

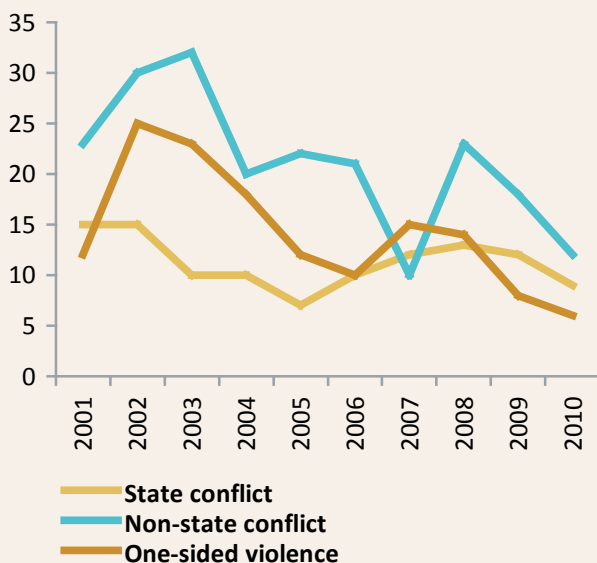


FIREARMS TRAFFICKING IN WEST AFRICA

What is the nature of the market?

After the Cold War, there was a time when West Africa received tons of armaments from outside the continent.⁶⁴ This era has largely passed, because today, regional supply can satisfy local demand. On the one hand, the number of civil wars in Africa has declined since the 1990s, reducing demand. On the other, the firearms trafficked during those years did not evaporate, and continue to be re-circulated throughout the region.

Figure 26: Armed conflict in Africa (2001-2010)⁶⁵

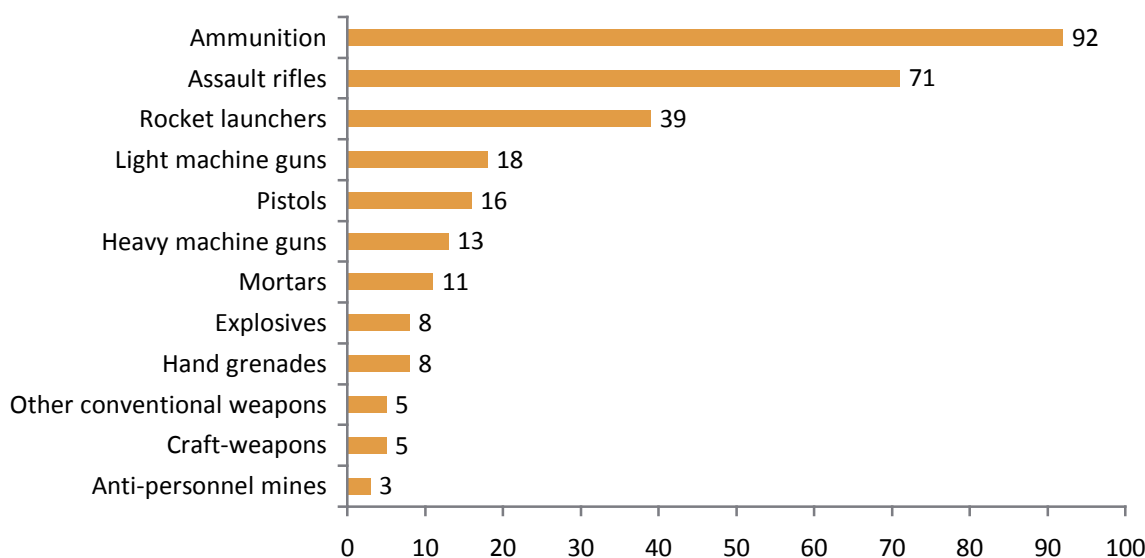


Source: Uppsala Conflict Data Program

These legacy firearms are primarily of interest to those looking to start a revolution. For daily use, the primary source of arms appears to be official state stocks, legitimately procured but diverted to the illicit market. Criminals seem to be able to get what they need from the local security forces, buying or renting weapons from corrupt elements in the police and military. The imports that do occur are not made through underground arms brokers, but rather through mainstream commercial channels, and then directed through corrupt officials or complicit governments to criminals and rebel groups.

