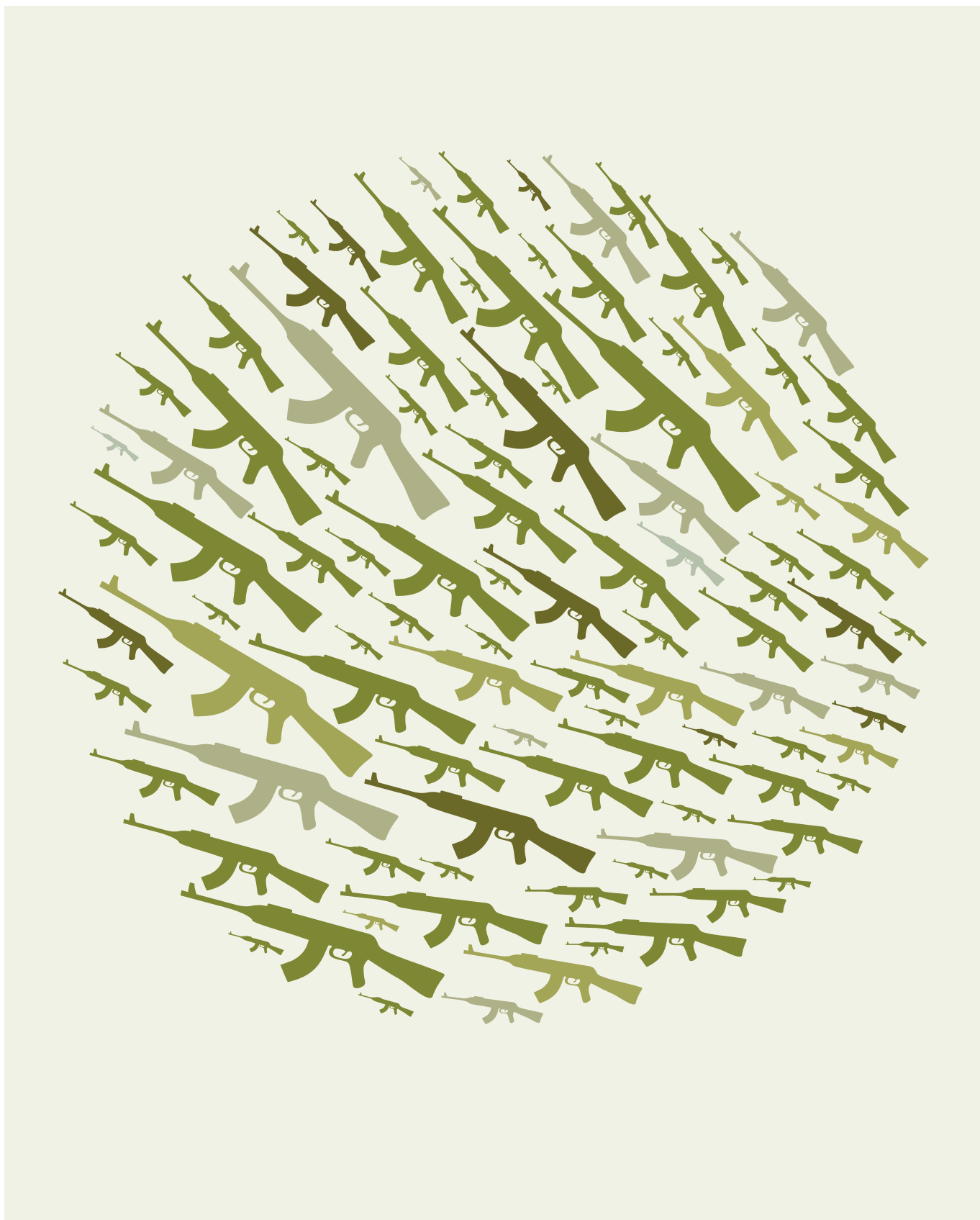


# FIREARMS TRAFFICKING IN THE SAHEL

TOCTA  
*Sahel*

Transnational Organized  
Crime Threat Assessment



**UNODC**

United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime





# Firearms Trafficking in the Sahel

Transnational Organized Crime  
Threat Assessment – Sahel



## Acknowledgements

This report is part of a Transnational Organized Crime Threat Assessment (TOCTA) on the Sahel. It was prepared by the UNODC Research and Trend Analysis Branch (RAB) and the UNODC Regional Office for West and Central Africa (ROSEN), under the supervision of Angela Me (Chief, RAB) and Amado Philip de Andrés (Regional Representative, ROSEN), and the coordination of François Patuel (Head of the Research and Awareness Unit, ROSEN). The project was funded by the Federal Republic of Germany.

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The preparation of this report would not have been possible without the data and information reported by Member States to UNODC and other international organizations. UNODC is particularly grateful to government and law enforcement officials contacted during research undertaken in the Sahel.

The TOCTA Sahel team would also like to extend heartfelt thanks to all those who agreed to be interviewed. Their generosity, time and willingness contributed greatly to this research. Invaluable inputs and suggestions were received from Hernan Epstein, Kameldy Neldjingaye and colleagues from the Global Firearms Programme, including Simonetta Grassi, Abdou Hamani and Leonardo Lara Villarroel.

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# Key takeaways

➤ Although more than 9,300 people died in violent incidents in the Sahel countries in 2022, the single greatest source of violent incidents is not related to clashes between armed groups and pro-governmental forces.

➤ Several mutually reinforcing factors have contributed to the growth of both insurgency and banditry, including intercommunal tensions, violence between farmers and herders, violent religious extremism and competition over scarce resources such as water and arable land. Environmental factors such as climate change may also be having an impact on conflicts in the Sahel. All the groups involved require firearms and ammunition, and as their numbers multiply so too do business opportunities for arms traffickers in the Sahel countries.

➤ While there is evidence of long-range firearms trafficking to the Sahel, including by air from France and from Turkey via Nigeria, it appears that the vast majority of firearms trafficked in the region are procured within Africa.

➤ Since 2019, Libya has become a source of supply for newly manufactured weapons. Apparently, newly produced AK-pattern assault rifles, sourced from Libya, are available on the black market in Gao, Timbuktu and Ménaka regions of northern Mali.

➤ Evidence shows that the diversion of weapons from national armed forces – whether through capture on the battlefield, theft from armouries, or purchase from corrupt elements in the military – is the primary source of firearms in the Sahel countries today.

➤ The AK-type models that make up a large share of the assault rifles in the Sahel are durable and often still effective in combat decades after their manufacture. Rebels who participated in the 1990 Tuareg rebellions in Mali and the Niger, as well as previous uprisings, retained many of their arms, which were either held in caches or in the possession of individuals.

➤ As well as remaining in the region, weapons trafficked in the Sahel also make their way to the coastal countries of West Africa and have been used in terrorist attacks in the Gulf of Guinea.

➤ To enable communities to defend themselves against extremist groups, some States in the region have armed militias or other non-state actors, whose weapons are even more likely to be diverted than those entrusted to official national security structures.





➤ Despite there being numerous sources of manufactured firearms, the large market for artisanal weapons made in West and Central Africa implies that there are limits to the supply. While violent extremist groups linked to Al Qaida and Islamic State are more likely to use industrially manufactured weapons, other non-state armed groups, such as traditional hunter groups and other community militias, may prefer artisanal weapons because they are cheaper.

➤ Open markets selling firearms in the Sahel are often located in small towns and villages along strategic corridors. Many of the areas known as being hubs for weapons trafficking are simply areas with a low state presence along borders or transportation routes where multiple criminal activities take place.

➤ As the supply chains and traffickers are many and varied, it appears that the number of individuals who are primarily involved in large-scale arms trafficking in the Sahel countries is limited. Rather, it seems that weapons are exchanged in an opportunistic way depending on shifts in supply and demand.

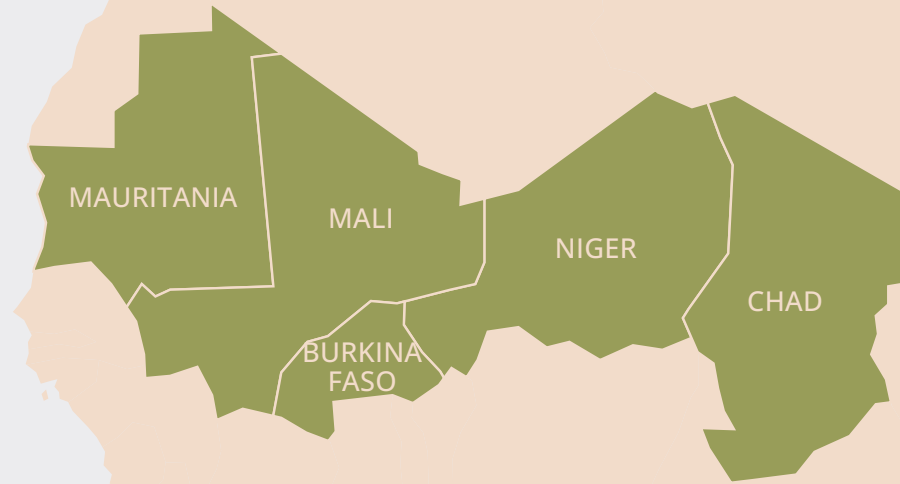
➤ Ethnic connections can be important facilitators of arms trafficking across national borders in the Sahel. Many of the conflicts in the region have an ethnic dimension, as do criminal groups, who may prefer to sell or transfer firearms to co-ethnics in other countries. Nonetheless, in some cases, similar weapons have been confiscated from very different groups, suggesting that they share a common source of supply or that they exchange firearms.

➤ Violent extremist groups are not primarily engaged in firearms trafficking in the Sahel. However, they may have a “client-seller” relationship with the communities and other armed groups they interact with, and are only likely to receive an indirect financial benefit from the use of firearms rather than from their trafficking.

