

Forum: Disarmament and International Security GA1

Issue: The question of Arms Trafficking and Militia Violence in the Sahel Region

Student Officer: Eleni Genitsaropoulou

Position: Chair

INTRODUCTION

The Sahel is a region in Africa, defined as the transition from the northern Sahara Desert to the southern fertile savannas. It stretches from the Atlantic Ocean to the Red Sea, passing through parts of various countries, including Senegal, Mauritania, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Nigeria, Chad, and Sudan. Due to its weak borders and weak governance, this region has grown into an important route for the illegal trade of weapons originating from West Africa, Libya, or black markets in recent years.

The arms supply in the Sahel not only supports armed militias but also the activities of criminal syndicates, terrorist networks such as Boko Haram, Al-Qaeda splinters, or the Islamic State. These armed groups in the Sahel exploit poverty, government neglect, and ethnic tensions to enlist members by appealing to local discontent and offering a sense of protection, purpose, or economic opportunity.

Generally, arms trafficking has increased violence in the region. Between 2017 and 2021, arms seizures in the Sahel rose by 105%, according to the UN Office on Drugs and Crime¹. This sharp surge demonstrates how illicit weapons have become more widespread across the region. Consequently, this contributes to humanitarian crises and displacement. Since almost 2.9 million people were internally displaced throughout the larger Sahel region, the practice poses a threat to internal peace.² Furthermore, regional security is undermined, and peacekeeping efforts are becoming increasingly complicated.

In addition to this, insecurity is rising, economic growth is being eroded, food shortages are becoming more common, and many individuals are displaced, which leads to refugee flows to mainly North Africa and Europe.

Overall, the issue of arms trafficking and militia violence in the Sahel region is a critical concern that affects people in the region and in other countries as well. Instability in the region is associated with organized crime, terrorism, and human trafficking. While multiple organizations, including the Sahel Alliance or the Concordis International, have initiated peacekeeping efforts and development projects, no significant progress has been made.

¹United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime. *Transnational Organized Crime Threat Assessment for the Sahel: Firearms*. UNODC, 2023, https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/tocta_sahel/TOCTA_Sahel_firearms_2023.pdf.

²United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. *West and Central Africa: Regional Trends in Forced Displacement – Mid-Year 2025 Update*. UNHCR, June 2025, <https://www.unhcr.org/sites/default/files/2025-06/west-central-africa-regional-trends-forced-displacement-nt-2025.pdf>.

DEFINITION OF KEY-TERMS

Arms Trafficking

Arms trafficking, or gunrunning, is the illicit trade in guns, ammunition, and explosives across borders, typically the diversion of weapons from legitimate to illegitimate channels. Arms trafficking is organized crime that sustains violence, conflict, and insecurity and could lead to instability and undermine peace and development.³

Militia

“A militia is a military organization of citizens with limited military training, which is available for emergency service, usually for local defense. In many countries the militia is of ancient origin.”⁴

Militia Violence

“Militia violence can range from verbal threats and intimidation to physical confrontations and even more serious acts of violence like bombings or assassinations, though the frequency and severity of these acts can vary.”⁵

Transnational Crime Networks

Transnational organized crime networks are criminal organizations based across borders, employing illicit activities such as drug trafficking, human trafficking, and cybercrime. They are characterized by being well-structured, violent, and exploiting differences among countries. They have a tendency to destabilize governments, foster corruption, and produce societal instability.⁶

Proliferation of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW)

The proliferation of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW) refers to the excessive acquisition and unregulated transfer of SALW, both internationally and domestically, by states, civilians, and commercial entities. It includes the desecration and uncontrolled movement, possession, and use of SALW by the unauthorized groups such as insurgents, criminals, and non-state actors.⁷

Terrorism

“Terrorism involves violence or the threat of violence against people or property to further a particular ideology. Terrorism can be: International, meaning a foreign terrorist organization influences or directs the attacks.”⁸

Border Porosity

“Border porosity refers to the degree to which an international border allows the unrestricted flow of people, goods, weapons, or illicit materials across it—essentially its permeability. In the context of security and governance, a *porous border* is one that lacks effective control

³ “Sahel: Security Council Warned That Africa’s ‘Reluctant Monopolies’ Are Failing to Prevent Violence.” *UN News*, 11 Nov. 2021, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2021/11/1106282>.

⁴ “Militia.” *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, Encyclopaedia Britannica, Inc., <https://www.britannica.com/topic/militia>.

⁵ International Association of Chiefs of Police. *Militia Violent Extremism*. IACP, <https://www.theiacp.org/sites/default/files/DVE/Militia%20Violent%20Extremism.pdf>.⁶ United Nations. *Transnational Crime*. United Nations, <https://www.un.org/en/peace-and-security/transnational-crime>.

⁷ Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe. “Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW).” OSCE, <https://salw.osce.org/Topics/ViewPage/2-small-arms-and-light-weapons-salw>.