The need for extra-regional supply was further undercut when the Gaddafi regime in Libya collapsed in 2011. The scale of Gaddafi's arsenal is still being evaluated by the United Nations, but all indications are that it was vast and sophisticated. The more complex weapons systems are mainly of risk in the Middle East, because most West African groups lack the expertise to make optimal use of the latest technology. But a large number of more common firearms were also amassed during Gaddafi's 40 years of rule, including tens of thousands of firearms in recent years.⁶⁶ These firearms could be sold, albeit for relatively low prices per unit, to any of a number of rebel or criminal groups in West Africa. Armed groups of particular concern include:

- The non-state armed groups in northern Mali, including the various factions of Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), the *Mouvement national pour la libération de l'Azawad* (MNLA), *Ansar Dine*, and the *Mouvement pour l'unicité et le jihad en Afrique de l'Ouest* (MUJAO);
- The secessionist groups in northern Niger, including *Mouvement des Nigériens pour la Justice* (MNJ), the

Figure 27: Seizures of weapons in West Africa, 2008-2011

Source: Analysis of 38 major weapon seizures between 20 March 2008 and 14 November 2011⁶⁷

Front for the Liberation of Aïr and Azaouak (FLAA), and the Front for the Liberation of Tamoust (FLT);

- Boko Haram in Nigeria;
- The *Mouvement des forces démocratiques de Casamance* (MFDC) in Senegal
- The “third phase rebels” of the Niger Delta in Nigeria
- Forces loyal to former Ivorian president Laurent Gbagbo (such as the Young Patriots), who are now refugees or hiding out in neighbouring countries.

Empowerment of these groups could result in long-term conflict, as the region remains highly unstable. Political instability has also been demonstrated through recent coups in:

- Mauritania (2008)
- Guinea (late 2008)
- Niger (2010)
- Guinea-Bissau (2012)
- Mali (2012)

The international community has been trying to foster stability in yet another set of countries: those recovering from full scale civil war. Large United Nations Peacekeeping operations are still active in:⁶⁸

- Liberia (since 2003, currently 7,869 soldiers)
- Côte d’Ivoire (since 2003, currently 9,596 soldiers)

In sum, despite the decline in active conflicts, many countries in West Africa are still affected by the presence of militant groups, irregular changes of government, or the aftermath of civil war. Though the location of demand shifts over time, there is no shortage of potential buyers for

firearms in the sub-region. Since these weapons mainly come from national stocks, such as those in Libya, it is important that the international community keep careful tabs on licit imports to the sub-region.

How is the trafficking conducted?

West Africa presently lacks the capacity to produce its own weapons, so most of the guns in circulation originated from outside the sub-region.⁶⁹ Warsaw Pact weaponry dominates the market. For reasons of training, parts, ammunition, and habit, these weapons continue to be preferred two decades after the end of the Cold War.

Consequently, most of the assault rifles detected are of the Kalashnikov variety. Today, though, the newer ones are mostly of Chinese manufacture (Norinco Type 56). Similarly, the light machine guns encountered today are mostly PK-pattern, such as the Norinco Type 80. In keeping with these preferences, most of the ammunition detected is 7.62 x 39 mm (for Kalashnikov-type assault rifles) or 7.62 x 54R mm (for PK-type general-purpose machine guns), as well as Warsaw Pact heavy machine gun ammunition. Much of this ammunition originates from Iran, Sudan, or China.⁷⁰

Pistols come from a greater variety of sources. France supplied regional security forces in 1970s and 1980s with pistols such as MAB PA-15. There are also Tokarev-pattern pistols as well as modern commercial varieties in the more urban areas, from makers such as Glock and Beretta. In general, pistols tend to be seized in much smaller batches than long arms.

