

# Briefing Paper

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## THE WEST AFRICA–SAHEL CONNECTION

### Mapping Cross-border Arms Trafficking

Fiona Mangan and Matthias Nowak



# Credits and contributors

**Project coordinator:**

Matthias Nowak

**Editor:**

Glenn McDonald

**Production coordinators:**

Olivia Denonville and Lionel Kosimik

**Communications coordinator:**

Emilia Dungal

**Fact-checker:**

François Fabry

**Copy-editor:**

Alex Potter

**Proofreader:**

Stephanie Huitson

**Design and layout:**

Rick Jones

**Cartography:**

Jillian Luff, *MAPgrafix*

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## About the authors

**Matthias Nowak** is a researcher at the Small Arms Survey. His research focuses on documenting and researching the causes and mechanisms of illicit small arms proliferation in sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America. His work includes developing and implementing capacity-building projects on topics ranging from measuring the scale and scope of lethal violence and firearms-related conflict and crime to physical security and stockpile management. He holds a bachelor's degree in Economic and Social History from the University of Geneva and a master's in Development Studies from the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies in Geneva.

**Fiona Mangon** is a consultant with the Small Arms Survey, research director at Justice + Security in Transitions, and fellow of the University of South Carolina's Rule of Law Collaborative. She previously served as senior programme officer at the United States Institute of Peace, in addition to prior roles with the Stimson Center, Independent Diplomat, and Irish government.

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**Front cover photo**

Soldiers of the Niger National Guard protect a convoy crossing the Sahara Desert from Niger north to Libya. Agadez, Niger, October 2018.  
Source: Scott Peterson/Getty Images



## Overview

This Briefing Paper examines trends in cross-border arms trafficking across West Africa and the Sahel. It provides insights into the nature and scale of the illicit arms trafficking in the region, and examines how this problem is linked to other forms of organized crime. It includes an analysis of the interplay among organized criminal groups, local traffickers, non-state armed groups, terrorist organizations,<sup>1</sup> and state actors to highlight the ways in which these actors affect and define the nature and processes of illicit arms trafficking. Finally, the paper evaluates the impacts of the issue on border communities, explores current domestic and international responses, and presents a series of possible entry points for interventions.

## Key findings

- Illicit arms-trafficking patterns vary across the region. North of the Niger River, highly organized networks of traffickers move sizeable quantities of goods across large areas of land. South of the Niger River trafficking tends to be less organized, with the involvement of numerous local intermediaries.
- In some cases arms trafficking remains a specialized activity that is limited to experienced and well-connected smugglers who traffic sizeable shipments of small arms. This type of trafficking tends to develop around active conflict zones. Elsewhere, small to medium-sized shipments of arms are trafficked across borders together with other goods, indicating strong connections among the various illicit markets and trafficking actors.
- The linkages between weapons trafficking and other illicit flows result mainly from an overlap of the actors involved and the trafficking routes used. Connections exist between illicit arms trafficking and other types of illicit flows.
- Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, and Niger serve mainly as transit or origin countries for illicit arms bound for Mali, especially the Mopti, Gao, Kidal, and Timbuktu areas. Libya has been a source of trafficked weapons since 2011, but this trend appears to have reversed, and in recent years seizures of weapons and ammunition flowing back towards and into Libya have been reported.
- Significant numbers of illicit weapons in the region are sourced from national stockpiles. Craft production of firearms in illegal workshops also contributes to illicit proliferation, as does the conversion of alarm and blank-firing handguns.

## Introduction

Illicit arms trafficking forms part of a complex web of interconnected criminal markets extending through West Africa and the Sahel. Illicit flows of weapons, drugs, migrants, and smuggled commodities take on a strategic ordering based on the levels of profit, risk, and tactical importance associated with a particular commodity. Weapons are positioned at the top of this strategic order, serving as both an important trafficked commodity and a means of buying protection and maintaining control over populations and key trafficking routes, flows, and hubs.

Small arms and light weapons trafficking in West Africa is fed by easy access to stockpiles of arms and facilitated by weak responses from regional state security providers who often lack resources and capacity. Long, porous borders, and contested governance in vast territories further ease the movement of goods across national boundaries and through the region. Illicit arms proliferation and the absence of strong state institutions—or the active participation of such institutions in illicit arms trafficking—have contributed to a growth of armed actors in the region, injecting new levels of competition and violence into local-level conflicts. The prevalence of rebel, separatist, criminal, and violent extremist groups extending through North Africa, the Sahel, and West Africa and linkages between illicit cross-border arms transfers and other cross-border illicit flows have led to the militarization of traditional trading routes (Arbia and Kartas, 2015; de Tessières, 2017; FES, 2014). Efforts to ensure that state authorities apply international standards and best practices to the physical security and stockpile management (PSSM) of their weapons holdings constitute a work in progress in the region. The lack of controls to prevent diversion during small arms transfers, the weak enforcement of national firearms legislation (or the absence of updated and context-appropriate legislation), and the widespread craft production of firearms in illegal workshops also contribute to illicit proliferation.

This Briefing Paper offers a series of insights into the scope and characteristics of illicit arms trafficking in West Africa and the Sahel, and also illustrates how it is connected to other forms of organized crime and illicit trafficking in the region. The paper begins with a detailed mapping of the key arms-trafficking routes, flows of illicit arms, and actors in selected countries in West Africa. The second section evaluates the impacts of arms trafficking on communities, in particular on

their security. The third and fourth sections explore ongoing responses at the local, national, regional, and international levels to address the threat, and possible entry points for counter-trafficking interventions based on the research conducted for the paper, while also covering the risks and opportunities of the various measures suggested. The conclusion sums up the paper's broad contents and aims.

## The nature of illicit arms trafficking in West Africa and the Sahel

Internal and cross-border dynamics identified by field research conducted in Ghana, Guinea-Bissau, Mali, Niger, and the border areas of Burkina Faso and Mali provide valuable insights into the nature of illicit trafficking in the region (see Box 1). Each of the areas studied is either facing or recovering from armed conflict and insurgencies or threatened by transnational organized crime and terrorist groups. Although Ghana remains comparatively stable, it faces escalating organized crime and insecurity across its borders. Border areas in the region are adversely affected by low state presence, corruption, and state security institutions weakened because of armed conflict. Porous borders and transnational criminal networks, together with terrorist and armed groups, fuel illicit arms trafficking and threaten security across the region.

### Box 1 Methodology and terminology

Illicit cross-border arms trafficking remains highly opaque and extremely difficult to quantify, given the concealed nature of the trade and its nexus with support networks used for both other illicit goods and legal commodities. A range of methods, however, allow for some assessment of the scope and characteristics of illicit trafficking.

In the first instance, this Briefing Paper is based on extensive field research carried out in Ghana, Guinea-Bissau, Mali, Niger, and the border areas of Burkina Faso and Mali during April–November 2018 (see Map 1).<sup>2</sup> Expert field researchers employed qualitative research methodology, carrying out semi-structured interviews with key informants identified using a purposeful sampling technique. Where possible, researchers travelled to border areas and followed up with a limited number of telephone interviews. Interviewees included military officials, gendarmes, police, border security agents and other security providers (both formal and informal), local communities, members of armed groups, smugglers, and traffickers.

Secondly, the research is based on in-depth desk research that examined reports by national, regional, and international institutions; academic literature; and specialized texts collected and reviewed for the purpose of this paper. Finally, the authors requested data on seizures and trafficking cases from relevant state and regional authorities and analysed the data that was provided.

#### Terms and definitions

*Small arms* are defined as weapons capable of being carried by one person, and *light weapons* as capable of being carried by two or more persons (or an animal or light vehicle). *Small arms* are items such as revolvers and self-loading pistols, rifles, assault rifles, sub-machine guns, and light machine guns; *light weapons* are heavy machine guns, hand-held under-barrel and mounted grenade launchers, portable anti-aircraft guns, portable anti-tank guns, portable anti-aircraft missile systems (man-portable air defence systems, or MANPADS), and mortars with calibres of less than 100 mm, among other items (UNGA, 1997, paras. 24–27).

For the purpose of this Briefing Paper the term *trafficking* refers to the trade, production, or distribution of an illicit good, whereas *smuggling* involves moving (goods, people) illegally into or out of a country.<sup>3</sup>

The Small Arms Survey defines *illicit small arms* as 'weapons that are produced, transferred, held, or used in violation of national or international law' (Schroeder, 2014, p. 246). This definition acknowledges the many different forms that illicit arms flows can take.

Map 1 Countries covered by this study



Connections exist between illicit small arms and light weapons and other types of illicit transfers, including narcotics trafficking; human trafficking and smuggling; the trafficking of counterfeit goods; the illicit wildlife trade, including trade in illegal ivory; and the artisanal gold trade. The linkages between weapons trafficking and other illicit flows result mainly from an overlap of the actors involved and the trafficking routes used. Research also underscores the linkages between illicit weapons trafficking and money laundering in the region (GIABA, 2013, p. 57). Overall, it appears that illicit arms trafficking in West Africa follows traditional trafficking and commercial routes and is embedded in an established system of illicit trade across national borders (Arbia and Kartas, 2015, p. 2; Tubiana and Gramizzi, 2017).

However, in many ways arms trafficking significantly differs from other forms of trafficking, such as drug smuggling. Firstly, firearms are a durable good. A well-maintained assault rifle (for example, an AK-pattern rifle) can last for several decades. The Small Arms Survey estimates that, on average, 'countries have a growth rate of one per cent annually' of their firearms stockpiles, although some countries depart significantly from this norm (such as in the United Kingdom and United States, for example, with rates as high as 3.4 and 4.2 per cent, respectively, in recent years) (Karp, 2018, p. 7). While new arms continue to be purchased in high volumes and some enter the illicit market through diversion, the majority of illicit arms flowing through the region come from older stockpiles of weapons that move from one place to another—and often from crisis to emerging crisis. The 2011 'Arab Spring' and subsequent uprisings and civil war also show that severe instability generates demand for weapons (Holtom and Rigual, 2015).

Weapons sources in West Africa and the Sahel are both internal (sourced from within the region) and external (sourced from other regions and through international and intercontinental transfers). The industrial-scale production of arms in the region is comparatively limited, although small arms and their related parts, accessories, and ammunition are produced in Mali and Nigeria. In Mali the Cartoucherie du Mali produces ammunition, particularly 12-gauge shotgun cartridges (Holtom and Pavesi, 2018). In Nigeria the Defence Industries Corporation of Nigeria produces a broad spectrum of weapons, including AK-pattern and other rifles, sub-machine guns, general purpose machine guns, pistols, rocket-propelled grenade (RPG) launchers, 81 mm mortars, hand grenades,

and a wide variety of ammunition (DICON, n.d.). Production in sub-Saharan African states is largely not for export, but is primarily designed to meet the demand of national security forces. However, Boko Haram reportedly has stolen or captured Nigerian-made assault rifles and ammunition from security forces during clashes and attacks (de Tessières, 2017, p. 6).

Other types of illicit weapons circulating in the region include craft-produced firearms and alarm or blank-firing weapons that are converted to fire live ammunition (Nowak and Gsell, 2018; Florquin, Lipott, and Wairagu, 2019, pp. 58–59).<sup>4</sup> Local gunsmiths produce small arms in most West African countries, including Côte d'Ivoire,<sup>5</sup> Burkina Faso, Ghana, Guinea, Mali, Niger, and Nigeria.<sup>6</sup> In some cases the state authorizes and regulates this production, for example Sierra Leone. Estimating the number of weapons produced and entering the civilian market remains challenging, however, while record-keeping is limited.