⁸ U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement. “Terrorism and National Security Threats.” *ICE*, U.S. Department of Homeland Security, <https://www.ice.gov/about-ice/hsi/investigate/terrorism-national-security-threats>.

measures, enabling traffickers, armed groups, or illegal migration to cross with minimal hindrance.”⁹

Counterterrorism

Counterterrorism is the aggregate set of policies, strategies, and operations aimed at preventing, disrupting, and countering terrorism and the support groups for it. It includes interagency efforts of government, the military, law enforcement, intelligence agencies, and even grassroots organizations.¹⁰

Organized Crime

Organized crime has been defined as illegal activities pursued by organized groups or networks on a long-term, typically transnational, basis for the primary goal of gaining financial or other material benefits through illicit means. The groups may engage in multifaceted illegal activities like drug trafficking, human trafficking, money laundering, and other crimes.¹¹

Military Coup

“The military coup means the fact that armed forces take control of the administration of the country.”¹²

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Historical Background

History of Political Instability and Weak Governance

The Sahel has been affected by long-sustained political instability and weak governance. Colonial French-imposed post-independence state borders and centralized administrations, which aggregated heterogeneous ethnic groups without participatory political institutions, created weaknesses in social solidarity and state-building processes from the start. This created the weakness in social solidarity and state-building processes from the start. In the 1960s, after independence, countries like Mali, Niger, Chad, and Burkina Faso fell into one-party and military rule. Coups were commonplace, often couched as a need to rectify corruption and bad management but, in fact, perpetuating the same ills they appeared to treat.

President Hamani Diori was ousted by Niger's army in 1974 on charges that he had mismanaged famine relief. A Mali coup in 2012 led the way to a Tuareg rebellion and allowed jihadists to take northern areas. Between 2020 and 2023, the region experienced eight coups: two in Mali (2020 and 2021), two in Burkina Faso (2022), one in Chad (2021, following the death of President Déby on the battlefield), and one in Niger (2023, overthrowing President Bazoum). These military rebellions were legitimized as reactions to insecurity and governance crises but instead exacerbated instability.

⁹ Dimova, Rozita. “Railway Porosity across the Border: From Ottoman Railway Lines to Contemporary Migrant Transportation.” *Border Porosities: Movements of People, Objects, and Ideas in the Southern Balkans*, Manchester University Press, 2021.

https://www.manchesterhive.com/display/9781526140647/9781526140647_00009.xml.

¹⁰ Council on Foreign Relations. “Counterterrorism.” *World101*, Council on Foreign Relations, https://education.cfr.org/cfr_glossary/20?utm.

¹¹ United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime. “Defining Organized Crime.” *Education for Justice*, UNODC, <https://www.unodc.org/e4j/ru/organized-crime/module-1/key-issues/defining-organized-crime.html>.

¹² IGI Global. “Military Coup Attempt.” *IGI Global Dictionary*, IGI Global, <https://www.igi-global.com/dictionary/military-coup-attempt/64121>.

Since 2012, jihadist organizations like ISWAP and JNIM have taken advantage of these power vacuums. The Sahel region now contributes almost half of all terrorism-related fatalities worldwide. National armies are usually undertrained, under-equipped, and corrupt and are incapable of protecting civilians or recapturing territory. Their weakness only legitimizes coups and reproduces the cycle of violence and bad governance.

Colonial Borders that Contributed to Fragmented Ethnic and Social Groups

In French West Africa, borders were drawn over pre-existing pre-colonial states and trading regions without regard to existing social textures, uniting groups of multi-identities and separating others along new borders. Mali's borders, for instance, were formerly French Sudan circa 1891, uniting multi-identitarian Sudanian and Saharan peoples under a single régime. Niger's borders also developed piecemeal from 1904, remaking communities with no regard for ethnic solidarity.

The Tuareg, nomadic throughout the Sahel, were split between Mali, Niger, and Algeria, disrupting their seasonal migrations as well as politics. Colonial authorities reconstituted traditional hierarchies as well: in Niger and Mali, they promoted submissive chiefs and excluded others, reshaping socio-political realities that persist. In Chad, French authorities established administrative units that cultivated Sara identity among previously kin-based groups, but neglected enormous areas - a duality found both in identity formation and in political abandonment.

Overall, Sahelian colonial frontiers fragmented ethnic groups and rendered centralized governments that were insensitive to local government and land-use systems. This sowed seeds of disunity: individuals were fragmented, traditional leadership was manipulated, and conflicts over land increased. The artificial borders remain a core root of contemporary intercommunal warfare, resource wars, and disputed identities.

Past Conflicts that caused Instability in the Region

From the 1990s to the present, a series of interconnected conflicts across the Sahel and surrounding regions have caused a dangerous spread of weapons, making the region more unstable and violent. In Mali, recurring Tuareg rebellions exposed serious ongoing complaints and weakened government control in the northern part of the country.

In the wake of this fragmentation, jihadist groups such as Ansar Dine and al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) seized the opportunity to establish themselves firmly by taking advantage of local unrest and weak border controls to establish and expand arms supply lines, often relying on regional smuggling networks.

Simultaneously, Sudanese and Chadian civil wars during the 1990s and 2000s established a permanent Sahel arms smuggling network. Armed groups, sometimes backed by external powers, transported weapons along unauthorized commerce routes which finally ended up feeding black markets across Niger, Mali, and Burkina Faso. It has played a critical part in advancing armed groups and regional instability.

In the western region, the Boko Haram rebellion, which began in northeast Nigeria in 2009 and subsequently gave rise to breakaway groups like ISWAP, has spread as a regional threat into Niger, Chad, and Cameroon. It has been armed by weapons smuggled by the theft of arms from military stores and black markets, with smuggling networks over the Sahara being especially significant. These open borders have not only facilitated the export of weapons but also human trafficking and the movement of militant groups.

