the groups' activities in 2019.³⁶

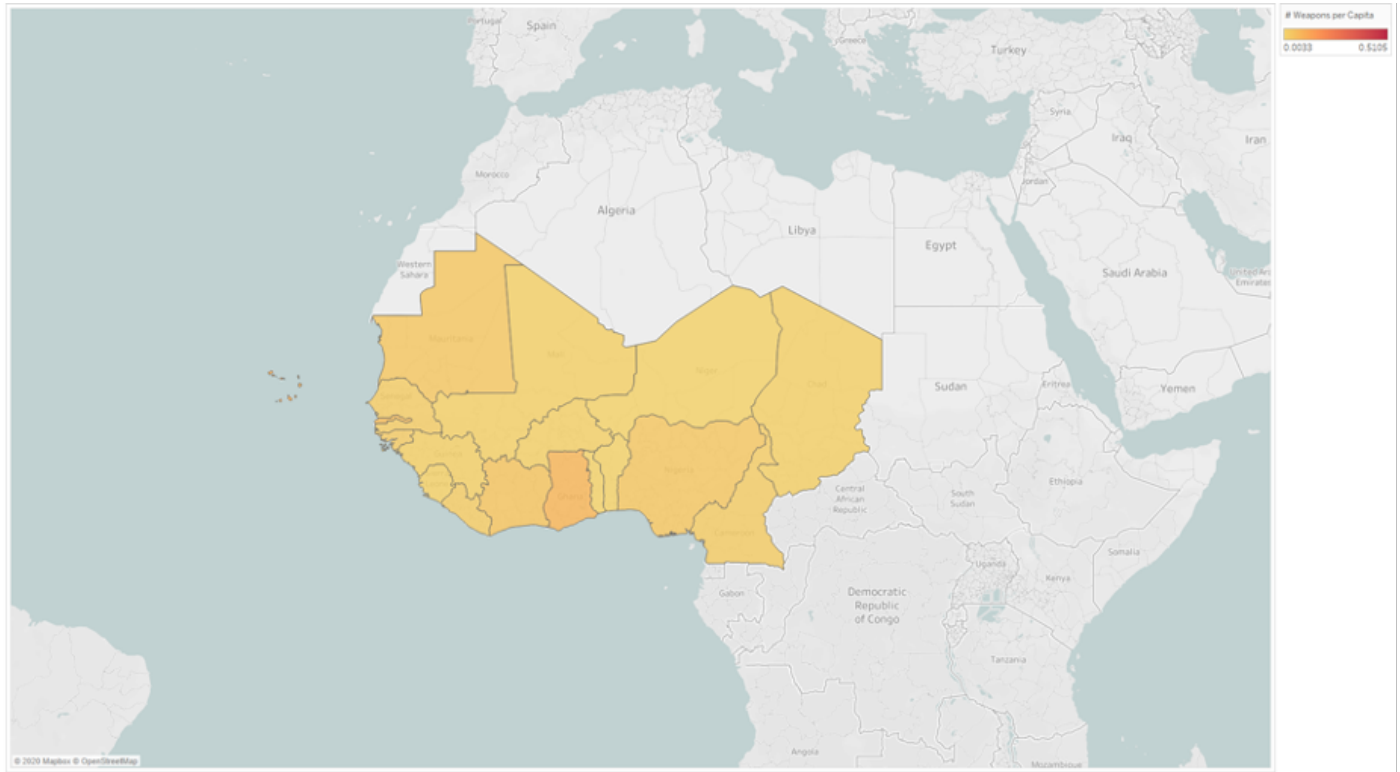


Figure 1. Number of SALW per capita in West Africa.³⁷

The security landscape has thus significantly transformed over recent years but, “while the causes of conflicts in the continent and the factors driving them have changed, the use of small arms and light weapons (SALW) has remained a common feature of these conflicts.”³⁸ West Africa seems to occupy a particular place on the continent as the subregion “concentrates the largest number (11 million) of - licit and illicit - civilian-held firearms on the continent,”³⁹ heterogeneously dispersed, with Nigeria and Cote d’Ivoire accounting for approximately 6 million and 1 million respectively of these civilian-held arms.⁴⁰ Even more problematic is the fact that many are illicitly acquired,⁴¹ including by individuals,

33 For a more detailed overview of the history, structure and strategies of the organisation, see: Jacob Zenn. (ed.) *Boko Haram Beyond the Headlines: Analyses of Africa's Enduring Insurgency*. Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, May 2018. <https://ctc.usma.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/Boko-Haram-Beyond-the-Headlines.pdf>.

34 Shekau's faction adopted the original denomination of Boko Haram, *Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati wal-Jihad* (JAS), while al-Barnawi's group is still known as ISWAP. The following analysis will however use, for the sake of clarity, the more common appellation “Boko Haram” to refer to both factions.

35 Institute for Economics & Peace. *Global Terrorism Index 2020: Measuring the Impact of Terrorism*, p.14.

36 Ibid., p.16.

37 Small Arms Survey, *Global Firearms Holdings*, June 2018, <http://www.smallarmssurvey.org/weapons-and-markets/tools/global-firearms-holdings.html>

38 Small Arms Survey. *Weapons Compass. Mapping Illicit Small Arms Flows in Africa*. January 2019, p.18. <http://www.smallarmssurvey.org/fileadmin/docs/U-Reports/SAS-AU-Weapons-Compass.pdf>.

39 Ibid., 31.

40 Arnaud Jouve, “Sahel : d'où viennent les armes et les munitions ?” *RFI*, April 9, 2020. <http://www.rfi.fr/fr/afrique/20200409-sahel-do%C3%B9-viennent-les-armes-et-les-munitions>.

41 Ibid.

bandits, self-defence militias, criminal gangs, as well as violent extremist actors.

The emergence of diverse terrorist and other non-state armed groups, and the subsequent deterioration of the security environment have initiated a vicious cycle through which mounting violence boosts the demand for and uncontrolled circulation of SALW, which in turn increases the lethality and damages caused by violent conflicts. The increasing threat to regional peace and stability, has led to the deployment of various interventions, including the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA), the successive French Operations of Serval and Barkhane, the G5 Sahel Joint Forces, and the more recently launched Takuba forces.⁴² It has moreover exacerbated and contributed to a “weaponization” of intra and intercommunal tensions, including longstanding tensions between sedentary farmers and (semi-) nomadic herders, while prompting the development of diverse vigilante groups and self-defence militias.

Based on an extensive review of past research, combined with primary data collected through a series of interviews, this chapter will thus explore (2.2) the characteristics of terrorist organisations’ possession and acquisition of SALW in West Africa, as well as (2.3) the role of these SALW in violent extremist group’s financing strategies. In line with the research focus, and while taking into consideration the broader West African regional context, this chapter will place particular emphasis on the two areas most affected by terrorist presence and activity within the subregion—i.e., the Sahel, which notably includes the tri-border area between Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso, and the Lake Chad Basin.

2.2. SALW possession and acquisition by terrorist organisations

As in other places across the globe, SALW seem to have become “the weapons of choice of many terrorist groups [...] as they are cheap and easy to access, transfer, hide and use.”⁴³ All experts interviewed as part of this research confirmed that the bulk of armament possessed and used by violent extremist groups operating throughout the subregion is composed of SALW. This section will thus explore (2.2.1) the different types of SALW predominantly used by terrorist organisations active in West Africa, as well as (2.2.2) the acquisition modes allowing these groups to build, and continue complementing, their arsenals.

2.2.1. Types of SALW possessed by terrorist organisations

Terrorist groups active in West Africa are mainly equipped with varied types of industrially manufactured SALW,⁴⁴ predominantly with automatic assault rifles. Other types of SALW described in the following sections either represent secondary sources, such as artisanal weapons which may in some cases represent a ‘second choice’, or avenues for further research as in the case of converted firearms for which no evidence points out yet to their use by terrorist groups.

An extensive use of industrial types of SALW

Automatic assault rifles seem to hold a predominant place within West African terrorist groups’ arsenals, with all experts consulted referring specifically to AK-patterns as the most commonly-used equipment—representing up to 95 percent of all automatic assault rifles in circulation in the Sahel.⁴⁵ According to information provided by Conflict Armament Research (CAR), violent extremist groups’ arsenals are further complemented with other military-type weapons, ranging from small to medium-

42 Anna Schmauder, Zoe Gorman and Flore Berger, “Takuba: A New Coalition for the Sahel,” *Clingendael Institute*, (June 30, 2020), <https://spectator.clingendael.org/en/publication/takuba-new-coalition-sahel>.

43 Opening Remarks by Mr. Vladimir Voronkov Under-Secretary-General, UN Office of Counter-Terrorism, at the Launching event of the Project on Addressing the terrorism-arms-crime nexus, held at the UN headquarters on February 21, 2020. <https://www.un.org/counterterrorism/cct/terrorism-arms-crime-nexus>.

44 Arnaud Jouve, “Sahel : d’où viennent les armes et les munitions ?” *RFI*, April 9, 2020, <https://www.rfi.fr/fr/afrique/20200409-sahel-doù-viennent-les-armes-et-les-munitions>.

45 Ibid.

calibre machineguns to rocket-propelled grenade (RPG) launchers, and related ammunition (see Box 1).⁴⁶ In line with general trends observed on the continent, most of these weapons remain “cold war era models and makes,”⁴⁷ notably produced in China, Russia and the former Soviet Union.⁴⁸ CAR notes however that years of production of AK assault rifles seized in the region range from 1951 to as recently as 2017.⁴⁹ While SALW compose the large majority of their equipment, some interviewees however underlined the possession of a limited set of heavy weapons, such as large calibre mortars, “tanks or at least armoured vehicles.”⁵⁰

Box 1 Types and origins of SALW used by terrorist groups (Source: CAR dataset)⁵¹

The weapons used by/seized from West African terrorist and other non-state armed groups correspond to military-type, small and medium calibre infantry weapons, essentially encompassing assault rifles, machineguns, rocket and grenade launchers, and related ammunition. This typology of materiel faithfully mirrors what is used by domestic security and defence forces in the region. Based on CAR’s dataset, the most common types of SALW employed by these groups include:

AK-pattern assault rifles (7.62 x 39 mm): This category represents by far the most common weapon employed by terrorist groups operating in West Africa. CAR’s global dataset contains thousands of AK-pattern rifles from various manufacturing states and ranging from production in 1951 to as recently as 2017. In West Africa, the majority of these weapons are of Chinese manufacture (34 percent), followed closely by Russia and the former Soviet Union (29 percent), and then thirdly from a variety of states, including Bulgaria, Egypt, Hungary, Iran, Iraq, Poland, Romania, and Serbia, to name but a few.

Machine guns: Small to medium-calibre machineguns represent a significantly smaller proportion compared to AK-pattern weapons but are nonetheless frequently seized from terrorist groups. Machineguns used in West Africa are primarily Soviet-origin weapons and their copies made by other countries such as those listed above. These weapons are most commonly chambered in 7.62 x 39 mm, 7.62 x 54R mm, and 12.7 x 108 mm.

Rocket-propelled grenade launchers: As with machine guns, rocket-propelled grenade launchers such as the Soviet-manufactured RPG-7 and its variants made by many of the countries listed above, represent a significantly smaller proportion compared to AK-pattern weapons but are nonetheless frequently seized from terrorist groups.

Sniper/designated marksman rifles, handguns, and submachine guns: These types of weapons are seized relatively infrequently from terrorist groups. The majority of designated marksman rifles that CAR has documented in West Africa have been traced back to exports from Eastern European countries to Libya in the late 1970s.

Regarding heavy weapons, while large calibre autocannons such as the ZU-23-2 have historically been employed by terrorist groups, CAR has not documented any in the West Africa region to date. Similarly, terrorist groups in Mali have increasingly employed large calibre mortars, but these weapons (aside from the mortar rounds themselves), do not figure in CAR’s dataset to date. CAR has however documented several 122 mm rockets which are often employed in an improvised manner by terrorist groups operating in northern Mali.

Overall, no major difference was observed between the types of SALW possessed by various terrorist organisations active across the subregion, neither between terror groups operating in the same geographical area nor between those present in the Sahel and the Lake Chad basin. The only noticeable difference lies in the origins of the armament, with for instance, one interviewee explaining

46 These inputs were drafted by CAR experts based on the organisation’s dataset specifically for the purpose of this research and appear as separate boxes throughout the report.

47 Small Arms Survey. *Weapons Compass. Mapping Illicit Small Arms Flows in Africa*. January 2019, p.16, <http://www.smallarmssurvey.org/fileadmin/docs/U-Reports/SAS-AU-Weapons-Compass.pdf>.

48 Interview, international arms expert based in Europe.

49 Inputs provided by CAR for the purpose of this research.

50 Interview, international arms expert based in Europe.

51 CAR’s West Africa dataset consists of several thousand weapons and items of ammunition documented across the region.

The majority of the data pertaining specifically to materiel seized from terrorist groups has been collected in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger, which therefore serve as the primary basis for the below observations and analysis. CAR’s dataset includes materiel seized from terrorist groups such as Al-Mourabitoune, the *Front de libération du Macina* (FLM), Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), Jama'a Nusrat ul-Islam wa al-Muslimin (JNIM), Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS), and Boko Haram and its offshoot groups. Non-state armed groups such as the *Mouvement national de libération de l'Azawad* (MNLA) or *Groupe autodéfense touareg Imghad et alliés* (GATIA), among others, largely use the same type of materiel as terrorist groups and have therefore also been included in some of the analysis.

that, because “the Lake Chad Basin has a different set of influencers, connections, loyalties and networks [...] more Sudanese-sourced ammunition and small arms” are in circulation in this area as compared to the Sahel region.⁵² Other minor variations in the models of SALW stem from the differences in the equipment used by national security and defence forces from which these groups capture weaponry. Finally, the size of their arsenals naturally depends on the size of the organisation considered, with smaller cells like Ansarul Islam possessing smaller quantities than larger terrorist networks.⁵³ According to CAR’s data, no major discrepancy between arms used by terrorist and other non-state armed groups can be observed (see Box 2).

Box 2 Differences between groups, evolutions, and trends (Source: CAR dataset)

Despite the numerous terrorist and non-state armed groups operating in West Africa, CAR’s dataset does not indicate any discernible difference in the typology of SALW employed between different groups (between non-state and terrorist groups, or between terrorist groups themselves). This is largely because both types of groups depend on acquiring SALW from defence and security forces, meaning the materiel available to them is largely homogenous. While terrorist groups often employ different *modi operandi* than other armed groups, the conventional SALW in their possession is largely the same. Similarly, over the last decade, the typology of weapons and ammunition observed remains largely unchanged in the region as a whole. This is likely the result of how defence and security forces in the region have continued to use the same types of weapons over time.

A limited use of craft-produced SALW: an ‘entry-level’ or ‘second-best’ option?

Illicit arm flows in West Africa are also fuelled by craft-produced SALW,⁵⁴ which encompass “weapons and ammunition produced largely by hand and in relatively small quantities”⁵⁵ often “outside of state control.”⁵⁶ The artisanal production of firearms is indeed a widespread practice in the subregion, where blacksmiths are reportedly able to craft “from rudimentary pistols and 12-gauge hunting rifles to more sophisticated weapons like submachine guns”⁵⁷ and assault rifles.⁵⁸ Burkina Faso, Côte d’Ivoire, Ghana, Guinea, Mali, Nigeria, and Sierra Leone were often mentioned by interviewees among the sources for these types of weapons.⁵⁹

52 Interview, international arms expert based in Europe.

53 Interview, national stakeholder based in Burkina Faso.

54 Small Arms Survey. *Weapons Compass. Mapping Illicit Small Arms Flows in Africa*. January 2019, p.57, <http://www.smallarmssurvey.org/fileadmin/docs/U-Reports/SAS-AU-Weapons-Compass.pdf>.

55 Nicolas Florquin, “Les filières multiples du trafic des armes légères,” *Diplomatie*, n° 92, mai-juin 2018, pp.56-57. <http://www.smallarmssurvey.org/fileadmin/docs/L-External-publications/2018/Diplomatie-no-92-Les-filieres-multiples-du-traffic-des%20armes-legeres.pdf>.

56 Nicolas Florquin. *Linking P/CVE & Illicit Arms Flows in Africa*, RESOLVE Policy Note, Community-Based Armed Groups Series, November 2019, p.3. https://resolvenet.org/system/files/2020-06/RSVE_PolicyNote_Florquin_Nov2019.pdf

57 Small Arms Survey. *Weapons Compass. Mapping Illicit Small Arms Flows in Africa*. January 2019, p.16, <http://www.smallarmssurvey.org/fileadmin/docs/U-Reports/SAS-AU-Weapons-Compass.pdf>.

58 Arnaud Jouve, “Sahel : d’où viennent les armes et les munitions ?” *RFI*, April 9, 2020, <https://www.rfi.fr/fr/afrique/20200409-sahel-doù-viennent-les-armes-et-les-munitions>.