➤ Militant control of transportation routes is key to successful arms trafficking in the Sahel. The limited number of ways of crossing the Sahara Desert means that the groups that are in position to tax and control trans-Sahara trade can raise funds to purchase firearms and protect their goods.

➤ In the Sahel, investigations and court decisions often only link firearms offences with illicit possession. Firearms are usually treated as tools for committing crime or as evidence. Addressing the illicit origin of and trafficking in firearms is the only possible way to target the perpetrators at the source of trafficking networks.





**For the purpose of this report,  
“Sahel countries” refers to  
Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali,  
Mauritania and the Niger.**



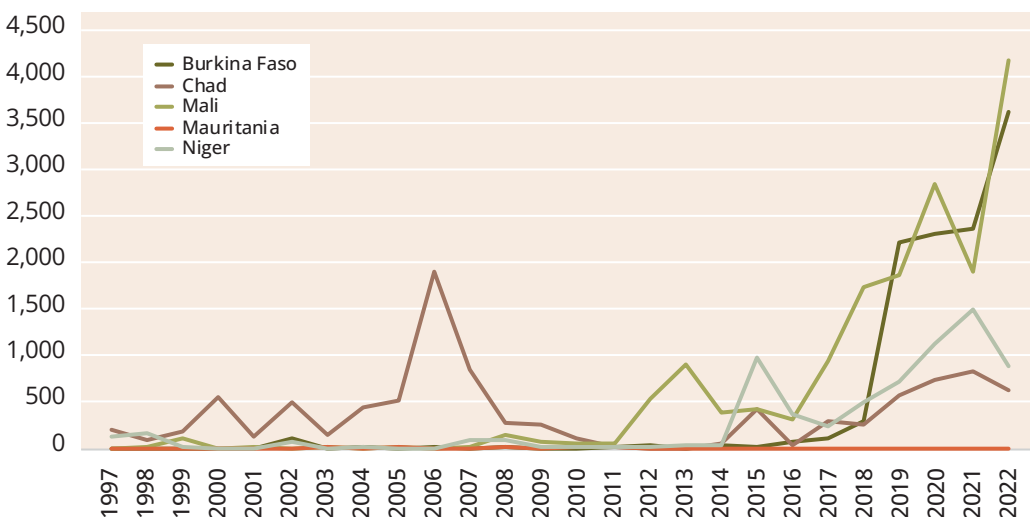
# Firearms Trafficking in the Sahel

## Market background

There is often no clear delineation between violent crime and conflict in the Sahel countries and the sine qua non of both is firearms.<sup>1</sup> Groups of armed men are involved in all manner of violent and acquisitive crime in the region, which has known several periods of upheaval since the 1990s (figure 1).<sup>2</sup> Several mutually reinforcing factors have contributed to the growth of both insurgency and banditry in the Sahel, including intercommunal tensions, violence between farmers and herders, violent religious extremism and competition over scarce resources such as water and arable land.<sup>3</sup> The longer the region remains insecure, the more people are likely to take up arms there. From the perspective of the victims of violence, it matters little whether the motivation is criminal or political.

After the fall of Libyan leader Muammar Gadhafi in 2011, Tuareg soldiers who had served in the Libyan military returned to the Sahel with looted weapons,<sup>4</sup> helping precipitate the latest in a series of Tuareg rebellions in the north of Mali.<sup>5</sup> This rebellion was followed by a coup d'état in Mali in 2012.<sup>6</sup> Extremist groups capitalized on the ensuing chaos, leading to the growth and consolidation of groups that would affiliate with Al Qaida and Islamic State. Through the capture of military and police bases in the north of the country, the groups added Malian weapons to their arsenals.<sup>7</sup> The main Tuareg separatist groups signed a peace accord with the Malian Government in 2015,<sup>8</sup> but the extremist groups continue to carry out attacks, with the conflict spilling over into Burkina Faso and the Niger, most notably in the transborder region known as Liptako-Gourma (map 1).<sup>9</sup>

**FIG 1.** Number of fatalities in the Sahel countries per year, 1997–2022



Source: Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) for Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania and the Niger between 1 January 1997 and 17 November 2022.

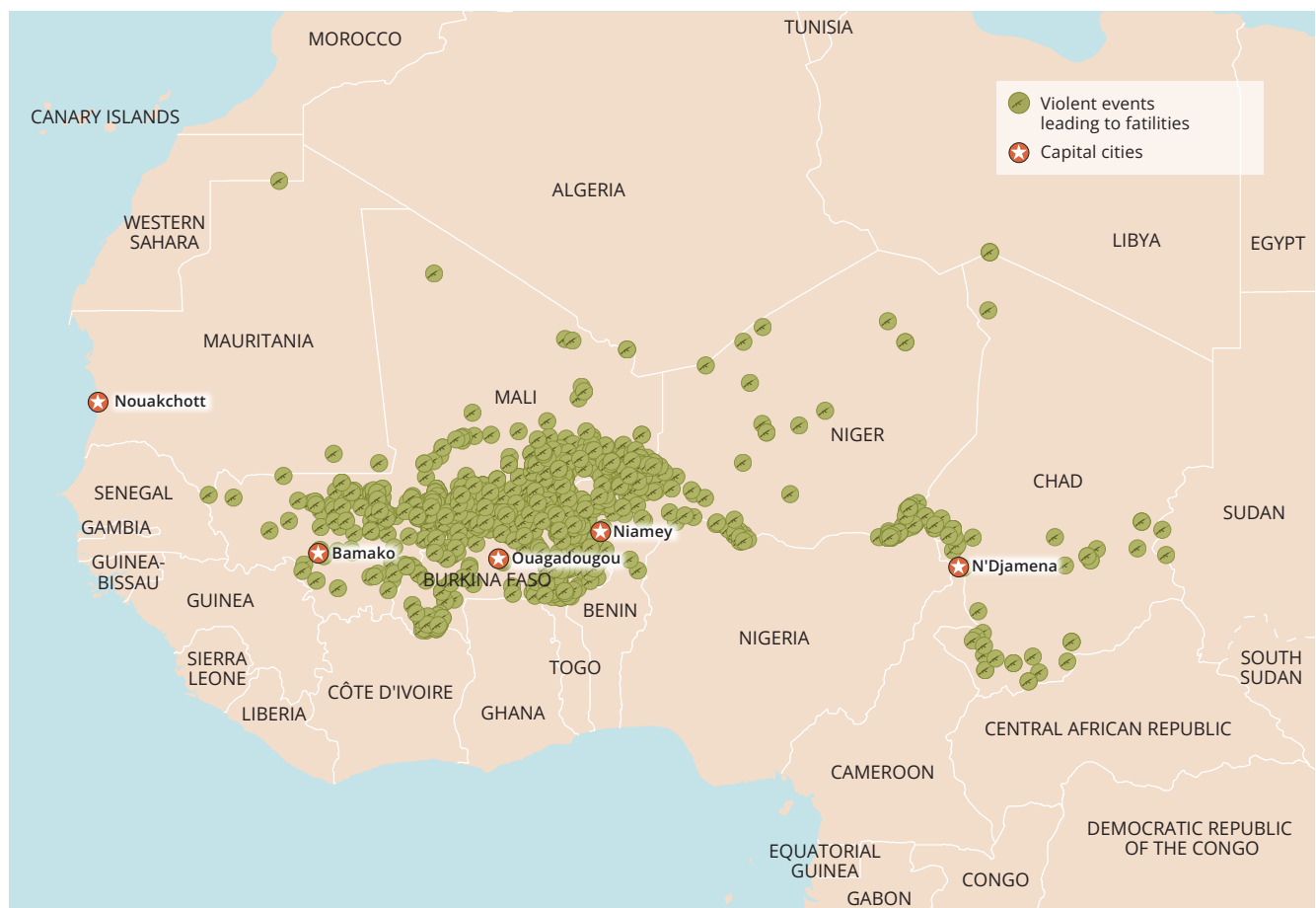
That is just part of the story, however. Around the same time as the Tuareg rebellion, although independently, the violent extremist group known as Boko Haram expanded its area of operations from north-eastern Nigeria to include the parts of Cameroon, Chad and the Niger that are in the central Lake Chad Basin. Yet the fact that these seemingly unrelated events occurred simultaneously could suggest a common driver. There is debate in the academic community, for example, on the impact that environmental factors such as climate change may be having on conflicts in the Sahel, and the extent to which they can be isolated from other issues such as governance and demographics.<sup>10</sup>

The central Lake Chad Basin and the central Sahel remain the two major theatres of the current conflicts in

West and Central Africa. These conflicts have led to mass population displacement, disrupted local agriculture and education, and have recently spurred military coups in Mali and in Burkina Faso, as well as an attempted coup in the Niger.<sup>11</sup> Additionally, in Chad, various armed actors, including mercenaries and rebels operating on both sides of the country's borders with Libya and the Sudan, have fought with each other over resources and territorial control, as well as with the Chadian Government.<sup>12</sup> In April 2021, the Chadian President, Idriss Déby, died from injuries sustained in clashes with rebels in the north of the country.<sup>13</sup>

Remarkably, the single greatest source of violent incidents in West Africa is not actually related to clashes between armed groups and pro-governmental forces,

**MAP 1.** Fatalities associated with non-state armed groups in the Sahel countries, January–November 2022



The boundaries and names shown and the designations used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by the United Nations. Final boundary between the Republic of Sudan and the Republic of South Sudan has not yet been determined.

Source: ACLED data for Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania and the Niger between 1 January and 30 November 2022.