The internal conflict that started in 2013 in the Central African Republic (CAR) has led to widespread displacement of people as well as the movement of armed fighters to countries like Chad and Cameroon. The CAR's militant groups frequently exchange natural resources such as diamonds and gold for arms, creating a broader arms market in the region. The trade has also entrenched violence and instability in the Sahel, linking supposedly isolated conflicts into a complex web of insecurity driven by resource and arms trafficking.

Disclosure of Armed Groups and Militias

Rise of Non-State Armed Actors

The Sahel is a very common region nowadays for the emergence and expansion of non-state armed actors, including extremist terrorist organizations, ethnic militias and criminal syndicates that are not operating under formal state control. Multiple groups have managed to gain traction through the widespread exploitation of disillusionment, poverty and marginalization. Often, these actors offer an alternative source of protection, identity, or income, especially in areas where the state has historically failed to provide services or security.

Furthermore, ethnic tensions have helped lead to the growth of armed groups. In areas like central Mali and northern Burkina Faso, local groups formed to protect their communities based on ethnic ties. These groups usually start as local defense teams but later become armed militias with bigger goals, such as political or economic power. Often, these groups mix ideology, ethnic loyalty, and organized crime, as they control smuggling paths, illegal mining areas, and weapons deals. Members are often recruited from different countries because borders are porous, and they join because they believe in fighting back, protecting their people, or seeking revenge.

Creation of Power Vacuums and the Influence of State Weaknesses

The political and institutional vulnerability of Sahelian states is closely linked to the growth of these armed non-state actors. Many of the region's governments find it difficult to exercise authority outside of major cities, effectively leaving large rural and border areas ungoverned. Armed groups fill the void in these areas by imposing their own legal systems, offering essential services, or just using violence to gain control. Because of this irregular state presence, militias are able to flourish and spread.

Political unrest, such as recent military takeovers in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, has made matters worse. Central governments have been weakened by these upheavals, and regional coordination initiatives have been hindered. Furthermore, local populations may turn to armed groups for protection or retaliation because security forces are frequently underfunded, inadequately trained, or suspected of violating human rights. In certain areas, the public's faith in the government has been severely eroded, making militias the more approachable or trustworthy sources of power.

Risky security vacuums have also been left behind by foreign troop withdrawals, such as the conclusion of France's Operation Barkhane and the reduction of UN peacekeepers. Armed groups quickly take advantage of these transitional periods by stepping up their attacks, expanding their territory, and solidifying their hold on power. These events highlight the close relationship between militia empowerment, security vacuums, and state weakness in determining the unstable environment of the Sahel.

Arms Trafficking Networks

Crucial Post-Conflict Zones and Black Markets

The availability of weapons from post-conflict areas, particularly Libya, is one of the main causes of the proliferation of armaments in the Sahel. Libya plunged into anarchy after Muammar Gaddafi's regime fell in 2011, leaving its enormous arsenals of heavy and small arms unguarded. Through both intentional transfers by armed actors and looted caches, these weapons—such as assault rifles, machine guns, mortars, and man-portable air-defense systems (MANPADS)—flooded the area [Small Arms Survey, 2015]. These weapons were readily acquired by militias, terrorist organizations, and criminal networks in the black markets throughout the Sahara as a result of the breakdown of Libya's central government.

By connecting northern suppliers and southern buyers, the Libyan black market developed into a major trans-Saharan arms trade hub. Smugglers transported weapons into Mali, Burkina Faso, and Nigeria via desert routes that crossed southern Libya and northern Niger. The spread of weapons from Libya significantly increased the amount of firepower that armed groups in the Sahel could use, and it transformed small-scale uprisings into well-armed insurgencies.

Most Commonly used Routes and Methods for Trafficking of Weapons

Many of the trans-Saharan trade routes that are commonly used for arms trafficking in the Sahel predate colonial borders. Important routes include those that connect southern Libya with northern Mali via Agadez, Niger; Darfur, Sudan, with Chad and the CAR; and Nigeria with northern Burkina Faso via Cameroon. These routes are deeply ingrained in local smuggling economies because they are frequently the same ones used to traffic people, drugs, and other illegal goods.

Depending on the risk and the terrain, smugglers transport weapons using a range of techniques. To covertly transport weapons across the hostile desert landscape, four-wheel drive vehicles, camouflaged convoys, and even donkeys and motorcycles are used. Traffickers frequently conceal weapons in shipments of consumer goods, fuel, or livestock. Unchecked arms flows are further made possible by border official corruption and the sparse presence of state authorities along isolated areas.

In order to evade detection, weapons are often trafficked in modular parts, such as barrels, receivers, and magazines, which are then reassembled once they reach their destination, according to field reports and satellite evidence. A cycle of rearmament among non-state actors is also facilitated by the fact that some weapons are obtained from national military stockpiles, either through theft or capture on the battlefield.

The Role of Organized Crime

In the Sahel, organized crime groups are very important for keeping and growing the illegal arms trade going. These groups help armed groups get more weapons and connect them with suppliers, who are often in countries that have had conflicts, like Libya or Sudan. Unlike groups that fight for a cause, these criminal networks are only interested in making money. They often work with criminal mining organizations, drug cartels, and human traffickers.

These organizations operate successfully by establishing cross-border connections, using covert communication channels, and using threats or bribes to control situations. They are also aided by complicit security authorities, warlords, or local figures for cash or a share of the illegal gains. They even aid terrorist groups at times by providing protected transit corridors for smuggling.