59 Roberto Sollazzo and Matthias Nowak. *Tri-border Transit: Trafficking and Smuggling in the Burkina Faso-Côte d’Ivoire-Mali Region*, Small Arms Survey, Briefing Paper, October 2020, p.13. <http://www.smallarmssurvey.org/fileadmin/docs/T-Briefing-Papers/SAS-SANA-BP-Triborder-Transit.pdf>



Figure 2. Craft-produced SALW confiscated by the Nigerian Army in 2016.⁶⁰

Artisanal SALW fuel a large array of non-state actors, such as road bandits, cattle thieves, criminals, and local community-based self-defence militias which proliferate across the region,⁶¹ including traditional Dozo hunters or Koglweogo groups.⁶² However, and unlike some organisations which have relied heavily on “the production - sometimes quasi-industrial - of an impressive array of small arms and light weapons to strengthen their arsenals,”⁶³ such as the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia or the Irish Republican Army, craft-production does not seem to be a primary source for terrorists operating in West Africa.⁶⁴

Some interviewees nevertheless underlined occasional appearances of such handcrafted weaponry in pictures and video footage of terrorist attacks conducted in the Sahel theatre,⁶⁵ but also in the Lake Chad basin,⁶⁶ which might point to “a mix in terms of armament of these groups.”⁶⁷ This confirms past research highlighting that “craft firearms have also been found in the hands of violent extremist groups such as Boko Haram.”⁶⁸ It appears that “not all Boko Haram members have a weapon, some are only armed with old bolt-action rifles or craft weapons, and ammunition is in short supply.”⁶⁹ Craft-produced firearms may thus represent a ‘second-best’ option for terrorist organisations.

It should nevertheless be reminded that, given the fluidity of the affiliations and the fact that terrorist groups have often resorted to ‘ad hoc’ fighters to carry out large-scale attacks,⁷⁰ artisanal weapons may not be part of the core groups’ arsenal. Because they are relatively easy to procure as compared to more sophisticated weaponry, artisanal SALW may initially help terrorist groups building up their stockpiles, as explained by an interviewee: “because they are in an opportunist mode, they may

60 “Eleven Soldiers killed, one missing” *The Guardian*, August 7, 2016, <https://guardian.ng/news/eleven-soldiers-killed-one-missing/>; Vadana Felbab-Brown and James J.F. Forest, “Political Violence and the Illicit Economies of West Africa,” *Brookings Scholars*, November 15, 2012, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/political-violence-and-the-illicit-economies-of-west-africa/>.

61 Arnaud Jouve, “Sahel : d’où viennent les armes et les munitions ?” *RFI*, April 9, 2020, <https://www.rfi.fr/fr/afrique/20200409-sahel-doù-viennent-les-armes-et-les-munitions>.

62 Roberto Sollazzo and Matthias Nowak. *Tri-border Transit: Trafficking and Smuggling in the Burkina Faso-Côte d’Ivoire-Mali Region*, Small Arms Survey, Briefing Paper, October 2020, p.13. <http://www.smallarmssurvey.org/fileadmin/docs/T-Briefing-Papers/SAS-SANA-BP-Triborder-Transit.pdf>

63 Nicolas Florquin, “Les filières multiples du trafic des armes légères,” *Diplomatie*, n° 92, mai-juin 2018, pp.56-57. <http://www.smallarmssurvey.org/fileadmin/docs/L-External-publications/2018/Diplomatie-no-92-Les-filieres-multiples-du-traffic-des%20armes-legeres.pdf>.

64 Arnaud Jouve, “Sahel : d’où viennent les armes et les munitions ?” *RFI*, April 9, 2020, <https://www.rfi.fr/fr/afrique/20200409-sahel-doù-viennent-les-armes-et-les-munitions>.

65 Interview, local researcher based in Côte d’Ivoire.

66 Interview, international arms expert based in Europe.

67 Interview, local researcher based in Côte d’Ivoire.

68 Nicolas Florquin. *Linking P/CVE & Illicit Arms Flows in Africa*, RESOLVE Policy Note, Community-Based Armed Groups Series, November 2019, p.2. https://resolvenet.org/system/files/2020-06/RSVE_PolicyNote_Florquin_Nov2019.pdf.

69 Savannah de Tessières. *At the crossroads of Sahelian conflicts: insecurity, terrorism, and arms trafficking in Niger*. Small Arms Survey Report, January 2018, p.57. <http://www.smallarmssurvey.org/?highlight=sana-niger.html>.

70 International Centre for Counter-Terrorism. “Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State: Competition or Cooperation in Western Sahel,” *Live Briefing*, March 26, 2020. <https://icct.nl/event/icctlivebriefing-26-march-2020/>.

use one shotgun to get a more powerful weapon and build up their military capacity, but it is not something that they go after and definitely not something that they rely regularly on.”⁷¹ Along the same line, these arms could represent an ‘entry-level’ equipment for individuals who plan to join terrorist groups but do not benefit yet from the right connections, as suggested by another expert:

“My sense is that it is not a necessary source. It might rather be a source for affiliated cells which are not necessarily yet well-connected with the centralised hierarchy. These will most probably, at the beginning, use these types of weapons that are the easiest available. [...] It seems that the access to more sophisticated weapons, including assault rifles, is a bit more complicated and requires some level of connection with criminal or terrorist organisations and their networks, which is not always easy to create. So I wonder if it is like an ‘entry-level’ first step to get a craft-produced weapon because this is what is available, and it allows to attack a gendarme and steal his rifle, and then move on to the next step.”

International arms expert based in Europe

The specific case of improvised explosive devices (IEDs)

A noticeable exception to the limited use of handmade weapons relates to terrorist organisations’ use of Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs). Although at a smaller scale than ISIS, violent extremist groups also seem to have increasingly relied on IEDs throughout West Africa. In Nigeria, Boko Haram is believed to have produced home-made explosives in local workshops in Bauchi State, North-eastern Nigeria⁷²—a region where, according to UNHCR data, “some 230 people were killed by IEDs and more than 300 injured in 2019.”⁷³ In the Sahel, the use of such devices is “a rising trend,”⁷⁴ with several interviewees describing it as the main evolution in terms of terrorist groups’ equipment in recent years.

“It has increased as one of the modes of action of the groups labelled as terrorists in Mali, particularly in the centre, and increasingly also in Burkina Faso, in the Eastern and Sahel regions.”

Local researcher based in Côte d’Ivoire

Burkina Faso has, for instance, suffered from around 90 IED incidents since early 2016, with a significant increase recorded over the past two years.⁷⁵ In Niger, while they had previously mainly been deployed by Boko Haram in the Eastern Diffa region, research has showed that IED usage has extended to the western regions of Tillabéri and Tahoua where ISGS is currently active (see Figure 3).⁷⁶ Interviewees based in Mali and Burkina Faso also underlined the increased use, in addition to victim-operated devices, of more sophisticated remote-controlled IEDs, “which means that there is a more frequent use of these IEDs in the city, and no longer only on the main supply axes.”⁷⁷ It should finally be noted that the use of IEDs has also taken the form of suicide vehicle-borne explosive devices (SVBIEDs).⁷⁸

71 Interview, international arms expert based in Europe.

72 Small Arms Survey. “Weapons Compass. Mapping Illicit Small Arms Flows in Africa,” January 2019, p.57; See also: Inter-Governmental Action Group against Money Laundering in West Africa (GABIA). *The Nexus between Small Arms and Light Weapons and Money Laundering and Terrorist Financing in West Africa*. Report, 2013.

73 UNHCR. “Landmines, improvised explosive devices pose deadly risks for displaced in Sahel and Lake Chad,” July 28, 2020. <https://www.unhcr.org/news/briefing/2020/7/5f1fccbe4/landmines-improvised-explosive-devices-pose-deadly-risks-displaced-sahel.html>.

74 Ibid.

75 UNMAS, “Burkina Faso,” January 13, 2020. <https://www.unmas.org/en/programmes/burkina-faso>.

76 ACLED, “Explosive Developments: The Growing Threat of IEDs in Western Niger,” 2019. <https://acleddata.com/2019/06/19/explosive-developments-the-growing-threat-of-ieds-in-western-niger/>.

77 Interview, international stakeholder based in Mali.

78 ACLED, “Explosive Developments: The Growing Threat of IEDs in Western Niger,” June 19, 2019. <https://acleddata.com/2019/06/19/explosive-developments-the-growing-threat-of-ieds-in-western-niger/>.

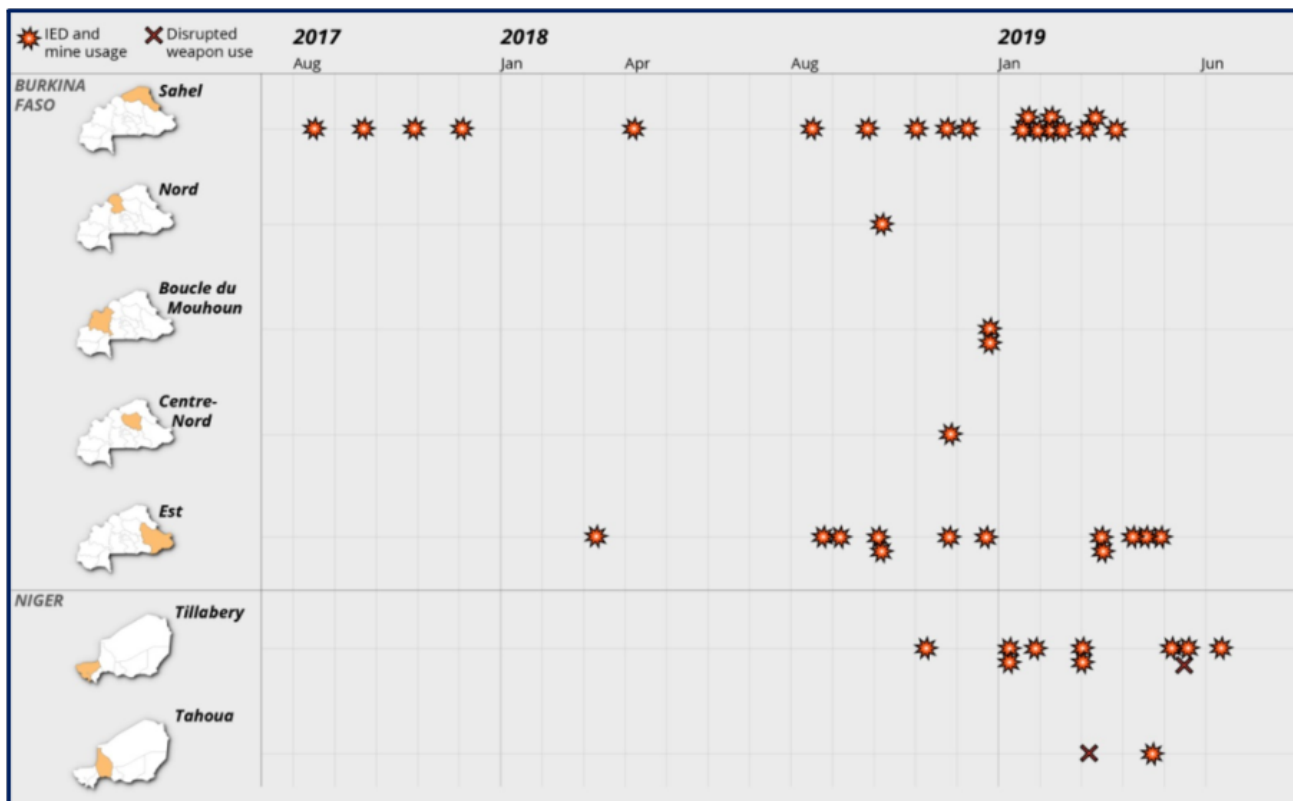


Figure 3. This graph demonstrates the increasing usage of IEDs in Burkina Faso and Western Niger between August 2017 and June 2019.⁷⁹

Converted SALW: a rising threat?

A significant increase in the use of converted firearms, which refer to “alarm weapons - i.e., designed to fire only blank cartridges - or neutralised weapons that have been illegally modified to allow them to fire live ammunition”⁸⁰, has been witnessed worldwide in recent years, mainly as a result of their use in high-profile attacks in Europe. However, the proliferation of converted weaponry is increasingly noticeable in other parts of the world, including in West Africa.⁸¹ As Turkish-made blank-firing weapons “started flooding the civilian Libyan market after the revolution, [...] this type of materiel has also been smuggled further afield from Libya to illicit markets in Egypt, Niger, and Tunisia.”⁸² An arms expert indeed confirmed that “non-negligible volumes” of blank pistols are currently in circulation throughout West Africa, specifying that “the proportion of those that are actually converted is very limited.”⁸³ It appeared, for instance, that “informal gold diggers in northern Niger resorted to [...] converted imitation handguns smuggled from Libya.”⁸⁴ The extent to which terrorist organisations, more particularly, rely on such materiel however remains unknown, but seems rather unlikely for a number of reasons both linked to the wide availability of ‘real’ weapons across their operational areas, and to these groups’ modes of action:

“Converted weapons are not assault rifles, but rather single-shot or, at times, repeating handguns. They are more useful for targeted assassination or intimidation, rather than for a military operation per se. [...] Generally speaking, when there is easy access to real weaponry,

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Nicolas Florquin, “Les filières multiples du trafic des armes légères,” *Diplomatie*, n° 92, mai-juin 2018, p 57. <http://www.smallarmssurvey.org/fileadmin/docs/L-External-publications/2018/Diplomatie-no-92-Les-filieres-multiples-du-traffic-des%20armes-legeres.pdf>.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Savannah de Tessières. *At the crossroads of Sahelian conflicts: insecurity, terrorism, and arms trafficking in Niger*. Small Arms Survey Report, January 2018, p.46. <http://www.smallarmssurvey.org/?highlight=sana-niger.html>.

⁸³ Interview, international arms expert based in Europe.

⁸⁴ Nicolas Florquin. *Linking P/CVE & Illicit Arms Flows in Africa*, RESOLVE Policy Note, Community-Based Armed Groups Series, November 2019, p.3. https://resolvenet.org/system/files/2020-06/RSVE_PolicyNote_Florquin_Nov2019.pdf

this type of thing normally remains rather secondary.”

International arms expert based in Europe

2.2.2. The acquisition of SALW by terrorist organisations

As underlined by an interviewed international arms expert, and confirmed by CAR data (see Box 3), it clearly appears that “most of the weapons that terrorist groups use are either legacy of older conflicts that happened in the region, or the effect of diversion of much more recent and ongoing conflicts.”⁸⁵ Alongside rather marginal supply sources, such as the procurement of non-military equipment on local illicit markets, the large majority of the equipment used by violent extremist organisations operating in West Africa, both in the Sahel and the Lake Chad Basin, have indeed been diverted from state stockpiles through different processes.⁸⁶

Box 3 Origin of SALW and methods of diversion (Source: CAR dataset)

Based on CAR’s West Africa dataset, weapons and ammunition used by terrorist and non-state armed groups can be categorised in to four major groups:

Materiel originating from immediately available State-owned inventories, through diversion from national security and defence forces: Diversion from armed forces and security entities’ stockpiles correspond to different mechanisms including battlefield capture by the enemy (raids and ambushes), other forms of unintentional losses, or intentional diversion from military personnel. The procurement of such materiel by armed groups is achieved at short-range and conducted in an opportunistic manner. Approximately 15 percent of the weapons and 40 percent of the ammunition in CAR’s dataset related to armed extremist groups in the Lake Chad region, which for instance, can be connected to national stockpiles from countries sharing the Lake’s shores (Nigeria, Niger, Chad). In CAR’s dataset approximately 20 percent of the weapons used to conduct terrorist attacks or seized in counter-terrorist operations in Burkina Faso were generated from the national inventories of Burkina Faso and Mali.

Materiel resulting from the legacy of previous regional conflicts: The vast majority, not to say the totality of military type materiel, also originates from the initially State-owned inventories of countries that experienced armed conflicts such as Côte d’Ivoire, Liberia, or Libya. The geographical dissemination of these stocks over time does not, however, necessarily suggest that the weapons were recently diverted, nor the existence of direct flows from the national stockpiles to the extremist armed groups currently operating in West Africa. The procurement of such equipment by armed groups is achieved at a longer-range (when compared to the previous mechanism) and appears to concern smaller volumes of weapons and ammunition. 15 percent of the weapons used to conduct terrorist attacks or seized in counter-terrorist operations in Burkina Faso in CAR’s dataset, for instance, originated from the national stockpiles of Côte d’Ivoire, Liberia, or Libya.