## NON-STATE ARMED GROUPS IN THE SAHEL<sup>a</sup>

The region's official branch of Al Qaida, Jama'at Nusrat ul-Islam wa al-Muslimin (JNIM), was formed in 2017 through a merger between Ansar Dine, Katibat Macina, Al Mourabitoun and Al Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb.<sup>b</sup> According to data on violent deaths gathered by ACLED, JNIM affiliates are now active in large swaths of central and northern Mali, as well as in Burkina Faso and the Niger, and have spread their activities southwards into parts of southern Mali, southern Burkina Faso and northern Côte d'Ivoire.<sup>c</sup>

Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) emerged from a split from Al-Mourabitoun in 2015 and was officially recognized by Islamic State in 2016.<sup>d</sup> The group is most active in Mali, the Niger and Burkina Faso. The Lake Chad basin (the south-eastern Niger, south-western Chad, north-eastern Nigeria and northern Cameroon) is dominated by a separate Boko Haram splinter group known as Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP).<sup>e</sup>

Self-defence militias or vigilante groups have emerged throughout the region, including traditional hunter (*Dozo*) groups and the Dogon self-defence group Dan Na Ambassagou. To protect their herds, many pastoralists have also taken up arms. In addition to these informal groups, self-defence militias have been legalized in Burkina Faso.<sup>f</sup> In Mali, very few of the members of armed groups that signed the 2015 peace accords have been disarmed and demobilized<sup>g</sup>,

and some are alleged to have been involved in banditry and trafficking.<sup>h</sup> They include groups affiliated to Coordination of Movements of Azawad (CMA)<sup>i</sup> and to the Plateforme, a coalition of armed movements signatory to the Agreement for Peace and Reconciliation in Mali.<sup>j</sup> In effect, the possession and use of military weapons by civilians has become tolerated in these countries, complicating firearms enforcement.<sup>k</sup>

Bandits – groups of armed men who raid and plunder villages – are strongest in north-western Nigeria but are found throughout the Sahel. When asked what his group did with the ransom of 60 million Nigerian naira they were paid for a group of kidnapped schoolgirls, one bandit said: “We bought more rifles”.<sup>l</sup> Their existence has also spurred self-defence militias, which may take the offensive against communities they believe to be complicit with bandits. The perception that bandit groups are structured along ethnic lines fuels intercommunal tensions.

Traffickers may be aligned to, or be part of, any of these groups or may simply pay them for safe passage. They also constitute a source of demand for firearms, as they seek to protect their merchandise from bandits, particularly in northern Mali, the northern Niger and northern Chad, as well as southern Libya and Algeria. People moving goods in trucks in those areas may have PK-style machine guns in addition to AK variants for personal protection.<sup>m</sup> Demand for weaponry is particularly strong in the region's gold-mining areas.<sup>n</sup>

a These are broad categories of armed groups operating in the Sahel and are not mutually exclusive. At different points in time, groups of traffickers may become involved in banditry and vice versa.

b UNSC, “Jama'at Nusrat ul-Islam wa al-Muslimin”. Available at: <https://www.un.org/securitycouncil/content/jamaa-nusrat-ul-islam-wa-al-muslimin-jnim>.

c ACLED, “10 Conflicts to Worry About in 2022”, February 2022.

d UNSC, “Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS)”. Available at: <https://www.un.org/securitycouncil/content/islamic-state-greater-sahara-isgs>.

e UNSC, “Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP)”. Available at: <https://www.un.org/securitycouncil/content/islamic-state-west-africa-province-iswap-0>.

f Claire Zutterling, “Armer les civils: la loi des volontaires pour la défense de la patrie au Burkina Faso”, GRIP, 30 October 2020; Antonin Tisseron, *Pandora's box. Burkina Faso, Self-defence Militias and VDP Law in Fighting Jihadism* (Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2021).

g These being the Plateforme Des Mouvements du 14 Juin 2014 d'Alger (Plateforme) and the Coordination des Mouvements de l'Azawad (CMA).

h As at mid-2020, the disarmament, demobilization and reintegration process involved only 1,840 combatants from the signatory groups, out of nearly 85,000 combatants registered. The following two-year period has seen little progress. See Mathieu Pellerin, “Mali's Algiers Peace Agreement, five years on: an uneasy calm”, International Crisis Group, 24 June 2020 and the Carter Center, “Report of the independent observer: observations of the implementation on the agreement on peace and reconciliation in Mali, resulting from the Algiers Peace Process”, 2022.

i CMA-affiliated groups include the High Council for the Unity of Azawad (HCUA), the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA), and the Arab Movement of Azawad (MAA).

j Plateforme-affiliated groups include Ganda Izo, Mouvement pour le salut de l'Azawad (MSA) of the Dawshak, Groupe d'autodéfense des Touaregs Imghad et leurs alliés (GATIA), Ganda Koy, and MAA-Platform

k For instance, when a Ganda Koy militia commander suspected of being involved in migrant smuggling, recruiting migrants on behalf of armed groups and maintaining a criminal gang involved in robberies, murders, extortion and abduction, was summoned to a police station in Gao, northern Mali, he came with his weapon and openly threatened the officers. See UNSC, Final report of the Panel of Experts established pursuant to Security Council resolution 2374 (2017) on Mali and renewed pursuant to resolution 2484 (2019), S/2020/785/Rev.1, para. 105.

l BBC, “Face to face with the bandit warlords of Nigeria”. Available at <https://www.bbc.com/news/av/world-africa-62270540>.

m Interviews with an elected official and advisor to one of the signatory groups in Bamako, Mali, December 2021.

n Roberto Sollazzo and Matthias Nowak, “Tri-border transit: Trafficking and smuggling in the Burkina Faso–Côte d'Ivoire–Mali region”, Briefing Paper, Small Arms Survey, October 2020; Nicolas Florquin, “Linking P/CVE & illicit arms flows in Africa”, Resolve Network Policy Note, November 2019; International Crisis Group, “Getting a grip on central Sahel's gold rush”, No. 282/Africa, 13 November 2019.

but to intercommunal violence between agrarian and pastoralist communities in the North West and North Central regions of Nigeria, which is fuelled by criminal groups.<sup>14</sup> According to Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) data, this intercommunal violence has killed more people in recent years than Boko Haram and the Islamic State’s West Africa Province (ISWAP) in the North East of Nigeria.

The involvement of Sahelian armed groups in various forms of banditry, including cattle rustling, robberies and kidnappings has also been fuelling violence in the Sahel by escalating existing intercommunal tensions.<sup>15</sup> Throughout the region, groups of bandits and traffickers have grown and are fighting for control of trade routes.<sup>16</sup> All these groups require firearms and ammunition, and as their numbers multiply so, too, do business opportunities for arms traffickers in the Sahel countries.

### Nature of the market

In the Sahel, criminals profit from supplying firearms both to the groups that prey on communities and the communities that seek to defend themselves from those

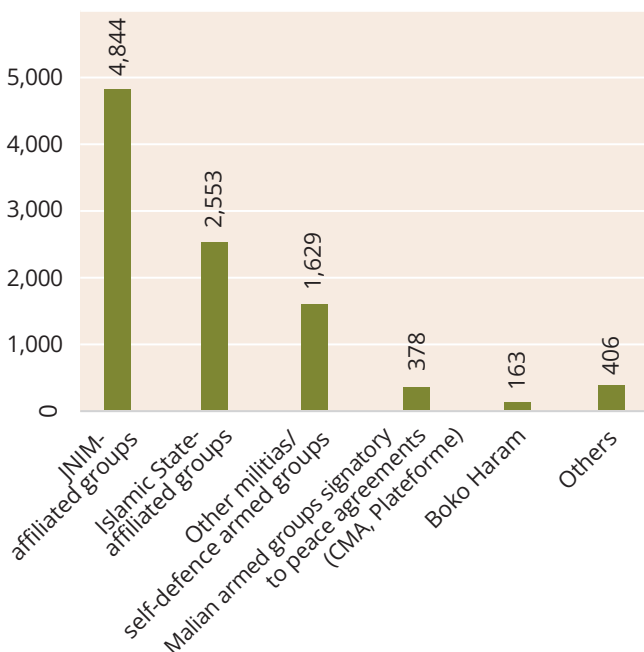
groups. Firearms sales can also be a source of funding for extremist groups, who create demand for the weapons they supply. Criminals and extremist groups have access to different types of manufactured weapons from several sources (figures 3 and 4) and yet the demand appears to exceed the supply, as prices remain high and artisanal firearms are also abundant.

### Sourcing of firearms

There is evidence of long-range firearms trafficking to the Sahel, including by air from France and from Turkey via Nigeria.<sup>17</sup> It appears, however, that the vast majority of firearms trafficked in the region are procured within Africa,<sup>18</sup> and come onto the market from the following sources:

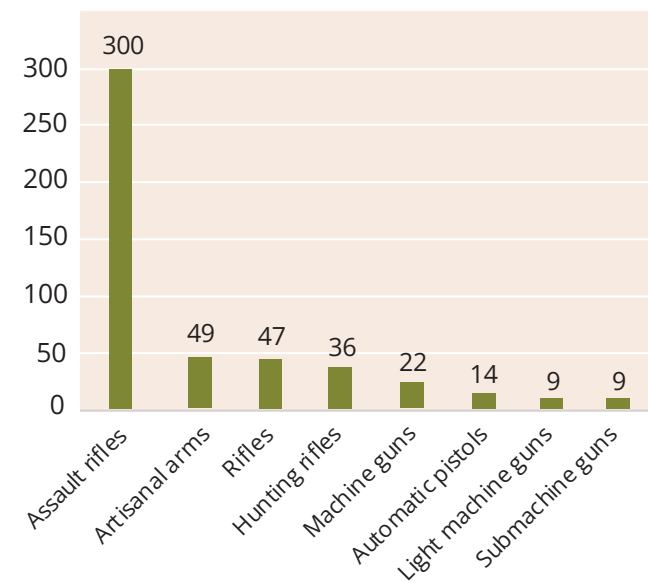
- **Libya**, both at the onset of the 2012 conflict in Mali and subsequently
- **Diverted weapons** from national militaries in the region
- **Legacy firearms** from previous conflicts<sup>19</sup>
- **Transfers of weapons** from state security forces to support non-state actors
- **Artisanal production**

**FIG 2.** Fatalities associated with non-state armed groups in the Sahel countries, January–November 2022



Source: ACLED data for Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania and the Niger between 1 January and 30 November 2022.