Where arms trafficking comes with other organized crimes, it brings profound security interests that cannot be addressed with the application of exclusively military solutions.

To let down the popularity and revenues of such criminal businesses, countries need to consolidate their law enforcement, share information, and help develop the economy.

Case study: Mali's 2012 crisis

The 2012 crisis in Mali shows how after a war, weapons spread, the country becomes weak, and ethnic groups start fighting. Something that changed the security situation in the Sahel region. The conflict began in January 2012 when the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA), made up of Tuareg fighters who had come back from Libya with heavy weapons, started a rebellion in northern Mali. They quickly took control of towns like Aguelhok, Ménaka, and Tessalit. They took advantage of the fall of Gaddafi's government and the flood of weapons into the area. On April 6, 2012, the MNLA declared the independent state of "Azawad" covering Gao, Kidal, and Timbuktu, but this wasn't recognized by other countries.

Soon after the rebellion started, another group called Ansar Dine, led by a Tuareg religious leader named Iyad ag Ghali, split from the MNLA and took over northern cities. They introduced strict Islamic laws and destroyed cultural sites in Timbuktu, including important historical buildings. In many areas, Ansar Dine pushed the MNLA aside using both religious ideas and force.

Meanwhile, things got out of control in the capital.

On March 21–22, 2012, some unhappy Malian soldiers, led by Captain Amadou Sanogo, carried out a coup, removing President Amadou Toumani Touré. The soldiers said they were upset about not getting enough help to fight the rebels in the north. The government quickly fell apart, and the rebels gained more land quickly.

By March 30, the MNLA and Ansar Dine together controlled cities like Kidal, Gao, and Timbuktu. But disagreements in ideas and leadership caused fighting within the group. In June 2012, a group of jihadists called MUJAO took over Gao from the MNLA after violent fighting.

International attention grew as Ansar Dine and their allies kept taking control, enforcing strict Islamic rules and breaking down local government. Their quick advances led to threats from ECOWAS and diplomatic warnings, but military action was delayed until early 2013.

In January 2013, France started Operation Serval with support from the UN and peacekeepers.

The goal was to stop the spread of jihadists near Konna and retake towns in the north. This action helped take back key cities, though armed groups moved into the desert and started more attacks.

MAJOR COUNTRIES AND ORGANIZATIONS INVOLVED

Mali

Mali is still mired in cascading crises of ethnic strife, jihadist rebellion, and militia fighting, especially in central and northern Mali. Since state control in the north collapsed in 2012, groups like JNIM and ISGS have become increasingly powerful by capitalizing on grievances of sidelined Fulani and Tuareg groups.

The government of Mali cannot keep territory under control in places like Mopti, Segou, Gao, and Menaka. Despite Russian-backed Wagner fighters and Bayraktar drones, military forces never fail to lose ground. Boulikessi was captured by JNIM in June 2025, with over 100 soldiers killed and a retreat ensuing.

Inter-clans skirmishes over territory and resources, especially between Fulani and Dogon communities, continue to destabilize the region. Despite appearing to be government-aligned militias, they are prone to undermining central control.

Illicit arms trafficking exacerbates the crisis. Libyan weapons since 2011 have flooded the Sahel, and porous borders and corruption have enabled militias and criminals to continue cycles of violence.

Burkina Faso

Burkina Faso is experiencing increasing levels of violence due to the growing activities of extremist groups and local militias, particularly in the northern and eastern regions of the country. Groups such as Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM), the Islamic State-linked Sahel Province, and the local group Ansarul Islam have taken control of large areas, accounting for up to 60% of the country by 2025. Recent attacks on places like Mansila in June 2024, which resulted in the deaths of over 100 soldiers, and Nassougou in August 2024, which caused 50 to 200 deaths, demonstrate the strength and brutality of these groups.

To address this issue, the government has established new units known as the Rapid Intervention Battalions (BIR) and begun utilizing the Volunteers for the Defense of the Homeland (VDP), a group of civilians assisting in the fight against the extremist groups. However, this has created ethnic tensions, particularly with the Fulani people. These efforts have not halted the rise in attacks. Experts from international organizations assert that using airstrikes and force in the short term will not resolve the problem.

Chad

Due to the country's geographical location, Chad has a crucial role in regional counterterrorism. It borders Libya, Sudan, Central African Republic (CAR) and Niger. As a member of G5 Sahel and other initiatives including the U.S. Trans-Saharan Counterterrorism Partnership, it receives training and financial support in order to strengthen border controls and counter arms smuggling routes.

Recently, as of 2025, the country is engaging in joint anti-jihadist operations in the Sahel, while also contributing personnel and resources to regional alliances that aim to minimize terrorist invasions and illegal trade.

France

As the erstwhile colonial power, France has had a long history of strategic and security interests in maintaining stability in the Sahel region. It led Operation Barkhane (2014–2023), deploying thousands of soldiers in Mali, Chad, Burkina Faso, and Niger, with

bases in Gao (Mali), Ouagadougou (Burkina Faso), N'Djamena (Chad), and Niamey (Niger). France is also at the forefront of the formation and sponsorship of the G5 Sahel Joint Force, providing political support, logistical support, and coordination through UN Resolution 2359 (2017). Also running concurrently are European Union operations, for example, EUTM Mali, EUCAP Sahel Mali, and EUCAP Sahel Niger, which provide training, strategic advice, and equipment to Sahel national forces.