Commercially available materiel: This category mainly includes non-military equipment (handguns and shotguns), explosives and related items. The procurement of such materiel by armed groups is achieved at short-range and relies on the presence of immediately available illicit markets, supplied through various diversion mechanisms (from long-range illicit smuggling, as observed in 2017 between Turkey and Nigeria, to illicit local trade or individual thefts/losses). However, these items represent a limited proportion of the materiel used by (or seized from) armed groups operating in West Africa, as armed groups mostly operate with military-type weapons and ammunition.

Materiel that cannot be traced (because of obliterated marks, age or lack of cooperation from the manufacturing/exporting countries): When looking at West African armed/terrorist groups, this equipment essentially includes military-type infantry weapons (as discussed above) and related ammunition (most of the time documented without packaging). Although it is nearly impossible to determine from where this materiel was diverted, they almost certainly also originate from State-owned inventories (whether from the immediate region or more distant states). Weapons with obliterated serial numbers only represent a small proportion of those CAR has documented in relation to terrorist groups—less than 3 percent of the Burkina Faso database, for instance.

85 Interview, international arms expert based in Europe.

86 For a more detailed typology of diversion, see: Conflict Armament Research. “Typology of Diversion: A statistical analysis of weapon diversion documented by Conflict Armament Research,” *Diversion Digest, Issue 1*, August 2018. <https://www.conflictarm.com/digests/diversion-digest-issue-1/>.

From wars to wars: legacy of previous conflicts

One particularity of arms lies in their longevity and their subsequent ability to remain in circulation for a long period of time, with “illicit flows of SALW therefore organis[ing] the movement of weapons from one conflict system to another over time.”⁸⁷ While such dynamics have been observed in various regions, notably in Afghanistan, Iraq or Somalia,⁸⁸ they seem to have also played a key role in the illicit proliferation of arms across West Africa. Though most of the SALW “were introduced to Africa in the 1970s and 1980s, in the midst of the Cold War, by the major powers in order to support their allies – or proxies – on the continent [...], at the end of the Cold War several factors, including the collapse of many of those states, the outbreak of civil wars and widespread corruption, contributed to the rise of illegal weapons trafficking.”⁸⁹ Such a context has facilitated arm transfers, and provided terrorist groups with a first type of supply sources.⁹⁰

“There are all the weapons that are already there as a result of the various rebellions and civil wars. In Côte d’Ivoire, there has been a proliferation of small arms as a result of the decade of military-political crisis from 2002 to 2010. Some of these weapons have been recovered, but some are still circulating.”

Local researcher based in Côte d’Ivoire

Over the past two decades, illicit SALW circulating throughout West Africa have indeed been fuelled by equipment diverted in the aftermaths of diverse conflicts, including weapons left over from previous rebellions in Mali and Niger, as well as civil wars in Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Côte d’Ivoire.⁹¹ The Ivorian case provides a particularly telling example of the impact that a localised conflict can have on the proliferation of arms across a broader region. Although subject to UN arms embargo at the time,⁹² significant flows of SALW originating from neighbouring Burkina Faso found their way into the arsenals of northern Ivorian rebel movements during the conflict.⁹³ In the aftermath, significant quantities of arms had been accumulated, and important illegal transfers were organised by zone commanders of Ivorian northern regions to Mali and Niger.⁹⁴ In spite of the implementation of a DDR programme following the crisis, a large number has continued to circulate throughout the subregion,⁹⁵ and were eventually “found in the stocks of Malian and Burkinabe armed groups.”⁹⁶

87 Mattias Nowak, “Enjeux du trafic d’armes : l’Afrique de l’Ouest dans la tourmente”. *Les Grands Dossiers de Diplomatie*, n° 52, août-septembre 2019, p.52. www.smallarmssurvey.org/fileadmin/docs/L-External-publications/2019/Grands-Dossiers-Diplomatie-no-52-Enjeux-du-traffic-armes.pdf.

88 Nicolas Florquin, “Les filières multiples du trafic des armes légères,” *Diplomatie*, n° 92, mai-juin 2018, p.57. <http://www.smallarmssurvey.org/fileadmin/docs/L-External-publications/2018/Diplomatie-no-92-Les-filieres-multiples-du-traffic-des%20armes-legeres.pdf>.

89 Djallil Lounnas. *The Links Between Jihadi Organizations and Illegal Trafficking in the Sahel. Middle East and North Africa Regional Architecture (MENARA) Working Papers*, No. 25, November 2018, p.5. https://www.iai.it/sites/default/files/menara_wp_25.pdf. See also: UNODC. *Transnational Organized Crime in West Africa: A Threat Assessment*, February 2013. https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/tocta/West_Africa_TOCTA_2013_EN.pdf.

90 Mattias Nowak, “Enjeux du trafic d’armes : l’Afrique de l’Ouest dans la tourmente”. *Les Grands Dossiers de Diplomatie*, n° 52, août-septembre 2019, p.52. www.smallarmssurvey.org/fileadmin/docs/L-External-publications/2019/Grands-Dossiers-Diplomatie-no-52-Enjeux-du-traffic-armes.pdf.

91 William Assanvo, Baba Danoko, Lordi-Anne Thérooux-Bénoni, and Ibrahim Maïga. *Violent extremism, organised crime and local conflicts in Liptako-Gourma*. Institute for Security Studies (ISS), West Africa Report 26, December 2019, p.10. <https://issafrica.s3.amazonaws.com/site/uploads/war-26-eng.pdf>.

92 For more details, see: “UN arms embargo on Cote d’Ivoire,” *SIPRI databases*. https://www.sipri.org/databases/embargoes/un_arms_embargoes/cote/cote_default.

93 Arnaud Jouve, “Sahel : d’où viennent les armes et les munitions ?” *RFI*, April 9, 2020, <http://www.rfi.fr/fr/afrique/20200409-sahel-do%C3%B9-viennent-les-armes-et-les-munitions>. See also: Savannah de Tessières. *Enquête nationale sur les armes légères et de petit calibre en Côte d’Ivoire : Les défis du contrôle des armes et de la lutte contre la violence armée avant la crise post-électorale*, Rapport Spécial, Small Arms Survey, 2012. <http://www.smallarmssurvey.org/fileadmin/docs/C-Special-reports/SAS-SR14-CoteIvoire.pdf>.

94 Arnaud Jouve, “Sahel : d’où viennent les armes et les munitions ?” *RFI*, April 9, 2020, <http://www.rfi.fr/fr/afrique/20200409-sahel-do%C3%B9-viennent-les-armes-et-les-munitions>.

95 Conflict Armament Research. *Investigating Cross-Border Weapon Transfers in the Sahel*. November 2016, p.7. <https://www.conflictarm.com/reports/investigating-cross-border-weapon-transfers-in-the-sahel/>

96 Mattias Nowak, “Enjeux du trafic d’armes : l’Afrique de l’Ouest dans la tourmente”. *Les Grands Dossiers de Diplomatie*, n° 52, août-septembre 2019, p.52. www.smallarmssurvey.org/fileadmin/docs/L-External-publications/2019/Grands-Dossiers-Diplomatie-no-52-Enjeux-du-traffic-armes.pdf.

Diversions from national stockpiles: the collapse of state control over arsenals

While SALW possessed by different belligerents may thus remain in circulation following the end of hostilities, in other cases, crises have directly “caused the collapse of state institutions and led to the widespread looting of large parts of national stockpiles.”⁹⁷ Terrorist groups have notably benefited from the proliferation of weapons originating from post-Gaddafi’s Libya. Following the fall of the Libyan regime in 2011, the country became an “open-air arsenal, [and] the hub for arms trafficking in the region.”⁹⁸ Arms looted from national stockpiles “spilled into neighbouring countries at an alarming rate following the revolution, fuelling conflict across the region and bolstering the operational capacity of criminals all the way from Mali to southern Sudan – and beyond,”⁹⁹ possibly reaching as much as twelve countries (see Figure 4).¹⁰⁰ Many were brought in Northern Mali by Tuareg fighters, who had joined the ranks of Gaddafi’s Islamic Legion, and subsequently used to conduct the 2012 rebellion led by the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA), temporarily allied with terrorist elements of AQIM, Ansar Dine and the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO). The presence of arms “originally sold to the Qaddafi regime by Poland in the 1970s”¹⁰¹ among weapons caches discovered in Tessalit, Kidal, and Gao, is one example of cases that confirmed the occurrence of such outflows from Libya to the Sahel. According to interviewees, “it is clear that the breakdown of the Libyan regime has fuelled a number of actors in the region, including terrorist organisations.”¹⁰²

Libya is not the only recent illustration of such dynamics. Significant amount of equipment was also diverted from Malian state stocks following the breakout of the Tuareg insurrection in early 2012.¹⁰³ In the face of the rebel offensive, led by Tuareg separatists backed for a time by terrorist organisations, Malian armed forces withdrew from military bases located in the country’s Northern regions, leaving behind their arsenals available for looting. This partly explains why the vast majority—up to 80 percent or more, according to some estimates¹⁰⁴—of Mali-based terrorist groups’ equipment originate from the country’s national stockpiles.

“The sources of weaponry shift depending on geopolitical events, such as the breakdown of the Libyan regime and the outflow of weapons, and then the civil war in Libya with actually some flows being reversed and weapons flowing back into the country.”

Expert on arms trafficking based in Europe

As rightly pointed out by an interviewed expert, arm flows however transform according to changing security developments, constantly adapting to the law of supply and demand, as illustrated by arm flows from Libya having been “redirected, more recently, to their countries of origin.”¹⁰⁵ As a result of both law enforcement efforts and “renewed fighting in Libya from 2014 onwards, which created

52-Enjeux-du-traffic-armes.pdf.

97 Nicolas Florquin, “Les filières multiples du trafic des armes légères,” *Diplomatie*, n° 92, mai-juin 2018, p.56. <http://www.smallarmssurvey.org/fileadmin/docs/L-External-publications/2018/Diplomatie-no-92-Les-filieres-multiples-du-traffic-des%20armes-legeres.pdf>.

98 Ibid., p.55.

99 Mark Micalef, Raouf Farrah, Alexander Bish, and Victor Tanner. *After the Storm: Organized crime across the Sahel Sahara following upheaval in Libya and Mali*. Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, 2019, p.vii. <https://globalinitiative.net/after-the-storm/>.

100 Nicolas Florquin, “Les filières multiples du trafic des armes légères,” *Diplomatie*, n° 92, mai-juin 2018, p.55. <http://www.smallarmssurvey.org/fileadmin/docs/L-External-publications/2018/Diplomatie-no-92-Les-filieres-multiples-du-traffic-des%20armes-legeres.pdf>.

101 Djallil Lounnas. *The Links Between Jihadi Organizations and Illegal Trafficking in the Sahel. Middle East and North Africa Regional Architecture (MENARA) Working Papers*, No. 25, November 2018, p.6. https://www.iai.it/sites/default/files/menara_wp_25.pdf.

102 Interview, expert on arms trafficking based in Europe.

103 Nicolas Florquin, “Les filières multiples du trafic des armes légères,” *Diplomatie*, n° 92, mai-juin 2018, p.56. <http://www.smallarmssurvey.org/fileadmin/docs/L-External-publications/2018/Diplomatie-no-92-Les-filieres-multiples-du-traffic-des%20armes-legeres.pdf>.

104 Interview, international expert based in Mali.

105 Mattias Nowak, “Enjeux du trafic d’armes : l’Afrique de l’Ouest dans la tourmente”. *Les Grands Dossiers de Diplomatie*, n° 52, août-septembre 2019, p.53. www.smallarmssurvey.org/fileadmin/docs/L-External-publications/2019/Grands-Dossiers-Diplomatie-no-52-Enjeux-du-traffic-armes.pdf.

internal demand for arms and ammunition,” flows have progressively decreased, and to some extent even reversed.¹⁰⁶ In this new context, terrorist groups have proved resilient and able to adapt their procurement strategies. As “the proliferation from Libyan arms stockpiles has contracted,”¹⁰⁷ terrorist groups are indeed believed to “have diversified their supply chains,”¹⁰⁸ increasingly relying on battlefield capture.

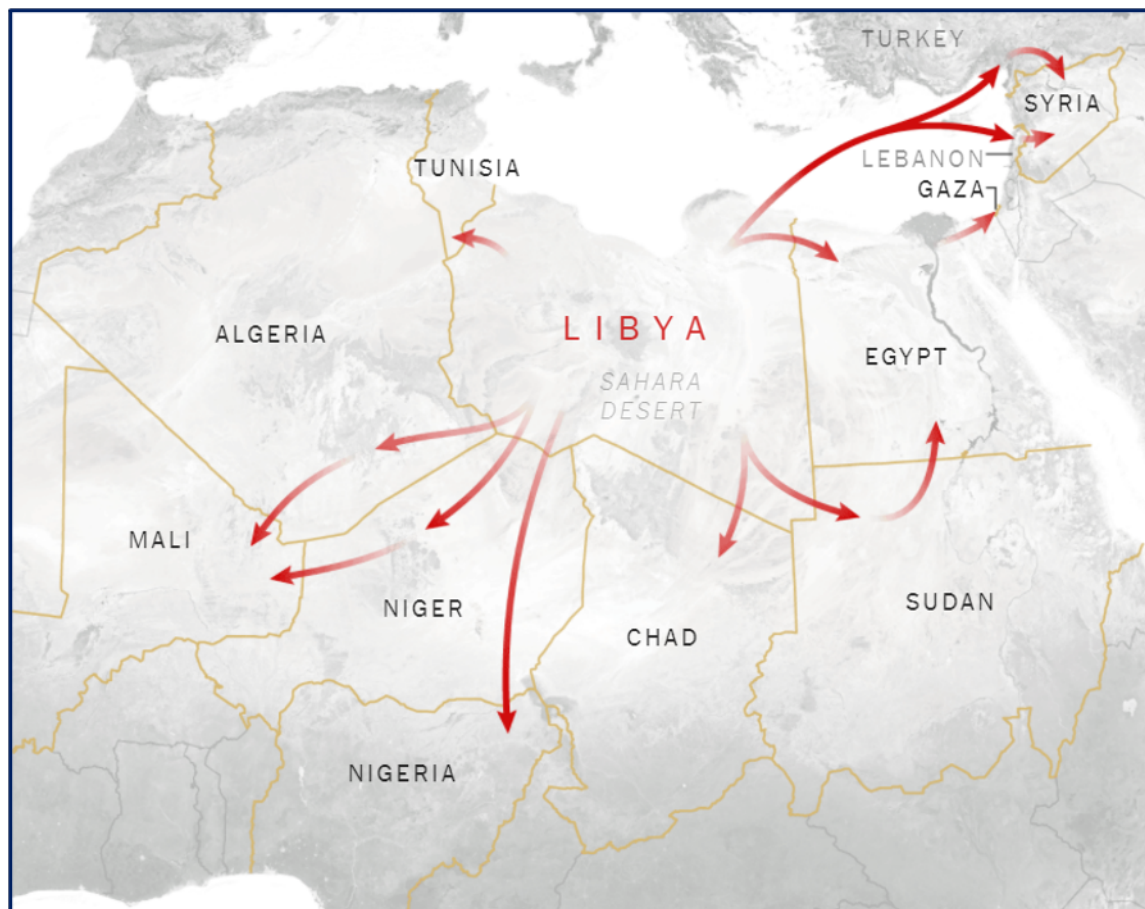


Figure 4. Arms flows out of Libya following the fall of the Gaddafi regime in 2011.¹⁰⁹

Diversion from national stockpiles: battlefield capture

Terrorist groups’ arsenals have over time been further complemented by large amounts of materiel looted during attacks on security and defence positions.¹¹⁰ In addition to SALW seized in early 2012, Sahel-based extremist groups have continued to obtain arms and ammunition in attacks on Malian military bases and convoys—sometimes “within less than a year of distribution within the defence and security forces.”¹¹¹ Far from being confined to Mali, similar incidents have been reported in Burkina Faso¹¹² and Niger. Seizures from regular armed forces also represent an important source of weaponry for Boko Haram and its offshoot groups. Under Shekau’s leadership, starting in 2009, the group

¹⁰⁶ Mark Micaleff, Raouf Farrah, Alexander Bish, and Victor Tanner. *After the Storm: Organized crime across the Sahel Sahara following upheaval in Libya and Mali*. Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, 2019, p.vii. <https://globalinitiative.net/after-the-storm/>.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Jaimie Dettmer, “Jihadists, Insurgents Plundering State Arsenals Across Sahel.” VoA, November 20, 2016. <https://www.voanews.com/africa/jihadists-insurgents-plundering-state-arsenals-across-sahel>.

¹⁰⁹ Scott Shane and Jo Becker, “A New Libya, With ‘Very Little Time Left’” *The New York Times*, February 27, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/28/us/politics/libya-isis-hillary-clinton.html>

¹¹⁰ Hassane Koné, “Comment les groupes terroristes qui opèrent dans le Sahel s’arment-ils ?” *ISS Today*, February 12, 2020. <https://issafrica.org/fr/iss-today/comment-les-groupes-terroristes-qui-operent-dans-le-sahel-sarment-ils>.