**FIG 3.** Breakdown of weapons seized in Mali (numbers), 2014–2020

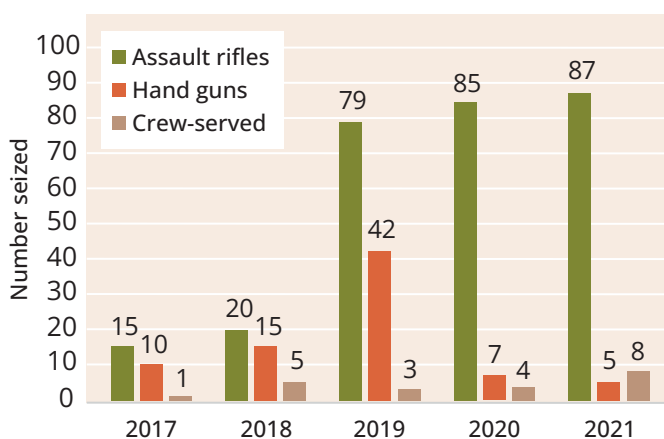


Source: Secrétariat Permanent de la lutte contre la prolifération des armes légères et de petits calibre, Mali, 28 December 2021.

**Libya**

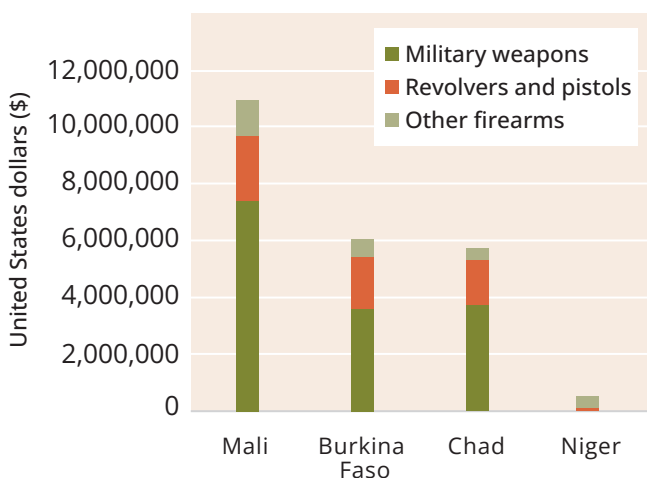
The influx of weapons into the Sahel from Libya after the fall of Gadhafi was a key source of firearms entering Mali at the onset of the conflict there in 2012. Significant seizures of firearms and other material from Libya were made for two or three years after the initial influx but Libya’s role as a source country diminished after 2014.<sup>20,21</sup> This was the result of three factors: renewed conflict in Libya; strengthened oversight of arms imports into Libya;<sup>22</sup> and security and surveillance interventions.<sup>23</sup>

**FIG 4.** Annual breakdown of the main types of weapon seized in Burkina Faso, 2017–2021



Source: Burkina Faso National Commission on Small Arms and Light Weapons (CNLPAL), 8 February 2022.

**FIG 5.** Value of recorded imports of firearms in the Sahel countries, 2017–2021



Source: Based on International Trade Centre (ITC) Trade Map data, using the following HS codes: 9301 (military weapons, including submachine guns), 9302 (revolvers and pistols) and 9303 (firearms and similar devices that operate by the firing of an explosive charge, e.g. sporting shotguns and rifles).

Note: Data on Mauritania are not available on the ITC Trade Map.

By 2016/17, organized convoys of firearms departing Libya for Mali had, in the words of one expert, “gone quiet.”<sup>24</sup> Since 2019, however, Libya has again become a source of supply, this time for newly manufactured weapons. According to an elected official in Mali, newly produced AK-pattern assault rifles, sourced from Libya, are available on the black market in Gao, Timbuktu and Ménaka regions of northern Mali.<sup>25</sup> Moreover, the most recent assessment by the United Nations Panel of Experts monitoring the implementation of the sanctions regime in Libya notes that most Libyan territory is still controlled by armed groups and that the arms embargo imposed on the country is “ineffective”, as certain Member States continue to violate it.<sup>26</sup>

**Diverted weapons**

Interviews and other evidence show that the diversion of weapons from national armed forces – whether through capture on the battlefield, theft from armouries, or purchase from corrupt elements in the military – is the primary source of firearms in the Sahel countries today.<sup>27</sup> This perspective is backed up by studies of the makes and models of weapons found among non-state armed groups.<sup>28</sup>

Since the 2012 conflict in Mali, military, gendarmerie and police outposts across the Sahel countries have been targeted for their weapons and ammunition. There is also evidence of weapons being diverted from official government stocks in Chad, Cameroon, the Niger and Nigeria.<sup>29</sup> Weapons can also be stolen from peacekeeping forces.<sup>30</sup>

Some of the countries in the region continue to import millions of dollars of new firearms, arguably contributing to the divertible supply (figure 5).

**Legacy firearms**

The AK-type models that make up a large share of the assault rifles in the Sahel are durable and often still effective in combat decades after their manufacture. According to a senior government official specialized in countering arms proliferation, rebels who participated in the 1990 Tuareg rebellions in Mali and the Niger, as well as previous uprisings, retained many of their arms, which were either held in caches or in the possession of individuals.<sup>31</sup> The civil wars in Sierra Leone, Liberia and Côte d’Ivoire between the 1990s and 2010s also contributed significantly to the supply of weapons in the region.<sup>32</sup>

### Transfers of weapons

To enable communities to defend themselves against extremist groups, some States have armed militias or other non-state actors, whose weapons are even more likely to be diverted than those entrusted to official national security structures. For example, in Burkina Faso, the Government launched a programme in 2020 to arm citizens who joined the *Volontaires pour la défense de la patrie* (VDP), a national self-defence movement.<sup>33</sup> However, reportedly, VDP members are easy targets for extremists who target them both for their weapons and to deter any future collaboration with the State.<sup>34</sup> Meanwhile, in central Mali, self-defence militias such as *Dan Na Ambassagou*, are alleged to have received resources from sympathetic elements within the state security forces.<sup>35</sup>

### Artisanal production

Despite there being a multitude of sources of manufactured firearms, the large market for artisanal weapons made in West and Central Africa implies that there are limits to the supply. In 2018, Burkina Faso estimated that 60 per cent of the firearms seized in the country in 2016/17 were of artisanal production.<sup>36</sup> According to the Nigerian National Small Arms and Light Weapons Survey,

17 per cent of rural and 10 per cent of urban weapon holders in the country possess artisanal weapons.<sup>37</sup> This type of firearm is manufactured throughout West and Central Africa, particularly in Ghana.<sup>38</sup> As one analyst noted, “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”.<sup>39</sup> Artisanal weapons are not limited to crude rifles and shotguns, however, and include everything up to fully automatic weapons.<sup>40</sup>

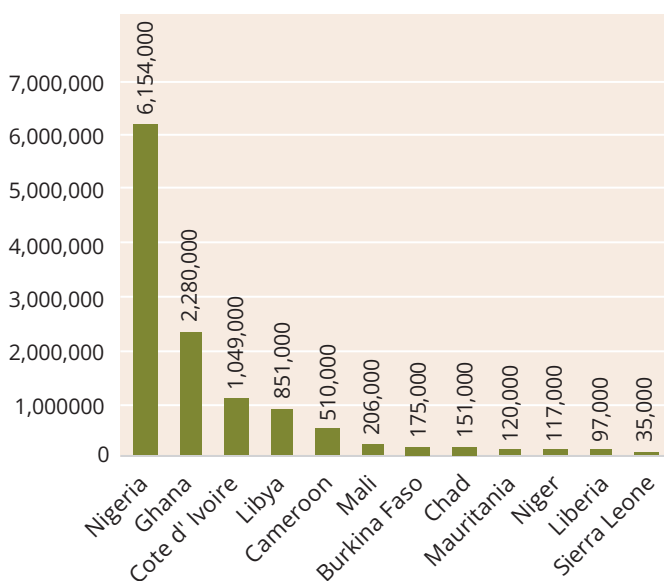
While violent extremist groups linked to Al Qaida and Islamic State are more likely to use industrially manufactured weapons, other non-state armed groups, such as traditional hunter groups and other community militias, may prefer artisanal weapons because they are cheaper.<sup>41</sup> Between 2014 and 2020, a little more than half of the seized weapons reported in Mali were artisanal.<sup>42</sup> This may change in the future if the ongoing conflicts spur individuals and groups to upgrade their weaponry, or industrially produced weapons become more available on the black market.

### Retailing of firearms

Just as the sources of firearms are diverse, so too are the *modi operandi* used to traffic them. For example, elements of Chadian rebel group *Le Front pour l’alternance et la concorde au Tchad* (FACT) are based in Libya, and may have access to new firearms through their allies there, as the United Nations Panel of Experts on Libya reports “ant-trafficking” across the country’s borders with Chad and Niger.<sup>43</sup> Armed groups access, and may resell, weapons secured through battlefield capture, raids on military installations and purchases from corrupt military officials. It appears, therefore, that the markets are highly decentralized.

That said, there are also open markets selling firearms in the Sahel, often located in small towns and villages along strategic corridors. For example, in August 2021, the United Nations Panel of Experts on Mali reported that the village of Agazragane, Mali, which is reportedly not controlled by any armed group,<sup>44</sup> is the largest weapons market in the region. The town of Ber, in Timbuktu region, is another example.<sup>45</sup> Located at the southern edge of the Sahara Desert and close to an important regional port on the Niger River, Ber serves as a crossroads with direct overland and river access to northern Mali’s two largest cities, Timbuktu and Gao. The town has long served as a market for consumer products smuggled from Algeria, as well as for firearms.<sup>46</sup>

**FIG 6.** Estimated number of firearms in civilian hands in selected countries in West and Central and North Africa, 2017



Source: Aaron Karp, “Estimating global civilian-held firearms numbers”, Small Arms Survey Briefing paper, June 2018.