Furthermore, the diversion of national stockpiles through corruption, theft, or battlefield capture has supplied the region's illicit arms markets and trafficking networks with significant quantities of equipment (Pellerin, 2018a; 2018b; Nowak and Sollazzo, 2018; Foucher, 2018). For instance, the majority of illicit weapons seized from armed groups in northern Mali were found to have originated from national government stockpiles (Anders, 2015, p. 179). In Burkina Faso significant quantities of weapons were also diverted from government stockpiles in 2011 following a military and police mutiny (Mémier, Luntumbue, and Ravet, 2012, pp. 164–65). The diversion of weapons and ammunition from UN and regional peacekeeping missions and from international monitoring and counter-terrorism forces is also notable. Missions in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger have all experienced attacks on bases and other incidents resulting in significant losses of arms and ammunition (Berman, Racovita, and Schroeder, 2017).<sup>7</sup>

Several trafficking routes, both within the region and extending to neighbouring areas, feed regional demand for illicit weapons. Outflows from Qaddafi-era Libyan state stocks have been important sources of illicit weapons for sub-Saharan Africa since 2011. Although these flows have slowed following the resumption of civil conflict in Libya in 2014, they nonetheless remain a significant source of weapons regionally, including new weapons that have since entered Libya in violation of a UN arms embargo (Florquin, Lipott, and Wairagu, 2019, p. 50).<sup>8</sup> In May and June 2017 it was reported that the

Nigerien authorities had apprehended migrants travelling south from Libya with at least 27 handguns (NigerInter, 2017). In the same year French regional military forces forming part of Operation Barkhane seized approximately 3,000 cartridges hidden in vehicles close to Arlit in northern Niger (Reuters, 2015). Other crises in other countries have also sparked the diversion of national arms stockpiles. For example, weapons seized in Burkina Faso, northern Nigeria, and central Mali were traced back to Ivorian stocks (CAR, 2016; 2017).<sup>9</sup> Other known cross-border trafficking hubs and routes include those between:

- Benin and Nigeria;
- Burkina Faso and Côte d'Ivoire;
- Liberia and Côte d'Ivoire;
- Guinea-Bissau and Senegal;
- Gambia and Senegal;
- Liberia and Sierra Leone/Guinea;
- Algeria and Mali;
- Chad and Niger;
- Nigeria and Niger; and
- the Lake Chad region to Niger and Mali (de Tessières, 2017, pp. 4–8; UNODC, 2009, p. 52).

The terrorist organization al-Murabitun has used assault rifles of the same model, producer, and year of production in multiple attacks carried out across several countries, including Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, and Mali (Anders, 2018, p. 5), which demonstrates how high-profile armed groups are able to move weapons across the region's national borders to carry out devastating attacks.

The following sections look in greater detail at arms-trafficking routes, flows, and actors in selected West African countries.

## Key arms-trafficking routes and flow patterns

The destinations of arms flows to and through the surveyed countries are generally dictated by changes in supply and demand, while variations in these flows are due to political and security dynamics. This section describes key routes and flow patterns in each of the countries analysed.

### Niger

Based on fieldwork findings, it appears that Niger serves primarily as a transit country for arms traffickers (see Map 2). Weapons and other illicit flows enter northern Niger through Libya's south-western border in and around an area known as

the Salvador Pass and move through age-old trans-Saharan trade routes, with some routes now moving into southern Algeria to avoid US and French surveillance of the area in recent years. These flows respond to significant demand for weapons in Mali, but also move southward to Burkina Faso, Nigeria, and other states in West and sub-Saharan Africa. Pre-dating recent arms flows from Libya, a key historical route in Niger extends from the Lake Chad region through Niger to Mali. This route remains active, but was more prominent in the 1990s and the early part of the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Another route involves localized flows in the Tillabéri and Tahoua regions of southern and western Niger. Niger also hosts a limited domestic market, and there is evidence of increasing local demand from gold miners, traffickers and smugglers, rural communities, and tribes. Traffickers and smugglers increasingly carry

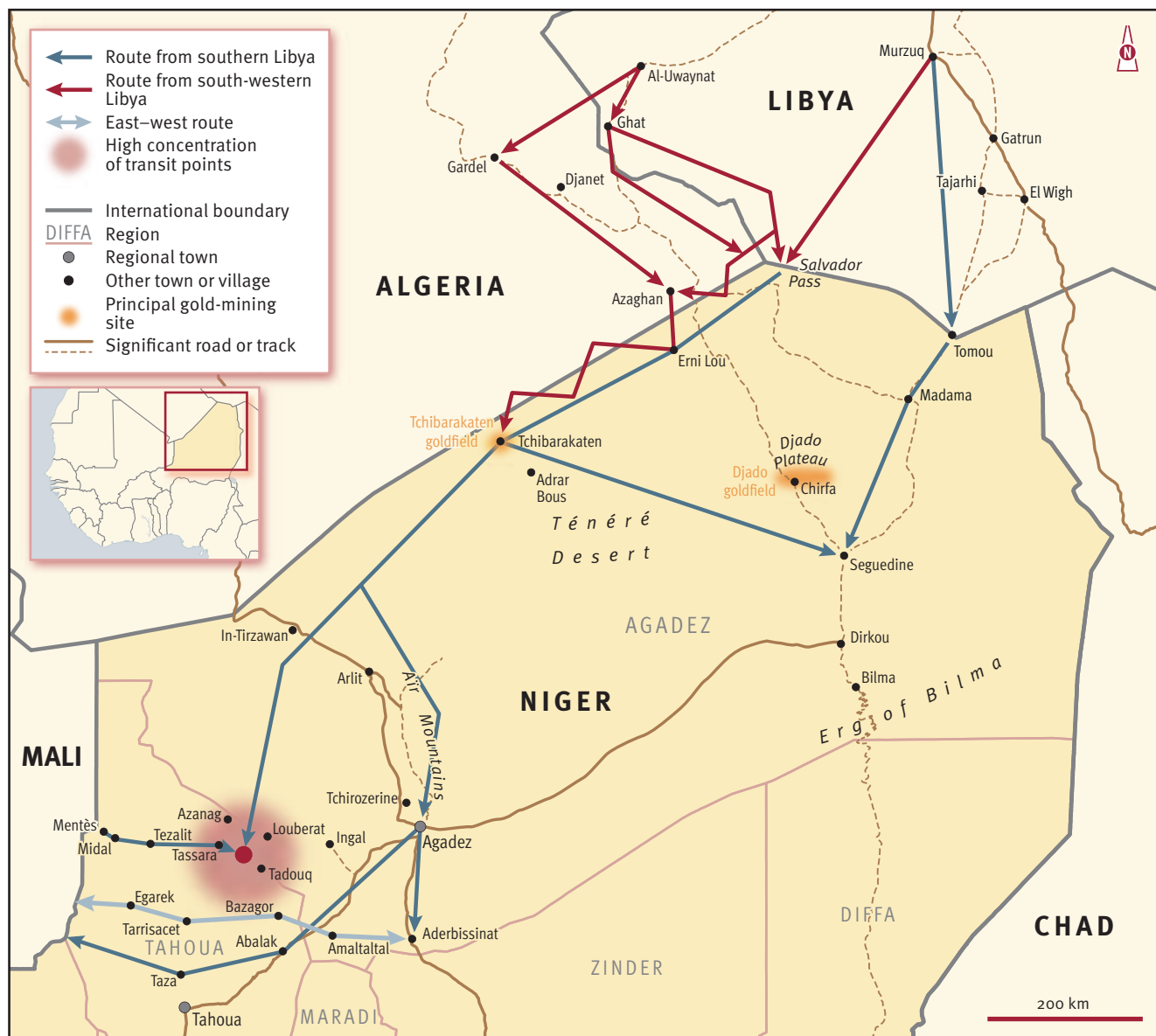
arms, and members of rural communities and tribes have begun to arm themselves in response to highway banditry, illegal checkpoints, and inter-community violence; this latter type of violence is itself fuelled by the increased circulation of arms in the region (Pellerin, 2018b).

## Mali

In contrast to Niger, Mali is a primary destination country for arms trafficking in the region. Rebellion and instability have seriously undermined peace and security in the country since flows of arms from Libya in 2011–12 provided the firepower needed to launch widespread violent conflict. In spite of the deployment of two French military operations (Operation Serval in Mali and Operation Barkhane covering the Sahel more broadly) and a UN peacekeeping operation (the United

Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali, or MINUSMA), security remains in flux and demand for arms is strong. Fieldwork reveals that a number of key trafficking routes exist, as shown in Map 3. A significant number of weapons have been trafficked from Libya through Niger (and to a lesser extent through Algeria) to supply weapons markets in northern Mali, such as in the towns of Kidal and Gao. Arms flows peaked in 2012–13, but decreased from 2014 onward as political conflict in Libya’s coastal cities and in the south of the country among Tuareg, Tubu, and Arab groups increased internal demand and produced a counter-flow of ammunition and arms back to Libya.<sup>10</sup> Illicit trade along the Libya–Niger–Mali route has also been inhibited by aerial surveillance by Operation Barkhane—a French anti-insurgent operation in the Sahel that was launched in summer 2014.

**Map 2** Illicit arms-trafficking routes in and through Niger



Source: Pellerin (2018b)

Base map data source: OpenStreetMap

Other externally sourced weapons flows include routes that enter Mali from Mauritania, with the arms having either been trafficked from coastal West Africa, including Senegal, or originating in the disputed territory of Western Sahara (Pellerin, 2018a). Interviews revealed that the coastal West African route draws arms from a number of coastal towns and cities to converge at the border town of Bakel on the Senegal River, which serves as a key trafficking and smuggling hub. They are then taken across the river, which delineates the border, and enter Mauritania. The weapons then traverse Mauritania to enter Mali via the southeastern border of Mauritania, travelling toward the small town of Foïta, where they converge with arms flows from Western Sahara. These routes are used to transport a wide range of firearms, including semi-automatic pistols and AK-pattern assault rifles.<sup>11</sup>

Guinea also serves as a source of and transit point for weapons flows to Mali. All armed groups in Mali confirm that they have used the Guinean channel to procure arms during recent bouts of conflict. Guinea's National Commission for the Fight against the Proliferation of

Small Arms and Light Weapons (CNLPA) insists that these weapons flows stem from illicit arms still in circulation that were used during the Sierra Leonean and Liberian conflicts in the late 1990s and early years of the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century; however, there is evidence of diversion from Guinean army stocks. For example, in 2016 MINUSMA identified the use in northern Mali of Iranian ammunition and related weapons that were produced in 2007 and originated from Guinean stocks (Pellerin, 2018a).

In addition to larger arms flows, smaller caches of arms from West Africa are often found mixed with other licit and illicit goods smuggled from Nigeria, Guinea, and other West African countries. These represent more limited flows that, for example, are transported on *pinasse* boats up the Niger River to Labbezanga. In addition, some arms found in central Mali have been identified as weapons diverted from Burkina Faso, primarily from government stores. These are mainly transported by road, including on public transport buses, to Koro and Bankass.<sup>12</sup>

In Mali itself arms circulate with ease due to limited state security presence in many parts of the country. Traffickers use

a multitude of routes, making it more relevant to focus on key towns that serve as trafficking hubs. These hubs include Foïta, Koygma, Ber, Lerneb, Raz El Ma, and Gossi in the Timbuktu and Taoudeni regions; In Khalil, I-n-Afarak, Talhandak, Tin-Essako, and Aneff in the Kidal region; and Ménaka and Gao (the capitals of the Malian regions of the same names) (Pellerin, 2018a).