¹¹¹ Interview, International expert based in Mali.

¹¹² Hermann Boko, “Au Burkina Faso, les jihadistes attaquent l’armée pour se ravitailler en armes et munitions.” *France 24*, August 20, 2019. <https://www.france24.com/fr/20190820-burkina-faso-groupes-jihadistes-armes-munitions-G5-sahel-militaires>.

“began to pillage arms from Nigerian military barracks and other police stations that they raided.”¹¹³ In recent years, arms have reportedly been obtained from Nigerian, Nigerien, Cameroonian, and Chadian state forces during clashes and attacks.¹¹⁴ While capturing materiel through targeted raids on military patrols or convoys, they have also carried out larger attacks allowing them to overpower entire bases, and to seize important caches, as in Jilli in July 2018.¹¹⁵ Such methods are believed to have provided the group with “millions of rounds of ammunition, thousands of assault rifles and assorted firearms, and hundreds of military vehicles, including armoured tanks and self-propelled artillery.”¹¹⁶

SALW can also be diverted from international troops deployed within peacekeeping operations, with such methods having notably been employed by Charles Taylor during Liberia’s civil war.¹¹⁷ Several interviewees affirmed that, despite some attacks carried out against the MINUSMA, no significant amount of material has been looted from its stockpiles. While terrorist groups have been able to “attack, and occasionally get inside the camps, they do not usually capture material,”¹¹⁸ as these assaults remain ‘hit-and-run’ types of attacks.¹¹⁹

While many consider battlefield captures as being “mainly based on opportunism,”¹²⁰ some interviewees indicated that some deliberate attacks have been carried out against armed forces with the specific aim to capture equipment, notably in Southern Niger and in Mali. Capturing material is thus considered by some as ‘a key motivation.’¹²¹ According to an interviewee, terrorist groups’ reliance on battlefield captures has moreover been a progressive process:

“Initially, terrorist started by attacking light patrols, including motorbike teams. After gathering some weapons, they tried to attack smaller army positions such as police stations or brigades. So they tried step-by-step to gather as much weaponry as possible and now are attacking large army positions.”

National stakeholder based in Burkina Faso

In addition to the immediate security concerns that arise from terrorist organisations’ increased firepower, these diversions pose serious challenges. Such seizures have been used as part of terrorist groups’ propaganda, with various videos and pictures showing off terrorist groups’ spoils of war (see Figure 5). Boko Haram has, for instance, started as early as 2013 to release videos of “specific Boko Haram attacks and seized weaponry, or *ghanima* (“spoils”) from barracks to demonstrate the group’s victories over government forces.”¹²²

113 Omar Mahmoud, “Local, Global, or in Between? Boko Haram’s Messaging, Strategy, Membership, and Support Networks,” in Jacob Zenn, (ed.) *Boko Haram Beyond the Headlines: Analyses of Africa’s Enduring Insurgency*. Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, May 2018, pp.99-100. <https://ctc.usma.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/Boko-Haram-Beyond-the-Headlines.pdf>.

114 The attack conducted in Bouma on 23 March 2020 provides a recent example of such attacks. See: “Le Tchad endeuillé par la mort de 98 soldats dans une attaque de Boko Haram,” *RFI*, March 25, 2020. <http://www.rfi.fr/fr/afrique/20200325-le-tchad-endeuill%C3%A9-la-mort-98-soldats-une-attaque-boko-haram>.

115 James Reinl, “How stolen weapons keep groups like Boko Haram in Business.” *GlobalPost*, PRI, April 19, 2019, <https://www.pri.org/stories/2019-04-19/how-stolen-weapons-keep-groups-boko-haram-business>.

116 John Campbell, “Boko Haram Arms Stockpiling Indicates Long-Term Threat.” *Council on Foreign Relations*, September 21, 2020. <https://www.cfr.org/blog/boko-haram-arms-stockpiling-indicates-long-term-threat>.

117 James Reinl, “How stolen weapons keep groups like Boko Haram in Business.” *GlobalPost*, PRI, April 19, 2019, <https://www.pri.org/stories/2019-04-19/how-stolen-weapons-keep-groups-boko-haram-business>.

118 Interview, international arms expert based in Europe.

119 Interview, international stakeholder based in Mali.

120 Written inputs, international stakeholder based in Mali.

121 Interview, international arms expert based in Europe.

122 Omar Mahmoud, “Local, Global, or in Between? Boko Haram’s Messaging, Strategy, Membership, and Support Networks,” in Jacob Zenn, (ed.) *Boko Haram Beyond the Headlines: Analyses of Africa’s Enduring Insurgency*. Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, May 2018, p.103. <https://ctc.usma.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/Boko-Haram-Beyond-the-Headlines.pdf>.



Figure 5. SALW and other equipment that had been looted by various terrorist groups operating in West Africa.¹²³

As pointed out by an interviewee, terrorist groups' capacities to loot great quantities of weaponry from national armies also "questions the security of transferring new weapons to the security and defence forces, as they could very rapidly fall in the wrong hands – which would have political implications back in exporting countries."¹²⁴ The very fact that terrorist groups possess similar equipment as those used by regular armed forces also has important implications. An arms expert underlined the impact on these groups' access to ammunition supplies: "if terrorist organisations have the same weapons as the security and defence forces, with the same calibres—meaning also using the same ammunition—, it is very easy to get their hands on the ammunition that is already lying around in the country or to attack again the security and defence forces and use their ammunition."¹²⁵ It moreover poses significant risks at the operational level, as "people having the uniform, appearance and same weapons as state national security and defence forces, and then conducting operations like this can cause confusion. Either they attack civilian places and it is misinterpreted as an attack from the security and defence forces, or it enables them to move around without being detected."¹²⁶

By contrast, this may also raise issues in terms of liability and collection of evidence in cases of human rights abuses, in a region where security and defence forces have repeatedly been accused of exactions and serious human rights violations against civilian populations.¹²⁷ In this context, it is also worth highlighting the potential risks associated with some governments' decisions to create vigilante groups, providing arms and equipment to civilians, to counter the spread of terrorist organisations.

123 Chris Tomson, "Al-Qaeda insurgents capture loads of weapons from Nigerian Army," *AMN News*, August 7, 2017, <https://www.almasdarnews.com/article/pictures-al-qaeda-insurgents-capture-loads-weapons-nigerian-army/>; Anifowoshe Jamiu, *Unifomoshe Blog*, November 12, 2016, <https://hanifowoshe.blogspot.com/2016/11/militant-group-displays-weapons-and.html>.

124 Interview, international arms expert based in Europe.

125 Interview, international arms expert based in Europe.

126 Interview, international arms expert based in Europe.

127 See: Amnesty International. *Stars on their shoulders. Blood on their hands. War crimes committed by the Nigerian military*, 2015. <https://www.amnestyusa.org/files/report.compressed.pdf>; Amnesty International. *Human rights under fire: Attacks and violations in Cameroon's struggle with Boko Haram*, 2015, <https://www.amnesty.org/download/Documents/AFR1719912015ENGLISH.pdf>; Amnesty International. *They executed some and brought the rest with them: human rights violations by security forces in the Sahel*, 2020. <https://www.amnesty.org/download/Documents/AFR3723182020ENGLISH.pdf>.

While many observers rightly warn against the risk that these initiatives “inflamm tensions further and could drive more communities into the hands of the jihadists,”¹²⁸ it may also provide extremist groups with further opportunities to divert SALW.

Rampant corruption and SALW intentional diversion

Alongside battlefield captures and losses of equipment, there also appears to be intentional diversion of arms and weapons initially detained legally entering the illicit sphere “through the actions of corrupt elements who engage in the illegal trade for personal profit.”¹²⁹ While security and defence personnel represent primary targets for terrorist groups eager to acquire more equipment, security officials “can also be part of the problem.”¹³⁰

National armed forces of some Sahelian countries, including within Malian and Nigerien security forces, have reportedly “lost or sold their arms to armed groups, criminals and jihadists.”¹³¹ Several examples illustrate such behaviours, such as the arrest of six Malian soldiers in 2016 in relation to a case of arms theft from an armoury.¹³² These practices are not limited to the Sahel. Important “voluntary or involuntary diversion from governmental arsenals” have also taken place in countries of the Lake Chad Basin, where “underpaid soldiers from morale-sapped units have been known to make cash trading guns on the side”¹³³—a practice that seems to have benefitted Boko Haram.¹³⁴

“There are credible indications that some governments in the subregion continue old-established practices of arming allied militias and of turning a blind eye to corruption.”

International stakeholder based in Mali

Although considered by most interviewees as a marginal supply source, such practices ought to be carefully considered in the event of any effort made at curbing a terrorist groups’ access to weaponry. They first underscore the fact that “morale is a key factor,”¹³⁵ and as a consequence, “paying soldiers more and boosting morale could go a long way to stopping light hands in weapons depots.”¹³⁶ However, some observers also underline the context of rampant corruption that allows for these practices to take place,¹³⁷ and point out to the broader responsibility of national governments in combatting such abuses. While acknowledging that “preventing unexpected battle losses is almost impossible,” many argue that more effort should be done “to ensure that arms and ammunition are not diverted or lost through other means, such as abandonment, illicit transfers, corruption and poor management of recovered material.”¹³⁸

128 Will Brown. “The Sahel squeeze,” *The Africa Report*, June 4, 2020. <https://www.theafricareport.com/25128/the-sahel-squeeze/>; International Crisis Group. *Burkina Faso: Stopping the Spiral of Violence*, Africa Report N°287, February 24, 2020. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/sahel/burkina-faso/287-burkina-faso-sortir-de-la-spirale-des-violences>.

129 Nicolas Florquin. *Linking P/CVE & Illicit Arms Flows in Africa*, RESOLVE Policy Note, Community-Based Armed Groups Series, November 2019, p.2. https://resolvenet.org/system/files/2020-06/RSVE_PolicyNote_Florquin_Nov2019.pdf.

130 Ibid.

131 Arnaud Jouve, “Sahel : d’où viennent les armes et les munitions ?” *RFI*, April 9, 2020, <http://www.rfi.fr/fr/afrique/20200409-sahel-do%C3%B9-viennent-les-armes-et-les-munitions>.

132 “Plusieurs militaires accusés de vol d’armes au Mali,” *RFI*, April 28, 2016. <https://www.rfi.fr/fr/afrique/20160428-mali-armee-reguliere-vol-stock-defense-militaire>.

133 James Reinl, “How stolen weapons keep groups like Boko Haram in Business.” *GlobalPost*, PRI, April 19, 2019.

134 “Nigerian Military: Some Officers Selling Arms to Boko Haram,” *VoA News*, September 04, 2016. <https://www.voanews.com/africa/nigerian-military-some-officers-selling-arms-boko-haram>.

135 James Reinl, “How stolen weapons keep groups like Boko Haram in Business.” *GlobalPost*, PRI, April 19, 2019.; AFP. “Nigerian soldiers lash out in video after bloody Boko Haram attack,” *France 24*, November 24, 2018. <https://www.france24.com/en/20181124-nigerian-soldiers-lash-out-video-after-bloody-boko-haram-attack>.

136 James Reinl, “How stolen weapons keep groups like Boko Haram in Business.” *GlobalPost*, PRI, April 19, 2019.

137 John Sunday Ojo, Kazee, Oyedele Lamidi, Ayotunde David Odewale, Bolanle Shiyanbade, & Godwin Ihemeje. “Enemy within the State: The Pathology of Boko Haram Insurgency, Military Corruption, and Fallacy of Arms Procurement in Nigeria,” *International Journal of Public Administration*, 43(12), 2020, pp.1068-1082.

138 Paul Williams cited in: James Reinl, “How stolen weapons keep groups like Boko Haram in Business.” *GlobalPost*, PRI, April 19, 2019.

2.3 The use of SALW as a source of finance

Terrorist organisations need funds to conduct their operations and expand their activities, which notably includes attracting and recruiting members, procuring subsistence and operational means, as well as building and maintaining their legitimacy.¹³⁹ While SALW are primarily used to carry out attacks across borders,¹⁴⁰ they may also represent strategic assets, which allow violent extremist groups to generate income. After exploring the nature of the crime-terror nexus in respect to SALW in West Africa (2.3.1), this section will thus examine the role that SALW play within terrorist organisations' financial strategies, either (2.3.2) indirectly facilitating the conduction of various activities aimed at generating income, or (2.3.3) more directly providing these groups with proceeds from their involvement in SALW trafficking.

2.3.1. SALW and the prevalence of the crime-terror nexus

All aforementioned dynamics contribute to the “pool of materiel being smuggled across national borders,” which have been recognised as the main current issue faced by African states.¹⁴¹ While transcontinental arm transfers seem to have significantly decreased, as compared to the period of the civil wars in Liberia and Sierra Leone,¹⁴² smuggling across land borders still flourishes across the subregion. While providing an overview of the main characteristics of SALW trafficking in West Africa, this section will explore the nature of the relationships between criminal and terrorist actors in respect to this specific activity.

SALW trafficking in West Africa: between large-scale trafficking and ‘ant trade’

While “few, if any, areas in West Africa are considered safe from the threat of arms trafficking [...], some areas are more vulnerable than others.”¹⁴³ For instance, Nigeria’s “long history of armed conflict, combined with the country’s notoriously porous borders, has made it a regional hub for arms trafficking.”¹⁴⁴ Moreover, the scale and the types of actors involved seem to vary significantly across the sub-region. Previous research conducted by the Small Arms Survey has shown that, to the North of the Niger river, across the Sahel-Sahara regions, arms are usually subject to larger-scale trafficking.¹⁴⁵ Along centuries-old Trans-Saharan trade routes, trafficking is managed by “highly-organised groups operating across the Sahara, or on a West-East axis, and characterised by what is called ‘poly-traffics’ because they combine arms with other products, such as drugs.”¹⁴⁶

“There are trans-Saharan/Sahelian networks which are complex, very organised, sophisticated, and have the infrastructure capacity to make the difficult journey through the old-established Saharan routes. They are groups of smugglers, or merchants, who have the capacity, connections, knowledge to transport anything along these routes, including armament, and have developed these networks to serve certain groups.”

139 Kangdim Dingji Maza, Umut Koldaş, and Sait Aksit, “Challenges of Combating Terrorist Financing in the Lake Chad Region: A Case of Boko Haram,” *SAGE Open*, April-June 10(2), p.3. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/2158244020934494>.

140 Bate Felix, “Blood-soaked truck symbolizes Boko Haram’s war without borders,” *Reuters*, February 18, 2015. <https://ca.reuters.com/article/nigeria-violence-cameroon/blood-soaked-truck-symbolises-boko-harams-war-without-borders-idINKBN0LM0KD20150218>.

141 Einas Mohammed, Emilia Dungal, and Nicolas Florquin, “Navigational Tools: What We Learned from Mapping Illicit Small Arms Flows in Africa,” *Medium*, June 26, 2019. <https://medium.com/@SmallArmsSurvey/navigational-tools-what-we-learned-from-mapping-illicit-small-arms-flows-in-africa-efc160a9ff8e>

142 Arnaud Jouve, “Sahel : d’où viennent les armes et les munitions ?” *RFI*, April 9, 2020, <http://www.rfi.fr/fr/afrique/20200409-sahel-do%C3%B9-viennent-les-armes-et-les-munitions>.

143 OECD. *Illicit Financial Flows: The Economy of Illicit Trade in West Africa*, OECD Publishing, Paris, 2018, p.83. https://www.giaba.org/media/f/1048_IFF-THE%20ECONOMY%20OF%20ILLCIT%20TRADE%20IN%20WEST%20AFRICA.pdf.

144 Ibid.

145 Fiona Mangan and Nowak, M. *The West Africa-Sahel Connection: Mapping Cross-border Arms Trafficking*, Small Arms Survey, Briefing Paper December 2019, p.3. <http://www.smallarmssurvey.org/fileadmin/docs/T-Briefing-Papers/SAS-BP-West-Africa-Sahel-Connection.pdf>.

146 Arnaud Jouve, “Sahel : d’où viennent les armes et les munitions ?” *RFI*, April 9, 2020, <http://www.rfi.fr/fr/afrique/20200409-sahel-do%C3%B9-viennent-les-armes-et-les-munitions>.