**CASE STUDY: FIREARMS TRAFFICKED FROM THE SAHEL TO AND FROM THE GULF OF GUINEA<sup>a</sup>**

In early 2021, police officers in one of the countries on the Gulf of Guinea seized a significant quantity of weapons of war in a private residence near the capital, which included:

- › fifty-four AK-type rifles
- › nine RPG-7-type rocket-propelled grenade launchers
- › three 35 mm grenade launchers
- › three 12.7 calibre heavy machine guns
- › three light machine guns
- › three submachine guns
- › one bolt action rifle
- › rounds of different types of ammunition for use in these firearms

Investigations revealed that some of the suspects in the case were active members of the armed forces, and that some of the weapons had been diverted from national stockpiles, while others had been trafficked to and from a neighbouring Sahelian country. One of the main suspects is believed to have been in contact with terrorist armed groups in the Sahel.

Several suspects in the case were sentenced to 20 years in prison. There was no police or judicial cooperation between the coastal country and the Sahelian country, including investigating the connection between the suspects and Sahelian terrorist groups.

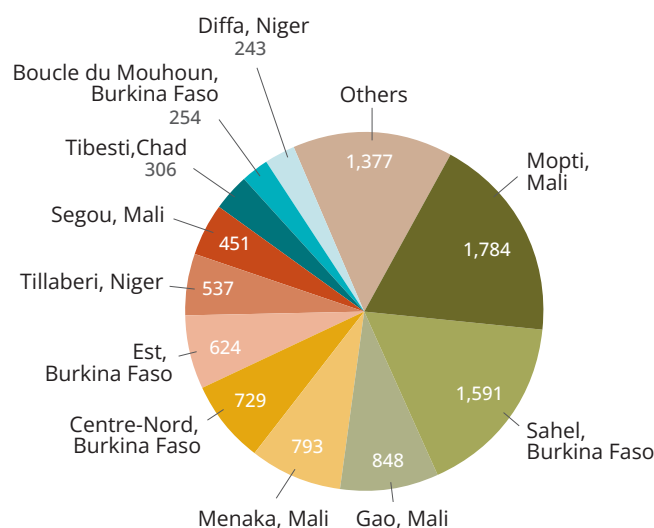
<sup>a</sup> Judicial sources, 2022. For security reasons, the names of the countries involved and the exact dates have been removed. Part of the flow also moves from the Sahel to the coastal countries of North Africa. In its 2018 IAFR response, Algeria estimated that the trafficking route from Mali to Algeria is the third most common route for firearms trafficking in the region.

Many of the areas known as being hubs for weapons trafficking are simply areas with a low state presence along borders or transportation routes where multiple criminal activities take place. The massive Kouri Bougoudi goldfield, for example, which straddles the border between Chad and Libya, is both a hub of criminal activity and a key zone for firearms trafficking.<sup>47</sup> Once in Chad, weapons moving from Libya may continue on to the Sudan as well as the Central African Republic.<sup>48</sup>

Demand for weapons appears to be highest in the central Sahel, however. As indicated by the fact that most of the recent conflict fatalities in the Sahel countries occurred in the contiguous areas of Burkina Faso, Mali and the Niger known as Liptako-Gourma (figure 7).

The variety of sources and retail hubs does not mean that the supply of weapons is sufficient to meet the demand for them. As noted above, many buyers resort to purchasing artisanal weapons, and firearms prices remain relatively high throughout the Sahel. In northern Mali, for example, black market prices for AK-style weapons ranged from \$750 to \$1,300 in 2021, depending on the model and condition, with cartridges selling for approximately \$0.70 each.<sup>49</sup> In the Niger, prices of similar firearms reportedly ranged from \$1,200 to \$1,400 in the area around Tahoua, \$1,600 in the areas around Maradi

**FIG 7. Conflict fatalities in the Sahel countries, January–November 2022**



Source: ACLED data for Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania and the Niger between 1 January and 30 November 2022.

Note: the following are all part of Liptako-Gourma: Mopti, Mali; Sahel, Burkina Faso; Gao, Mali; Menaka, Mali; Est, Burkina Faso; Tillaberi, the Niger.

## INVOLVEMENT OF VIOLENT EXTREMIST GROUPS IN WEAPONS TRAFFICKING

There is evidence that violent extremist groups are involved in some types of arms transfer. For instance, in 2015, a large shipment of weapons, ammunition and cash was seized in the northern Niger. The nine individuals arrested were suspected of being affiliated to a terrorist group. Investigations revealed that they had been selling drugs to individuals in a foreign country. It was also discovered that one of the members ran a charity in Libya that dealt with fundraising. Part of the money raised from the sale of drugs was used to purchase vehicles, weapons and ammunition. The rest of the cash seized, roughly \$562,500, was to be used to finance future terrorist actions in the Niger and the Sahel in general. All of the individuals arrested were charged with criminal association in relation to a terrorist enterprise, possession and transport of firearms and ammunition, money laundering and terrorist financing.<sup>a</sup>

Claims that violent extremist groups derive significant revenue from arms trafficking are likely overstated, however.<sup>b</sup> Violent extremist groups are not primarily engaged in firearms trafficking in the Sahel. Nonetheless, they may have a “client-seller” relationship with the communities and other armed groups they interact with, and are only likely to receive an indirect financial benefit from the use of firearms rather than from their trafficking.<sup>c</sup>

Violent extremist groups do not necessarily profit from arms trafficking because they are involved in their direct sale, but because they supply arms to allied groups and local franchises. When violent extremist groups transfer weapons to external actors, they typically do so in the form of in-kind contributions to actors whom they are trying to incorporate into their ranks, or to communities to whom they are offering protection.<sup>d</sup> There have even been instances of JNIM affiliates in central Mali disarming and demobilizing members and allies.<sup>e</sup>

Weapons seized by violent extremist groups throughout West Africa indicate that transfers take place cross borders, not least between Mali and Burkina Faso, where groups affiliated with JNIM, in particular Katibat Macina and Ansarul Islam, have shared or supplied each other with weapons over the course of several years.<sup>f</sup>

An instructive example of a violent extremist group’s capacity to transfer and transport weapons within the region are the attacks on a nightclub in Bamako, Mali, in March 2015, the attack on a guesthouse for United Nations contractors in Sévaré, Mali, in August 2015, the simultaneous attacks on a hotel and restaurant in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, in January 2016, the attack on Grand Bassam, Côte d’Ivoire, in March 2016, and the attack on the airport in Gao, Mali, in November 2016. Despite the geographical distance between those attacks, which took place in a period of two and a half years, all five were carried out by an Al Qaida-affiliated group using AKMS-pattern assault rifles of the same model, manufacturer and year of production, which investigators were able to link to the same initial illegal diversion.<sup>g</sup>

Munitions that originated in Malian stockpiles were also used in a 2021 attack in Togo, further underscoring the extent to which various violent extremist armed groups have connections across multiple countries and move weapons and goods across borders.<sup>h</sup>

a GIABA, *Terrorist Financing in West and Central Africa* (Dakar, 2016), p. 22.

b Interview with a high-ranking Malian military official, Bamako, Mali, 26 December 2021; Méryl Demuynck, Tanya Mehra and Reinier Bergema, “ICCT situation report: the use of small arms and light weapons by terrorist organisations as a source of finance in West Africa and the Horn of Africa”, International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague, June 2020.

c Ibid.

d Phone interview with a security analyst focusing on armed conflict in the Sahel, 28 January 2022; Interview with an arms expert in Bamako, Mali, 20 December 2022; William Assanvo et al., “Extrémisme violent, criminalité organisée et conflits locaux dans le Liptako-Gourma”, Institute for Security Studies, 10 December 2019; Méryl Demuynck, Tanya Mehra and Reinier Bergema, “ICCT situation report: the use of small arms and light weapons by terrorist organisations as a source of finance in West Africa and the Horn of Africa”, International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague, June 2020.

e Interview with an arms expert in Bamako, Mali, 20 December 2022.

f Interview with an arms expert in Bamako, Mali, 20 December 2022; Phone interview with security analyst focusing on armed conflict in the Sahel, 28 January 2022; William Assanvo et al., “Extrémisme violent, criminalité organisée et conflits locaux dans le Liptako-Gourma”, Institute for Security Studies, 10 December 2019; Méryl Demuynck, Tanya Mehra and Reinier Bergema, “ICCT situation report: the use of small arms and light weapons by terrorist organisations as a source of finance in West Africa and the Horn of Africa”, International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague, June 2020.

g Holger Anders, “Monitoring illicit arms flows. the role of UN peacekeeping operations”, Briefing Paper, Small Arms Survey, June 2018; Nicolas Florquin, “Linking P/CVE & illicit arms flows in Africa”, Resolve Network Policy Note, November 2019; CAR, *Investigating Cross-Border Weapon Transfers in the Sahel* (November 2016).

h Interview with an arms expert in Bamako, Mali, 20 December 2022.



and Zinder, and up to \$2,500 in those around Diffa and Maïné-Soroa.<sup>50</sup> In Burkina Faso, in 2019, AK-type assault rifles were reportedly available on the black market for approximately \$1,700.<sup>51</sup>

## Main actors involved in firearms trafficking

As the supply chains and traffickers are many and varied, it appears that the number of individuals who are primarily involved in large-scale arms trafficking in the Sahel countries is limited.<sup>52</sup> Rather, it seems that weapons are exchanged in an opportunistic way depending on shifts in supply and demand. For example, to increase their profit, traders who move commercial goods from one country to another may choose to transport weapons alongside other cargo.<sup>53</sup>

Ethnic connections can be important facilitators of arms trafficking across national borders in the Sahel. According to a government official in Mali, for example, traders who sell weapons in Ber are from Arab communities in northern Mali and have tribal connections in Libya.<sup>54</sup> Moreover, many of the conflicts in the region have an ethnic dimension, as do criminal groups, who may prefer to sell or transfer firearms to co-ethnics in other countries.