It is difficult to speak of consistent flows, because both the source and the destination shift with the progression of political events. Since most flows are intra-regional, almost

Map 5: Major seizures of illicit weapons and direction of movement in West Africa, (2008-2011)



Source: Analysis of 38 major weapon seizures between 20 March 2008 and 14 November 2011⁷¹

all of the trafficking takes place by land, although air shipments have been detected. These weapons may be destined for particular buyers, or they may be offered at one of a number of well-known trading hubs, particularly in the Sahel. These include the areas around the Aïr, Hoggar and Tibesti mountain ranges, in addition to traditional arms trading centers, such as Agadez (Niger) and Gao (Mali).

The best way to determine the source and patterns of firearms trafficking is to examine recent seizures, but, given local enforcement capacity, seizures are relatively rare. The map below plots 38 major arms seizures made between 2008 and 2011 and the direction of movement at the time of interception.

These seizures indicate that there are essentially five main sources of illicit firearms in West Africa:

- Legacy weapons from past conflicts in the region;
- Weapons from recent conflicts in neighbouring regions;
- Weapons sold by or rented from corrupt security officials;
- Weapons transferred from sympathetic governments;
- A relatively small number of weapons imported from outside Africa.

An example of the first source (legacy weapons) can be seen in seizures made in Liberia. Recent seizures were comprised of weapons from the second Liberian civil war (1999-

2003), and ammunition from the war in Sierra Leone (1991-2002). Firearms from conflicts that ended more than a decade ago continue to surface, despite efforts to clean up these weapons.⁷²

The second source (neighbouring sub-regions) can be seen in a wide variety of seizures. In addition to Libya, weapons have been transferred from past conflicts in Algeria (1992-1998), Chad (1990-2010), Ethiopia (1974-1991), and Sudan (1983-2005). Today, most come from Eastern Chad and the Darfur region in Sudan. Sudanese weapons and ammunition have been detected in Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea and Mali – all countries that do not procure from Sudan.⁷³ It is likely that this supply will soon be eclipsed by supply from Libya, though. There has been a significant escalation in arms seizures in northern Niger (headed for Agadez, a regional sales hub) and southern Algeria (transiting in the direction of Niger and northern Mali). The President of Niger, Mahamadou Issoufou, has warned that Libyan weapons are “being disseminated all over the region.”⁷⁴

Flows from the third source (corrupt security officials) remain strong because few states in the sub-region have records of all the weapons they possess, and thus cannot detect when some disappear. Accounting for ammunition is even weaker, and sales of odd rounds supplement the meager incomes of police and soldiers in many parts of the sub-region. Where soldiers and police cannot part with

their weapons indefinitely, they may rent them to the very people they are meant to be combatting. In Nigeria, for instance, police recently arrested three officers for renting Kalashnikov-pattern weapons and selling 1,200 rounds of ammunition to local criminals.⁷⁵ A 2008 enquiry by Burkina Faso's National Small Arms Commission found that about half the weapons seized in the country came from the national security forces, while only just over 10% had been smuggled across the border.⁷⁶ These sales can occur across borders, as can be seen in seizures crossing from Guinea into Mali. Once stolen, the weapons and ammunition were transported to Mali in civilian trucks, often secreted under local produce.⁷⁷ Malian Customs officials report having seized Kalashnikov-pattern assault rifles, PK-pattern machine guns, RPG-7 rocket launchers and various types of ammunition.⁷⁸

