

Arms Trafficking: **Fueling Conflict in the Sahel**

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ABSTRACT

Conflict in West Africa and the Sahel regions has escalated in recent years, due to an alarming rise of violent extremist organizations (VEOs) and the proliferation of weapons – some having been pilfered from the Libyan conflict in 2011. In this current conflict zone, legal sales and illegal trafficking of small arms and light weapons (SALW) become jumbled together in black and gray markets where violent actors are poised to take advantage. Recent anti-trafficking initiatives have become futile in areas where the national and international stakeholders have a limited ability to document, confiscate, or re-purpose illicit arms. Niger, Mali, and Nigeria face the particular challenge of addressing arms trafficking while simultaneously trying to prevent hostile attacks and high-stake kidnappings by Boko Haram. Socio-economic factors in rural regions also pose an obstacle to implementing effective and sustainable anti-trafficking measures that do not leave communities vulnerable and unprotected. A coordinated effort by local, national, and international stakeholders, including policy change, increased training of local implementers, and financial support from the international community, will be essential to curbing SALW trafficking the Sahel and West Africa regions and impacting the trajectory of violence.

Arms trafficking in West Africa and the Sahel continues to fuel armed conflict, crime, instability and violent extremism.¹ Across the Sahel, states face increasing intercommunal conflict and attacks by violent extremist organizations (VEOs), such as Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin² (JNIM), the Islamic State³ (IS), and the IS affiliate, Boko Haram.⁴ These groups continuously undermine the ongoing military operations in the region. Increasing conflict along Niger and Mali's borders threatens regional stability and the efficiency of current military

operations against VEOs. The persistent threat from Boko Haram in the Lake Chad Basin and, more recently, trending south into northern Nigeria has created doubt in the international community that current military options will suffice to prevent further attacks, and fostered fear among local communities that now seek to arm and protect themselves. Consistent attacks by VEOs on communities and ongoing military operations contribute to a proliferation of arms in the region. Although a number of attacks are caused by improvised explosive devices (IED) or melee weapons, this article will demonstrate that the proliferation of arms is a driving factor of conflict in the Sahel. Reducing arms trafficking in the Sahel is thus critical to thwarting VEOs in the region and to stabilizing these fragile states.

Small arms and light weapons (SALW), referring to “any human-portable lethal weapon that expels or launches, is designed to expel or launch, or may be readily converted to expel or launch a shot, bullet or projectile by the action of an explosive”,⁵ make their way to the Sahel through legal weapons transfers, black markets, gray markets, as well as through theft of national stockpiles or individuals’ weapons caches. A gray market refers to arms diversions that occur through state actors who participate in the illicit economy by authorizing the sale or purchase of covert arms, by ignoring illicit arms sales, or by neglecting to uphold procedures and standards that enforce legal arms transfers.⁶ In order to understand the impact of SALWs on the Sahel’s conflict zones, this article will attempt to define the volume and impact of weapons circulating throughout the Sahel by analyzing their destinations, or end uses. An analysis of SALWs’ documented end uses will enable a clearer illustration of how arms trafficking destabilizes the Sahel and prevents long-term peace. Regional governments, invested stakeholders, and state leaders have a responsibility to wholly adopt anti-arms trafficking operations in their efforts to re-secure the Sahel and protect communities. Moreover, state and international anti-corruption measures are essential to implementing long-term solutions. Moreover, state and international anti-corruption measures are essential to implementing long-term solutions. Nine policy recommendations and accompanying actions for local, national, and international stakeholders will be provided to this end.

TRACKING GUNS IN THE SAHEL

According to research by the Belgian firm *Groupe de recherche et d’information sur la paix et la sécurité*, almost 12 million SALWs currently circulate the Sahel.⁷ Some of these SALWs have entered the region through legal defense agreements between African states and arms-supplying states, which are often a result of contracts that date back to African states’ independence in the 1960s. However, the United Nations has passed several mandates⁸ between 2006 and 2015 specifically prohibiting the sale or supply of weapons to countries

in conflict or those with poor human rights records.⁹ In cases where these mandates are ignored, national governments and international arms control agencies often have limited resources to identify and prosecute buyers and sellers. In other instances, after arms legally enter a country, they are simply diverted from the licit market to the black and gray markets; an action that is made significantly easier in already-unstable regions. Instability also allows VEOs, organized crime actors, and local armed groups to steal from national stockpiles with impunity. Ghana, Mali, and Nigeria are also regional producers of SALWs.¹⁰ Though the Economic Community of West African States announced the Declaration of Moratorium on Importation, Exportation, and Manufacture of Light Weapons in West Africa in 2008, intra-continental and intra-regional trade upholds the illicit arms market in the Sahel.¹¹