Nonetheless, in some cases, similar weapons have been confiscated from very different groups, suggesting that they share a common source of supply or that they exchange firearms. For example, Conflict Armament Research inspected four Tabuk assault rifles used in conflicts between herders and farmers in Nigeria, all of which had had their external markings erased in a “highly distinctive way” and had a “narrow range” of serial numbers. Similar weapons, which were used by Katibat Macina in an attack on a gendarmerie in central Mali, were detected in both northern Mali and the northern Niger.<sup>55</sup>

## Principal enablers of firearms trafficking

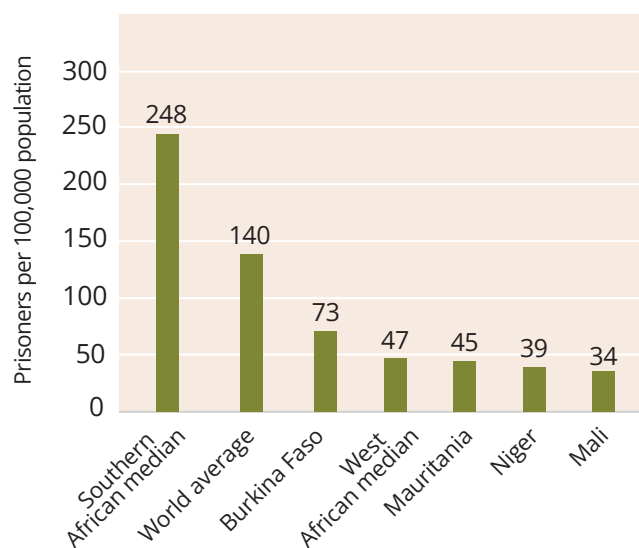
Firearms trafficking and conflict in the Sahel are two elements of a vicious circle, as conflict enables firearms trafficking and firearms trafficking enables conflict in the region. This is because combatants need weapons and ammunition and so do the community militias that have emerged to defend their communities from those

combatants. Also, States that arm militias inadvertently add to the stock of weapons that can be diverted to combatants. The only true beneficiaries of this situation are arms traffickers.

Another enabler of firearms trafficking is the fact that the Sahel countries suffer from serious deficits in law enforcement capacity, meaning that they are only able to apprehend, convict and imprison a small number of criminals relative to their populations (figure 8). For example, the latest data suggests that Mali is presently able to hold some 3,000 prisoners in its overcrowded prisons,<sup>56</sup> yet the country has suffered more than 1,000 deaths associated with non-state armed groups annually in recent years.<sup>57</sup> The result is that militants and criminals act with a large degree of impunity, fuelling frictions between communities and enabling firearms trafficking.<sup>58</sup>

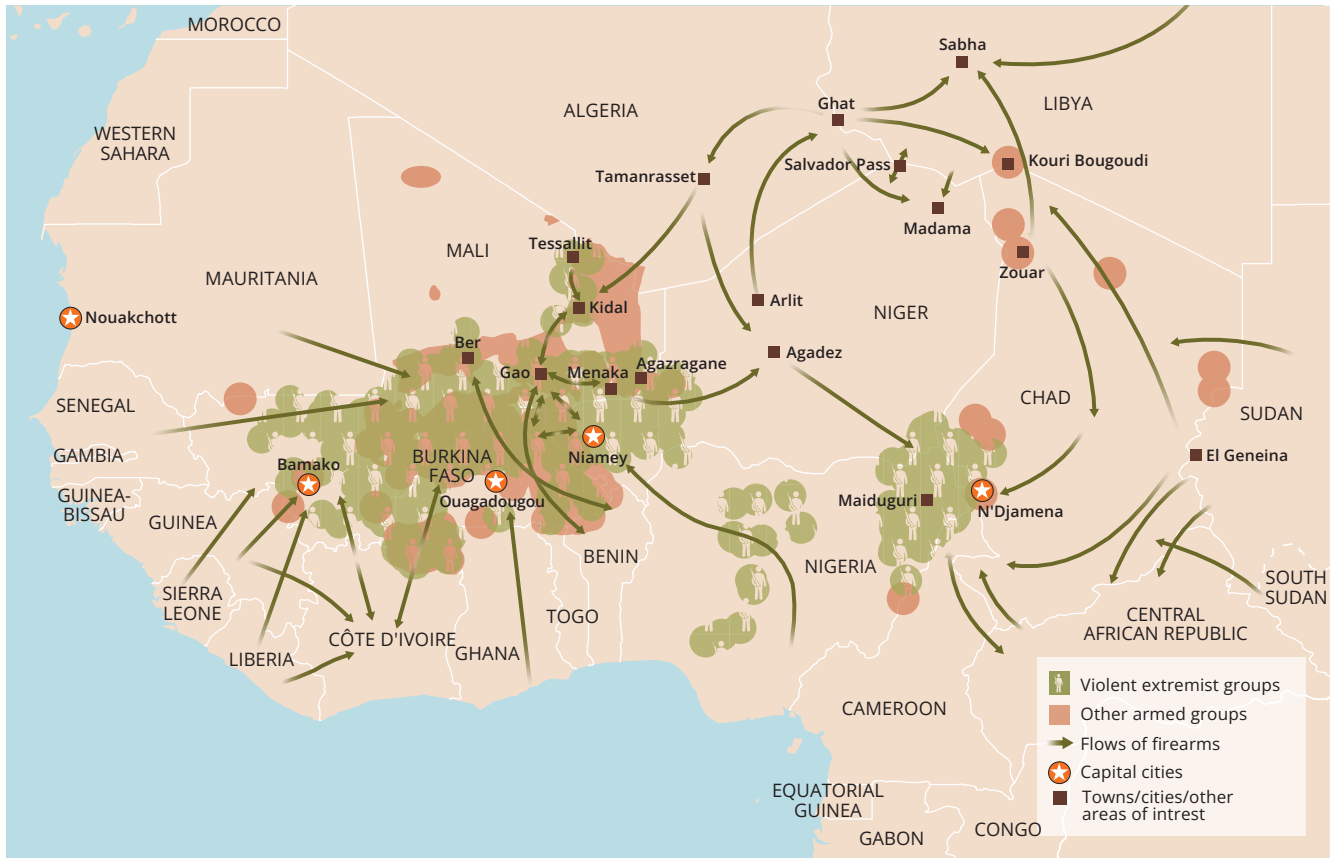
Militant control of transportation routes is also key to successful arms trafficking in the Sahel. The limited number of ways of crossing the Sahara Desert means that the groups that are in position to tax and control trans-Sahara trade can raise funds to purchase firearms and protect their goods.

**FIG 8.** Estimated number of prisoners in the Sahel countries per 100,000 population, 2020



Source: UNODC, Crime Trends and Operations of Criminal Justice Systems (CTS) and World Prison Brief, Institute for Crime & Justice Policy Research.

Note: The figure provided by Mali in 2020 is slightly higher: 37 prisoners per 100,000 inhabitants.

**MAP 2.** Firearms trafficking flows in the Sahel

The boundaries and names shown and the designations used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by the United Nations. Final boundary between the Republic of Sudan and the Republic of South Sudan has not yet been determined.

Source: ACLED data between 1 January 2019 and 7 October 2022. Available at <https://acleddata.com> (accessed 7 October 2022); European Council on Foreign Relations data. Available at [https://ecfr.eu/special/sahel\\_mapping/](https://ecfr.eu/special/sahel_mapping/); Small Arms Survey; UNODC interviews.

## Policy implications

- I **The Sahel countries should further reinforce their efforts to collect data on firearms trafficking in order to improve understanding of and stop both national and transnational trafficking flows, including through United Nations-mandated data collection tools such as the Illicit Arms Flows Questionnaire.**

Although Member States in the Sahel have recently increased their efforts to collect evidence-based information on firearms trafficking, and even though most countries have an institution tasked with the coordination of issues pertaining to small arms control, or specialized units that deal with seized firearms,<sup>59</sup> there are major challenges in the centralization and analysis of this information. United

Nations-mandated data collection tools such as the Illicit Arms Flows Questionnaire (IAFQ) provide a framework that can facilitate the strengthening and building of a national data system on firearms trafficking and can facilitate information exchanges aimed at improving understanding of both regional and international trafficking routes.

More efforts are needed to enhance the intelligence picture of firearms trafficking by looking closer at the criminal context of each seizure and the whereabouts of the firearms, to improve understanding of the nature and extent of those trafficking flows – their routes and links to other kinds of trafficking – and devise concrete preventive and control measures to stop the illicit firearms flows and reduce access to arms by criminals and terrorists. In Mauritania and Chad, a first step could be the creation of a national institution dedicated to small arms control.

- Countries should double their efforts to prevent, detect, intercept and trace illicit firearms trafficking flows, especially at borders and during transfers.**

Countries need to intensify their efforts to detect and combat the illicit trafficking activity itself and prevent firearms from making their way into the hands of criminals and reappearing in the context of other crimes.<sup>60</sup> Enhanced border control and risk-profiling capacities are required to prevent and intercept illicit movements of firearms.

- Countries should strengthen investigations focused on firearms trafficking and improve the tracing of weapons.**

In the Sahel, investigations and court decisions often only link firearms offences with illicit possession and firearms are usually treated either as tools for committing crime or as evidence.<sup>61</sup> Countries need to see the value of addressing the illicit origin of and trafficking in firearms, as this is the only possible way to target the perpetrators at the source of trafficking networks. Detecting and investigating illicit trafficking requires additional efforts, time and resources that are often unavailable to criminal justice practitioners.