International arms expert based in Europe

Illicit arms flows occurring to the South of the Niger river seem to take on different features, with SALW being rather “the subject of a less-known ‘ant traffic.’”¹⁴⁷ This smaller-scale trafficking, which reportedly represents “one of the main modes of transport, from one country to another, of weapons diverted from national stockpiles,”¹⁴⁸ is particularly visible in border areas. Bordering regions between Cote d’Ivoire, Mali, and Burkina Faso, for example, constitute “a key geographical area for the transport of goods” and one of the centres of such types of arms trafficking throughout the region (see Figure 6).¹⁴⁹ This area occupies a strategic position as a conduit between the Gulf of Guinea coastal countries and the remote Northern Sahel-Sahara regions, with Cote d’Ivoire, more particularly, representing “an entry point for goods destined for its landlocked northern neighbours, Mali and Burkina Faso.”¹⁵⁰

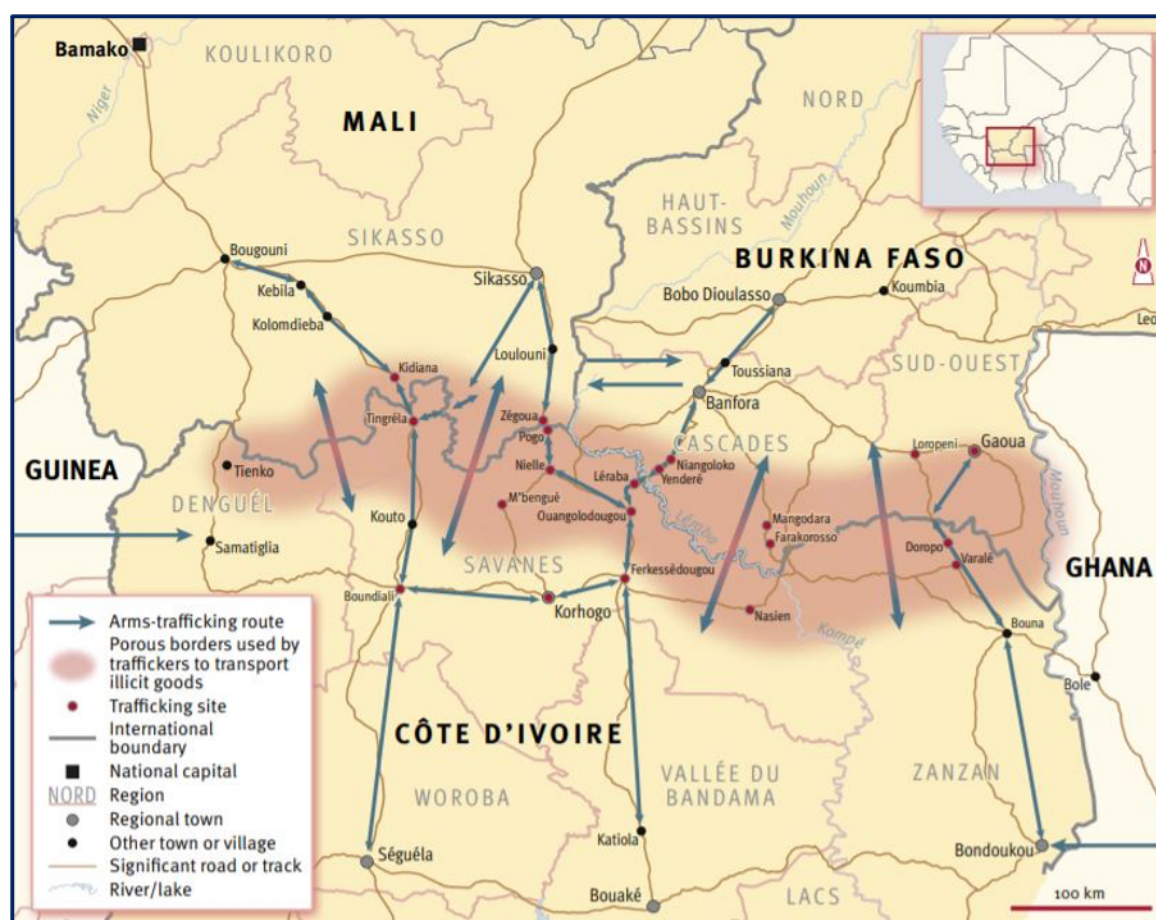


Figure 6. Illicit arms-trafficking routes in the Burkina Faso, Côte d’Ivoire, and Mali border areas¹⁵¹

In contrast with highly organised trafficking networks active in the Sahel-Sahara region, illicit smuggling activities in this region are rather structured around “bosses” (*patrons*)—individuals often part of trading elites and based in regional capitals—, and “transporters”—using their knowledge of local routes and interpersonal links with bordering communities “to move unhindered.”¹⁵² Although

147 Mattias Nowak, “Enjeux du trafic d’armes : l’Afrique de l’Ouest dans la tourmente”. *Les Grands Dossiers de Diplomatie*, n° 52, août-septembre 2019, p.52. www.smallarmssurvey.org/fileadmin/docs/L-External-publications/2019/Grands-Dossiers-Diplomatie-no-52-Enjeux-du-traffic-armes.pdf.

148 Ibid., p.55.

149 Arnaud Jouve, “Sahel : d’où viennent les armes et les munitions ?” *RFI*, April 9, 2020, <http://www.rfi.fr/fr/afrique/20200409-sahel-do%C3%B9-viennent-les-armes-et-les-munitions>.

150 Mattias Nowak, “Enjeux du trafic d’armes : l’Afrique de l’Ouest dans la tourmente”. *Les Grands Dossiers de Diplomatie*, n° 52, août-septembre 2019, p.53. www.smallarmssurvey.org/fileadmin/docs/L-External-publications/2019/Grands-Dossiers-Diplomatie-no-52-Enjeux-du-traffic-armes.pdf.

151 Fiona Mangan and Matthias Nowak, *The West Africa-Sahel Connection: Mapping Cross-border Arms Trafficking*, Small Arms Survey, Briefing Paper, December 2019, p.8. <http://www.smallarmssurvey.org/fileadmin/docs/T-Briefing-Papers/SAS-BP-West-Africa-Sahel-Connection.pdf>.

152 Mattias Nowak, “Enjeux du trafic d’armes : l’Afrique de l’Ouest dans la tourmente”. *Les Grands Dossiers de Diplomatie*, n° 52,

these networks smuggle various commodities, with different goods being transported together, there seems to be a division of labour “not at the level of the transporters but at the level of their bosses, who change according to the types of goods.”¹⁵³ While these types of flows may appear as minor, compared to large-scale operations occurring in the north, it should not be underestimated as “in the course of a single operation, up to 100 smugglers can be in action simultaneously.”¹⁵⁴

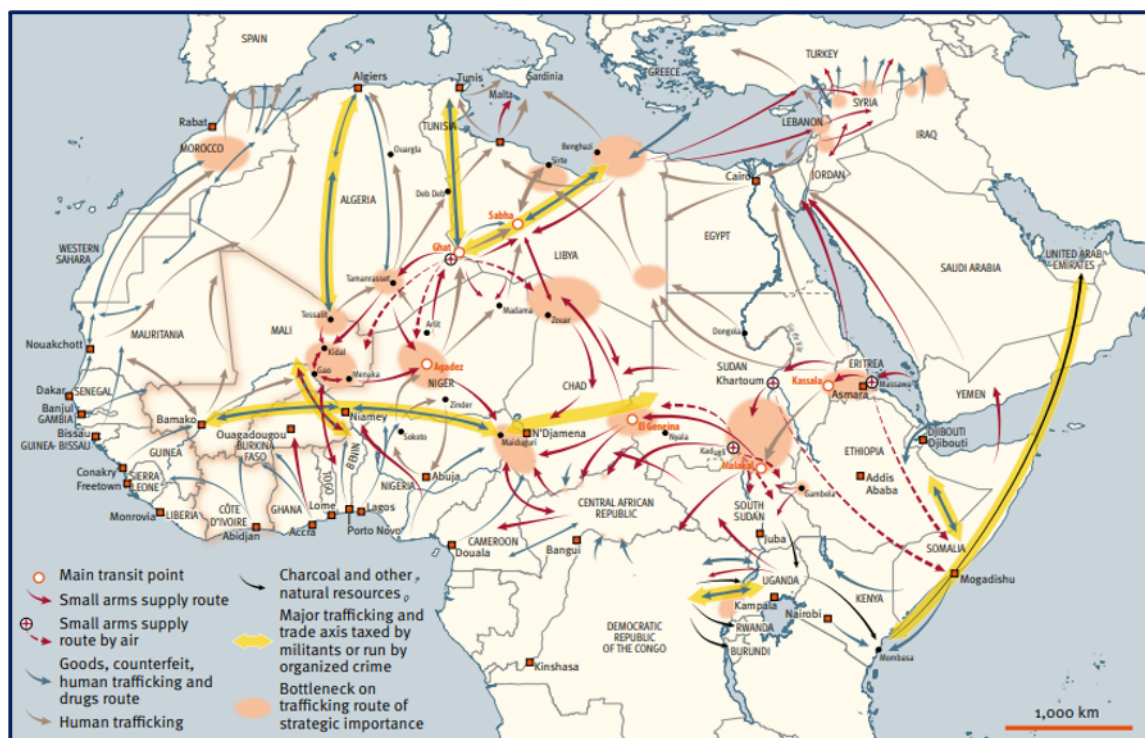


Figure 7. Map showing main trafficking routes and flows across West Africa.¹⁵⁵

Terrorist and criminal networks’ ‘client-supplier’ relationships

According to some interviewees, linkages between arms traffickers and violent extremist organisations primarily take the form of ‘client-supplier relationships.’¹⁵⁶ A recent field research conducted by the Institute for Security Studies (ISS) in the tri-border area between Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso, argues that “participating, even indirectly, in trafficking or maintaining links with traffickers allows violent extremist groups to procure means of subsistence (such as food and medicine), operational means (arms, ammunition, motorbikes, spare parts, fuel and means of communication such as phones, top-up cards or phone credit) and generate financial resources (namely through selling stolen livestock).”¹⁵⁷

More specifically, terrorist groups have reportedly forged “vital links with weapons traffickers,”¹⁵⁸ with observers arguing that “terrorist organisations in the region, including those linked with al-Qaeda, such as AQIM, established contacts with traffickers in order to obtain the weapons and ammunition

août-septembre 2019, p.55. www.smallarmssurvey.org/fileadmin/docs/L-External-publications/2019/Grands-Dossiers-Diplomatie-no-52-Enjeux-du-traffic-armes.pdf.

153 Interview, international arms expert based in Europe.

154 Mattias Nowak, “Enjeux du trafic d’armes : l’Afrique de l’Ouest dans la tourmente”. *Les Grands Dossiers de Diplomatie*, n° 52, août-septembre 2019, p.55. www.smallarmssurvey.org/fileadmin/docs/L-External-publications/2019/Grands-Dossiers-Diplomatie-no-52-Enjeux-du-traffic-armes.pdf.

155 Roberto Sollazzo and Matthias Nowak. *Tri-border Transit: Trafficking and Smuggling in the Burkina Faso-Côte d’Ivoire-Mali Region*, Small Arms Survey, Briefing Paper, October 2020, p.13. <http://www.smallarmssurvey.org/fileadmin/docs/T-Briefing-Papers/SAS-SANA-BP-Triborder-Transit.pdf>

156 Interview, local researcher based in Côte d’Ivoire.

157 William Assanay, Baba Danoko, Lori-Anne Théroux-Bénoni, and Ibrahim Maïga. *Violent extremism, organised crime and local conflicts in Liptako-Gourma*, p.9. <https://issafrica.s3.amazonaws.com/site/uploads/war-26-eng.pdf>.

158 Djallil Lounnas. *The Links Between Jihadi Organizations and Illegal Trafficking in the Sahel*, Menara, Working paper 25, November 2018, p.6. https://www.iai.it/sites/default/files/menara_wp_25.pdf.

needed for their activities.”¹⁵⁹ As part of primary data gathered by ISS, former members Ansar Dine and the MUJAO confirmed the existence of “commercial links” between terrorists and arms traffickers.¹⁶⁰ Similarly, illicit trafficking has allegedly represented an important source of weaponry for terrorist networks active in the Lake Chad region, with research underlying that “the regional arms pipeline proved important as Boko Haram weapons were reported to have originated from locations such as Chad, Mali, Libya, and as far as Darfur.”¹⁶¹ A number of experts interviewed however underlined that, given the significant quantities of SALW regularly captured from national forces by terrorist groups, material obtained from trafficking may not represent a large share of their arsenals. Most agree that “these groups actually do not need to take the risk nor to carry the burden of finding supply lines far away, moving logistics capacities, generating legal risks and so on, simply because the local and immediate availability is already there,”¹⁶² with most dynamics taking place at the regional level.

According to information gathered within this research, the degree of cooperation between criminal actors involved in arms trafficking and terrorist groups may, moreover, differ according to the location under scrutiny. In northern regions of the Sahel, experts suggest that terrorists may benefit from greater support, with one interviewee explaining that “in a place like Timbuktu for example, they [terrorist groups] have sympathisers and spies, who might not be perceived as being terrorists, but deliver material to them in remote locations. Anything that is available on the market, including surplus material from other armed groups, will make its way through middlemen to terrorist groups.”¹⁶³ Many experts moreover indicated that among the actors engaged in “the sale of arms to the population and to other groups in the area, including terrorist groups”¹⁶⁴ were certainly some elements from northern Mali so-called signatory armed groups.¹⁶⁵ Describing opportunistic transactions, one interviewee explained that “signatory groups might, for example, acquire weapons in anticipation of conducting a convoy escort of a drug shipment, and once the convoy makes its way through, there is a surplus of weapons.”¹⁶⁶

“In the case of small-scale trafficking observed along Cote d’Ivoire-Mali-Burkina Faso borders, traffickers are not directly affiliated, according to our information, with terrorist activity or groups. In some cases, we were told of the importance of trust and the danger of working with these groups. Some of the traffickers or small team leaders said that, for them, it is dangerous to associate with these types of organisations because, if there is any doubt about something being wrong, the lives of people from the whole group, including their families, may be at stake.”

International arms expert based in Europe

By contrast, small-scale ‘ant trade’ occurring in the southern parts of the subregion seems, for its part, less directly connected to terrorist organisations. This type of small-scale trafficking seems to be mainly fuelling other types of non-state armed groups, including self-defence militias.

However, it is not entirely excluded that terrorist groups indirectly benefit from this type of ant trafficking, through the looting of material possessed by self-defence groups. An expert interviewed as part of this research argued that, in a context where local self-defence groups are “building up

159 Ibid., p.5.

160 William Assanvo, Baba Danoko, Lori-Anne Théroux-Bénoni, and Ibrahim Maïga. “Violent extremism, organised crime and local conflicts in Liptako-Gourma,” Institute for Security Studies, p.10. <https://issafrica.s3.amazonaws.com/site/uploads/war-26-eng.pdf>.

161 Omar Mahmoud, “Local, Global, or in Between? Boko Haram’s Messaging, Strategy, Membership, and Support Networks,” in Jacob Zenn. (ed.) *Boko Haram Beyond the Headlines: Analyses of Africa’s Enduring Insurgency*. Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, May 2018, p.100. <https://ctc.usma.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/Boko-Haram-Beyond-the-Headlines.pdf>.

162 Interview, local researcher based in Côte d’Ivoire.

163 Interview, international arms expert based in Europe.

164 Interview, local researcher based in Côte d’Ivoire.

165 Signatories of the 2015 Algiers Accords and part of the ongoing Malian peace process, ‘signatory armed groups’ regroup pro-government groups of the Platform and armed groups allied within the Coordination of Azawad Movement (CMA). In addition, various splits occurred since 2015 leading to the creation of splinter groups, such as the Mouvement de Salut de l’Azawad (MSA), which are not officially ‘signatories’. For an overview of armed groups present across the country, see: Andrew Lebovich, “Mapping Armed Groups in Mali and the Sahel,” *European Council on Foreign Relations*, May 2019. https://ecfr.eu/special/sahel_mapping/.

166 Interview, international arms expert based in Europe.

their arsenal slowly, starting out with craft weapons and hunting weapons, and then acquiring assault rifles, [...] it is possible that terrorists are also acquiring weapons from these groups, not commercially, but by capturing them.”¹⁶⁷

And beyond...

Links between criminal and terrorist networks active in the Sahel have been subject to much debate in recent years. While some claim that “all the argumentation, either thematic or specific (as in the Sahel), appears to be based on anecdotal evidence and not the clear observation of clinical symptoms,” making it complicated “to definitively determine if such cases merely provide an isolated example or are reflective of an emerging trend or demonstrate a widespread problem,”¹⁶⁸ others point to “clear linkages among arms traffickers, organized criminal entities, jihadist groups, and insurgent armed groups.”¹⁶⁹ Whilst others alternatively suggest that criminal and terrorist networks’ relationships may rather depend on the nature of the criminal and trafficking activities in question, affirming that “jihadi organisations have established more regular interactions with illegal networks that provide ‘required goods for pursuit of their fight,’ such as gas traffickers, food traffickers and arms traffickers.”¹⁷⁰

“There are of course links or bridges between criminal groups and terrorist groups but they are limited in time and scope, and just happen when both groups have a mutual interest in doing it.