G5 Sahel Joint Force

Formed in 2017, the G5 Sahel Joint Force is a regional defense coalition composed of Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso, Chad, and Mauritania. Its core mandate is to coordinate and implement cross-border military interventions to counter terrorism, militia attacks, and transnational crimes such as arms and human trafficking in the Sahel region.

The force operates in three main areas of operation, the Western, Central, and Eastern, each addressing threats specific to their geographic and security environments. It has around 5,000 troops provided by member countries and operates in coordination with national armies, MINUSMA (the UN peacekeeping mission), and international partners, including France and the EU.

Despite setbacks that range from insufficient funding, equipment shortages, and political instability among member states, the G5 Sahel Joint Force is a valuable attempt at regional cooperation amidst rising security threats across the Sahel corridor.

ECOWAS (Economic Community of West African States)

It was established in 1975, and the organization has played a pivotal role in promoting economic integration, regional cooperation, and collective security in West Africa. It has been particularly concerned with conflict mediation, peacekeeping operations, and promotion of democratic government through observation of elections and crisis diplomacy.

The regional organization has nonetheless been plagued by rising demands due to a string of military coups in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger from 2020 to 2023. Hostilities escalated with ECOWAS imposing sanctions and calling for rapid returns to civilian rule, measures that were resoundingly rejected by the new regimes. In response, the three countries formally withdrew from ECOWAS by early 2025, severely weakening the bloc's cohesion and its ability to deal with security issues in the central Sahel.

Their exodus also creates doubts about regional integration, collective security efforts, and the general stability of West Africa, particularly as these countries seek alternative partnerships beyond the traditional multilateral one.

TIMELINE OF EVENTS

DATE	DESCRIPTION OF EVENT
1962–1964	First Tuareg Rebellion in northern Mali, fueled by smuggled small arms across desert routes.

March 18, 2003	UN Security Council Resolution 1467 calls for stronger measures to curb small arms trafficking in West Africa.
May to June 2006	Democratic Alliance for Change (ADC) Tuareg rebellion in Mali, with rebels sourcing weapons through smuggling networks related to Libya.
2011	The collapse of Gaddafi's regime in Libya unleashes arms stockpiles, spreading weapons across the Sahel.
October 6, 2016	Tazalit attack in Niger by jihadists using trafficked weapons from Mali.
March 23, 2019	Ogossagou massacre in Mali, where militias armed with illicit weapons killed civilians.
June 20-29, 2024	Massacres in Mali involved state forces, Wagner and Tuareg groups and all were using heavy arms.
August 24, 2024	The massacre in Burkina Faso by JNIM militants was equipped with smuggled arms.
February to April, 2025	Pro-government militias in Burkina Faso carry out mass killings of Fulani civilians using looted arms.

RELEVANT UN RESOLUTIONS, TREATIES AND EVENTS

UN Security Council Resolution 1467 (2003)

<https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/490259?ln=en>

Unanimously passed on 18 March 2003, Security Council Resolution 1467 was the first time the Council had made a direct link between the proliferation of small arms and mercenary activity and the destabilization of West Africa. It urged ECOWAS member states to make their 1998 Moratorium legally binding through the creation of a regional transfer register of arms, end-user certificates, national weapon inventories, and enhanced surveillance of airspace. It also called for capacity building of national commissions and enhanced donor support for their implementation. By putting these matters on the agenda of the Security Council, the resolution established an international legal basis for subregional

arms-control regimes.

UN Security Council Resolution 2195 (2014) <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/785567?ln=en>

The Security Council fully agreed on Resolution 2195, which says that terrorist groups often use illegal trade networks, like trafficking of small weapons, to gain money for their attacks. The resolution calls on countries to break the connection between terrorism and organized crime by checking borders more carefully, following criminal justice rules closely, and collaborating efficiently, so as to share information and handle legal issues. It also encourages cooperation with groups like the African Union and AFRIPOL, which helps reinforce the idea that arms trafficking and terrorism are closely connected problems that need a lot of effort to be solved.

UN General Assembly Resolution 55/255 (2001) – Firearms Protocol
<https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/441498?ln=en>

The Firearms Protocol was made in 2001 through a UN decision and started working in July 2005. It's part of the UN Convention against Transnational Organized Crime. It's the first international agreement that forces countries to make illegal gun making, selling, and owning a crime. It also asks countries to set up systems for checking guns when they are taken out or brought in, to mark and track weapons, to find illegal guns, and to help each other with legal support and sending people to face justice in other countries. As the legal tool for the prosecution of arms trafficking cases, the Protocol is in support of national efforts across Africa to develop judicial and forensic capability to combat arms trafficking.

ECOWAS Convention on Small Arms and Light Weapons (2006)

Signed by West African countries in June 2006 and started working in September 2009, the ECOWAS Convention builds on a 1998 pause in arms transfers. It makes it illegal to send small weapons to people who aren't allowed to have them. It also requires countries to mark, license, track, and securely store weapons. The agreement also asks for central records, the destruction of extra and seized weapons, and the creation of national committees. This treaty turns global rules into real laws that can be enforced within the region, helping countries work together and share information about weapons.