Moreover, there is a need for a more proactive responsiveness from criminal justice practitioners in order to look beyond the firearms themselves and give priority to the objective of investigating and prosecuting the illicit trafficking activity, and thus providing visibility and adequate responses.

- There is a need for greater international cooperation at the law enforcement and prosecutorial levels to ensure proper firearms investigations.**

National borders in the Sahel are porous and weapons cross them multiple times. Even though it is often clear that certain trafficked weapons have originated in a neighbouring country (because of the type of weapon, circumstances of its seizure or markings), there is seldom any formal international cooperation to investigate transnational arms trafficking in depth. This is of particular relevance when linked to the international tracing of firearms.

- Diversion of national firearms stocks, including further analysis of its drivers, should be further addressed.**

A significant portion of weapons trafficked in the region are diverted from national stocks and either used domestically or trafficked to other countries. Further research is needed to analyse the causes of such diversion and its links to economic development, corruption and poor morale by defence and security forces. Domestic trafficking is often the beginning of the illicit transnational supply chain of firearms and while these two phenomena require a joint analysis, distinct knowledge about their extent and characteristics is essential if national authorities and policymakers are to understand the source of the problem and conceive appropriate responses.

- National firearm databases are not a silver bullet for solving the firearms trafficking problem, but they can help address the issues linked to data collection, tracing, investigations and preventing diversion.**

To prevent and combat firearms trafficking, it is necessary to scale up capacities, procedures and tools to identify the illicit origin of seized, found and surrendered firearms and to record the results in an accessible manner. Member States should therefore set up centralized databases for both legal and seized firearms, which contain data on all firearms registered and seized within the national territory. The latter constitute a crucial element of any effective firearms control regime.

- Artisanal weapons remain a key concern and could be researched and regulated better.**

Although great emphasis is placed on the proliferation of industrial firearms and their use by terrorist and armed groups, artisanal weapons continue to be a major concern in the Sahel that can easily fuel violent crime and be used in inter-community conflicts. There is therefore a need to strengthen efforts to conduct research on and regulate the manufacture of and trade in such weapons.

## Endnotes

- 1 For the purpose of this report, “Sahel countries” refers to Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania and the Niger.
- 2 For example, one of the longstanding divisions in the Sahel is the conflict between semi-nomadic pastoralists and sedentary farmers, often from different ethnic communities. In the past, traditional arrangements allowed sharing of the land, but they have been disrupted by several factors, including climate change. Many of the “bandits” are from pastoralist groups or from agrarian vigilante groups that emerged to address the bandits’ incursions. Their looting raids are both a form of livelihood and a manifestation of community and ethnic conflict. See Marion Davis, “Pastoralism, farming and a changing climate in the Sahel region”, Stockholm Environment Institute, 2022; Report of the United Nations Secretary-General on the situation in the Sahel region, S/2013/354, 14 June 2013.
- 3 United Nations Security Council (UNSC), Report of the Secretary-General on the activities of the United Nations Office for West Africa and the Sahel, S/2021/612, 28 June 2021, para. 2; Philipp Heinrigs, “Security implications of climate change in the Sahel Region: Policy considerations” (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), 2011); International Crisis Group, “The Central Sahel: scene of new climate wars?”, Briefing No. 154/Africa, 24 April 2020; United Nations, Secretary-General, Remarks at Security Council debate on Security in the Context of Terrorism and Climate Change, 9 December 2021.
- 4 Nicholas Marsh, “Brothers Came Back with Weapons: The Effects of Arms Proliferation from Libya”, *PRISM*, vol. 6, No. 4 (2017).
- 5 The Tuareg are a largely pastoralist Berber people who live across a wide swath of the Sahel and Sahara, in particular in northern Niger and Mali. Seeing their interests as different from the majority peoples in the south of both countries, some Tuareg communities have rebelled against national rule on several occasions, including 1963, 1990 and 2012.
- 6 Simeon H. O. Alozieuwa, “The March 22, 2012 coup in Mali”, *Democracy and Security*, vol. 9, No. 4 (2013), pp. 383–397.
- 7 See Savannah de Tessières, *At the Crossroads of Sahelian Conflicts: Insecurity, Terrorism, and Arms Trafficking in Niger* (Geneva, Small Arms Survey, January 2018).
- 8 Gaudence Nyirabikali, “Mali Peace Accord: Actors, issues and their representation”, SIPRI, 27 August 2015.
- 9 For the purposes of this chapter, based on the ACLED conflict fatality data for the first half of 2022 (see Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED); [www.acleddata.com](http://www.acleddata.com)), this area comprises the regions of Gao, Ménaka, Ségou, and Mopti in Mali; the regions of Sahel, Nord, North Central, Boucle du Mouhoun, and Est in Burkina Faso; and the region of Tillabéri in Niger. The definition of the Liptako-Gourma Authority, which has broader developmental objectives, is wider, encompassing eight regions of Burkina Faso (Centre, Centre-Est, Centre-Sud, Centre-Nord, Est, Plateau Central, Nord, and Sahel), four regions of Mali (Mopti, Tombouctou, Gao, and Kidal), and two regions and a metro area in Niger (Tillabéri, Dosso, and Niamey); see <https://www.liptakogourma.org/zones-dintervention/>.
- 10 Luca Raineri, “Sahel climate conflicts? When (fighting) climate change fuels terrorism”, European Union Institute for Security Studies, 4 December 2020; Leif V. Brottem, “Environmental change and farmer-herder conflict in agro-pastoral West Africa”, *Human Ecology*, vol. 44, No. 5 (October 2016), pp. 547–563; International Crisis Group, “The Central Sahel: scene of new climate wars?”, Briefing No. 154/Africa, 24 April 2020.
- 11 Joseph Sany, “A sixth coup in Africa? The West needs to up its game”, United States Institute for Peace, 2 February 2022.
- 12 International Crisis Group, “Au Tchad, l’incursion des rebelles dévoile les fragilités du pouvoir”, 13 February 2019.
- 13 United Nations Secretary General, Secretary-General Hails Late President’s Tireless Efforts for Stability in Chad, at General Assembly Tribute to Memory of Idriss Déby Itno, SG/SM/20708, 3 May 2021.
- 14 For example, Conflict Armament Research (CAR), referring to ACLED data, argues: “Including reprisal attacks, Nigeria’s herder–farmer conflict killed more people in 2018 than Boko Haram and the Islamic State in West Africa. Indeed, the clashes claimed 40 per cent more lives than Islamist attacks in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger combined.” See Nigeria’s herder-farmer conflict, CAR data January 2020.
- 15 For example, “With armed conflict in central and northern Mali, rural banditry appeared to be more closely linked to the proliferation of different non-state armed groups than to terrorist groups specifically.” United Nations Office for West Africa and the Sahel (UNOWAS), *Pastoralism and Security in West Africa and the Sahel: Towards Peaceful Coexistence* (August 2018).
- 16 International Crisis Group, “Getting a grip on central Sahel’s gold rush”, Report No 282/Africa, 13 November 2019.
- 17 There is some evidence of seizures made in Mali in 2017 of arms that came from France by air (World Customs Organization) and research by CAR has shown that Turkish-manufactured pump-action and semi-automatic shotguns are smuggled into Nigeria, and that they have found their way into the hands of Boko Haram and ISWAP affiliates. See CAR, *Nigeria’s Herder-Farmer Conflict* (2020) and *Weapons Supplies Fuelling Terrorism in the Lake Chad Crisis* (2022).
- 18 According to the 2018 Illicit Arms Flow Questionnaire (IAFQ) response from Burkina Faso, for example, 64 per cent of all arms trafficked into the country came from Ghana, Côte d’Ivoire and Mali; according to a recent analysis of weapons seized in south-east Niger, CAR concluded “...there is minimal evidence of long-range trafficking support for armed groups fighting in the Lake Chad conflict”. See CAR, *Nigeria’s Herder-Farmer Conflict* (2020) and *Weapons Supplies Fuelling Terrorism in the Lake Chad Crisis* (2022).
- 19 Those conflicts include the civil wars and conflicts in Liberia, Sierra Leone, Guinea-Bissau, Côte d’Ivoire, Mali, and the Niger.
- 20 In 2014, for example, troops associated with Opération Barkhane seized three tons of small arms and other military equipment in a six-vehicle convoy moving between Libya and the northern Niger. See Savannah de Tessières, *At the Crossroads of Sahelian Conflicts: Insecurity, Terrorism, and Arms Trafficking in Niger* (Geneva, Small Arms Survey, January 2018); UNSC. Letter dated 4 March 2016 from the Panel of Experts on Libya established pursuant to resolution 1973 (2011) addressed to the President of the Security Council, S/2016/209, 9 March 2016.
- 21 CAR, *Investigating Cross-Border Weapon Transfers in the Sahel* (November 2016); Hassane Koné, “Where do Sahel terrorists get their heavy weapons?”, Institute for Security Studies, 12 February 2020; Nicolas Florquin, Sigrid Lipott and Francis Wairagu, *Weapons Compass: Mapping Illicit Small Arms Flows in Africa* (Geneva, Small Arms Survey, January 2019).
- 22 Prior to 2014, there was no notification system for arms imports into Libya, which meant that exporting states only had to notify the Sanctions Committee that they were shipping weapons to the Libyan Ministry of Defence. However, those exporting arms to Libya did not have to ask for authorization. Rather, the threshold was documentation declaring that the end user was a government authority. As a result, shipments of arms during this period entered with very little monitoring, as various government authorities, or actors purporting to represent the government, were providing end user documents. In response to escalating tensions in Libya, UNSC strengthened the sanctions regime, requiring tighter controls over authorization. While illegal export into Libya continued, these efforts did reduce the “grey” market or “semi-legal” imports because of required authorization from the Sanctions Committee.
- 23 UNSC, Letter dated 4 March 2016 from the Panel of Experts on Libya established pursuant to resolution 1973 (2011) addressed to the President of the Security Council, S/2016/209, 9 March 2016; Savannah de Tessières, *At the Crossroads of Sahelian Conflicts: Insecurity, Terrorism, and Arms Trafficking in Niger* (Geneva, Small Arms Survey, January 2018); Fiona Mangan and