One way that officials begin to measure the volume of SALWs transiting a region is by tracking SALWs that have been seized by authorities. With numerous fighters returning home from the Libyan conflict between 2011 and 2014, Nigerien authorities targeted the northern Agadez region, bordering Libya, Algeria, and eastern Mali, in attempts to stop arms proliferation in the Sahel.¹² Nigerien seizures of weapons remain low, counting less than 1,000 SALWs, IEDs, rockets, and hand grenades between 2011 and 2014, acknowledging that significantly more SALWs were carried out of Libya after the fall of Muammar Ghaddafi.¹³ The French army, participating in the counterterrorism-focused Operation Barkhane, reported seizing at least two tons of SALWs each trimester from 2015 to 2019.¹⁴ As of June 2018, an estimated 117,000 civilian-owned firearms existed in Niger, with just 2,000 being legally registered.¹⁵ The Nigerien military and law enforcement only recorded approximately 20,000 firearms. Mali and Burkina Faso reported similar figures of civilian-owned firearms in 2018, with Mali civilians possessing 206,000 firearms and Burkinabe civilians possessing 175,000 firearms.¹⁶ Meanwhile, Nigeria recorded more than 6,154,000 firearms in civilian possession as of June 2018, with 224,200 total firearms among the Nigerian military and 362,400 firearms with law enforcement.¹⁷ Nigeria clearly had the highest number of privately-owned firearms circulating within its borders according to these figures, recognizing that these figures do not represent the total volume of SALWs owned or available within these states.

Assuming that these firearms figures have fluctuated slightly since 2018, the Sahel has still not seen a significant disruption in the number of civilian or criminally-possessed SALWs. However, efforts have been made to examine the markings, make, and model of the small number of confiscated weapons to identify their source countries and potential patterns. For example, arms seized in 2016, were labeled as weapons from Sudan, the former USSR, China, Bulgaria, Egypt, Poland, and Romania.¹⁸ Some of these weapons were left over from the Cold War era, although newer models of automatic weapons

or Chinese-style Kalashnikovs have been confiscated in recent years.¹⁹ Recent insight into weapons' origins reveals that most imports of SALWs currently occur through West African port cities such as Dakar, Senegal; Conakry, Guinea; Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire; and Lagos, Nigeria.²⁰ While the import of SALWs to the African continent, particularly in the Sahel, does cause concern, researchers believe ongoing transcontinental arms trafficking is driven by other illicit activities, such as drug or human trafficking and organized crime, not so much by the direct facilitation of VEOs or armed militias.²¹

Other avenues of arms trafficking in the Sahel that are more difficult to quantify are local and regional production and confiscation or looting of national stockpiles. Evidenced by seizures throughout both Niger and Mali, Algerian ammunition from its Seriana plant has found a steady foothold in the illicit arms market in the Sahel.²² Ammunition manufactured in a Bamako factory has also been found throughout West Africa suggesting cross-border trade and smuggling supports distribution of ammunition produced in the region.²³ Individuals also contribute to the market with homemade weapons that are created from scratch or adapted from training weapons. Only Niger does not permit any production of small arms, ammunition, or weapons' components, while Mali, Nigeria, and Burkina Faso allow production among licensed manufacturers.²⁴ These systems of production control are not always effective, thus obfuscating the actual volume of weapons being illicitly produced in-country. Still, researchers believe that the primary method of arms trafficking in the Sahel occurs through looting of military or law enforcement stockpiles. Some open-source media reports have documented attacks on military garrisons and armed forces positions throughout the Sahel and researchers conclude that these attacks often prelude larger attacks in which the assailants can use the looted SALWs.²⁵ The loss or illicit sale of SALWs to criminals and extremists readily fuels arms proliferation in the Sahel, contributing to ongoing conflict and undermining efforts to stem cross-border trafficking and ultimately end extremists' campaigns and intercommunal conflict in the Sahel.