### Tri-border areas: Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, and Mali

In the tri-border areas of Burkina Faso–Côte d'Ivoire–Mali and Ghana–Côte d'Ivoire–Burkina Faso a number of key routes are used to smuggle licit and illicit goods of all kinds from one country to another (see Map 4). These goods include small amounts of arms concealed in cargo loads and transported primarily by motorcycles. Key routes include Bondoukou–Bouna–Varalé–Doropo serving the southern region of Burkina Faso, including the city of Gaoua; routes that circumvent the Ivorian border posts at Léraba and Pogo, the Burkinabe post at Yendere, and the Malian post at Zégoua; 13 small

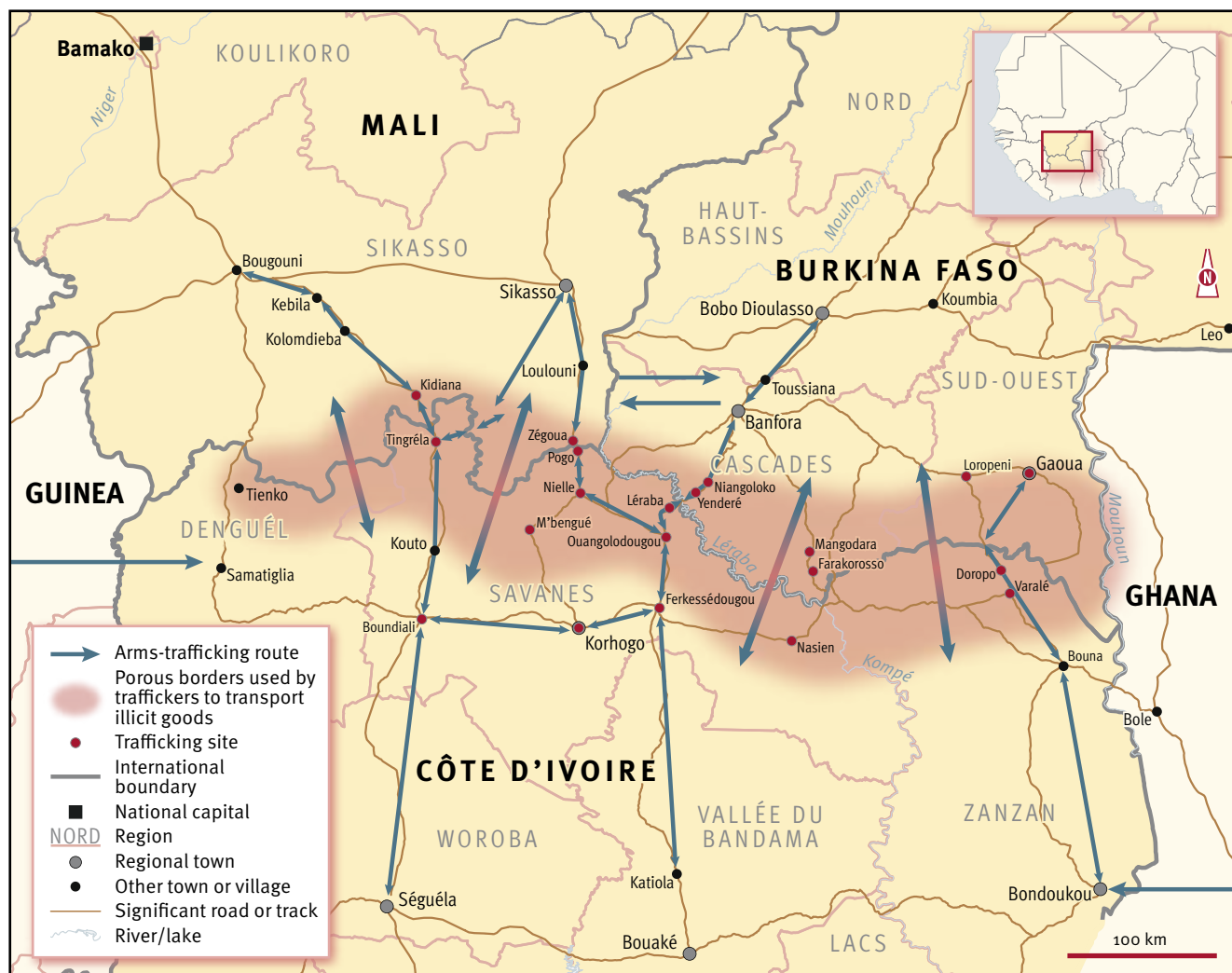
**Map 3** Illicit arms-trafficking routes in and through Mali



Source: Pellerin (2018a)

Base map data source: OpenStreetMap

**Map 4** Illicit arms-trafficking routes in the Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, and Mali border areas



Source: Nowak and Sollazzo (2018)

Base map data source: OpenStreetMap

crossing points close to Tigréla in northern Côte d'Ivoire; and key smuggling hubs in and around the towns of Bawku, Tumu, Hamile, Sampa, and Elubo in Ghana (see Map 5). These flows are much smaller than the other arms-trafficking routes studied, and could mostly be classified as being used for so-called 'ant' trafficking.<sup>13</sup> Ghana and Guinea are also frequently cited in field interviews as sources of arms and ammunition for small-scale traffickers, particularly small amounts of ammunition (especially hunting cartridges) and small arms (hunting rifles, craft weapons, and handguns).<sup>14</sup>

In Ghana cross-border communal ties are an important element in local trafficking dynamics. The people of Hamile and Tumu, the main transit points to Burkina Faso in north-western Ghana, are culturally linked to communities in neighbouring Burkina Faso, sharing the same local dialect, culture, and a hybrid Ghanaian-Burkinabe identity.<sup>15</sup> Cross-border trade also affects trafficking in the border town of Sampa in Ghana's Bono region. Cashew

farmers frequently cross the border to Bondoukou in Côte d'Ivoire in the course of their day-to-day trading activities. The scale of movement at this border crossing makes it difficult for border officials to identify and intercept trafficked goods (Aning, 2018, p. 2).

### Guinea-Bissau

Fieldwork in Guinea-Bissau revealed that the country's major source of trafficked weapons has always been its own military arsenals, which have been historically well supplied as a result of the liberation war against Portugal (the colonial power) from 1963 to 1974 and the 1998–99 civil war. In the 1990s significant flows of weapons were diverted from official stocks in Guinea-Bissau to separatists in the Casamance region in southern Senegal. This arms-trafficking flow has since largely stopped, however, because the Casamance conflict reduced in intensity and Senegal strongly pressured Bissau-Guinean elites to refrain from

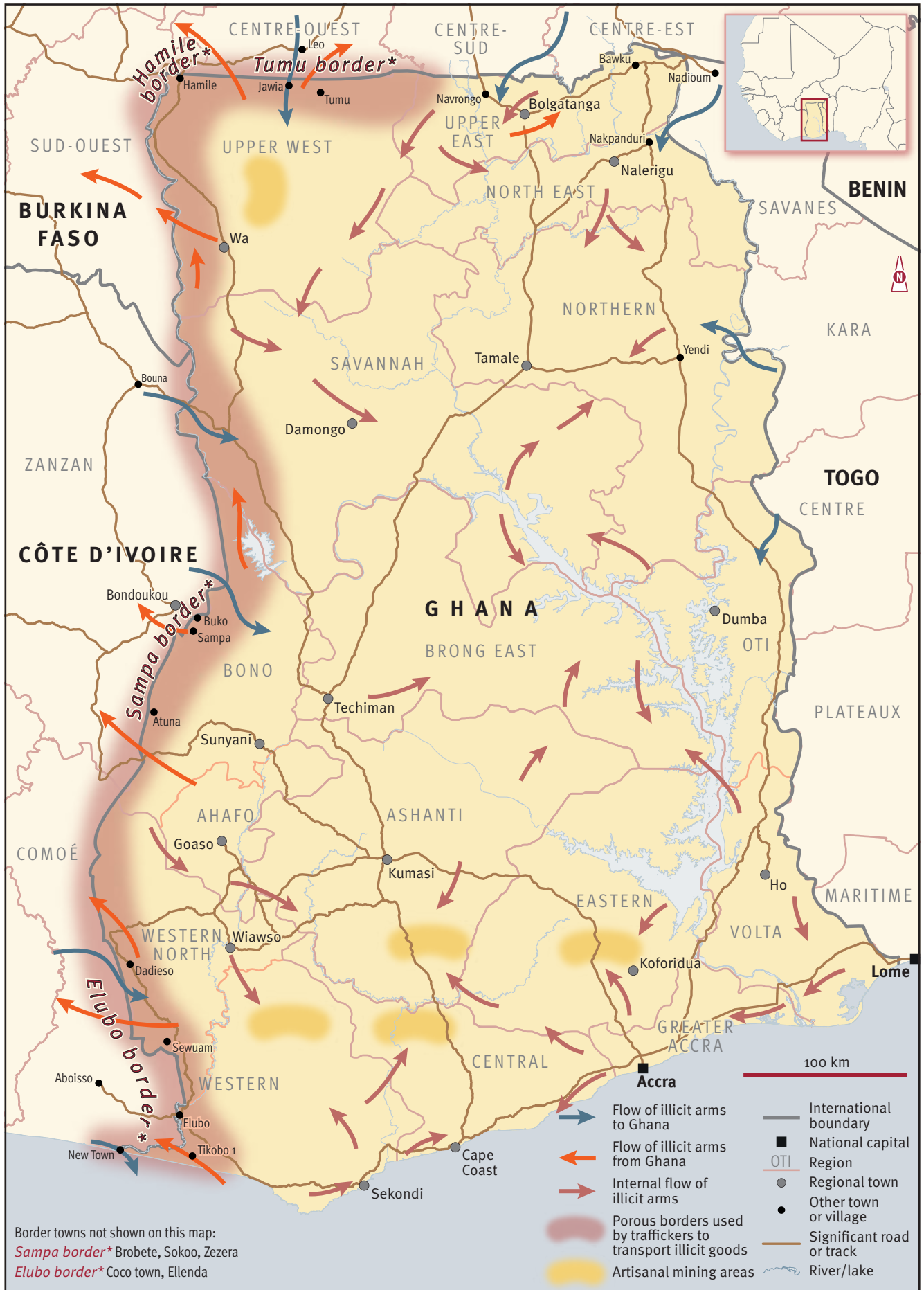
such trafficking. A second lower-level flow of weapons—mostly shotguns—is trafficked by rural populations who use them to hunt or defend themselves and, occasionally, to engage in banditry. These weapons include craft-produced shotguns produced in either Guinea-Bissau or neighbouring countries. Major regional markets for craft-produced arms trafficked into Guinea-Bissau include Serekunda in Gambia and Diaobé in Senegal (Foucher, 2013; 2018).

### Actors

Field research conducted across the Sahel and West Africa reveals a complex cast of actors, including criminal networks with varying levels of organization, armed groups, tribes, border communities, and a mix of government actors either directly or indirectly involved in smuggling activities. While some key informant interviews indicated that arms trafficking remains a specialized activity limited to experienced



**Map 5** Illicit arms-trafficking routes in and through Ghana



Source: Aning (2018)

Base map data source: OpenStreetMap

traffickers with high-level connections, this appears to apply to larger transfers, including transfers of light weapons or sizeable shipments of small arms. More commonly, however, small to medium-sized shipments of arms are increasingly trafficked in combination with other illicit and licit commercial flows, exhibiting complex connections among various markets and actors.

Across all contexts the proliferation of arms has transformed the nature of illicit trafficking and the *modi operandi* of the actors involved. Smugglers and traffickers at all levels respond to demand for arms from communities along smuggling routes and in border areas who have increasingly sought to arm themselves in response to community tensions, civil conflict, the presence of jihadist elements, and banditry. Actors involved in smuggling increasingly carry arms to protect their cargoes. In Mali and Niger a subset of actors are deepening their involvement in a burgeoning protection economy. In Mali the so-called signatory armed groups (Malian armed groups that signed up for and are currently participating in the ongoing peace process)<sup>16</sup> and jihadist elements set up checkpoints and control sections of roadway in the north of the country, levying a fee for passage and assuring ‘guaranteed protection’ until the next checkpoint. In Niger tribal militias control various routes and levy a tax on vehicles for safe passage through their areas. These militias have been known to intercept convoys and steal their cargoes or kidnap individuals, releasing them for a fee or a portion of the goods. The widespread availability of arms and the absence of state control over these vast territories foment the growth of such actors in these areas, injecting new levels of competition and violence into both illicit flows and legitimate trade.

## Mali

In Mali community tensions and rebellion have fuelled a steady market for armaments of all kinds since the 1990s, but this market has expanded dramatically since 2012. It now extends from smaller calibre weapons used by communities, self-defence militias, and small-scale criminals to a wide range of small arms and light weapons destined for organized armed groups, including jihadist groups whose presence has grown in the country since 1998. Arms traffickers are mainly long-established actors in the criminal economy of northern Mali, some of whom are also involved in drug trafficking. Although cross-border arms trafficking in Mali pre-dated the 2012 rebellion in the

country, the flows have since become more intense and the actors involved more numerous. Currently most arms traffickers are members of the signatory armed groups (see above). Embedding themselves in the various armed groups that are central to the ongoing conflict—the rebel coalition known as the Coordination of Azawad Movements (CMA) and the pro-government Platform of Armed Groups (Platform)—provides traffickers with both security protection and access to political protection if they are arrested. The CMA is mainly supplied with weapons from Tuareg tribal actors, including the Ifergoumessen Tuareg factions based in Kidal. They operate simultaneously in other areas of criminal activities, including drug trafficking and the interception of convoys. The Platform is primarily supplied by cross-border arms traffickers from the Lamhar tribe in the Gao region (Tabankort area). These traffickers may support a particular armed group during a time of armed conflict, but loyalties are far from assured, and most traffickers were also found to be selling arms to rival groups in peacetime. A few other arms traffickers active in the area are considered to be independent or affiliated to non-signatory armed groups, such as the Movement for the Salvation of Azawad (MSA) in the Ménaka region (Pellerin, 2018a).