International arms expert based in Europe

Overall, most interviewees agreed on the fact that links between criminal and terrorist groups are primarily based on pragmatism.¹⁷¹ While taking different forms, they are intended “to grow and sustain each organization, bolstering each group’s capabilities, strengthening their individual infrastructures and contributing to their financial well-being.”¹⁷² Even in instances where both types of actors simply ‘coexist’—meaning that they operate in the same geographical area without cooperation necessarily taking place between them—, it “does not necessarily mean that the activities of each don’t benefit the other.”¹⁷³

According to an interviewee, a number of (criminal) actors have certain acquaintances with terrorist organisations, with whom their share ‘give-and-take’ types of relationships, with for instance terrorist groups not disturbing traffickers in the conduction of their activities in exchange for their help in procuring or transporting necessary means.¹⁷⁴ Among other examples illustrating links between terrorist and criminal organisations, interviewees notably mentioned instances where attacks against national armed forces might have served to target camps and outposts blocking the main smuggling routes,¹⁷⁵ or cases where traffickers may have “opportunistically declared themselves affiliated to al-Qaeda” in order to “be able to work well.”¹⁷⁶

167 Interview, international arms expert based in Europe.

168 Erik Alda and Joseph L. Sala, “Links Between Terrorism, Organized Crime and Crime: The Case of the Sahel Region,” *Stability: International Journal of Security & Development*, 3(1): 27, 2014, p.3. <https://www.stabilityjournal.org/articles/10.5334/sta.ea/>.

169 Fiona Mangan and Matthias Nowak, *The West Africa-Sahel Connection: Mapping Cross-border Arms Trafficking*, Small Arms Survey, Briefing Paper, December 2019, p.21. <http://www.smallarmssurvey.org/fileadmin/docs/T-Briefing-Papers/SAS-BP-West-Africa-Sahel-Connection.pdf>.

170 Djallil Lounnas. *The Links Between Jihadi Organizations and Illegal Trafficking in the Sahel. Middle East and North Africa Regional Architecture (MENARA) Working Papers*, No. 25, November 2018, p.2. https://www.iai.it/sites/default/files/menara_wp_25.pdf.

171 Guillaume Soto-Mayor. “Trafics et trafiquants : éléments structurants des sociétés sahéniennes,” *Recherches internationales*, n°117, janvier-mars 2020, p.118. www.recherches-internationales.fr/RI117/RI117_Soto_Mayor.pdf.

172 Erik Alda and Joseph L. Sala, “Links Between Terrorism, Organized Crime and Crime: The Case of the Sahel Region,” *Stability International Journal of Security and Development* 3(1): 27-1, p.4.

173 Ibid., p.4.

174 Interview, national stakeholder based in Burkina Faso.

175 Interview, local independent consultant based in Mali.

176 Interview, international arms expert based in Europe.

2.3.2 Scope and dynamics of the indirect use of SALW as a source of terrorist finance

Besides their direct use to conduct attacks, SALW also confer coercion powers on their holders, allowing them to engage in various types of criminal activities, and to establish their control over lands and people, and in turn providing them with various local sources of income. This section will thus examine the instrumental use of SALW, reviewing the main income-generating activities carried out by violent extremist groups requiring—or being facilitated by—the possession of SALW.

SALW as key components of the “lucrative kidnapping industry”¹⁷⁷

Extremist groups’ possession of SALW plays an essential role in their ability to carry out “their everyday activities, including in the presumed main source of income: kidnapping of ‘westerners’ for ransom.”¹⁷⁸ Kidnappings for ransom (KFR) have been extensively used by al-Qaeda affiliated groups in the Sahel-Sahara region in the past two decades, leading to the emergence of what is sometimes labelled as a “lucrative kidnapping industry.”¹⁷⁹

From the kidnapping of 32 Europeans hostages in Northern Mali in April 2003 by its predecessor, the GSPC, AQIM seems to have continued earning considerable amounts from KFR.¹⁸⁰ While Western governments have—for obvious reasons—systematically denied the occurrence of such transactions, evidence indicates that ransom payments could amount to several million dollars for a single hostage,¹⁸¹ thus representing “one of the main sources of funding for terrorist groups in the Sahel-Sahara region.”¹⁸² Some estimates indicate that “that at the peak of the business (2005 to 2010), abduction revenues made up more than 90 per cent of terrorists’ financing in the [Sahel] region.”¹⁸³ Although the number of KFR of foreigners seems to have declined, it is certainly more linked to “the limited numbers of potential targets in the region,” rather than a voluntary shift in terrorist groups’ financing strategies.¹⁸⁴ This decline moreover seems to have been compensated by a “steady rise in the kidnapping of locals,”¹⁸⁵—as well as a displacement of the threat southward, including in Burkina Faso which is “new to this kind of activity.”¹⁸⁶ The abduction of two French tourists in Pendjari Park, northern Benin, in May 2019, has provided a particularly telling example of this expansion of the threat.¹⁸⁷

177 Catherine Van Offelen, “Le vrai visage du terrorisme Sahélien : le grand banditisme et la criminalité ordinaire.” *Revue Conflits*, July 28, 2020. https://www.revueconflits.com/le-vrai-visage-du-terrorisme-sahelien-le-grand-banditisme-et-la-criminalite-ordinaire/#_ftnref2.

178 Interview, international expert based in Mali.

179 Catherine Van Offelen, “Le vrai visage du terrorisme Sahélien : le grand banditisme et la criminalité ordinaire.” *Revue Conflits*, July 28, 2020. https://www.revueconflits.com/le-vrai-visage-du-terrorisme-sahelien-le-grand-banditisme-et-la-criminalite-ordinaire/#_ftnref2.

180 AQIM is believed to have earned at least US\$91.5 million in ransom payments between 2008-2013. See: Rukmini Callimachi, “Paying Ransoms, Europe Bankrolls Qaeda Terror,” *The New York Times*, July 29, 2014, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/07/30/world/africa/ransoming-citizens-europe-becomes-al-qaedas-patron.html>; See also, Samuel L. Aronson, “AQIM’s Threat to Western Interests in the Sahel,” *CTC Sentinel*, Vol.7, Issue 4, April 2014, p.8. <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/aqims-threat-to-western-interests-in-the-sahel/>.

181 Rukmini Callimachi, “Paying Ransoms, Europe Bankrolls Qaeda Terror,” *The New York Times*, July 29, 2014, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/07/30/world/africa/ransoming-citizens-europe-becomes-al-qaedas-patron.html>.

182 For instance, France is suspected to have paid around 17 million dollars in exchange for the liberation of four hostages abducted in the Areva uranium mine in Arlit, northern Niger, in 2010. See: Catherine Van Offelen, “Le vrai visage du terrorisme Sahélien : le grand banditisme et la criminalité ordinaire.” *Revue Conflits*, July 28, 2020.

183 Mark Micallef, Raouf Farrah, Alexander Bish, and Victor Tanner. *After the Storm: Organized crime across the Sahel Sahara following upheaval in Libya and Mali*. Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, 2019, p. 21. <https://globalinitiative.net/after-the-storm/>.

184 Ibid., pp.xiii-xiv.

185 Ibid., p.xiii.

186 Ibid., pp.xiii-xiv.

187 Sarah Maslin Nir, “Benin Awakens to the Threat of Terrorism After Safari Ends in a Nightmare.” *The New York Times*, August 20, 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/20/world/africa/safari-kidnapping-benin-terrorism.html>.

Not only has KFR brought Boko Haram to global attention—through the international campaign ‘Bring Back Our Girls’ following the 2014 abduction of 276 schoolgirls in Chibok—but this activity has also represented “a prime source of funding” for the group.¹⁸⁸ It has reportedly earned millions in ransoms from the abduction of foreigners, with for instance “four incidents in northern Cameroon netting Boko Haram several millions of dollars in ransoms in 2013 and 2014.”¹⁸⁹ It should however be noted that “while the abduction of foreigners attracts much attention, the great majority of kidnapping victims are Nigerian nationals.”¹⁹⁰ The group is indeed suspected to have “abducted several hundred people over the past five years in attacks on villages in north-east Nigeria, and in neighbouring countries such as Niger and Cameroon.”¹⁹¹

All experts interviewed as part of this research confirmed that SALW played a prominent role in enabling terrorists to conduct such operations. It is however worth underlying the links that seems to have been established between terrorist and criminal networks, whereby “a Western hostage captured by criminals - who are mobile and have local contacts - will be sold for a large sum to a terrorist group like AQIM, which will use its international propaganda networks to put pressure on the West and obtain payment of a ransom.”¹⁹² While shedding light on an interesting aspect of the crime-terror nexus in the region, such dynamics question the extent to which SALW possessed by terrorist organisations play a central role in the conduction of KFR. An interviewee however mentioned that smaller terrorist cells, such as Ansarul Islam, may also play this intermediary role, explaining that “especially in the case of foreigners, Ansarul Islam seems to be just a ‘buffer’ group. They may lead the kidnapping, but it is to hand the hostage over to a larger group that will be responsible for conducting the negotiations.”¹⁹³

SALW as enablers to conduct miscellaneous criminal activities

Terrorist organisations active in West Africa also appear to have generated important revenue from the conduction of miscellaneous other criminal activities, including theft and robberies, for which the possession of SALW appears as equally critical. Boko Haram militants have allegedly attacked and “robbed hundreds of banks in their home province of Borno and two other northern regions of Nigeria, and nabbed convoys and successful businesses,”¹⁹⁴ reportedly earning around 6 million dollars as proceeds from bank robberies from 2010 and 2013.¹⁹⁵ While bank robberies have decreased in recent years, the group has also been “accused of stealing cattle and selling it throughout the region.”¹⁹⁶ Cases of cattle abduction have not only been reported in northern Nigeria,¹⁹⁷ but also in southern

188 Kangdim Dingji Maza, Umut Koldaş, and Sait Aksit, “Challenges of Combating Terrorist Financing in the Lake Chad Region: A Case of Boko Haram,” *SAGE Open*, April-June 10(2), p.5. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/2158244020934494>.

189 These kidnappings included the abduction of a French priest in November 2013, followed by the abduction of two Italian priests and a Canadian nun in April 2014. (Mahmoud, O. “Local, Global, or in Between? Boko Haram’s Messaging, Strategy, Membership, and Support Networks,” p.111).

190 William Assanvo and Don Okereke, “Nigeria’s kidnapping crisis,” *ENACT*, February 01, 2019. <https://enactafrica.org/enact-observer/nigerias-kidnapping-crisis>

191 Ibid.

192 Catherine Van Offelen, “Le vrai visage du terrorisme Sahélien : le grand banditisme et la criminalité ordinaire.” *Revue Conflits*, July 28, 2020. https://www.revueconflits.com/le-vrai-visage-du-terrorisme-sahelien-le-grand-banditisme-et-la-criminalite-ordinaire/#_ftnref2

193 Interview, National Stakeholder based in Burkina Faso.

194 Peter Weber, “Who is financing Boko Haram?” *The Week*, May 12, 2014. <https://theweek.com/articles/447032/whos-financing-boko-haram>.

195 Kangdim Dingji Maza, Umut Koldaş, and Sait Aksit, “Challenges of Combating Terrorist Financing in the Lake Chad Region: A Case of Boko Haram,” *SAGE Open*, April-June 10(2), p.5. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/2158244020934494>; Omar Mahmoud, “Local, Global, or in Between? Boko Haram’s Messaging, Strategy, Membership, and Support Networks,” in Jacob Zenn. (ed.) *Boko Haram Beyond the Headlines: Analyses of Africa’s Enduring Insurgency*. Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, May 2018, p.99. <https://ctc.usma.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/Boko-Haram-Beyond-the-Headlines.pdf>.

196 Omar Mahmoud, “Local, Global, or in Between? Boko Haram’s Messaging, Strategy, Membership, and Support Networks,” in Jacob Zenn. (ed.) *Boko Haram Beyond the Headlines: Analyses of Africa’s Enduring Insurgency*. Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, May 2018, p.111. <https://ctc.usma.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/Boko-Haram-Beyond-the-Headlines.pdf>.

197 See: Ibrahim Sawab, “Herders Lose 1,637 Members, 200,773 Livestock to Boko Haram,” *Daily Trust*, January 28, 2016.

Chad¹⁹⁸ and northern Cameroon.¹⁹⁹ Cattle theft was also mentioned as a source of income for Sahel-based groups.²⁰⁰ However, the degree of involvement of violent extremist groups in such activities is still a matter of debate. While some argue that cattle abductions are carried out by “ordinary bandits, with no connection to extremist groups, [who] are taking advantage of the insecurity and confusion that prevails,”²⁰¹ others either report a form of cooperation between criminals and terrorists with “the former carrying out abductions on behalf of and with the authorisation of the latter,”²⁰² or point to a more direct involvement of terrorist groups for which “cattle rustling has become both a source of financing and livelihood.”²⁰³ While securing terrorist fighters access to food, it would also provide them with commodities to resell or exchange.

Terrorist groups have also allegedly been involved in different types of trafficking activities proliferating across the region (see Figure 8).²⁰⁴ Research indicates that “trafficking of persons, narcotics, arms, contraband products, stolen cattle [...] represent another flourishing avenue through which Boko Haram finances its operations.”²⁰⁵ Similarly, Sahelian terror groups have reportedly generated revenue from their involvement in the trafficking of, among others, contraband cigarettes, drugs, and migrant smuggling.²⁰⁶ One interviewee moreover mentioned the potential involvement of terrorist groups in poaching and the subsequent trafficking in protected species, “from which groups present in eastern Burkina Faso could possibly generate income.”²⁰⁷

198 See: “Tchad: Boko Haram Accusé De Vol De Bétail,” *RFI*, September 9, 2014.

199 Amnesty International, “Human Rights Under Fire: Attacks And Violations In Cameroon’s Struggle With Boko Haram,” 2015, p. 23.; Crisis Group, “Cameroon: Confronting Boko Haram,” *African Report* 241, November 16, 2016, p. 17.

200 Along with cattle theft, one interviewee also mentioned the theft and resale of vehicles. Interview, local independent consultant based in Mali.

201 William Assanvo, Baba Danoko, Lori-Anne Thérout-Bénoni, and Ibrahim Maïga. “Violent extremism, organised crime and local conflicts in Liptako-Gourma,” Institute for Security Studies, p.15. <https://issafrica.s3.amazonaws.com/site/uploads/war-26-eng.pdf>.

202 Ibid., p.15.

203 Ibid.

204 Mark Micallef, Raouf Farrah, Alexander Bish, and Victor Tanner. *After the Storm: Organized crime across the Sahel Sahara following upheaval in Libya and Mali*. Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, 2019, p.xi. <https://globalinitiative.net/after-the-storm/>.

205 Kangdim Dingji, Maza, Umüt Koldaş, and Sait Aksit, “Challenges of Combating Terrorist Financing in the Lake Chad Region: A Case of Boko Haram,” *SAGE Open*, April-June 10(2), p.6. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/2158244020934494>.