TRACKING THE HUMAN IMPACT

The human toll of arms trafficking and proliferation in the Sahel is important to grasp the urgency with which arms trafficking needs to be addressed. According to the Armed Conflict Location and Event Database, between February 2018 and February 2021, more than 67,400 individuals were killed as a result of armed clashes, attacks, mob violence, or the acquisition of territory by non-state or government actors in Mali, Niger, Nigeria, and Burkina Faso.²⁶ Burkina Faso saw the steepest increase in deaths compared to Mali and Niger, whose total annual deaths rose from approximately 300 in 2018 to nearly 1,900 in 2019.²⁷ Other victims of arms trafficking are those who have been displaced

as a result of increased violence. At the time of writing in early March 2021, refugees and asylum seekers from the region totaled 871,765.²⁸ Burkina Faso recorded 1,097,462 internally-displaced persons (IDP), Chad recorded 336,124 IDPs, Mali recorded 322,957 IDPs, and Niger recorded 298,458 IDPs.²⁹ These figures demonstrate the impact of SALWs in the hands of a variety of actors in the Sahel who contribute to ongoing violence. For example, the specific threat from Boko Haram to Nigeriens near the border with Nigeria has led many in small villages to create security forces, or comités de vigilance ('vigilance committees'), to protect themselves.³⁰ Arms circulating in the region have also led to an escalation of tensions between communities, such as herders and farmers in Nigeria, such that disputes are more often resolved with SALWs and more individuals now arm themselves against potential attacks.³¹ Thus, a reduction in arms trafficking also holds substantial implications for those who would not normally participate in the illicit arms market but must do so to defend themselves from the groups causing instability and violence.

Niger's border regions face a significant threat of violence related to arms trafficking due to the relatively-informal structure of the communities in these areas. In these small communities, which are often outside of the national government's purview of resources, arms trafficking can increase the violence suffered and the likelihood of radicalization. As citizens arm themselves against each other and against security forces that invade their farming and herding lands, violent extremist groups that move into the area find individuals already armed, suffering from economic hardship, and (sometimes) easily convinced to join their ranks. Even those who do not join the VEOs are still potential participants in the illicit arms trade to ensure their own survival and to acquire necessary income. The livelihoods of local populations are partially driven by the wealthy and powerful people throughout Niger who control various trafficking networks and routes in and out of the country.³²

Other underlying factors of arms trafficking and proliferation in the Sahel include a lack of security infrastructure dedicated to combating illicit arms, poor policing along borders and in less-populated regions, limited funding for security personnel, and international actors who actively subvert arms embargoes to arm violent actors. These factors create an environment where international actors, such as the United States³³ and France,³⁴ have been compelled to intervene on the basis of international cooperation and national security motives. Notwithstanding arms seizures by the French armed forces, the presence of international troops has done little to prevent arms proliferation in the Sahel and created minimal incentives for local and regional governments to focus funding or reform on an ongoing conflict. These compounding effects on regional stability require a discussion of who has been affected and their responses to illicit arms trafficking, in order to form a comprehensive strategy to combat future proliferation.

CHALLENGES AND IMPLICATIONS

The legal introduction of weapons to the Sahel and West Africa has not automatically led to an expansion of the illicit arms market. Though, with greater numbers of SALWs and rounds of ammunition, nefarious actors have expanded opportunities to participate in arms trafficking and other related criminal operations. For example, private arms smugglers in Bulgaria, Ukraine, and Russia often exchange their arms for diamonds mined in states such as Liberia, Togo, and Burkina Faso.³⁵ The demand for cheap diamonds in Europe coupled with the demand for weapons in West Africa have enabled these direct exchanges to continue under the radar of European customs officials and African authorities. Other illicit activities aided by the use or sale of SALWs include human smuggling, drug trafficking, and wildlife trafficking.³⁶ Arms trafficking thus reinforces illicit systems in which criminal actors use acquired weapons to conduct illicit activities. Moreover, the income from arms trafficking funds extremist and criminal organizations throughout the Sahel.