Smuggling networks’ sourcing of weaponry from outside Mali is only part of the story, however. Some sources estimate that 60–80 per cent of the arms circulating in northern Mali were diverted from national stockpiles (CAR, 2016, p. 29).<sup>17</sup> Targeted attacks on security forces and the capture of their weapons and ammunition represent a continuous and significant source of weapons for armed groups. Major diversions of arms from government stores to armed groups were documented in Amachach, Ménaka, Timbuktu, and Gao in 2006–07. The most important of these diversions implicated senior military officers in the transfer of several truckloads of arms and in allowing the looting of stockpiles. Some reports show that the Malian government deliberately provided arms, vehicles, fuel, and ammunition to proxy forces after the defeat of the Malian Armed Forces (FAMA) in Kidal in 2014 (Pellerin, 2018a). The Imghad and Allied Tuareg Self-defence Movement (GATIA) was formed in 2014 immediately after FAMA’s defeat in Kidal and as CMA forces were moving south and threatening to capture Gao and Timbuktu (Jeune Afrique, 2015). The Malian state’s supplying of GATIA was reportedly a deliberate act of state policy designed to ensure the government’s survival.<sup>18</sup> In 2012, as rebel armed elements and jihadist groups extended their control across the north



A FATIH 13 pistol manufactured in Turkey and seized in Burkina Faso. May 2018.  
Source: Matthias Nowak/Small Arms Survey

of the country, the FAMA retreated, abandoning bases and resulting in the complete loss of government weapons stocks in the region. More recent attacks on army camps and convoys have once again flooded arms-trafficking networks with military equipment. Fieldwork confirms that weak governance structures and corruption are central to illicit arms flows in Mali. Outflows of arms from government stocks are the result of state-linked trafficking strategies and are planned at the highest levels of government, but use non-state armed groups as proxies. Additionally, many mid-ranking Malian officers have long-established informal business arrangements with arms traffickers (Pellerin, 2018a).

## Niger

In Niger the most active arms-trafficking networks are tribal in nature. They are run by a combination of the Tubu tribe families in the traditional Kwar region extending from Lake Chad to Madama, and with a growing presence in Agadez; the Tuaregs in Agadez and part of the Tahoua region; and Arab tribes in Tahoua and Agadez. Armed groups involved in smuggling are generally formed around a tribal or family nucleus, but various groups and communities also work together across tribal and family lines. Arms trafficking works at different levels, with lower-level groups operating between Libya and Niger to supply the limited Nigerien domestic arms market. These groups mostly supply herders, farmers, gold-mining communities,

and migrant smugglers who need small arms—generally handguns—for self-protection (Pellerin, 2018b). These weapons include converted alarm guns of Turkish origin, shotguns, and AK-type assault rifles.<sup>19</sup> A second level of arms and ammunition transfers supply traffickers and criminal groups that use violence to control smuggling activities and routes—mostly involving AK-pattern assault rifles and semi-automatic pistols. Finally, specialized arms traffickers move larger shipments of small arms, light weapons, and heavy weapons through Niger mostly to Mali and beyond. The actors involved in these shipments are also increasingly linked to the drug trade (Pellerin, 2018b). Additionally, since Niger’s introduction of a 2015 law that criminalizes human smuggling across borders and restricts the transport of non-Nigerien migrants in border areas, reports have emerged that migrant smugglers and human traffickers are cooperating more closely with other illicit trafficking networks, including weapons networks (Pellerin, 2018b).

As in neighbouring Mali, government actors and forces in Niger play both a direct and indirect role in trafficking. The diversion of weapons from government stockpiles contributes to illicit flows in Niger and across the region (de Tessières, 2018, p. 11). A prominent case in 2013 involved a prison director in the Diffa region who was found to have sold his entire store of weapons to Boko Haram with the aid of a captain in the armed forces who worked for the military central weapons stores in Niamey.<sup>20</sup> Weapons

that were subsequently seized from Boko Haram members included Chinese Type 56 and Type 56-1 assault rifles, various Russian Federation AK-pattern assault rifles, Chinese Type 80 machine guns, Bulgarian and Chinese RPG launchers, and ammunition of various calibres (de Tessières, 2018).<sup>21</sup> Other weapons were diverted from national stocks as a result of attacks by Boko Haram and associated actors on Nigerien military bases or units, including in Bosso in July 2016, Tazalit in October 2016, Tiloa in February 2017, Abala in May 2017, Ayorou in May and October 2017, Midal in July 2017, and Toumour and Chetimari in January 2018 (Pellerin, 2018b, p. 7). These attacks led to the seizure of weapons that included vehicle-mounted anti-aircraft guns, rockets, RPG launchers, and AK-pattern assault rifles, as well as ammunition (de Tessières, 2018). Reports also assert the presence of links between trafficking networks and institutional, political, and security authorities at all levels of the Nigerien government, with the latter often helping to facilitate the transit of illicit arms flows through the country (Pellerin, 2018b, p. 8).

## Tri-border areas: Burkina Faso, Côte d’Ivoire, Ghana, and Mali

Actors working in the Burkina Faso–Côte d’Ivoire–Mali and Ghana–Côte d’Ivoire–Burkina Faso tri-border areas fall into two broad categories. The first includes low-level transporters who carry small amounts



Merchandise trucks are blocked at the Ivorian-Ghanaian crossing after Côte d’Ivoire closed its border. Noé, Côte d’Ivoire, September 2012.

Source: Sia Kambou/AFP Photos

of illicit goods across unmanned and uncontrolled border crossings, mostly in the bush and by motorcycle. They are generally unarmed and may or may not be part of a larger group. Members of the second category operate from regional capitals and trafficking hubs. They run organized trafficking rings and often control the lower-level transporters, assigning them to move cargo from one point to another. Research indicates low levels of arms trafficking through these networks, but small-scale seizures are frequent (Nowak and Sollazzo, 2018).

Government forces also play a role in these border areas. Some security officials rent or divert their military-grade weapons—most commonly AK-pattern assault rifles—to illicit users. Some security officials have also been observed helping to facilitate the trans-border movement of arms, with junior border officials aiding the passage of small-scale arms shipments as they are transported along bush routes (Nowak and Sollazzo, 2018).

## Guinea-Bissau

In Guinea-Bissau high-ranking military officials have supplied the illicit arms market with military-grade weapons from government stockpiles, obviating the need to access external sources. In the late 1990s and early years of the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century the country became known as a transit site for cocaine

trafficked from Latin America to Europe. This practice persists and has drawn the attention of elite politico-military actors away from illicit arms trafficking (Madeira, Laurent, and Roque, 2011, p. 4). Prior to this, in the 1990s military and political officials were involved in selling and renting weapons from state arsenals to support a separatist rebellion in the Casamance region in southern Senegal. As indicated above, however, this practice has decreased due to a reduction in the intensity of conflict in the Casamance (Foucher, 2018, pp. 1–2).

## Impacts of illicit arms trafficking

Many states in West Africa and the Sahel have experienced bouts of armed conflict and lower-intensity crises. Figure 1 depicts the rate of violent deaths in the field research countries between 2006 and 2017.

Recent figures estimate that violence was the cause of death of almost 150,000 people in Africa in 2017—more than a quarter of the global total of violent deaths that year. Firearms were used in more than 40,000 of these deaths, an estimated 28 per cent of the total (Small Arms Survey, n.d.a).

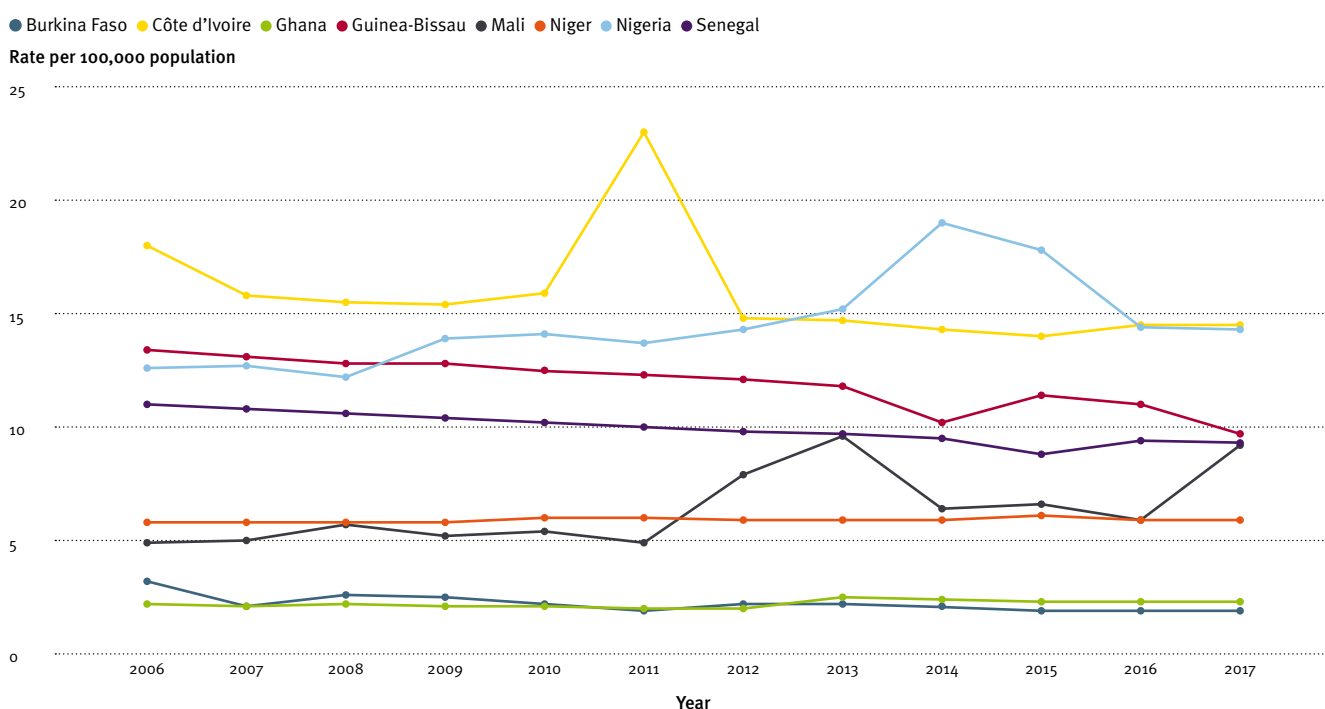
The trafficking and diversion of weapons and ammunition to armed groups and terrorist entities have undoubtedly

fuelled armed conflict in the Sahel and seriously threatened community safety across the region, in particular in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger. Devastating terror attacks have occurred in several regional cities in recent years, including Bamako in Mali, Ouagadougou in Burkina Faso, and Grand-Bassam in Côte d'Ivoire. Armed groups in Burkina Faso, northern Mali, and Niger pose a serious threat to both national security and defence forces and peacekeepers, with Mali's MINUSMA mission now considered one of the world's most dangerous peacekeeping missions (Seiff, 2017). The arrival and development of jihadist groups in northern Mali since 1998 has increased the demand for and circulation of heavy weapons, including vehicle-mounted 12.7 mm and 14.5 mm machine guns known as *koujeil*, RPG launchers and their ammunition, wire-guided anti-tank weapons, and MANPADS such as the SA-7. Jihadist groups have also procured mortar rounds and anti-vehicle landmines (likely from Libya) for attacks.<sup>22</sup> Much of the violence that has come to characterize the region is increasingly directed against civilians, as Figure 2 shows.