The fourth source (sympathetic governments) is probably best exemplified by the conflict in Côte d'Ivoire. Côte d'Ivoire remains the only country in West Africa under a UN arms embargo.⁷⁹ Successive UN Groups of Experts on Côte d'Ivoire have presented evidence of weapons flows from the territory of Burkina Faso to the *Forces nouvelles* rebel group.⁸⁰ The 2011 Group of Experts concluded that Burkina Faso had "played an increasingly important role in providing military assistance to the *Forces nouvelles*."⁸¹ In response to the threat, the government of Côte d'Ivoire armed militia groups and Liberian mercenaries. This, alongside a large number of desertions, spread weapons throughout the society. Fleeing forces loyal to the former government, including returning Liberian mercenaries, moved military weapons across the border into Liberia, and at least three major caches were discovered in 2011.⁸² These weapons are subject to further trafficking into neighbouring countries, including Burkina Faso.

Recent seizures coming from the fifth source (outside Africa) are relatively rare and often disputed. The best examples took place in Nigeria. On 26 October 2010, Nigerian authorities discovered 240 metric tons of ammunition from Iran in 13 shipping containers. The destination of this shipment remains unclear: while in bond, the documented consignee was changed to The Gambia, but it has been alleged that the shipment was in transit to a destination outside West Africa. A lesser-known seizure occurred on 17 June 2009, when Nigerian authorities in Kano seized an aircraft transporting weapons from Croatia to Guinea-Bissau. The aircraft was later released following assurances by the Government of Guinea-Bissau that the cargo was for official use.⁸³

Who is doing the trafficking?

The identity of the traffickers depends on the source and destination, which vary over time. Security forces, former or current militants, mercenaries: all may be involved in procuring, transporting, and selling firearms. The flows from both Libya to Mali and from Côte d'Ivoire to Liberia

are conducted by large numbers of former soldiers transporting their arms. The next buyers for these weapons could be anyone in the region.

For long distance deliveries, professional transportation agents may be involved. These include both formal and informal enterprises. Due to differences in national regulations, there exists a class of professional smugglers and traders who profit from the differences in taxation and subsidization. These agents may be involved in moving weapons along with many other forms of merchandise, licit and illicit. Cross-border ethnic linkages, of which there are many in the region, may promote these transfers.

In the Sahara, nomadic groups dominate the off-road movement of contraband, including cigarettes, fuel, and arms. Without specialized knowledge of the desert, the four-wheel-drive trucks that are used to move this merchandise would soon become stranded, or taken by bandits. Their unique familiarity with the terrain allows them to transport weapons from East to West as well as North to South. These groups rarely own the merchandise they are moving, and so profit only by fees paid for their services.

How big is the flow?

It would be impossible to estimate the amount of small-scale weapons trade that occurs in all 15 West African states. Rather, this section focuses on one flow, the one where the threat is most acute at the moment: the flow of assault rifles from Libyan stocks to the rebels of Mali. Because the rebels are smuggling weapons largely on their own behalf, there is no need for a value estimate. The damage done by this flow is more direct.

Estimating the supply is difficult for several reasons. First, it is unclear how many weapons Gaddafi amassed over his 40 years of opaque rule. Second, it is unclear what share of these weapons are available for the rebels to loot. Still, looking at the range of possibilities is helpful in getting a sense of proportion.

How many guns did Gaddafi possess? One approach is to start with the size of his security force and estimate the ratio of guns per soldier. In 2011, the International Institute for Strategic Studies estimated that Libya's armed forces comprised 76,000 active personnel and 40,000 reserve personnel.⁸⁴ Soldier to weapon ratios vary widely, from less than one gun per soldier to more than 10. Looking just at similarly situated countries, though, it seems likely that the ratio was between two and six firearms per soldier. This would suggest between 250,000 and 700,000 firearms, of which (based on typical arsenal composition), 70% to 80% are likely to be assault rifles.

Of these, how many are available for trafficking? One way of calculating this would be to compare the total number of weapons available to those accounted for and those seized. For example, various estimates suggest there were

22,000 man-portable air defense systems (MANPADS) in Libya's pre-conflict stockpile. Of these, some 5,000 have been secured in Libya, leaving 17,000 unaccounted for. Only 43 have been seized, all in Algeria.⁸⁵ If 10% of the flow had been seized, this suggests about 400 MANPADS might have been trafficked. This is about 2.5% of the whole supply.