Established traffickers with longstanding smuggling networks often circumvent the officials tasked with monitoring the imports and exports of goods. On the other hand, many arms traffickers operate with the support of corrupt customs officials or individuals along the transfer route who seek a share in the profit. One specific group responsible for the proliferation of illicit weapons includes Nigerien officials, who have been accused of selling arms and ammunition from national stockpiles to extremist actors such as Boko Haram.³⁷ Nigeria faces a similar corruption issue whereby security officials “donate” or sell weapons to local groups mired in ethnic conflict with whom they sympathize.³⁸ Security officials’ low wages incentivize their participation in illegal arms trafficking for supplemental income. In instances where officials allow weapons to be diverted or stolen from national stockpile management areas to armed groups of their choice, such as in Nigeria, individuals effectively take on the responsibility of the state by deciding who receives protection and how disputes should be resolved. Religious and ethnic motivations among security staff can sometimes be difficult to parse out as groups in conflict intermix and buy and sell weapons for various, sometimes contradictory, reasons. More importantly, the active participation of state officials in the illicit arms trade is contingent on the continued absence of state authority in areas prone to violence; the resultant power vacuum allows corrupt actors to operate with impunity.³⁹ The Sahel states host many different groups who continue to capitalize on limited state capacity, corruption, and illicit arms markets in the region.

Even if there were strict monitoring and enforcement at every border in the region, arms looted from national stockpiles and military garrisons would continue to fall into the hands of extremist groups and criminals due to a general dearth of resources. Some national stockpiles have never had the

infrastructure, funding, or personnel to manage any significant volume of weapons. In some cases, seized weapons are neither immediately destroyed or deactivated, nor are they traced and marked for use by state forces according to international best practices on handling illicit weapons.⁴⁰ National stockpiles are also typically overrun by the number of recovered weapons from ongoing conflicts and criminal actors. Consequently, officials have sometimes had to establish makeshift storage areas in officers' offices or toilets.⁴¹ These procedures for managing seized weapons are undoubtedly ineffective and reflect limited state capacity among the Sahel countries to currently manage their stockpiles. Further, the current situation reflects the limited political bandwidth at the state, regional, and international levels to negotiate and implement training or funding opportunities to address these issues while violence persists. Compounding these issues are porous borders and low levels of policing, which facilitate the smuggling of SALWs across borders. With limited funding for military garrisons or border checkpoints, especially in Nigeria where there are over 1,500 irregular, or otherwise illegal, identified entry points into the country, continued arms trafficking highlights the necessity for a full-scale approach that includes state building, anti-corruption practices, and increased training for security forces.⁴²

States that have robust tracking, reporting, and seizure systems are still challenged to determine which groups or individuals are most responsible for trafficking SALWs in the Sahel. The volume of SALWs that different extremist organizations obtain has significant implications for current stability and operations to prevent continued attacks. Officials, such as Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General Mohamed ibn Chabas,⁴³ grew alarmed at the growing amounts of explosives coming out of Ghana and into the unstable states of Mali, Niger, and Nigeria in 2018.⁴⁴ Boko Haram has used women, children, and said explosives to carry out attacks on civilians and security personnel throughout Nigeria and Niger. In 2016, a Nigerien military base in Bosso suffered an attack from approximately one hundred Boko Haram extremists using homemade rockets, assault rifles, light machine guns, and RPG-7 pattern rocket launchers to pilfer logistical and military material.⁴⁵ Extremist groups have also proven that they are capable of carrying deadly, catastrophic, and increasingly coordinated attacks with common SALWs. In August 2019, armed men attacked a military base in northern Burkina Faso and killed 24 Burkinabe soldiers, which was the worst attack ever suffered by the Burkinabe army.⁴⁶ Arms trafficking thus precipitates conflict and remains the medium through which conflict is sustained.

EFFORTS AND LIMITATIONS

Amidst the rapid proliferation of illicit arms in the past decade, the governments

of the Sahel and West Africa have made several attempts to address the issue and resulting insecurity. In 2017, Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger pooled their resources and established a joint security force to fight terrorism and transnational organized crime in the Liptako-Gourma region, which covers southwestern Niger, eastern Mali, and northern Burkina Faso. Likewise, the G5 Sahel Joint Force - a partnership between Burkina Faso, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, and Nigeria that was launched in 2017 - continues to lead operations against extremist groups and criminal organizations. The G5 Sahel Joint Force has an ongoing operation, titled Sama, which seeks to control the border regions between Mali, Niger, and Nigeria, and neutralize armed extremist groups that operate there⁴⁷ However, as demonstrated previously, these joint security forces have failed to prevent attacks on civilians and security forces in the region.