Kinshasa Convention (Central African Convention for the Control of Small Arms and Light Weapons)

Known officially as the Central African Convention for the Control of Small Arms and Light Weapons, this treaty was approved in April 2010 and became active on 8 March 2017 after being signed by at least six countries in the ECCAS group. The Convention follows a similar legal structure to ECOWAS but is adapted for the Central African region. It stops civilians from owning light weapons, requires special permits for users, controls how weapons are made and sold, and sets up national and regional records for arms and peacekeeping efforts. It also pushes for joint action to enforce rules across borders. As the only legally binding agreement on arms reduction for 11 Central African nations, it strengthens the broader efforts to control weapons across the continent.

PREVIOUS ATTEMPTS TO SOLVE THE ISSUE

Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF)

Established in 1994 and significantly reactivated eleven years ago by the Lake Chad Basin Commission (LCBC), the member states Cameroon, Chad, Niger, Nigeria and Benin expanded MNJTF's mandate, in order to coordinate counterterrorism operations against Boko Haram and groups across the Lake Chad region. Since then, it has managed to recapture territory, degrade Boko Haram's strengths, rescue people that have been abducted and facilitate the return of displaced populations. Most notably, Operation Lake Sanity 2 in 2024 was commended by the African Union and the Lake Chad Basin Commission (LCBC) for its effective execution and adherence to established human rights frameworks.

Despite these achievements, MNJTF faces critical challenges such as uneven collaboration between contributing countries, limited access to dedicated improvised explosive device (IED) countermeasures, shortage of operational aircraft, and operational compatibility limitations. In late 2024 and early 2025, Chad threatened to withdraw following a major Boko Haram attack that killed dozens of soldiers in Barakaram, while Niger formally exited the task force after its 2023 coup, which led to the reduction of MNJTF's regional unity and operational capacity.

Accra Initiative

The Accra Initiative was launched in 2017 and unites the coastal West African countries in order to counter the southward expansion of jihadist activity. It rests on three key foundations, including intelligence and information sharing, coordinated multinational border operations and strengthening security services. Between 2018 and 2019 the participating countries led integrated efforts that led to around 700 arrests and confiscations of illegal weapons. Mali and Niger later joined as observers and subsequently full members, strengthening coastal-Sahel coordination.

Operation Barkhane (2014–2022)

It was a counter-terror operation initiated by the French in Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso, Chad and Mauritania. Furthermore it aimed to assist local military forces, reduce terrorist networks and secure conflict areas.

Even though formally wound down in 2022, it continues to survive as training programs, logistical support, and political backing for regional groupings like the G5 Sahel. Even while recording uneven progress, Barkhane aimed to slow down the march of extremists and enable Western military presence on the Sahelian belt.

The United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA)

MINUSMA's aim was to stabilize Mali after 2012, protect its residents and contribute to the restoration of state authority. Nonetheless, it has faced persistent obstacles, including multiple lethal attacks, like a 2014 suicide attack in Aguelhok that resulted in the deaths of four Chadian peacekeepers, an ambush in Indelimane where nine Nigerian peacekeepers lost their lives and lastly a numerous assaults in Timbuktu and Menaka three years later.

Peacekeepers are frequently attacked by jihadi forces, making MINUSMA one of the

most dangerous UN missions; more than 168 peacekeepers have been killed since 2013, and violent convoy attacks continue to be common.

MINUSMA has been limited in monitoring arms trafficking due to systemic limitations: mission policy, host-nation authorization, and mobility and intelligence deficiencies have hindered effective interdiction of illicit movement of arms.

POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

Strengthening Security and Border Control

Enhancing borders plays a vital role in the prevention of illegal arms and other weapons smuggling into and across the Sahel region.

National states, in cooperation with regional authorities such as the African Union (AU) and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), should prioritize equipping the law enforcement organs with enhanced training and modern equipment to enhance their capacities in securing and maintaining national borders. Other donors from other countries, like the European Union, the United Nations, and the bilateral donors, also have the potential to contribute technical help, financing, and capacity support. Concurrent with internal efforts, regional efforts must be more powerful. Sahel nations must synchronize military and intelligence efforts amongst themselves through such channels as the G5 Sahel Joint Force, with outside actors being required to assist through logistical and operational measures as necessary. Breaking up the traffickers' and armed groups' chains across porous borders depends on such efforts.

In addition, state defense institutions and interior ministries must take responsibility to secure stockpile management through the enactment of strict controls and international best practice for securing and tracking national armories. AU, ECOWAS, and international community expertise that is available to support oversight mechanisms can assure and prevent diversion of arms.

Capacity Building and Law Enforcement

An effective Sahel arms trafficking strategy will need to extend beyond efficient border management and include robust legal and institutional mechanisms. Institutions need to be reinforced in order to empower law enforcement and judiciary institutions to investigate, prosecute, and deter criminal arms-related activity.

One of the ways is imparting specialized training to prosecutors, judges, and law enforcement officials. This includes sharpening their skills in identifying, tracking, and following up on weapons such that they possess technical know-how to handle sophisticated cases of arms trafficking. They can also derive a significant advantage from their foreign counterparts and donor agencies by offering them specialized modules of training and capacity-building inputs for establishing sustainable institutional capacities.

No more urgent is to improve information sharing among regional and national governments. Proper and timely communication between and among states must occur in order to detect trafficking rings, follow the trails of weapons, and coordinate joint prosecutions. Regional groups such as ECOWAS and the African Union, backed by INTERPOL and other international players, can help establish secure data-swap portals and similar legal mechanisms to facilitate transborder cooperation.