Arms circulation and trafficking feed a vicious cycle of escalating tension and violence as armed conflict, coupled with the inability of governments to protect their citizens, drives communities to procure arms for self-defence.

In Mali each episode of violent conflict between coalitions of armed groups—

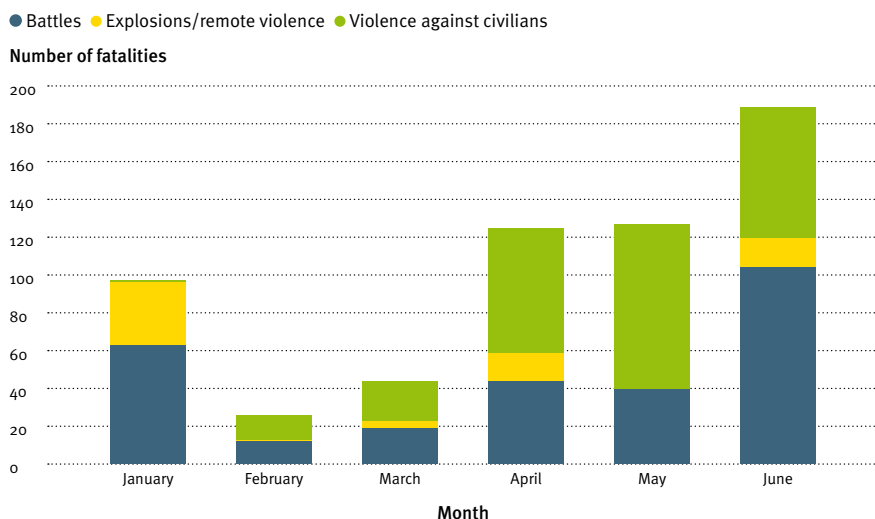
**Figure 1** Rate of violent deaths in selected West African countries per 100,000 population, 2006–17



Note: Violent deaths include fatalities in the context of both 'common crime' and conflict-related violence. For more information, see Mc Evoy and Hideg (2017).

Source: Small Arms Survey (n.d.a)

**Figure 2** Changes in patterns of violence in the regions of Gao and Ménaka (Mali) and Tillabéri (Niger), January–June 2018



Note: Figure 2 is based on Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED) research. ACLED classifies ‘explosions/remote violence’ as ‘asymmetric violent events aimed at creating asymmetrical conflict dynamics by preventing the target from responding’. These violent events include the use of ‘bombs, grenades, [and] improvised explosive devices’, among other things (ACLED, 2019).

Source: Nsaibia (2018)

the CMA and Platform—was preceded by both sides’ acquisition of fresh supplies of arms and/or ammunition. The same pattern can be seen with community-level conflicts in Mali. The reported arming of the traditional hunting militia in 2015 in Tenenkou, Mopti region, appears to have

exacerbated tensions between the militia and the region’s Fulani tribal community (Pellerin, 2018a). Similarly, the circulation of arms in Koro and Bankass accompanied the aggravation of community violence between the Dogon and Fulani communities in early 2018 and led to

the formal creation of community militia groups known as the Dana Amassagou and the Alliance pour le Salut du Sahel (Pellerin, 2018a). More than 200 civilians and militia group members were killed in this violence between January and May 2018 alone.<sup>23</sup> Meanwhile, fighting in the Ménaka region linked to the MSA and GATIA armed groups significantly increased demand for weapons in 2018.<sup>24</sup>

In northern Niger jihadist groups settled in rural areas, having been pushed out of Mali by the French military’s Operation Serval in 2013. The increasing presence of these loosely affiliated armed groups heightened a sense of community insecurity and fear. Their arrival also injected illicit arms into an already fractious environment, further inflaming longstanding intercommunal tensions, such as seasonal conflicts between Fulani herders and rural farming communities. Another example can be observed in the Agadez region, where clashes between Fulani and Tuareg tribes have expanded to include opportunistic attacks on gold miners returning from sites in Djado and Tchibarakaten. Additionally, a more recent dynamic in the period January–June 2018 has seen increasing non-state armed group Islamic State in the Greater Sahara, MSA, and GATIA attacks on civilians along the Niger–Mali corridor in the Ménaka and Tillabéri regions. These attacks have intensified after counter-terrorist operations by Operation Barkhane forces (see Figure 2). Communities felt vulnerable and increasingly sought access to illicit arms for protection when the state failed to provide it. Access to arms combined with declining trust in the state led to increased reliance on self-help in dealing with insecurity, resulting in an overall increase in violent confrontations and attacks (Pellerin, 2018b).

In Burkina Faso violence is mounting. Similar to patterns observed in Niger, armed elements linked to extremist violence in Mali and Niger spread south and west into northern Burkina Faso from 2014 to 2016, bringing political instability with them. Terrorist attacks and insurgent group violence, combined with broader social unrest, farmer–herder conflicts, and the increased spread of arms, have resulted in near daily violent incidents from late 2018 to date. Violence has occurred across the country, but is particularly centred in the north and increasingly the east. In 2019 a spate of armed attacks on churches raised concern that groups are seeking to exacerbate sectarian tensions in a country where Muslim and Christian communities have lived side by side relatively peacefully in the past (Maslin Nir, 2019).



A seized Polish PKMS underfolder showing machine-erased markings. Service régional de la police judiciaire, Sikasso, Mali. May 2018. Source: Matthias Nowak/Small Arms Survey



Craft weapons and 12 gauge hunting rifles seized in Comoé region, Burkina Faso. May 2018.  
Source: Matthias Nowak/Small Arms Survey

Violence in Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso has precipitated a humanitarian crisis in the Sahel. As conflict and insecurity have escalated, local communities have increasingly faced food insecurity, large-scale displacement, and the disruption of access to basic services, including health care and education. The UN estimates that 5.1 million people will need humanitarian assistance in 2019 and that armed violence will continue to afflict the lives and livelihoods of populations across the Sahel (UNOCHA, 2019).

Road bandits, known as *coupeurs de routes*, also affect the safety and free movement of communities living in border areas. They are known to attack transport trucks and passenger buses. Road bandits are reportedly a serious threat to security in border areas in Burkina Faso, Ghana, Côte d'Ivoire, Mali, and Niger. In fact, interviews with local communities indicated that many view road banditry as their main safety concern after terrorists and armed groups.<sup>25</sup>

The injection of arms into mining areas has significantly affected gold mining—both industrial and artisanal—which has become a key target of criminals, armed groups, and terrorist elements. Insecurity in gold-mining areas drives demand for illicit weapons, as has been observed particularly in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger (de Tessières, 2017; Pellerin, 2018b; Nowak and Sollazzo, 2018). As an industry, gold mining has become more vulnerable since the crisis in Mali in 2011–12, although banditry and weapons proliferation have been increasing since the early years of the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, in line with the increase in armed conflict that governments and traditional leaders have not been able to prevent or control. Insecurity has also allowed criminal and terrorist groups to become directly and indirectly involved in gold mining in Burkina Faso, Niger, and Mali, and to a lesser extent in Ghana and Côte d'Ivoire. Armed group and terrorist attacks on mines are growing in frequency; for example, at the Essakane gold mine in Burkina Faso, and in the Air, Boungou, Djado, Mana, and Téra regions in Niger. Kidnapping for ransom, extortion, and protection payments are also common. Insecurity and organized criminal involvement in mining areas also attract other illicit commodities (for example, drugs) and crime (such as minor conflicts among miners and attacks on them) (Sollazzo, 2018).

Interviews reveal that border communities are vulnerable to criminality linked to arms trafficking and organized criminal activity (Pellerin, 2018a; 2018b; Nowak and Sollazzo, 2018; Aning, 2018). Although not the direct targets of traffickers, border

populations may suffer at the hands of trafficking groups because of the predatory behaviour they may adopt towards these communities. Border communities are also affected by clashes between criminal groups and other trafficking groups, on the one hand, and with state security forces, on the other. Armed actors may directly target border populations for reasons relating to terrorism, ethnic and religious conflict, or access to resources. Criminal activity in border areas also harms the prosperity of border communities because it increases the cost of acquiring basic goods and services due to the need for increased security.

On the positive side of the ledger, none of the communities surveyed reported being targeted by illicit arms traffickers *because* of the business such traffickers conduct in the areas where they lived (Pellerin, 2018a; 2018b; Nowak and Sollazzo, 2018; Aning, 2018). In fact, many community members passively tolerate trafficking networks, while others actively engage in illicit trafficking. Trafficking networks often recruit from border communities, providing opportunities to unemployed youth who are familiar with the local terrain. This can foster local participation in and acceptance of trafficking, particularly in areas with limited opportunities in the licit economy and a weak state presence. For example, trafficking is perceived as a valid career for demobilized fighters in Côte d'Ivoire and youths in Ghana, Mali, and Niger, given the easy money it is able to provide and the lack of alternative employment (Nowak and Sollazzo, 2018; Aning, 2018; Pellerin, 2018a; 2018b). Friendship, family, and cross-border group or ethnic ties support and facilitate communities' illicit trafficking activities. Transporters of illicit goods in Côte d'Ivoire and Ghana, for example, rely on an extensive network of facilitators and contacts who assist the transportation of these goods by informing transporters on the movements of security forces (Nowak and Sollazzo, 2018; Aning, 2018).

## Responses to illicit arms trafficking

The fight against illicit arms trafficking has involved myriad responses at the local, national, regional, and international levels. This section combines an analysis of field-based responses with a review of key actors and initiatives in order to consider issues of coordination, duplication, integration, and coherence. It is intended to provide an illustrative overview of key initiatives and programming rather than a

comprehensive list of all such responses. Additionally, although responses are subdivided and analysed as international, regional, and national and local, it should be noted that these distinctions are not always as clear in practice, with numerous initiatives potentially falling under several headings.

## International responses

A variety of international bodies have attempted to curb West African arms trafficking, including the UN and its agencies, INTERPOL, and the World Customs Organization (WCO). International anti-trafficking initiatives include arms detection efforts, military and security-centric anti-trafficking interventions, capacity building, research into and analysis of trafficking trends, PSSM training programmes, weapons-marking programmes, the decommissioning and destruction of arms, and community-based initiatives. A number of international NGOs and agencies are also active in this space, including the UN Mine Action Service (UNMAS), the Mine Advisory Group (MAG), Conflict Armament Research, the HALO Trust, the Danish Demining Group (DDG), and the Small Arms Survey.<sup>26</sup>

International actors have tended to emphasize militarized and security-centric responses to the fight against illicit arms flows. The UN is active across the region and is responsible for a series of political and peacekeeping missions and agencies that seek to address illicit arms circulation as part of their work. For example, units within MINUSMA (the UN mission in Mali) collect information that could help fight organized crime and arms trafficking. MINUSMA does not have an anti-trafficking mandate, however, and therefore its

intelligence-gathering capabilities have a limited impact beyond informing the mission's operational planning and reducing the risk to UN staff. France launched a military intervention, Operation Barkhane, in August 2014 to intervene in all five Sahelian countries. This operation, however, officially does not undertake anti-trafficking initiatives except when jihadist groups are involved.<sup>27</sup> Nevertheless, French forces in Mali, and to a lesser extent MINUSMA, have been seizing weapons since 2013 through well-documented operations that involve the discovery of weapons caches generally belonging to jihadist groups<sup>28</sup> or seizures resulting from random searches of vehicles during patrols. While most operations have targeted jihadist groups, several weapons seizures have also targeted the signatory armed groups, in particular groups belonging to the Platform. Seizures have included indirect fire weapons and ammunition such as 122 mm rockets for the BM-21 Grad multiple rocket launcher.<sup>29</sup>

Unlike Operation Barkhane or MINUSMA, the activities of the UN Integrated Peacebuilding Office in Guinea-Bissau have been more overtly and strategically focused on anti-arms and anti-drug trafficking. The UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) has also supported the establishment of transnational crime units (TCUs) in Guinea-Bissau to foster coherent responses to drug trafficking and organized crime with a particular emphasis on border control and maritime security.