The Malian state, which suffered a coup in August 2020, particularly struggles to address ongoing violence.⁴⁸ Within Mali, ongoing community disputes over land and water have escalated in recent years, such as in March 2019 when 160 ethnic Fulani civilians were killed by armed men dressed as ethnic Dogon hunters in central Mali.⁴⁹ These and other deadly disputes among the many armed groups that inhabit Mali allow extremists to capitalize on ethnic tensions and weak state capacity to respond to instances of grave violence. Nigerien and French military forces have since expanded the scope of their operations to work with non-state armed groups in counterterrorism and stability measures.⁵⁰ However, working with these armed groups such as the Self-Defense Group of Imrad Tuareg and Allies and the Movement for the Salvation of Azawad, which are simultaneously embroiled in other conflicts, has only fueled intercommunal rivalries, conflicts over territory, and the presence of arms in the Sahel.⁵¹ These efforts to negotiate with non-state armed groups and other efforts to counter extremists' movements throughout the Sahel states have had little to no impact on the proliferation of SALWs in the region. In general, the concentration on resolving political disputes through negotiations and repelling extremist groups from border regions has not resolved the underlying issues of corruption, weak state capacity, and shortsightedness within the security sector.

THE ISSUE OF MANPADS

The United States has a vested interest in the security of the Sahel and the disruption of the arms trafficking trade throughout West Africa. For the U.S. government, shoulder-fired surface-to-air missiles or Man-Portable Air Defense Systems (MANPADS) are the most concerning SALWs transiting these countries. While the U.S. military continues to contribute air support and security training to African military forces and the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA), these MANPADS

have the potential to disrupt U.S. efforts in the region and inflict acute violence on civilians. The proliferation of these weapons to terrorist groups and non-state actors in the Sahel presents a risk to regional and international forces that are assisting with counterterrorism and routine security operations by limiting the potential for increased air support and threatening operations' continuity. The G5 Sahel Joint Force and the international troops deployed to the region all must address the specific threat from SALWs, including MANPADS, to their current operations and seek to prevent their further proliferation in this still unstable region.

ADDRESSING CORRUPTION IN THE SAHEL

Anti-corruption practices are critical to stopping arms trafficking and proliferation in the Sahel. Indeed, first, the governments of Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger, and Nigeria must make a concerted effort to combat corruption and strengthen the institutions necessary to allocate funding and resources for security and economic reasons. A recognition of the pervasive corruption within the security, political, and economic sectors of these states must be followed by a top-down approach to identify, adjudicate, and thereby discourage corrupt practices by any individual affiliated with the state. Sahel states should charge and prosecute corrupt authorities, in a transparent manner, who continue to participate in the illicit arms economy, in order to deter others from selling, donating, or turning a blind eye to illegal weapons. Civil society actors also have an important role in combating arms trafficking as individuals can help hold authorities publicly accountable to the people and to the state.

Second, anti-corruption measures can also be paired with efforts to improve the visibility and effectiveness of local and national police forces, while simultaneously incentivising good behavior. Police forces should work in cooperation with the military forces deployed throughout the region to engender successful transitions of military-secured areas further to nationally-controlled and managed areas. This level of coordination will discourage arms traffickers from operating where military forces are not present and leave police forces with sufficient training to protect civilians from harm. Governments should also re-negotiate the salaries of security personnel to ensure that there are more incentives for these officials to prioritize their commitment to the force, to their colleagues, and to their communities over potential income from arms trafficking. An independent government oversight committee, or civil society organization with some form of public power, should be created to investigate and prosecute the individuals who participate in illicit arms deals. Anti-corruption measures are essential to rebuilding legitimacy and authority between security forces and citizens in the Sahel.