Promoting Accountability and Civilian Protection

Protecting military and security operations from violating international humanitarian law is vital to the preservation of civilian life and the legitimacy of state and regional action in the Sahel. Compliance with principles of law and ethics not only safeguards vulnerable populations but also fosters trust between security forces and people.

Among the central obligations is to ensure full application of international humanitarian law in all military and security operations. Military commanders must be trained and held to a level where civilians are safeguarded and the deployment of force is maintained proportionate. Governments from the affected areas, with help from the international community, should integrate these commitments in the military doctrine, rules of engagement, and the plan of operations.

Just as important is the research and prosecution of human rights violations. All bearers of firearms, ranging from state security forces to militias and non-state armed groups, are answerable to accountability. Independent commissions, rapporteur courts, as well as international human rights organizations can place the abuses on record while upholding the rule of law.

Finally, civil society groups need to be safeguarded. They play an important role in an effort to oversee human rights, record violations and safeguard the public interest. The government and the international community need to guard their efforts, enable them to engage in respective processes and avoid reprisals against activists who voice concerns publicly.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Africa Center for Strategic Studies. *Recalibrating a Multitiered Stabilization Strategy in Coastal West Africa: A Response to Violent Extremism*.

<https://africacenter.org/publication/asb43en-recalibrating-multitiered-stabilization-strategy-coastal-west-africa-response-violent-extremism/>.

Africa Center for Strategic Studies. *Militant Islamist Violence in the*

Sahel. <https://africacenter.org/spotlight/militant-islamist-violence-sahel/>.

African Union. *Communiqué on Regional Security*. <https://au.int/fr/node/44012>.

Amani Africa. *Update on the Activities of the MNJTF and Consideration of the RS-SRR*.

<https://amaniafrica-et.org/update-on-the-activities-of-the-mnjtf-and-consideration-of-the-rs-sr/>.

Britannica. "Militia." *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/militia>.

Bridges from Bamako. "The End of the Malian Exception." 28 Mar. 2025,

<https://bridgesfrombamako.com/2025/03/28/the-end-of-the-malian-exception/>

CalP Network. *Sahel 2025 Humanitarian Needs and Response Overview*. June 2025,

<https://www.calpnetwork.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/Sahel-2025-HNRO-ENG-0530.pdf>

Council on Foreign Relations. *Violent Extremism in the Sahel. Global Conflict Tracker*, <https://www.cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/violent-extremism-sahel>.

Council on Foreign Relations. *Glossary Entry: Militia*.
https://education.cfr.org/cfr_glossary/20?utm.

Diva Portal. *Understanding Regional Instability: A Sahelian Case*.
<https://www.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:632135/FULLTEXT01.pdf>

.

Egmont Institute. Wilen, Nina. *Sahel Security Dynamics: Policy Brief No. 374*. Apr. 2025,
https://www.egmontinstitute.be/app/uploads/2025/04/Nina-Wilen_Policy_Brief_374_vFinal.pdf?type=pdf.

ENACT Africa. "Arms Trafficking Threatens West African Wildlife Sanctuary."
<https://enactafrica.org/enact-observer/arms-trafficking-threatens-west-african-wildlife-sanctuary>.

FIDH. *Mali: Armed Groups and State Violence*. <https://www.fidh.org/IMG/pdf/mali592ang.pdf>.

Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect. *Mali Country Profile*.
<https://www.globalr2p.org/countries/mali/>.

Human Rights Watch. *Mali: Army, Wagner Group Disappear, Execute Fulani Civilians*. 22 July 2025,
<https://www.hrw.org/news/2025/07/22/mali-army-wagner-group-disappear-execute-fulani-civilians>.

ICE. *Terrorism and National Security Threats*. U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement,
<https://www.ice.gov/about-ice/hsi/investigate/terrorism-national-security-threats>.

IGI Global. "Military Coup Attempt." *Dictionary of Information Science and Technology*, <https://www.igi-global.com/dictionary/military-coup-attempt/64121>.

IACP. *Militia Violent Extremism*. International Association of Chiefs of Police,
<https://www.theiacp.org/sites/default/files/DVE/Militia%20Violent%20Extremism.pdf>.

Interpol. *ENACT Firearms Public Report 2024*.
<https://www.interpol.int/fr/content/download/21293/file/ENACT%20Firearms%20Public%20report%202024.pdf>.

International Crisis Group. "Why Militancy is Spreading in Mali."
IWPR, <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/why-militancy-spreading-mali>.

ISS Africa. *Illicit Activities Fuel Extremism in the Sahel's Conflict Zones*.
<https://issafrica.org/pscreport/psc-insights/illicit-activities-fuel-extremism-in-the-sahel-s-conflict-zones>.

ISS Africa. *Arms Trafficking from Libya to Niger is Back in Business*.
<https://issafrica.org/iss-today/arms-trafficking-from-libya-to-niger-is-back-in-business>.

ISS Africa. *Decades of Security Cooperation Under Threat in Lake Chad Basin*.
<https://issafrica.org/iss-today/decades-of-security-cooperation-under-threat-in-lake-chad-basin>.

LSE. *Colonial Borders in the Sahel Affect Stability Today*.
https://eprints.lse.ac.uk/108246/1/Africa_2020_12_07_colonial_borders_in_the_sahel_affect.pdf.

Manchester University Press. Welsh, Jennifer. "The Return of the Sovereign." *The Responsibility to Protect in a Changing World*, edited by Bellamy and Dunne, 2016,
<https://www.manchesterhive.com/display/9781526140647/9781526140647.00009.xml>.