206 Christian Nellemann, et al. (Eds). *World atlas of illicit flows*. A RHIPTO-INTERPOL-GI Assessment, 2018, p.92. <https://globalinitiative.net/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/Atlas-Illicit-Flows-Second-Edition-EN-WEB.pdf>

207 Interview, Local Researcher based in Côte d’Ivoire.

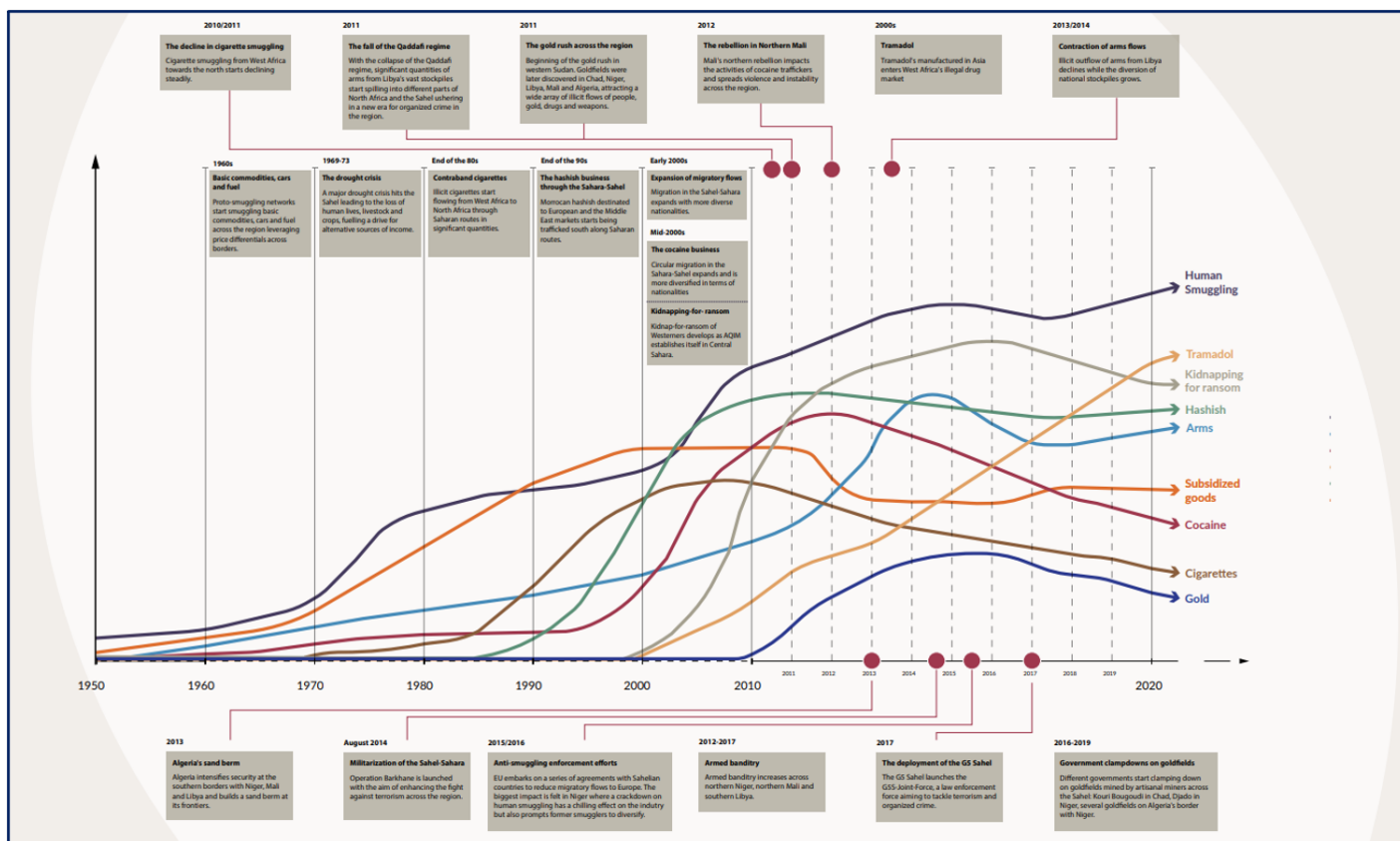


Figure 8. Timeline showing the evolution of black economies and criminal markets in the Sahel-Sahara.²⁰⁸

However, it seems that “their involvement generally appears indirect, in that they are not the holders of the trafficked products.”²⁰⁹ Groups can “without being involved in certain activities, profit from them in several ways: by collecting taxes on convoys of goods transiting through an area under their control, by providing escort, protection or transportation services.”²¹⁰ Reports indicate that groups like AQIM, al-Mourabitoun and Ansar Dine “are now increasingly changing how they finance themselves, shifting their attention away from kidnapping for ransom and cigarette smuggling to protection-taxing the trafficking of drugs [...] an activity that pays much higher dividends,”²¹¹ a trend confirmed by some interviewees:

“While there is long-standing speculation about extremist involvement in the trafficking of drugs and other contraband, there is no evidence for this. Still, extremist groups may provide “protection services” for convoys travelling through their areas of operation in northern Mali, for which groups will also carry arms and ammunition.”

International stakeholder based in Mali

Research moreover underlines that West African terrorist organisations have “been significantly bolstered by having access to a steady supply of arms from Libya since 2011, which has strengthened their position to offer ‘protection’,”²¹² further underscoring the importance of SALW possession in the conduction of these activities. Such forms of indirect involvement in illicit trafficking are only possible because of the control some violent extremist organisations are able to exert over portions

208 Mark Micallef, Raouf Farrah, Alexander Bish, and Victor Tanner. *After the Storm: Organized crime across the Sahel-Sahara following upheaval in Libya and Mali*. Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, 2019, pp.x-xi. <https://globalinitiative.net/after-the-storm/>.

209 William Assanvo, Baba Danoko, Lori-Anne Thérone-Bénoni, and Ibrahim Maïga. “Violent extremism, organised crime and local conflicts in Liptako-Gourma,” Institute for Security Studies, p.9. <https://issafrica.s3.amazonaws.com/site/uploads/war-26-eng.pdf>.

210 Ibid.

211 Christian Nellemann, et al. (Eds). *World atlas of illicit flows*, A RHIPTO-INTERPOL-GI Assessment, 2018, p.79. <https://globalinitiative.net/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/Atlas-Illicit-Flows-Second-Edition-EN-WEB.pdf>.

212 Ibid.

of territories, with more opportunities to levy funds being derived from the taxation and extortion of local populations.

Many interviewees indeed referred to the taxation of populations living in the areas controlled by terrorist groups as a non-negligible source of funding. In the Sahel, terrorist groups have, for instance, relied on the imposition of a 'religious' tax (called '*zakat*') collected from local populations, a form of racketeering in disguise. Importantly, "incursions into villages to demand such payments are backed by extremist possession of small arms and related ammunition."²¹³ Such a practice, "while unlikely to be a significant source of income in a broader sense, [is] important for local-level income,"²¹⁴ and further illustrates the instrumental use of SALW as a source of terrorism financing. Similar practices have been used in the Lake Chad basin, where Boko Haram has "set up instruments for collecting taxes (*haraji*)"²¹⁵ in areas under its control.

SALW and the exploitation of the artisanal gold mining sector

Growing concerns also surrounds the exploitation of the artisanal gold mining sector as a new avenue for terrorist finance in the Sahel.²¹⁶ A recent investigation by Reuters underlines that "for the Islamists, the mines are both a hideout and a treasure trove: of funds with which to recruit new members and buy arms, and of explosives and detonators to stage the attacks that extend their power."²¹⁷ Regarding this latter point, several experts interviewed indeed mention the "diversion of explosives from artisanal mining sites, which is a real problem and risk."²¹⁸ In a context marked by a rise in IED attacks, gold mines are believed to "provide a supply route for the manufacture of IEDs, particularly in central Mali and parts of Burkina Faso."²¹⁹ Some concerns were also expressed with the risk of seeing these sites becoming "training grounds, notably with regard to the manipulation of explosives."²²⁰ These sites are described as attracting poles for illicit arms more generally, due to a dynamic whereby "miners seek to protect themselves from those who would prey on their success, the people nearby are also increasingly turning to armed members of their communities to protect them and to prevent insecurity and instability from taking hold [which], in turn, drives demand from criminals for even greater firepower to subdue those ranged against them."²²¹

213 Written inputs, international stakeholder based in Mali.

214 Written inputs, international stakeholder based in Mali.

215 Dingji Maza, K., Koldaş, U., & Aksit, S. "Challenges of Combating Terrorist Financing in the Lake Chad Region: A Case of Boko Haram," p.6. See also: Archbishop of Kaduna Catholic Diocese cited in: "Boko Haram Still Collecting Taxes, Providing Services in Borno – Archbishop of Kaduna." *Sahara Reporters*, June 19, 2019, <http://saharareporters.com/2019/06/19/boko-haram-still-collecting-taxes-providing-services-borno-%E2%80%93-archbishop-kaduna>.

216 See for instance: GIABA. *Money Laundering and Terrorist Financing linked to the Extractive Industry / Mining Sector in West Africa*, Typology Report, October 2019. https://www.giaba.org/media/f/1104_pkbat_41745%20ENG-ML%20-%20TF%20IN%20EXTRACTIVE.pdf; Sophie Douce, "Au Burkina Faso, les mines d'or sous la menace djihadiste," *Le Monde*, November 21, 2019. https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2019/11/21/au-burkina-faso-les-mines-d-or-sous-la-menace-djihadiste_6020049_3212.html; Fages, C. "Or: le Burkina Faso et son industrie minière face au défi du terrorisme," *RFI*, November 10, 2019. <https://www.rfi.fr/fr/emission/20191111-burkina-faso-terrorisme-industrie-mini-ere-or>.

217 David Lewis and Ryan McNeill, "How jihadists struck gold in Africa's Sahel," *Reuters Special Report*, November 22, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/gold-africa-islamists/>.

218 Interview, international arms expert based in Europe.

219 International Crisis Group. *Getting a Grip on Central Sahel's Gold Rush*, Africa Report N°282, November 13, 2019, p.8. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/afrika/sahel/burkina-faso/282-reprendre-en-main-la-ru-ee-vers-lor-au-sahel-central%20/>.

220 Ibid.

221 Roberto Sollazzo and Matthias Nowak. *Tri-border Transit: Trafficking and Smuggling in the Burkina Faso-Côte d'Ivoire-Mali Region*, Small Arms Survey, Briefing Paper, October 2020, p.7. <http://www.smallarmssurvey.org/fileadmin/docs/T-Briefing-Papers/SAS-SANA-BP-Triborder-Transit.pdf>

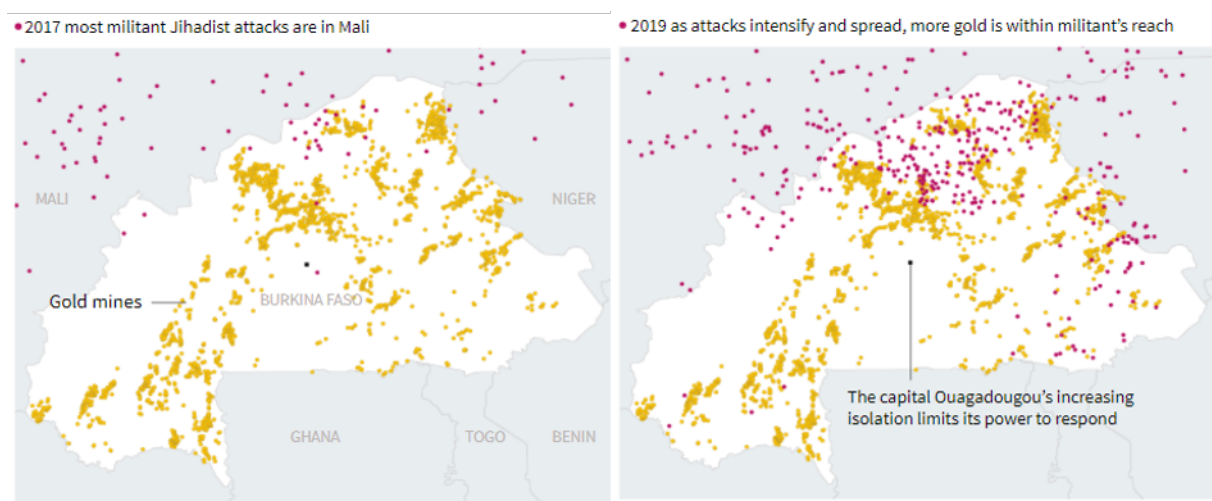


Figure 9. Terrorist activity around artisanal gold mines in Burkina Faso between 2017-2019.²²²

In addition, “high-value commodities such as gold and diamonds serve as alternative currencies in money-laundering schemes, while also financing terrorist organizations in West Africa.”²²³ Gold extracted from artisanal mines in Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso, are estimated to represent “a total monetary value of between \$1.9 and \$4.5 billion per year.”²²⁴ Gold mining sites and convoys have thus become strategic targets for terrorist attacks (see Figure 9), as illustrated by the ambush against a convoy of the Canadian mining company Semafo in eastern Burkina Faso in November 2019.²²⁵ But these types of operations are not the only way extremist actors can make use of this flourishing sector. Often located in regions where the state presence is either weak or contested, “scores of the small-scale excavations are in areas controlled by jihadis.”²²⁶ According to research conducted by the International Crisis Group, it seems that “the main jihadist groups in the Sahel benefit financially from gold extraction [...] in ways that vary from region to region.”²²⁷ While groups like Ansar Dine in northern Mali, as well as ISGS and JNIM in eastern Burkina Faso, do “not have an armed presence to secure the site, but levies the zakat (religious tax) upon miners and the rest of the population,” groups operating in the Burkinabe Soum province may moreover earn money from securing mining sites.²²⁸ Extremist groups’ *modus operandi* was further described by an interviewee as follows:

“Typically, when they arrive in an artisanal gold mining area, they do everything they can to take control of the gold mining site. So if there was a security mechanism there, they get rid of it. If it was the defence and security forces, they get rid of them. If it was other security actors, such as the Koglweogo in Burkina or others, they get rid of them. They provide security for the site themselves, or they join forces with other actors who provide security for the site, and in exchange for this service, they get paid.”

Local researcher based in Côte d’Ivoire

After having chased out security guards from the sites, “extremist groups then fill the void they

222 David Lewis and Ryan McNeill, “How jihadists struck gold in Africa’s Sahel,” *Reuters Special Report*, November 22, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/gold-africa-islamists/>.

223 Ibid.

224 International Crisis Group. *Getting a Grip on Central Sahel’s Gold Rush*, Africa Report N°282, November 13, 2019, p.1. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/sahel/burkina-faso/282-reprendre-en-main-la-rupee-vers-lor-au-sahel-central%20/>.

225 Sophie Douce, “Burkina Faso : au moins 38 personnes tuées dans une attaque « planifiée » contre un convoi minier,” *Le Monde*, November 07, 2019. https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2019/11/07/au-moins-37-morts-dans-l-attaque-d-un-convoi-minier-dans-l-est-du-burkina-faso_6018310_3212.html.

226 Will Brown. “The Sahel squeeze,” *The Africa Report*, June 4, 2020. <https://www.theafricareport.com/25128/the-sahel-squeeze/>.

227 International Crisis Group. *Getting a Grip on Central Sahel’s Gold Rush*, Africa Report N°282, November 13, 2019, p.7. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/sahel/burkina-faso/282-reprendre-en-main-la-rupee-vers-lor-au-sahel-central%20/>.

228 Ibid.

have created and emerge as the guardians of security for the mines,”²²⁹ and get remunerated for their protection. Some also argue that, in Burkina Faso, “Islamists had taken control of some mines, especially in protected areas, where they encouraged camps of miners to dig in violation of government bans.”²³⁰ Finally, recent reports indicate that gold produced within sites under terrorist groups’ control in the eastern regions of the country have been “purchased by buyers from Benin and Togo.”²³¹

2.3.3. Scope and dynamics of the direct use of SALW as a source of terrorist finance

In light of the previous section, SALW appear as critical assets allowing terrorist groups to carry out a diverse set of income-generating activities. In parallel to this instrumental use, arms and ammunition also represent valuable trafficking commodities as such. Researching the use of SALW as a source of terrorist finance thus requires an exploration of the level of involvement of terrorist organisations in SALW trafficking, either as suppliers directly generating income from the sale of arms and ammunition, or as intermediaries benefitting from arms trafficking through taxation, the provision of transport and protection services.

Terrorist organisations’ direct involvement in SALW trafficking

Arms trafficking has regularly been listed among “the potential sources of funding for terrorist groups in West and Central Africa.”²³² Many reports claim that violent extremist organisations have obtained profit from arms trafficking, arguing for instance that Boko Haram has partly financed its operations through “black-market operations such as [...] arms sale.”²³³ However, there does not appear to be any concrete evidence pointing to a structural involvement of terrorist organisations in arms trafficking as suppliers. Even if this involvement was to be established, it remains unclear “whether terrorist groups engage in arms trafficking as a means of remaining self-sufficient or as a way to finance their activities.”²³⁴

While data gathered through this research mostly confirmed these trends, some interviewees underlined that, as opportunistic actors, terrorist groups could occasionally resort to this activity if perceived as beneficial under certain circumstances, thereby rather pointing to a potential ad-hoc involvement. For instance, it was argued that “if they have weapons that are surplus to their needs or they have an alliance, they would happily sell material to other groups as long as they are aligned, even on a short term basis.”²³⁵ Along this line, one interviewee referred to instances where violent extremist groups may have acted as arms providers, indicating that: “We know that, at one point in time, certain actors within the jihadist movement took up causes for certain communities [...] We know that these groups have provided training in the handling of weapons. It is therefore reasonable to assume that arms transfers also took place to accompany this support.”²³⁶ Most of the experts consulted regard these types of transactions as a way of ‘buying loyalties’, rather than a ‘trading

229 William Assanvo, Baba Danoko, Lori-Anne Thérout-Bénoni, and Ibrahim Maïga. “Violent extremism, organised crime and local conflicts in Liptako-Gourma,” Institute for Security Studies, p.16. <https://issafrica.s3.amazonaws.com/site/uploads/war-26-eng.pdf>.

230 David Lewis and Ryan McNeill, “How jihadists struck gold in Africa’s Sahel,” *Reuters Special Report*, November 22, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/gold-africa-islamists/>.

231 Sampson Kwarkye, “Breaking terrorism supply chains in West Africa.” *ISS Today*, June 8, 2020. <https://issafrica.org/iss-today/breaking-terrorism-supply-chains-in-west-africa>.

232 See for instance: FATF-GIABA-GABAC. *Terrorist Financing in West and Central Africa*. FATF, Paris, October 2016, p.19. www.fatf-gafi.org/publications/methodsandtrends/documents/terrorist-financing-west-central-africa.html.