To address the arms-trafficking issue globally, UNODC has adopted a multi-pronged approach through its Global Firearms Programme. The initiative was launched to assist states to build adequate criminal justice systems that can



FN Herstal Mag 58 7.62×51mm general-purpose machine gun, Type 56 and AKM-pattern rifles (left), and Bulgarian 7.62×39mm ammunition (right) seized in Ménaka, Mali, 2013.

effectively respond to the challenges posed by organized criminality specifically related to trafficking in firearms, their parts, and components. The programme aims to assist states by supporting legislative and policy development and preventative and security measures, enhancing criminal justice responses, promoting cooperation and information exchange among states and regions, improving data collection and analysis through annual targeted questionnaires such as the UN illicit arms flows questionnaire (UNODC, 2019), and ensuring that global firearms trafficking is understood within the broader framework of other cross-cutting issues.<sup>30</sup>

In November 2017 INTERPOL, UNODC, the WCO, and eight African countries (Benin, Burkina Faso, Chad, Guinea, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, and Nigeria) launched a joint operation known as TRIGGER III. The operation included several capacity-building stages before implementing interventions aimed at disrupting firearms-trafficking networks. A total of 152 firearms have been seized and 50 people arrested for firearms-related offences in operations associated with TRIGGER III.<sup>31</sup> INTERPOL implements and promotes the Illicit Arms Records and tracing Management System (iARMS), which facilitates information exchange and cooperation among law enforcement agencies carrying out firearms-related investigations, including the tracing of licit firearms that have been involved in the commission of a crime. Within months of TRIGGER III's implementation in West Africa firearms records in the iARMS database increased 45-fold and tracing requests 18-fold.<sup>32</sup> Currently, 12 out of 17 countries in the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) region have added information to this database. Countries' submission of records of lost and stolen firearms to the iARMS database facilitates anti-trafficking investigations—specifically when a firearm recorded in iARMS as being present in one country is subsequently seized in another country. In this way the increased use of the database strengthens regional and global cooperation in the investigation and tracing of illicit firearms.

Additionally, the WCO conducts a Small Arms and Light Weapons Programme aimed at strengthening states' capacity to detect and prevent illicit trafficking in small arms and light weapons. The programme, which launched in 2015, focuses on international cooperation, intelligence gathering, technical assistance, and the development of tools to target illicit arms flows. To enhance the effectiveness of assistance projects, the WCO signed a memorandum of understanding with the UN Office for Disarmament Affairs.

Ongoing activities, such as the Strategic Trade Control Enforcement Programme, focus on counter-proliferation measures for certain commodities (nuclear, biological, and chemical), while project Global Shield focuses on the detection and interdiction of precursor chemicals and components used in the manufacture of improvised explosive devices.<sup>33</sup> Additionally, the WCO Regional Intelligence Liaison Office provides intelligence and threat assessments that focus on particular countries, goods, or borders in the wider West African region in order to support efforts to link national customs agencies at the regional level.

A number of international actors have led counter-proliferation and counter-diversion activities aimed at preventing diversion from national and seized stockpiles. UNMAS, MAG, Humanity and Inclusion (HI), and the HALO Trust all provide support to PSSM and record-keeping (and tracing) initiatives focused on national stockpiles and seized weapons. MAG, for example, has deployed personnel to Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, and Sierra Leone to carry out activities that include mine clearance, weapons and ammunition safe storage programmes, and risk and awareness education initiatives. HI also runs projects in Mali and Niger that improve physical infrastructure for safe small arms storage and conducts risk awareness education initiatives in communities affected by explosive remnants of war. In addition, HI runs programmes to clear explosive remnants of war and demining operations in West Africa.

UNMAS conducts risk education, explosive ordnance disposal, and rehabilitation programming for armouries in Mali to help strengthen national stockpile safety. The HALO Trust has been active in Nigeria and has recently opened offices in Guinea-Bissau to support state efforts to secure weapons storage facilities and destroy surplus and obsolete weapons. Projects undertaken by Conflict Armament Research and the Small Arms Survey in Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger, and Nigeria, often in collaboration with ECOWAS, include analysis, the mapping of trends and flows, and assisting states—and their national small arms commissions (NATCOMs)—to develop databases for weapons identification, as well as record-keeping and tracing systems to manage seized weapons.<sup>34</sup>

Finally, a number of organizations have undertaken community-level activities. For example, the DDG<sup>35</sup> leads a border security programme in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger that focuses on building trust between security providers and communities in border areas, and aims to identify these communities' needs and communicate them to security providers.<sup>36</sup>

## Regional responses

Regionally, a number of actors are working to enhance bilateral and multilateral cooperation in the areas of law enforcement and border security in order to combat weapons trafficking. ECOWAS, for example, has a dedicated Small Arms Division that supports counter-proliferation and anti-trafficking measures adopted by NATCOMs in the region. In the Lake Chad basin several countries have bilateral cooperation agreements on border management that extend from simple information exchanges to joint patrol operations. These joint patrols are not specifically mandated to counter arms trafficking, however, but rather to combat armed groups, looting, and cross-border thefts (GRIP and Small Arms Survey, 2016, p. 50).

Notably, Chad has established agreements with neighbouring states to combat illicit arms trafficking across shared borders. Agreements of this kind can be beneficial when participating states are committed to establishing mutually strengthened borders, and could be replicated in other West African border areas (RECSA, 2013, p. 36). ECOWAS's West African Police Chiefs Committee (WAPCCO) has been tasked with identifying crime trends and patterns, establishing and maintaining contacts among the various regional law enforcement authorities, and improving the exchange of information and intelligence. To date, however, no formal channels have been established for such exchanges.<sup>37</sup>

The African Union (AU) Master Roadmap of Practical Steps to Silence the Guns in Africa by Year 2020 (AU, n.d.) provides a continent-specific framework to promote peace and security. It

*provides a number of practical steps and modalities for action to address the underlying drivers of conflict, as well as the tools and enablers of violence, including preventing the illicit flows of weapons on the continent and to conflict zones* (Florquin, Lipott, and Wairagu, 2019, p. 15).

The AU Roadmap addresses issues such as stockpile management and the detection of illicit arms flows. Its implementation at the regional level focuses on cross-border cooperation to stem illicit arms flows, and improving firearms marking programmes and record-keeping systems to prevent diversion to non-state armed actors.

Regional militarized responses are also beginning to emerge. For example, in 2012 the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF) was mandated to address terrorist threats, most specifically to tackle the



Boko Haram insurgency. The force comprises military units from Cameroon, Chad, Niger, and Nigeria and is headquartered in N'Djamena (ICG, 2017, p. i). Despite some successes there has been criticism of its effectiveness and concern over reports of violence against local communities and the use of armed civilians to support MNJTF operations (ICG, 2017). While the force continues to exist, albeit at a relatively low level of activity, international support has recently shifted to the G5 Sahel Joint Force (FC-G5S), comprising security forces from Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger, which was established in 2017 to address cross-border security challenges in the Sahel. The FC-G5S, which includes the fight against organized crime in its mandate, conducts a range of operations across a band of 50 km on each side of the borders of participating states. This gives the FC-G5S the potential to disrupt trafficking patterns and force traffickers to change routes and bypass the G5 Sahel countries (similar to the impact of Operation Barkhane). FC-G5S forces could, however, benefit from a greater emphasis on anti-trafficking doctrine and tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTP), and from the enhanced regional coordination of efforts to prevent illicit trafficking. Priorities include the strengthening of investigative powers and the accompanying use of arrest and prosecution powers in each participating state, in addition to strengthened cross-border justice and security cooperation.<sup>38</sup>

Promising regional PSSM initiatives also exist, although their impact has yet to be fully assessed. For example, the ECOWAS Small Arms Division aims to encourage the exchange of information on small arms and light weapons among regional authorities and strengthen weapons storage, safety, and management systems. In this regard, Burkina Faso, Niger, and Nigeria are piloting a mechanism for sharing information on seized weapons that should lead to increased tracing capabilities.<sup>39</sup>

## National and local responses

At the local level in the tri-border area of southern Burkina Faso, northern Côte d'Ivoire, and southern Mali informant networks can alert law enforcement officials when suspicious activity is observed. For example, if they observe a group of motorcycles riding through villages near unmanned border crossings, informants may alert their contacts in the security and defence forces to request assistance (Nowak and Sollazzo, 2018).<sup>40</sup> Informal

intelligence networks can be useful, but they tend to be ad hoc<sup>41</sup> and may also have associated risks. For example, security forces can be manipulated into taking action against a particular group or community; particular groups can remain untouched, while others are systematically targeted; and tip-offs against rivals can be used to assert dominance and power in a particular business or geographical area.

Despite the importance of investigating and prosecuting transnational organized crime, especially for the purposes of combating arms trafficking, surprisingly little mention was made of this during the interviews conducted for this study. A single interviewee in Mali cited the role of special prosecutors in detecting and prosecuting drug trafficking linked to organized crime, specifically in relation to the seizure of almost five tons of cannabis close to Sikasso in Mali (Nowak and Sollazzo, 2018).<sup>42</sup> Niger's Central Counter-Terrorism Service, which was established in 2011, is, however, increasingly involved in the fight against arms trafficking.<sup>43</sup>

NATCOMs act as critical coordinating bodies for the PSSM, marking, record-keeping, and tracing activities outlined above. They are also the key interlocutors for and recipients of funding from many international actors. States parties to the ECOWAS Convention on Small Arms and Light Weapons, Their Ammunition and Other Related Materials (ECOWAS Convention) are obliged to establish NATCOMs (ECOWAS, 2006), and each of the countries where field research was undertaken has a NATCOM focused on tackling the proliferation and illicit circulation of arms.<sup>44</sup> In each country the NATCOM is the national authority in charge of implementing the ECOWAS Convention, and also acts as the national counterpart of the ECOWAS Commission's Small Arms Division. In theory NATCOMs in the ECOWAS region are mandated to coordinate relevant activities, exchange information and lessons learned, and conduct strategic planning on small arms control. In practice, however, they carry out these tasks with varying degrees of success.<sup>45</sup>

Many NATCOMs across West Africa and the Sahel are institutionally weak, coordinating their activities well neither at the regional level, nor domestically with national security agencies. As a consequence, the effectiveness of national and local counter-trafficking efforts varies across the region.<sup>46</sup> Burkina Faso's CNLPAL and its High Authority on Arms Imports Controls and Their Use, for example, collaborate on PSSM action plans (with assistance from the Small Arms Survey and MAG)

and have made progress in conducting PSSM activities based on a 2017 action plan (Nowak and Sollazzo, 2018). Guinea-Bissau's NATCOM, on the other hand, although it has existed since July 2006, has little more than a permanent secretary, while there is no dedicated budget (Foucher, 2018).

Niger was the first West African country to officially establish a comprehensive NATCOM in 1994 at the end of the country's first rebellion. Niger's National Commission for Illicit Weapons Collection and Control (CNCCAI) undertakes voluntary arms collection and destruction activities. The UN Regional Centre for Peace and Disarmament in Africa, UNODC, and technical partners such as HI support Niger in its efforts to mark weapons through awareness raising and training, and by supplying marking equipment (UNODC has given three marking machines to the CNCCAI). The involvement of the international community in Niger (for example, Operation Barkhane's joint patrols with Nigerien forces) has helped to reduce and displace arms-trafficking flows (de Tessières, 2018, pp. 64–65). The Small Arms Survey has also assisted Niger to develop a new national action plan for 2019–21, and is working with the CNCCAI to develop a set of indicators to strengthen the national monitoring and evaluation of small arms control initiatives.

Ghana's National Commission on Small Arms and government security forces have pursued a two-pronged approach targeting the economic (revenue generation) and security (law enforcement, crime control, and armed violence reduction) components of arms trafficking. Poor institutional coordination has, however, led to conflicting initiatives, while overlapping small arms laws and regulations have further complicated the picture (Aning, 2018). In Ghana the cultural acceptance of trans-border illicit flows of goods, including arms, permeates society and shapes government responses to the problem. One senior security officer asserted that there is

*no deterrence since most of the security personnel—police, customs, immigration, Bureau of National Intelligence and the military—see it as a God-given opportunity to make money; they simply aid the smuggling business.*<sup>47</sup>

These attitudes impede national and local efforts to stem illicit arms flows.