MEC Council. Zoubir, Yahia H. *The Sahel in Crisis: Middle East Council on Global Affairs Brief*. June 2022,
https://mecouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/MECGA_Issue-Brief_Zoubir_Final.pdf.

MNJTF. *Operations Update*. Oct. 2024, <https://mnjtffmm.org/2024/10/>.

Open Textbook Library. *Definition of Organized Crime*. UNODC,
<https://www.unodc.org/e4j/ru/organized-crime/module-1/key-issues/defining-organized-crime.html>.

Perplexity.ai. "Sources for the 2012 Crisis in Mali."
<https://www.perplexity.ai/search/sources-for-this-the-2012-cris-Au6ZYlwMSSCnNS3K94aNsA?0=r>.

Security Council Report. *Security Council Resolutions on Small Arms*.
https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/un_documents_type/security-council-resolutions/?citype=Small+Arms&cbtype=small-arms.

Security Council Report. *Resolution 1467 on Arms*.
<https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/un-documents/document/arms-sres-1467.php>

.

Security Council Report. *UNOWAS Monthly Forecast – August 2025*.
<https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/monthly-forecast/2025-08/un-office-for-west-africa-and-the-sahel-unowas.php>.

Stability Journal. *Stability Article on Sahel Crisis*.
<https://stabilityjournal.org/articles/10.5334/sta.br>.

UN Digital Library. *UN Report 490259*. <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/490259?ln=en>.

UN News. "Militants Threaten Stability in the Sahel." 2023,
<https://news.un.org/en/story/2023/06/1137542>.

UN News. "West African Leaders Seek Solutions to Curb Terrorism."
<https://www.voanews.com/a/west-african-leaders-seek-solutions-to-curb-terrorism-from-sahel-region/6845539.html>.

UN News. "Sahel Faces Growing Instability." 2021,
<https://news.un.org/en/story/2021/11/1106282>.

UN Security Council. *Transnational Crime and Peace & Security*.
<https://www.un.org/en/peace-and-security/transnational-crime>.

UNODC. *Trafficking in the Sahel: Guns, Gas, and Gold*. May 2023,
https://www.unodc.org/unodc/frontpage/2023/May/trafficking-in-the-sahel_-_guns--gas--and-gold.html.

UNODC. *TOCTA Sahel Firearms Report 2023*.
https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/tocta_sahel/TOCTA_Sahel_firearms_2023.pdf.

UNODC. *Africa Leads Counter-Terrorism via CONNECT*. May 2025,
<https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/terrorism/latest-news/2025-africa-leads-efforts-to-prevent-and-counter-terrorism-and-violent-extremism-through-the-connect-initiative-in-the-margins-of-the-34th-ccpcj.html>.

UNHCR. *West and Central Africa: Regional Trends - 2025*. June 2025,
<https://www.unhcr.org/sites/default/files/2025-06/west-central-africa-regional-trends-forced-displacement-2025.pdf>.

UNDP. *Sahel Resilience Project Update Vol. 11*. Jan.–May 2024,
https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/2025-02/sahel_resilience_project_update_january-may_2024_vol-11.pdf.

UNESCO. *Ahmad Al Faqi Al Mahdi: I Plead Guilty*.
<https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/ahmad-al-faqi-al-mahdi-i-plead-guilty-0>

UN Security Council. *Enhancing Regional Counter-Terrorism Cooperation*. July 2025,
<https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/whatsinblue/2025/07/informal-interactive-dialogue-on-enhancing-regional-counter-terrorism-cooperation-in-west-africa-and-the-sahel.php>.

VOA News. "UN Warns of Arms Proliferation." 2003,
<https://www.voanews.com/a/a-13-a-2003-03-19-66-un-66846387/375559.html>

World Bank. *Organized Crime in the Sahel*. <https://africa.ocindex.net/country/libya>.

Kujenga Amani. "Alliance of Sahel States Challenging Colonial Borders and UN Representation." Apr. 2024,
<https://kujenga-amani.ssrc.org/2024/04/18/alliance-of-sahel-states-challenging-colonial-borders-and-un-representation/>.

ACLED. *Conflict Watchlist 2024: Sahel*.
<https://acleddata.com/report/conflict-watchlist-2024-sahel-deadly-new-era-decades-long-conflict>.

ACLED. *Africa Overview – July 2025*.
<https://acleddata.com/update/africa-overview-july-2025>

ISW. *Africa File: JNIM Offensive in Sahel*. 5 June 2025,
<https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounders/africa-file-june-5-2025-jnim-offensive-across-sahel-somalia-down-not-out-central-africa>.

ScienceDirect. *Political Economy of Sahel Conflict*.
<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0305750X22002984>.

GCTF. *Global Counterterrorism Forum Archive*.
<https://www.thegctf.org/Home/PgrID/696/PageID/2/ArtMID/491/ArticleID/13>.

United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime. *Transnational Organized Crime Threat Assessment for the Sahel: Firearms*. 2023,
https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/tocta_sahel/TOCTA_Sahel_firearms_2023.pdf.

UN News. "Sahel: Criminal Networks Fuel Trafficking of Gold, Gas, and Guns." 6 June 2023,
<https://news.un.org/en/story/2023/06/1137542>.

Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime. *Organized Crime Index: Libya*.
<https://africa.ocindex.net/country/libya>