233 Kangdim Dingji Maza, Umut Koldaş, and Sait Aksit, “Challenges of Combating Terrorist Financing in the Lake Chad Region: A Case of Boko Haram,” *SAGE Open*, April-June 10(2), p.3, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/2158244020934494>.

234 FATF-GIABA-GABAC. *Terrorist Financing in West and Central Africa*. FATF, Paris, October 2016, p.22. www.fatf-gafi.org/publications/methodsandtrends/documents/terrorist-financing-west-central-africa.html.

235 Interview, international arms expert based in Europe.

236 Interview, Local Researcher based in Côte d’Ivoire. See also: William Assanvo, Baba Danoko, Lori-Anne Thérout-Bénoni, and Ibrahim Maïga. “Violent extremism, organised crime and local conflicts in Liptako-Gourma,” Institute for Security Studies, p.21, <https://issafrica.s3.amazonaws.com/site/uploads/war-26-eng.pdf>.

operation' allowing terrorist organisations to generate income.²³⁷

Overall, international, and local researchers and stakeholders interviewed agreed on the fact that terrorist groups generally do not “use weapons as a commodity to sell and make profit off.”²³⁸ While acknowledging the strategic importance of possessing SALW to carry out activities aimed at generating revenue, some underlined the small incentive for terrorist groups to get directly involved in arms trafficking:

“I have the impression that they would rather outsource the trafficking and transport of arms than internalise it, with all the logistics and cost that it entails. For terrorist groups, it is probably easier to pay someone to do it, to have someone they can trust who can be more or less freely connected to the organisation, rather than dedicating the organisation’s effort to this kind of trafficking, especially to generate income. [...] I am not sure that this traffic is very important to create income. However, owning weapons is an absolutely strategic asset to generate any kind of income, so that is different.”

International arms expert based in Europe

Several arguments were put forward by different interviewees to support the idea of a limited direct involvement of terrorist groups in arms trafficking. As SALW represent critical operational and financing tools, terrorist groups are certainly more inclined to remain on the demand rather than the supply side. Even in the case of potential surplus, this material may well rather be used to grow their ranks, or to strengthen their network. SALW trafficking is moreover an activity requiring certain logistics and human resources, generating costs as well as a certain level of risk, while not representing the most lucrative criminal activity. Several other interviewees moreover noted that one of the main challenges consists in distinguishing members of different armed groups,²³⁹ notably due to their rapidly changing—and sometimes cumulative—affiliations, making it even more complex to assess on behalf of which group an individual engaged in arms trafficking may operate.

Terrorist organisations’ indirect involvement in SALW trafficking

Another avenue for terrorist groups to levy funds from arms may be to position themselves as “services providers and ‘regulators’ of illegal activities.”²⁴⁰ In line with dynamics previously described, most interviewed experts suggested that terrorist groups benefit from the growing insecurity along traditional trading routes and the taxation of illicit flows crossing West Africa. Overall, most interviewees agreed that terrorists’ indirect implication in trafficking activities, irrespective of the nature of the commodities smuggled, is rather “context-specific”²⁴¹ and linked to the control of territories, and thus certainly also applies to SALW trafficking. For many, the exact role played by terrorist organisations however remains difficult to assess with precision since “it comes down to the age-old question of who is a terrorist.”²⁴² While acknowledging that violent extremist groups certainly gain some money from protection-taxation, it thus remains difficult to “point the finger as to where, when and how often” it happens.²⁴³ In addition, the configuration of SALW trafficking would not allow terrorist groups to generate much income by taxing arm convoys, which are believed to transport rather small quantities:

“In this [Sahelian] region, groups that control a territory are probably generating revenue and

237 Interview, international arms expert based in Europe.

238 Interview, international arms expert based in Europe.

239 Aurélien Tobie, and Boukary Sangaré. *The Impact of Armed Groups in the Populations of Central and Northern Mali: Necessary Adaptations of the Strategies for Re-establishing Peace*. Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), October 2019. https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2019-11/1910_sipri_report_the_impact_of_armed_groups_on_the_populations_of_central_and_northern_mali_en_0.pdf.

240 William Assanvo, Baba Danoko, Lori-Anne Thérone-Bénoni, and Ibrahim Maïga. “Violent extremism, organised crime and local conflicts in Liptako-Gourma,” Institute for Security Studies, p.9, <https://issafrica.s3.amazonaws.com/site/uploads/war-26-eng.pdf>.

241 Interview, international stakeholder based in Mali.

242 Interview, international arms Expert based in North America.

243 Interview, international arms Expert based in North America.

taxing all forms of activity, which is legal trade, illicit trade, trafficking, and whatever basically creates an opportunity, so it is not impossible that it applies to weapons as well in some circumstances. [...] But I am not sure that big volumes of weapons are actually making the bulk of trafficking. There have been big long-range convoys moving out weapons from Libya for instance, driving all the way to Northern Mali, Southern Algeria, driving across Niger, and going West or South to the Lake Chad basin, but it is not something that happens that regularly.”

International arms expert based in Europe

Arms transfers among terrorist networks

An interesting dynamic highlighted by previous research, and confirmed by some interviewees, regards the existence of arms transfers among terrorist networks operating throughout the region. Assault rifles of the same model, with sequential serial numbers and markings erased in similar ways, were used in attacks carried out by different al-Qaeda affiliates, including against the Radisson Blu Hotel in Bamako, the Cappuccino restaurant and Splendid Hotel in Ouagadougou, and the resorts in Grand Bassam, Côte d'Ivoire, between 2015 and 2016 (see Figure 10).²⁴⁴ This well-known case demonstrated the ability of “these groups to move equipment across borders and to carry out attacks in different locations across western Africa,”²⁴⁵ in the pace of just one year.



Figure 10. This map shows the locations of the three terrorists attacks carried out by al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb on western targets.²⁴⁶

Some reports also point out to “arms transfers between ‘jihadists’ operating on either side of the border in central Mali and in the Burkina regions of the Sahel and the north,”²⁴⁷ notably between the Burkinabe group Ansarul Islam and the Katiba Macina based in central Mali. A locally-based expert interviewed described instances where “a main group such as JNIM or one of its components is an arms supplier either to a katiba or to a much smaller group, but always from the same movement.”²⁴⁸

244 Holger Anders. *Monitoring Illicit Arms Flows. The Role of UN Peacekeeping Operations*, Small Arms Survey, Briefing Paper, June 2018, p.5. <http://www.smallarmssurvey.org/fileadmin/docs/T-Briefing-Papers/SANA-BP-Monitoring-Illicit-Arms-Flows-PKOs.pdf>.

245 Small Arms Survey. *Weapons Compass. Mapping Illicit Small Arms Flows in Africa*. January 2019, p.41, <http://www.smallarmssurvey.org/fileadmin/docs/U-Reports/SAS-AU-Weapons-Compass.pdf>.

246 Loucoumane Coulibaly and Dionne Searcey, “16 killed in Terrorist Attack on Resort in Ivory Coast,” *New York Times*, March 13, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/14/world/africa/gunmen-carry-out-fatal-attacks-at-resorts-in-ivory-coast.html>.

247 William Assanvo, Baba Danoko, Lori-Anne Théroux-Bénoni, and Ibrahim Maïga. “Violent extremism, organised crime and local conflicts in Liptako-Gourma,” Institute for Security Studies, p.11. <https://issafrica.s3.amazonaws.com/site/uploads/war-26-eng.pdf>.

248 Interview, Local Researcher based in Côte d'Ivoire.

There is however no evidence to support that such ‘internal’ transfers are remunerated which, according to the same expert, seems rather unlikely:

“There was no information indicating a remuneration for these arms transfers. [...] But when you see the way these groups operate, when you see the relations that some small groups maintain with their “parent organisation” which is in another area, this is probably just logistical support, without any remuneration being provided.”

Local researcher based in Côte d’Ivoire

Another source of great concern relates to links between terrorist groups operating in different conflict zones across the region, and in its neighbourhoods, as it may have played a role in some groups’ “expanding capabilities.”²⁴⁹ For instance, it is believed that some Boko Haram militants received training in Somalia, including “instruction in IEDs”²⁵⁰, and in northern Mali in 2012, where AQIM had then managed to conquer territories.²⁵¹ This latter experience has reportedly “resulted in the boost in Boko Haram’s desert warfare capabilities, including the appearance of technical [vehicles with a mounted gun] and the use of RPGs for the first time in Nigeria in early 2013, along with ‘shaped charge’ IEDs for suicide attacks.”²⁵² However, these ties have “likely declined after 2013, especially after the French intervention severed networks between Boko Haram and AQIM.”²⁵³ While there have also been suspicions of arms transfers between IS networks active in Libya and in the Lake Chad, there has been very little concrete evidence of it, with “only a few almost anecdotal reports of a couple of traders being caught on their way from southern Libya to Nigeria.”²⁵⁴ More recently, new concerns have been raised by the apparent rapprochement between IS-affiliates operating in the Sahel and the Lake Chad, with ISIS central claiming attacks carried out by ISGS under the name of ISWAP. Most interviewees however indicated that, although requiring close monitoring, it remained uncertain whether this last development has translated into any materiel support being provided by one cell to another.

2.4. Conclusion

Despite the African Union’s efforts to curb violence by “Silencing the Guns” on the continent by the year 2020,²⁵⁵ including by addressing the issue of illicit arms trafficking and stopping “rebels/ insurgents, non-state actors and their financiers and political backers from accessing weapons,”²⁵⁶ around 50 million SALW are still believed to be in circulation across the African continent, among

249 Omar Mahmoud, “Local, Global, or in Between? Boko Haram’s Messaging, Strategy, Membership, and Support Networks,” in Jacob Zenn. (ed.) *Boko Haram Beyond the Headlines: Analyses of Africa’s Enduring Insurgency*. Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, May 2018, p.98. <https://ctc.usma.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/Boko-Haram-Beyond-the-Headlines.pdf>.

250 Barkindo, A. “Abubakr Shekau: Boko Haram’s Underestimated Corporatist-Strategic Leader” in Zenn, J. (ed.) *Boko Haram Beyond the Headlines: Analyses of Africa’s Enduring Insurgency*. Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, May 2018, p.61. <https://ctc.usma.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/Boko-Haram-Beyond-the-Headlines.pdf>

251 Omar Mahmoud, “Local, Global, or in Between? Boko Haram’s Messaging, Strategy, Membership, and Support Networks,” in Jacob Zenn. (ed.) *Boko Haram Beyond the Headlines: Analyses of Africa’s Enduring Insurgency*. Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, May 2018, pp.98-99. <https://ctc.usma.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/Boko-Haram-Beyond-the-Headlines.pdf>. See also: Schemm, P. “France Says Nigerian Militants Trained in Mali,” *Associated Press*, November 14, 2013. <https://apnews.com/article/045270e9d410419394c903b3dda1e50d>.

252 Omar Mahmoud, “Local, Global, or in Between? Boko Haram’s Messaging, Strategy, Membership, and Support Networks,” in Jacob Zenn. (ed.) *Boko Haram Beyond the Headlines: Analyses of Africa’s Enduring Insurgency*. Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, May 2018, p.99. <https://ctc.usma.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/Boko-Haram-Beyond-the-Headlines.pdf>.

253 Ibid., p.111.

254 Interview, international arms expert based in Europe. See: Cooper, H. “Boko Haram and ISIS are Collaborating More, U.S. Military Says,” *New York Times*, April 20, 2016. <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/04/21/world/africa/boko-haram-and-isis-are-collaborating-more-us-military-says.html>

255 Okumu, W., Atta-Asamoah, a., & Sharamo, R. D. *Silencing the Guns in Africa by 2020: Achievements, Opportunities and Challenges*, ISS Monograph 203, August 2020. <https://issafrica.org/research/monographs/silencing-the-guns-in-africa-by-2020-achievements-opportunities-and-challenges>.

256 For more details, see the African Union Master Roadmap of Practical Steps to Silence the Guns in Africa by Year 2020 (Lusaka Master Roadmap 2016), available here: https://au.int/sites/default/files/documents/38304-doc-1_au_roadmap_silencing_guns_2020_pdf_en.pdf.

which almost 80 percent are in the hands of civilians.²⁵⁷ West Africa in particular has been faced with a complex web of security challenges in recent years. In a context marked by chronic political instability and mounting violence, armed groups have proliferated and increased the demand for and the illicit circulation of SALW, the main type of equipment used by terrorist groups. Despite the presence of a wide range of armed actors across the subregion, including various al-Qaeda and Islamic State-affiliated organisations, little difference can be observed in terms of their armament. Most of these groups, whether located in the Sahel or the Lake Chad Basin, seem to rely on what some experts labelled as “a homogeneous pool of material from the immediate region”²⁵⁸ which is mainly comprised of automatic assault rifles, machineguns, and rocket-propelled grenade launchers, supplemented with very limited set of heavy weapons.

Terrorist organisations active in West Africa nonetheless appear to have had access to a relatively steady supply of SALW, mainly originating from different national stockpiles. In addition to arms recirculating following various conflicts, civil wars, and rebellions, a large share of these groups’ equipment continues to be diverted from security and defence forces following attacks on posts and convoys, and to lesser extent, as a result of the practices of corrupt officials. Their ability to adapt their arms procurement following the decrease in arm flows originating from Libya, with terrorist networks starting to rely more heavily on battlefield captures, moreover underscores the fact that “there are many different types of small arms trafficking channels, which can also change over time [and] are constantly adapting to new regulations, changing security conditions and the requirements of those who demand and use these weapons.”²⁵⁹ It underlines the necessity of acting on numerous fronts—from enhanced stockpile management to border surveillance, intelligence-sharing, anti-corruption measures, etc.—in order to curb illicit arms trafficking.

Such efforts would certainly also help “breaking the funding and logistics supply chains”²⁶⁰ of violent extremist cells active in West Africa. In addition to representing critical operational means enabling terrorist actors to conduct their violent activities, this research has indeed shown that SALW also appear as strategic assets allowing them to generate funds. Even if representing valuable trafficking commodities, most experts interviewed seem to agree that proceeds from either a direct or indirect involvement in SALW trafficking is rather small, especially as compared to funds derived from other activities requiring the possession of arms. SALW possessed by terrorist organisations mainly facilitate, or even enable, the conduction of other income-generating activities ranging from KFR, robberies, thefts, as well as taxation on goods, activities, and people within the areas under their control. Apart from funds derived from potential donations, or legitimate businesses, SALW seem to play a critical role in most of the financing sources terrorist organisations currently rely on.

“I would not say that weapons are actually generating revenue for terrorist groups, neither directly nor indirectly in terms of weapons as a commodity. Then, of course, weapons are what makes everything else possible for them. That is what creates their authority, their capacity to threaten and therefore to collect and generate revenues.”

International arms expert based in North America

Concerning the evolution of current trends, it seems that “as the demand for arms is influenced by insecurity, it is reasonable to assume that it will not diminish in the near future.”²⁶¹ Serious efforts will

257 Small Arms Survey. *Weapons Compass. Mapping Illicit Small Arms Flows in Africa*. January 2019, p.31, <http://www.smallarmssurvey.org/fileadmin/docs/U-Reports/SAS-AU-Weapons-Compass.pdf>.

258 Interview, international arms expert based in North America.

259 Nicolas Florquin, “Les filières multiples du trafic des armes légères,” *Diplomatie*, n° 92, mai-juin 2018, p.57. <http://www.smallarmssurvey.org/fileadmin/docs/L-External-publications/2018/Diplomatie-no-92-Les-filieres-multiples-du-traffic-des%20armes-legeres.pdf>.

260 Sampson Kwarkye, “Breaking terrorism supply chains in West Africa.” *ISS Today*, June 8, 2020. <https://issafrica.org/iss-today/breaking-terrorism-supply-chains-in-west-africa>.

261 Mattias Nowak, “Enjeux du trafic d’armes : l’Afrique de l’Ouest dans la tourmente”. *Les Grands Dossiers de Diplomatie*, n° 52, août-septembre 2019, p.55. www.smallarmssurvey.org/fileadmin/docs/L-External-publications/2019/Grands-Dossiers-Diplomatie-no-52-Enjeux-du-traffic-armes.pdf.

thus be required to address the acquisition of SALW by terrorist organisations. However, due account should be paid to the risks associated with disrupting these groups' supply chain, which could not only prompt attacks aimed to "protect hideouts, secure supply routes, or attack border posts that extremists believe are impediments to their supply of materials,"²⁶² but also impact "the livelihoods of individuals and communities who rely on cross-border trade."²⁶³

262 Sampson Kwarkye, "Breaking terrorism supply chains in West Africa." *ISS Today*, June 8, 2020. <https://issafrica.org/iss-today/breaking-terrorism-supply-chains-in-west-africa>.

263 Ibid.