Mali's CNLPAL has developed a national action plan and conducts civilian

arms control and disarmament activities with national and international partners. Nevertheless, Malian authorities have done relatively little to become involved in the problem of cross-border trafficking. This is due, on the one hand, to the weakness of the state in northern and central Mali and, on the other hand, to the prioritising of the fight against terrorism.

NATCOMs could be key players in both national and regional counter-proliferation and counter-trafficking efforts, but require greater support in any efforts to develop this role.

## Possible counter-trafficking interventions

Possible entry points for counter-trafficking interventions were discussed with interlocutors active in the field. Table 1 provides a summary of their proposals. Many of the core suggestions expressed came from members of security and defence forces seeking further international support

to counter cross-border arms trafficking. The measures they proposed focused on the formal security sector.

It is important to note that the security-centric proposals outlined in Table 1 represent just one type of support needed to address illicit cross-border arms flows. The initiatives that the security providers suggested require complementary economic, political, and social measures. The sociocultural and economic drivers of illicit trafficking are key in this regard. Interviews with traffickers and actors with ties to smuggling rings and organized criminal networks stressed that economic hardship drives many community members to engage in illicit activities. Interviewees expressed their desire to give up such activities and find less risky ways of generating an income. Yet a lack of viable employment opportunities and the challenges facing people attempting to secure a stable income—particularly in remote communities and border areas—make trafficking an attractive alternative.

Terrorism and intercommunal violence, which are currently endemic in many of the

areas surveyed for this study, have driven demand for small arms. The increased use of firearms by self-defence militias and hunter brotherhoods, such as the Dozo, and in resolving local conflicts has caused longstanding intercommunal tensions to increase. The result has been a significant escalation of violent conflict in both northern and central Mali and northern and eastern Burkina Faso. Tit-for-tat attacks between communities have been fuelled by—and have in turn exacerbated—ethnic and communal grievances. Tackling these complex conflict dynamics will require responses that extend beyond the strengthening of border patrols and the development of security sector counter-trafficking capacities. Interventions to support community mediation, strengthen good governance, and prevent violent extremism form part of a broader package that deals with illicit arms flows by addressing the drivers of both demand and supply.

The proposals contained in Table 1 nevertheless highlight important opportunities for strengthening the work of the

**Table 1** Proposed counter-trafficking measures and associated opportunities and risks, West Africa

| Intervention area   | Opportunities   | Risks   |
|---|---|---|
| <b>Promote and support the role of specialized inter-agency investigation and prosecution units.</b>                          | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Specialized inter-agency units exist in a number of the countries where field research was undertaken.</li> <li>Inter-agency units benefit from support from international organizations such as UNODC or INTERPOL, and show promise.</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Most interviewees asserted that specialized investigative and prosecution units do not work as they ideally should. Making such units more visible, however, could trigger resistance and inter-institutional rivalry.</li> <li>There is limited knowledge of the role of specialized units among law enforcement agents on the ground, limiting these units' involvement in the investigation and prosecution of cases of illicit trafficking and organized crime.</li> <li>The exchange of information across institutions is central to the success of such units, but is reported to be poor and politicized in many cases.</li> </ul> |
| <b>Foster intelligence gathering at the local level, and formalize procedures, funding, and information exchange systems.</b> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>More money (to maintain networks of informants), reporting, and sharing of intelligence at the local level would strengthen counter-trafficking efforts, including the ability to monitor the movement of armed groups and terrorist networks.</li> <li>The formalization of intelligence-gathering procedures would help to avoid the instrumentalization of security and defence forces by local actors and communities.</li> <li>Community actors can be drawn into increased engagement in such efforts, including through decentralized outposts of national commissions, security agencies, and related institutions.</li> <li>Youth groups could be an important source of intelligence and if motivated to work with the authorities, could be recruited for counter-trafficking efforts.</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Members of security and defence forces tend to jealously protect their intelligence networks, since their effectiveness and members' safety often depend on such networks.</li> <li>The cost of formalizing informant networks and procedures can be high; paying informants can also lead to official funds flowing into the hands of criminal networks that provide information.</li> </ul>  |

| Intervention area   | Opportunities  | Risks   |
|---|--|---|
| <p><b>Use counter-poaching units as a model for the development of broader cross-border/anti-trafficking units.</b></p>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• These efforts should include the development of specialized doctrine, in-operation mentoring, TTP, and human rights training. In-operation mentoring allows a unit's work to be monitored. Joint patrolling also serves to monitor personnel performance. Sustainability and exit-strategy planning are built into this form of support.</li> <li>• Such an initiative would support local engagement and capacity building.</li> <li>• Given the overlaps in criminal networks involved in the trafficking of arms and, for example, ivory, anti-trafficking units could overlap and co-train and patrol.</li> </ul>                                       | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Such units could be targeted by terrorist, organized crime, and non-state armed groups.</li> <li>• Monitoring and evaluation mechanisms would be required to check on the effectiveness of these units and their human rights performance.</li> <li>• In-operation mentoring requires relatively burdensome and costly security measures for the embedded mentoring teams.</li> </ul>  |
| <p><b>Combine PSSM training with counter-trafficking and anti-organized crime doctrine and anti-corruption measures.</b></p>                                      | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Specialized units can be trained to fight illicit arms trafficking and organized crime together with PSSM specialists, who have an important role to play. Combining training and reinforcing links between these areas of work may mutually benefit training outcomes, awareness raising, and institutional networks.</li> <li>• Such training can also increase the perceived value of being an armourer and make the post more sought after.</li> <li>• Counter-corruption measures are potentially relevant to build the capacity of all types of security and defence forces.</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• This kind of additional training makes courses longer and thus more expensive.</li> <li>• Identifying the right staff for combined training might be more difficult and would require enhanced selection and vetting processes.</li> </ul>   |
| <p><b>Assess the feasibility of installing land-border checkpoints with multiple controls: scanners, canine units, and personal checks.</b></p>                   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• These kinds of measures can be quickly put in place and would provide better control of cross-border passenger and vehicle movements.</li> <li>• Cooperation among developing countries, including exchanges with countries such as Brazil, Colombia, or Rwanda, can be implemented in order to share common lessons learned on the costs, requirements, and experiences of such initiatives.</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Security and defence forces may be reluctant to institute such measures because of the logistical requirements and costs, especially for canine units.</li> <li>• Staff need to be efficient and properly trained or such measures can lead to long delays at border-crossing points.</li> <li>• Climate conditions and the supply of electricity are key considerations when establishing such checkpoints.</li> <li>• Effective oversight and anti-corruption measures are also needed.</li> </ul> |
| <p><b>Strengthen coordination between international agencies and national security providers, and align national, bilateral, and multilateral strategies.</b></p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Freedom of movement may increase corruption and illicit arms flows. Connecting arms-related work with corruption-related work is key.</li> <li>• The effective coordination of funders and agencies on the ground will increase the effectiveness of related initiatives.</li> <li>• The alignment of national, bilateral, and multilateral interests and activities would strengthen existing regional approaches to organized crime and arms trafficking, such as the G5 Sahel, the Mano River Union, and TCUs.</li> <li>• Donor coordination is essential in light of the multiplicity of approaches and interventions present in the region.</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Coordination of this kind is costly and requires political support.</li> <li>• Aligning multilateral interventions with national and bilateral interests has political risks and could be subject to manipulation.</li> <li>• Coordination weakens the autonomy of funders with specific priorities, potentially resulting in the reduction or withdrawal of such funding.</li> </ul>  |
| <p><b>Use UN stabilization and peacekeeping missions in the region to enhance the understanding of and responses to illicit arms proliferation.</b></p>           | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• MINUSMA gathers a large amount of data and intelligence, but lacks internal mechanisms to distil and analyse this information for counter-trafficking purposes.</li> <li>• Enhanced collaboration among MINUSMA, national institutions (including NATCOMs), and international experts could strengthen the analysis of data related to arms trafficking.</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• UN missions are complex bureaucracies, and bodies that hold arms-related data may be reluctant to share it within the mission and with outsiders.</li> </ul>   |

Source: Key informant interviews in Burkina Faso, Ghana, Guinea-Bissau, Mali, and Niger, April–June 2018.

security and defence forces that combat illicit arms trafficking and organized crime. The table, in effect, gives voice to many of those on the front line of the fight against illicit trafficking by communicating their specific needs and recommendations. Notwithstanding its security sector focus, Table 1 offers ideas for practical projects that can be implemented with the support of the donor community and other multi-lateral partners to strengthen counter-trafficking efforts.

## Conclusion

Two different levels of arms trafficking emerge from field research for this Briefing Paper undertaken in West Africa and the Sahel. In northern Mali and Niger high-level illicit arms trafficking involves an increasing degree of criminal organization and the militarization of traditional smuggling routes. Flows include both small and large quantities of arms and involve numerous different types of weaponry, actors, and recipient groups. By contrast, research carried out in Guinea-Bissau and in the tri-border areas of Burkina Faso–Côte d'Ivoire–Mali and Ghana–Côte d'Ivoire–Burkina Faso revealed lower-level arms flows, generally involving so-called ant trafficking, with arms often

being smuggled together with other goods—both licit and illicit. The types of weapons circulating in the tri-border areas tend to be small arms and artisanal weapons.

Actors operate with different degrees of specialization. More sophisticated and organized armed groups—including criminal, insurgent, and jihadist groups—are involved in trafficking weapons, drugs, gold, and other goods, as well as humans in order to generate revenue and equip themselves with arms. Lower-level smugglers of legal goods and transporters of migrants, on the other hand, tend to engage only in the occasional, small-scale trafficking of weapons. Crossover can occur, however, with specialized traffickers sometimes subcontracting lower-level smugglers to transport large illicit consignments of arms or other goods—often without disclosing what the shipment contains.

Both smuggling and trafficking activities generate revenue for local communities (who can act as informants, subcontractors, providers of storage hubs, etc.), road bandits (*coupeurs de routes* who tax convoys), and local state agents (who demand bribes). Counter-trafficking measures risk disrupting these income streams, adversely affecting these actors (and potentially their communities), and fuelling animosity towards the state. Removing

an important income stream can push some actors deeper into the criminal economy to survive. In Niger, for example, the criminalization of cross-border migrant smuggling and restrictions on the transport of non-Nigerien migrants in border areas led some transporters to turn to other forms of trafficking. Counter-trafficking efforts need to be cognizant of such potential knock-on effects.

The impact of arms trafficking on local communities is also significant. Border communities—particularly in northern Niger and Mali—are coming under increasing pressure. Traditional trading livelihoods are threatened by the expanding presence of non-state armed groups and predatory state security personnel. Armed conflict and insecurity, as well as external pressure to refrain from cross-border smuggling of all kinds, further endanger communities' way of life.

Surging illicit arms flows have increased the availability of firearms in many communities. Formerly low-level local conflicts thus risk violent escalation as traditional weapons—or, indeed, peaceful means of dispute settlement—are replaced with modern firearms. Increased insecurity drives local demand for firearms for self-protection, notably for easy-to-conceal handguns. A burgeoning market for cheap, converted, or convertible alarm



Mauritanian soldiers stand guard at a G5 Sahel task force command post in the southeast of Mauritania near the border with Mali. November 2018. Source: Thomas Samson/AFP Photos

and blank-firing handguns among gold smugglers in northern Niger, the spread of craft-produced weapons, and the formation of local self-defence groups throughout the region are clear manifestations of this. Efforts to curb weapons proliferation therefore need to combine support for economic livelihoods with initiatives to improve community security.

Border patrols, targeted search missions, and intelligence-based sting operations are important contributions to the fight against organized crime and illicit trafficking. Yet law enforcement agencies and border forces across the region find their capacity and mobility constrained by ongoing conflicts and the proliferation of terrorist groups, particularly in Mali, northern Burkina Faso, and eastern and northern Niger. Despite clear linkages among arms traffickers, organized criminal entities, jihadist groups, and insurgent armed groups, efforts and resources dedicated specifically to the fight against arms and ammunition trafficking remain limited. They could be stepped up. Counter-proliferation measures, including PSSM measures, are being taken to secure, mark, and record the stockpiled weapons of national security forces in order to prevent their diversion. Weapons-tracing efforts, however, remain limited. Nevertheless, ongoing efforts to build national capacity for weapons tracing show the potential of such work. Enhancing training for and equipment provided to border forces could help to increase seizures of weapons and drugs. Strengthening regional cooperation and intelligence sharing would also help to stem the flow of illicit arms across porous borders and through insecure border areas.