Third, anti-corruption measures and police building must be jointly

implemented with better dispute resolution mechanisms at the civil society and judicial level. The Sahel states' governments should increase their funding and support of courts, including promoting these courts' legitimacy through advocacy and marketing campaigns, until these courts become citizens' preferred method for resolving territorial disputes, corruption charges, and other accusations. This policy is an integral aspect of anti-arms trafficking measures in the Sahel because more efficient, effective courts can replace the need for communities to resolve disputes using SALWs. Building up the judicial system, which will also ensure corrupt officials are held to account, will only increase the legitimacy of government institutions and build state capacity to provide for civilians. This process of creating trust in the state is critical to ensuring the participation of civil society in anti-trafficking measures and peace initiatives, contributing to greater overall stability. A stronger security apparatus throughout the Sahel will also deter arms traffickers from operating in the region.

Fourth, along with anti-corruption measures, governments in the Sahel must make greater effort to directly curb the flow of weapons that pass through their borders. These states must collect, mark, and destroy all excess supplies of small arms and light weapons. This policy can have significant implications for preventing arms that have already been trafficked from re-entering the illicit arms trade, while also decreasing the number of weapons that must be managed by Sahel security forces. Implementing this policy will likely require an overhaul of the training and maintenance programs within these countries' militaries, in order to ensure that all personnel are capable of carrying out the necessary functions to mark, track, and destroy weapons.

Fifth, the Sahel states' governments should also seek greater support from international partners, such as France and the United States, and regional organizations, such as ECOWAS, for financial, logistical, and operational means of combatting terrorism and arms trafficking. An arrangement tied to reform, such as the anti-corruption practices mentioned previously or efforts to prosecute and prevent human rights abuses by security forces, would be mutually beneficial to international stakeholders and regional governments. These partnerships can be built on shared intelligence that enables these governments to apprehend arms traffickers on well-known routes as they enter the region. Many of the seizures that Nigerien authorities have made in the past decade have occurred while weapons and ammunition were in transit, indicating that the Nigerien government is capable of carrying out such operations, though not at the scale necessary to be individually successful. These strengthened partnerships must expand from current counterterrorism goals to recognize the impact of arms trafficking in prolonging conflict. This long-term vision of peace and stability should also be built by greater interagency cooperation at the regional and national levels. Due to the interconnected nature of arms

trafficking with drug trafficking, illicit financial activity, and other crimes, an interagency and intergovernmental approach would increase the capabilities of anti-trafficking authorities without requiring an extensive increase in funding or other resources.

Sixth, while regional governments and organizations implement these policy initiatives, the United States and other Western governments, such as France and Britain, should augment their anti-arms trafficking efforts. Of specific interest to these governments is an emphasis on marking, tracking, and collecting high-powered ground-to-air weapons that directly threaten troops stationed in the region. Specifically, stricter enforcement of MANPADS transfers into this region and the collection of illicit IEDs already in the area will have the two-fold effect of combating the illicit arms trade and allowing these troops to operate without threat of attack from these specific weapons.

Seventh, Western governments also have the responsibility to strictly enforce arms embargoes to countries with poor human rights records or documented instability, as Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger, and Nigeria currently face, using unilateral or multilateral sanctions and political leverage within international organizations. The U.S. and other Western governments must implement policies to better monitor and track end-user certificates of SALWs that are exported from their countries. These governments should develop interagency monitoring groups that follow all weapons exported or transferred out of their countries, in order to ensure these weapons are only used by legitimate, legal actors. This policy will address arms trafficking at its source, while also making it easier to identify the source countries of weapons that continue to fall into the hands of disreputable actors. Western governments will also have more leverage at the international level, through the United Nations or other international organizations, to then pressure countries to stop selling, transferring, or allowing their weapons to reach rebellious groups, violent extremist groups, and other disruptive actors. These governments have the responsibility to enhance international laws and norms against arms trafficking, as well as enforcing punishments against countries and individuals who subvert international law.

Eighth, the U.S. State Department can act as a bridge for national government ministries to access the international community's resources on arms trafficking, such as through the UN Office on Drugs and Crime and international nongovernmental organizations like the Small Arms Survey. The State Department may also facilitate the funding of central governments' security and development infrastructures (checkpoints, official roads, etc.), so as to simultaneously combat immediate threats and build resiliency in border regions facing entrenched violence. This policy has the additional benefit of furthering partnerships with governments in the Sahel, which will create better relationships in the future and greater trust among U.S. allies.