If the ratio between soldiers and guns were four per soldier, there would be just over 450,000 firearms in Gaddafi's arsenal. Applying a trafficking rate of 2.5% suggests some 12,000 arms may have been trafficked, of which around 9,000 are likely to have been assault rifles. Since there has been less concern about assault rifles than MANPADS, the interception rate could be lower, and the number of weapons double or triple this number as a result. A figure in the low tens of thousands seems reasonable.

In terms of demand in Mali, the number of rebels remains unknown. It has been estimated that perhaps 1,500 to 2,000 Tuareg mercenaries recently returned from Libya,⁸⁶ carrying at least their own weapons. Census data indicate that there are some 800,000 Tuareg in Mali today, of whom about 80,000 would be adult men.⁸⁷ If 20% enlisted in the conflict, this would represent 16,000 soldiers.⁸⁸ While non-Tuareg peoples of the north are also enlisted in the struggle, it seems likely that the number of soldiers is also in the low tens of thousands.

Among the rebels are deserters from the Malian army, who would also have brought their own arms, and some rebels could be armed through caches from previous rebellions. Some indication of weapon demand might be gleaned from earlier disarmament programs in the Sahel region. As many as 12,000 rebel soldiers, mostly Tuareg, were demobilized

after the first rebellion in Mali (1996-2003), but only about one third presented weapons, suggesting caches of thousands of weapons are possible. Much smaller numbers demobilized after the second rebellion in 2009, all with their weapons.

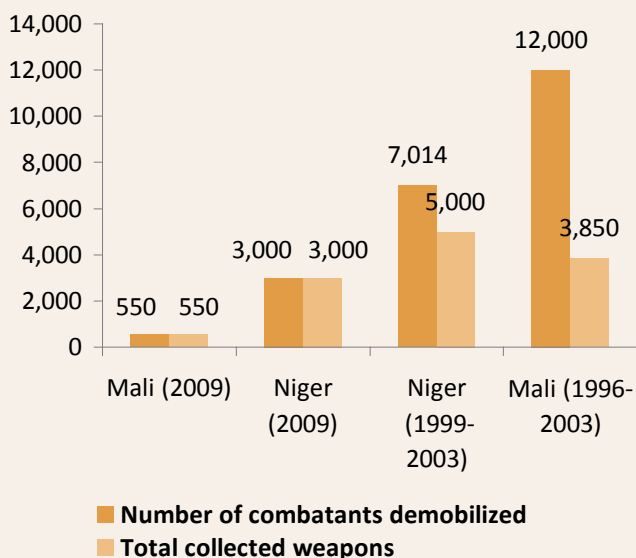
Weapons per soldier ratios tend to be much lower for rebel groups in Africa than for conventional militaries, on the order of one weapon per soldier.⁹⁰ Based on both supply and demand side estimates, the number of weapons trafficked is likely to be in the low tens of thousands, perhaps 10,000 to 20,000 in 2012.

Implications for policy

Because most of the illicit flow is coming from licit stocks, improving control of these stocks is essential. A simple starting place would be an inventory of both state and private firearms. The military and the police should, at the very least, have records of their weapons and the officers responsible for them. Accounting for ammunition should also become routine. A registration and licensing drive could help bring privately owned firearms under control. The fees collected could bring this process close to being self-supporting.

Most official stocks are out of proportion to local needs, so reducing their size would be advisable. When the ratio of security forces to firearms approaches parity, personnel will be more likely to be held accountable when weapons go missing. In order to keep stocks proportionate, imports should be monitored and unusual orders queried.

Figure 28: Rebels demobilized and arms collected in past conflicts in the Sahel



Source: Multiple source⁸⁹