Most interventions at the international, regional, national, and local levels are currently focused on addressing threats posed by an ongoing regional surge in terrorism and intercommunal violence. The numerous actors and programmes carrying out these interventions pose a risk of duplication and wasted resources. Field research conducted for this study revealed that local security actors are concerned that interventions in this field are too donor-driven and lack an understanding of the context in which they are implemented. This has led to programming that has often missed the mark or resulted in unintended negative outcomes.

This Briefing Paper seeks to offer practical information and proposals that can be used to develop and implement more nuanced, sustainable, and context-sensitive initiatives. The preceding section sets out a number of concrete proposals for programming made by security actors, including an outline of associated oppor-

tunities and risks. It is clear, however, that efforts to fight illicit arms trafficking must extend beyond security sector responses and include steps to address social and economic vulnerability and support community mediation programming, good governance, and efforts to tackle violent extremism. Security sector support should, in short, be seen as part of a broader set of interventions premised on a clear understanding of the drivers of both the demand for and supply of illicit arms in the region. ●

## List of abbreviations and acronyms

**ACLED** Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project

**AU** African Union

**AU Roadmap** African Union Master Roadmap of Practical Steps to Silence the Guns in Africa by Year 2020

**CAR** Conflict Armament Research

**CMA** Coordination des mouvements de l'Azawad (Coordination of Azawad Movements)

**CNCCAI** Commission nationale pour la collecte et le contrôle des armes illicites (National Commission for Illicit Weapons Collection and Control)

**CNLPAL** Commission nationale de lutte contre la prolifération et la circulation illicite des armes légères et de petit calibre (National Commission for the Fight against the Proliferation of Small Arms and Light Weapons)

**DDG** Danish Demining Group

**ECOWAS** Economic Community of West African States

**ECOWAS Convention** ECOWAS Convention on Small Arms and Light Weapons, Their Ammunition and Other Related Materials

**FAMa** Forces armées maliennes (Malian Armed Forces)

**FC-G5S** G5 Sahel Joint Force

**GATIA** Groupe autodéfense touareg Imghad et alliés (Imghad and Allied Tuareg Self-defence Movement)

**HI** Humanity and Inclusion

**iARMS** Illicit Arms Records and tracing Management System

**INTERPOL** International Criminal Police Organization

**MAG** Mine Advisory Group

**MANPADS** Man-portable air defence system(s)

**MINUSMA** United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali

**MNJTf** Multinational Joint Task Force

**MSA** Mouvement pour le salut de l'Azawad (Movement for the Salvation of Azawad)

**NATCOM** National commission on small arms and light weapons

**NGO** Non-governmental organization

**Platform** Platform of Armed Groups

**PSSM** Physical security and stockpile management

**RPG** Rocket-propelled grenade (launcher)

**TCU** Transnational crime unit

**TTP** Tactics, techniques, and procedures

**UNMAS** United Nations Mine Action Service

**UNODC** United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime

**WAPCCO** West African Police Chiefs Committee

**WCO** World Customs Organization

## Notes

- 1 There is no universal agreement on the definition of terrorism. For the purposes of this Briefing Paper, the term 'terrorist organization' refers to a group that engages in acts of terror, which the UN defines as 'Criminal acts intended or calculated to provoke a state of terror in the general public, a group of persons or particular persons for political purposes are in any circumstance unjustifiable, whatever the considerations of a political, philosophical, ideological, racial, ethnic, religious or any other nature that may be invoked to justify them' (UNGA, 1995, p. 4).
- 2 Case studies based on the field trips undertaken for this research have been produced and used as sources for this Briefing Paper: on the Burkina Faso, Mali, and Côte d'Ivoire border areas, see Nowak and Sollazzo (2018); on Ghana, see Aning (2018); on Guinea-Bissau, see Foucher (2018); and on Mali and Niger, see Pellerin (2018a; 2018b).
- 3 Note that there are no internationally agreed definitions of illicit arms, illicit arms flows, and illicit trafficking. The UN Firearms Protocol, for example, defines the illicit trafficking of small arms as the 'import, export, acquisition, sale, delivery, movement or transfer of firearms, their parts and components and ammunition from or across the territory of one State Party to that of another State Party if any one of the States Parties concerned does not authorize it in accordance with the terms of this Protocol or if the firearms are not marked in accordance with article 8 of this Protocol' (UNGA, 2001). This definition focuses solely on illicit cross-border movements of arms and ammunition; however, illicit arms flows can include firearms that are purchased from local illicit markets, diverted from the legal holdings of security agencies or private individuals, or produced locally and illicitly (through unlicensed 'craft' production and the illicit conversion of alarm and blank-firing weapons).

- 4 Warsaw Pact weaponry dominates the market in West Africa (UNODC, 2012, p. 34). The most prevalent arms in northern Mali are Eastern Bloc- and Chinese-standard weapons (Anders, 2015, pp. 166–67). In Mali the materiel recovered by the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) is largely composed of Soviet and Chinese production from the 1960s onwards (written communication with MINUSMA Joint Mission Analysis Centre official, October 2017). Some Western-made small arms and light weapons have also been documented. In some cases most of the firearms are recycled after conflicts and rebellions in the region (UNREC, 2016, p. 37).
- 5 Confidential source.
- 6 See UNODC (2009, p. 5); UNREC (2016, p. 21); Pellerin (2017, p. 9); and Nowak and Gsell (2018).
- 7 See the Small Arms Survey's Peace Operations Data Set (PODS), which documents attacks on peacekeepers and other incidents resulting in the loss of arms and ammunition (Small Arms Survey, n.d.b).
- 8 Key informant interviews in Mali, March–April 2018 and Niger, January–June 2018.
- 9 Written communication with a MINUSMA officer, October 2017.
- 10 Key informant interview with a member of the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad, Niamey, Niger, April 2018.
- 11 Key informant interviews with two Malian intelligence officers, Bamako, Mali, March and April 2018.
- 12 Key informant interview with local arms-trafficking experts, Bamako, Mali, March 2018.
- 13 Key informant interviews carried out in Burkina Faso and Mali, May 2018.
- 14 Key informant interviews carried out in Burkina Faso and Mali, May 2018.
- 15 Interview with a resident of Hamile, Ghana, about the cultural ties among borders towns and villages on either side of the Burkina Faso–Ghana border, November 2018.
- 16 The Accord for Peace and Reconciliation in Mali emanating from the Algiers Process was formally signed on 15 May 2015 by the Government of Mali, the Platform of Armed Groups, and two groups forming part of the Coordination of Azawad Movements (CMA). The remaining CMA groups signed the accord on 20 June 2015.
- 17 Key informant interview with a MINUSMA officer in charge of combating arms trafficking, Bamako, April 2018.
- 18 Key informant interview with an anonymous MINUSMA officer, April 2019.
- 19 On the issue of converted firearms circulating in Africa and beyond, see Florquin and King (2018); de Tessières (2018).
- 20 Key informant interview with a Nigerien intelligence officer, undisclosed location, April 2018.
- 21 Key informant interview with a Nigerien intelligence officer, undisclosed location, April 2018.
- 22 Key informant interview via electronic media with a MINUSMA arms-trafficking specialist, 15 June 2018.
- 23 Approximate figure based on confidential data provided by the International NGO Safety Organization.
- 24 Key informant interviews with several members of the MSA, Bamako, Mali, March and April 2018.
- 25 Key informant interviews with transporters and community members in various locations, Burkina Faso and Mali, May 2017.
- 26 The Small Arms Survey supports states and international organizations to implement core small arms and light weapons commitments and programmes through capacity building, including the development and evaluation of national action plans or strategic documents in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger (Small Arms Survey, 2019). The Survey also produces a range of research publications that inform the policies and decision-making of a range of donors and partners in the region.
- 27 Key informant interview with an Operation Barkhane representative, Bamako, Mali, March 2018.
- 28 The most important operation of this type, carried out by Sabre (a component of the French special forces in the Sahel) in October 2017, led to the neutralization in Niger of a jihadist convoy that was heading towards Mali and carrying SA-7 MANPADS, ZU-23 anti-aircraft guns, approximately 100 anti-tank rockets, machine guns, and ammunition (key informant interview via electronic media with a MINUSMA arms-trafficking specialist, 15 June 2018).
- 29 Key informant interview with an anonymous MINUSMA official, Bamako, Mali, April 2019.
- 30 Of particular importance is the annual UN illicit arms flows questionnaire (UNODC, 2019) that assists states in gathering the data related to UN Sustainable Development Goal 16's Target 16.4, Indicator 16.4.2 ('Proportion of seized, found or surrendered arms whose illicit origin or context has been traced or established by a competent authority in line with international instruments') (UN, 2019; UNODC, 2019).
- 31 See INTERPOL (2019) for more details on the various stages of the TRIGGER operations.
- 32 Key informant interview with an anonymous INTERPOL officer, Lyon, France, May 2019.
- 33 Key informant interview with a WCO official, Brussels, Belgium, August 2019.
- 34 Key informant interviews with NATCOM representatives in Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger, and Nigeria, August 2017–May 2018.
- 35 Author phone interview with Line Brylle, DDG programmatic adviser on armed violence reduction, community safety, and conflict resolution, Bamako, Mali, 31 May 2018.
- 36 Author phone interview with Line Brylle, DDG programmatic adviser on armed violence reduction, community safety, and conflict resolution, Bamako, Mali, 31 May 2018.
- 37 Key informant interview with a WAPCCO representative, Abuja, Nigeria, August 2017.
- 38 Key informant interview with a security sector reform specialist in West Africa via electronic media, June 2018.
- 39 Key informant interview with representatives of the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit and ECOWAS, Abuja, Nigeria, August 2017.
- 40 Based on key informant interviews in Burkina Faso and Mali with customs, police, and gendarmerie members, May 2018.
- 41 Key informant interview with a gendarmerie adjudant chief major, Banfora, Burkina Faso, 8 May 2018.
- 42 Key informant interview with a customs official, Sikasso, Mali, 14 May 2018.
- 43 Key informant interview with a European Union Capacity Building Mission Sahel official, Niamey, Niger, 26 February 2018.
- 44 Burkina Faso: National Commission for the Fight against the Proliferation of Small Arms and Light Weapons (CNLPAL Burkina Faso); Côte d'Ivoire: National Commission to Combat the Proliferation and Illicit Circulation of Small Arms (COMNAT-ALPC); Guinea-Bissau: National Small Arms Commission (NSAC); Mali: National Commission for the Fight against the Proliferation of Small Arms and Light Weapons (CNLPAL); Niger: National Commission for Illicit Weapons Collection and Control (CNCCAI).
- 45 See Aning (2018); Foucher (2018); Pellerin (2018a; 2018b); Nowak and Sollazzo (2018).
- 46 See Aning (2018); Foucher (2018); Pellerin (2018a; 2018b); Nowak and Sollazzo (2018).
- 47 Key informant interview with a senior security official stationed at Jomoro municipality, Ghana, November 2018.

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# About the Small Arms Survey

The Small Arms Survey is a global centre of excellence whose mandate is to generate impartial, evidence-based, and policy-relevant knowledge on all aspects of small arms and armed violence. It is the principal international source of expertise, information, and analysis on small arms and armed violence issues, and acts as a resource for governments, policy-makers, researchers, and civil society. It is located in Geneva, Switzerland, and is an associated programme of the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies.

The Survey has an international staff with expertise in security studies, political science, law, economics, development studies, sociology, and criminology, and collaborates with a network of researchers, partner institutions, non-governmental organizations, and governments in more than 50 countries.

**For more information, please visit: [www.smallarmssurvey.org](http://www.smallarmssurvey.org).**

## Contact details

Small Arms Survey  
Maison de la Paix  
Chemin Eugène-Rigot 2E  
1202 Geneva  
Switzerland

**t** +41 22 908 5777

**f** +41 22 732 2738

**e** [info@smallarmssurvey.org](mailto:info@smallarmssurvey.org)

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