- Matthias Nowak, "The West Africa-Sahel connection: mapping cross-border arms trafficking", Small Arms Survey, Briefing Paper, December 2019; Interview with a high-ranking Malian military official, Bamako, Mali, 26 December 2021.
- 24 Interview with an arms expert in Bamako, Mali, 20 December 2022.
- 25 Interviews with an elected official and advisor to one of the signatory groups in Bamako, Mali, December 2021.
- 26 UNSC, Identical letters dated 15 March 2022 from the Permanent Representative of Israel to the United Nations addressed to the Secretary-General and the President of the Security Council, S/2022/229, 15 March 2022.
- 27 The Panel of Experts on Mali has expressed concerns at the "significance of the seizure, through attacks, of vehicles and weaponry". The Panel further notes: "the acquisition of those items is one of the principal reasons for the recent increase in such incidents, as it strengthens the capabilities of the terrorist groups to carry out their plans". UNSC, Final report of the Panel of Experts on Mali established pursuant to Security Council resolution 2374 (2017), S/2022/595, 3 August 2022, para. 83; See also Tanya Mehra et al., *Cashing in on Guns: Identifying the Nexus between Small Arms, Light Weapons and Terrorist Financing* (The Hague, International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, March 2021); Savannah de Tessières, *At the Crossroads of Sahelian Conflicts: Insecurity, Terrorism, and Arms Trafficking in Niger* (Geneva, Small Arms Survey, January 2018); Hassane Koné, "Where do Sahel terrorists get their heavy weapons?", Institute for Security Studies, 12 February 2020.
- 28 For example, around 2019, CAR examined 185 weapons seized in south-east Niger and found "At least...17 per cent of the sample...were diverted from the national custody of three countries: Chad, Niger, and Nigeria. More than one-fifth...of the documented ammunition originated in the state stockpiles of Nigeria." See CAR, *Weapons Supplies Fuelling Terrorism in the Lake Chad Crisis* (2022). In 2020, CAR examined 148 factory produced weapons in Northern Nigeria and found that some "had commonalities with small arms previously in service with national defence forces in Côte d'Ivoire... Predictably, given widespread weapon diversion from many governments in the region, CAR...traced four weapons...to the stockpiles of Nigerian defence and security forces. Nigerian-manufactured...ammunition...is the second-most prevalent type of ammunition in this data set." See CAR, *Nigeria's Herder-Farmer Conflict* (2020).
- 29 Eric G. Berman, "The management of lethal materiel in conflict settings: existing challenges and opportunities for the European Peace Facility", International Peace Information Service, September 2021.
- 30 Eric G. Berman, Mihaela Racovita and Matt Schroeder, *Making a Tough Job More Difficult: Loss of Arms and Ammunition in Peace Operations* (Geneva, Small Arms Survey, October 2017).
- 31 Senior government official involved in countering arms proliferation, Bamako, Mali, 28 December 2021.
- 32 Hassane Koné, "Where do Sahel terrorists get their heavy weapons?", Institute for Security Studies, 12 February 2020; Arnaud Jouve, "Sahel: d'où viennent les armes et les munitions?", Radio France international, 9 April 2020.
- 33 Claire Zutterling, "Armer les civils: la loi des volontaires pour la défense de la patrie au Burkina Faso", GRIP, 30 October 2020; Antonin Tisseron, "Pandora's box. Burkina Faso, self-defense militias and VDP Law in fighting jihadism", Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2021; Méryl Demuynck, "Civilians on the front lines of (counter-) terrorism: lessons from the volunteers for the defence of the homeland in Burkina Faso". International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, 2021.
- 34 Interview with Burkina Faso and Mali Security Analyst, Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, 13 December 2021; Méryl Demuynck, "Civilians on the front lines of (counter-) terrorism: lessons from the volunteers for the defence of the homeland in Burkina Faso". International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, 2021; Antonin Tisseron, "Pandora's box. Burkina Faso, self-defense militias and VDP Law in fighting jihadism", Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2021.
- 35 ACLED, "Actor profile: Dan Na Ambassador", 9 May 2022.
- 36 IAFQ response from Burkina Faso, 2018.
- 37 Matthias Nowak and André Gsell, "Handmade and deadly: craft production of small arms in Nigeria", Briefing paper, Small Arms Survey, June 2018.
- 38 Nicolas Florquin, Sigrid Lipott, and Francis Wairagu, *Weapons Compass: Mapping Illicit Small Arms Flows in Africa* (Geneva, Small Arms Survey, January 2019); William Assanvo, "Are West Africa's gunsmiths making violence cheap?", ISS Today, 18 October 2017.
- 39 Savannah de Tessières, *At the Crossroads of Sahelian Conflicts: Insecurity, Terrorism, and Arms Trafficking in Niger* (Geneva, Small Arms Survey, January 2018), p. 57.
- 40 Matthias Nowak and André Gsell, "Handmade and deadly: craft production of small arms in Nigeria", Briefing paper, Small Arms Survey, June 2018.
- 41 William Assanvo, "Are West Africa's gunsmiths making violence cheap?", ISS Today, 18 October 2017; Tanya Mehra et al., *Cashing in on Guns: Identifying the Nexus between Small Arms, Light Weapons and Terrorist Financing* (The Hague, International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, March 2021).
- 42 Secrétariat Permanent de Lutte contre la Prolifération des Armes Légères et de Petit Calibre, Mali (28 December 2021).
- 43 Ant-trafficking is a trafficking technique in which large number of traffickers transport small batches of firearms across borders. See UNODC, *Global Study on Firearms Trafficking* (United Nations publication, 2020), p. 11; UNSC, Letter dated 24 May 2022 from the Panel of Experts on Libya established pursuant to resolution 1973 (2011) addressed to the President of the Security Council, S/2022/427, 27 May 2022, p. 25.
- 44 Interview with a Malian researcher specializing in security in Bamako, Mali, 26 December 2021; Interviews with an elected official and advisor to one of the signatory groups, Bamako, Mali, December 2021; UNSC, Letter dated 6 August 2021 from the Panel of Experts on Mali established pursuant to resolution 2374 (2017) addressed to the President of the Security Council, S/2021/714, 6 August 2021; Hassane Koné, "Where do Sahel terrorists get their heavy weapons?", Institute for Security Studies, 12 February 2020.
- 45 Interviews with an elected official and advisor to one of the signatory groups, Bamako, Mali, December 2021.
- 46 Ibid.
- 47 Alexandre Bish, *Soldiers of Fortune: The Future of Chadian Fighters after the Libyan Ceasefire* (Geneva, Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, December 2021); Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, "Observatory of illicit economies in West Africa", Risk Bulletin: Issue 2. November 2021.
- 48 CAR, *Investigating Cross-Border Weapon Transfers in the Sahel* (November 2016); Nicolas Florquin, Sigrid Lipott, and Francis Wairagu, *Weapons Compass: Mapping Illicit Small Arms Flows in Africa* (Geneva, Small Arms Survey, January 2019).
- 49 Interview with a Malian researcher specializing in security in Bamako, 26 December 2021; Interviews with an elected official and advisor to one of the signatory groups, Bamako, Mali, December 2021; Phone interview with an arms expert focusing on the Sahel, 14 January 2022.
- 50 Phone interview and email correspondence with an arms expert focusing on the Sahel, 14 January 2022.
- 51 Phone interview and email correspondence with an arms expert working across the Sahel, focusing on Burkina Faso and the Niger, 25 January 2022.
- 52 Phone interview with a regional security analyst focusing on the Lake Chad region, 19 January 2022; Phone interview with a security analyst and arms trafficking expert, focusing on West Africa, North Africa, Central Africa, 1 February 2022; Phone interview with an arms expert focusing on the Sahel, 14 January 2022.

- 53 Phone interview with a security analyst and an arms trafficking expert, focusing on West Africa, North Africa, Central Africa, 1 February 2022; Interviews with an elected official and advisor to one of the signatory groups, Bamako, Mali, December 2021.
- 54 Interviews with an elected official and an advisor to one of the signatory groups, Bamako, Mali, December 2021.
- 55 CAR, *Nigeria's Herder-Farmer Conflict* (2020).
- 56 Report on the visit of the Subcommittee on Prevention of Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment to Mali, CAT/OP/MLI/1, 20 March 2014, para. 49.
- 57 ACLED data for Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania and the Niger between 1 January 1997 and 17 November 2022.
- 58 United Nations, Report of the Independent Expert on the situation of human rights in Mali, A/HRC/43/76, paras 20–27.
- 59 For instance, the National Commission on Small Arms and Light Weapons of Burkina Faso, the Permanent Secretariat to combat the Proliferation of Small Arms and Light Weapons of Mali, the National Commission for the Collection and Control of Illicit Arms of the Niger.
- 60 In line with Sustainable Development Goal 16.4.
- 61 Court decisions obtained by UNODC.



# FIREARMS TRAFFICKING IN THE SAHEL

**TOCTA**  
*Sahel*  
Transnational Organized  
Crime Threat Assessment

*Firearms Trafficking in the Sahel* is part of a series of transnational organized crime threat assessment reports on the Sahel.

The report explores firearms trafficking in the Sahel by looking at the nature of the market, the source and flows of firearms, the main actors involved and the impact of this form of trafficking on the region.



ISBN: 9789211483802



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