Finally, as a long-term policy for combating arms trafficking in Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger, and Nigeria, Western governments must encourage dialogue among border communities and government institutions. The African Union or ECOWAS can act as a mediator in these dialogues, which will address the specific issues of infrastructure and development support from the central government to these regions, stronger security presences, and separating informal economic activities like agriculture and herding from illicit arms and drug trades. This policy also centers the solutions to state fragility in the central governments, thereby encouraging good governance and democratic accountability in these states.

Arms trafficking has been a catalyst for violence and extremism in the Sahel. Extremist groups, like JNIM and the Islamic State, as well as desperate communities have used illicit arms for varying purposes. However, any and all uses of illicit arms contribute to the instability and fear facing this region. Regional organizations, like ECOWAS, and the national governments of these countries must take the lead in combating arms trafficking because of its interconnected nature to other illicit activity and the growth of insecurity within these countries' borders. Western governments, including the United States and France that currently have military personnel and advisors in the region, must adapt their approaches to address this significant driver of conflict in the region, beginning with policies to combat arms trafficking in source countries. A whole-of-government approach to addressing corruption, building state capacity, and protecting citizens from horrific instances of violence can become a cornerstone for stemming arms trafficking and proliferation and engendering long-standing peace in the Sahel.

ENDNOTES

- 1 West Africa commonly refers to the ECOWAS member states of Benin, Burkina Faso, Cabo Verde, Cote d'Ivoire, The Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea Bissau, Liberia, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone, and Togo, as well as Mauritania. The Sahel comprises the geographic area south of the Sahara desert and stretching east-west across the entire continent. The author will use the term "Sahel" to refer primarily to the conflict-affected states of Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger, and Nigeria.
- 2 Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin serves as an umbrella organization for Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, Al Mourabitoun, Ansar Dine, and the Macina Liberation Front. Mapping Militant Organizations, "Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb", Stanford University, July 2018.
- 3 The Islamic State's two main Sahel-affiliated groups, the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara and the Islamic State West Africa Province are both considered to have ongoing ties to the Islamic State organization of Iraq and Syria. This article considers both organizations, though distinct, under the one name of "Islamic State" to convey the breadth of IS' reach across the Sahel. Mapping Militant Organizations, "The Islamic State in the Greater Sahara" and "The Islamic State West Africa Province", Stanford University, July 2018.
- 4 Most sources report on Boko Haram activities as distinct from those of the Islamic State, mostly due to an inability to determine the extent of resources and direction assigned to Boko Haram by the larger IS organization. Thus, for the purposes of this article, Boko Haram will be considered as a unique organization with its own operative ends within Nigeria and as an ideological affiliate of the Islamic State. Mapping Militant Organizations, "Boko Haram", Stanford University, March 2018.

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- 11 Ibid., 347.
- 12 De Tessières, Savannah. *Sabelian conflicts: insecurity terrorism, and arms trafficking in Niger*. Switzerland: Small Arms Survey, (2018): 42, <http://www.smallarmssurvey.org/fileadmin/docs/U-Reports/SAS-SANA-Report-Niger.pdf>
- 13 Ibid., 43.
- 14 Interview with Mr. Florence Parly, Minister of the Armed Forces, "Intervention of French Armed Forces in Chad", Minutes of the Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defense and Armed Forces, February 20, 2019.
- 15 Small Arms Survey Database, "Global Firearms Holdings", *Small Arms Survey*, June 2018, <http://www.smallarmssurvey.org/weapons-and-markets/tools/global-firearms-holdings.html>
- 16 Ibid.
- 17 Ibid.
- 18 De Tessières, 47.
- 19 Jouve, "Sahel: d'où viennent les armes et les munitions?".
- 20 Ibid.
- 21 Ibid.
- 22 De Tessières, 53.
- 23 Jouve.
- 24 Alpers, Philip, Michael Picard and Clara Mourievat, "Niger--Gun Facts, Figures and the Law", Sydney School of Public Health, The University of Sydney, *GunPolicy.org*, June 9, 2020. <https://www.gunpolicy.org/firearms/region/westafrica> (see "Facts by Country")
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