

ARMS PROLIFERATION AND DISARMAMENT: A CASE STUDY OF THE SAHEL REGION

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Abstract

The Sahel region has become a critical corridor for arms proliferation, exacerbating insecurity, terrorism, and inter-communal conflicts across West and Central Africa. This article investigates the complex, interlinked, and remote drivers of arms proliferation in the Sahel, including porous borders, weak governance structures, ineffective law enforcement, and external geopolitical influences that fuel instability, as well as efforts to mitigate the surge. It further explores how climate-induced resource competition and socio-economic marginalisation intensify local grievances, creating fertile ground for armed groups and illicit trade networks. The study evaluates the effectiveness and limitations of existing disarmament and peace-building frameworks, such as the United Nations Integrated Strategy for the Sahel (UNISS), the African Union's Silencing the Guns initiative, and regional cooperation mechanisms under ECOWAS. Employing a qualitative research design grounded in content analysis and guided by conflict theory, the article provides a nuanced understanding of how structural inequalities and external interventions sustain the cycle of insecurity. The findings highlight that while current regional and international initiatives offer valuable frameworks, their impact remains limited by weak implementation, inadequate coordination, and insufficient local ownership. To enhance effectiveness, the study recommends strengthening border governance, investing in community-based security mechanisms, fostering intelligence sharing, and addressing the underlying political, economic, and environmental factors that perpetuate instability in the region.

Keywords: Arms Proliferation, Disarmament, Sahel, Security, Terrorism, Regional Cooperation.

Introduction

The Sahel region is the vast semi-arid belt stretching across West and Central Africa, including countries such as Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, and Chad, and their neighbours, with porous borders that facilitate illicit trade, especially in Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALWs). The spate of weapons flowing from Libya through Sub-Saharan Africa has made the Sahel even more vulnerable and insecure. This is particularly so after the fall of the Gaddafi regime in Libya, which fostered a thriving illicit arms market and widespread proliferation of small arms and light weapons (SALWs), which empower non-state armed actors, exacerbate communal tensions, undermine state authority, and impede development.

Since the early 2010s, the region has witnessed an excruciating escalation in violence, insecurity, and displacement, making arms proliferation one of the most frightening security challenges in the region as a critical driver of violence in the region. This trend has been driven by insurgencies, jihadist expansion, inter-communal conflicts, violent

banditry, and criminal networks, often exacerbating governance challenges. It is not an overstatement to say that small arms have been a significant factor in every political conflict in the Sahel. Out of the 640 million small arms in circulation worldwide, it is estimated that only the Sahel region has roughly 8 million small arms and light weapons. Small arms regulation is a matter of life and death (Amoa, 2006).

Accordingly, the Military Africa 2023 report titled ‘Due to Instability’, current figures indicate that of the 640 million small arms and light weapons circulated globally, an estimated 100 million are located in Africa, 30 million of which are found in sub-Saharan Africa. The accumulation and proliferation of these weapons across the region have directly resulted in conflicts with longer durations and higher fatalities. They can be linked to the recruitment of child soldiers, transnational criminal violence, non-state terrorist campaigns, and various humanitarian violations, including rape, torture, and kidnapping.

The proliferation of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALWs) in the region has produced far-reaching and deeply destabilising consequences for both national and regional security. The widespread availability of these weapons has not only escalated the frequency and intensity of violent incidents but also contributed to the prolongation of armed conflicts. Communal clashes, insurgent activities, and criminal violence have become significantly more lethal due to the ready accessibility of SALWs, particularly in conflict-prone nations such as Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Chad, and their neighbours.

The precarious nature to which this arms proliferation has placed the region into one of the most heavily armed regions outside formal state control, with Cross-border arms smuggling, systemic corruption, and ineffective law enforcement, hence making all efforts in combating arms trafficking and disarmament with little success, necessitates this paper. This paper thus seeks to explore the root causes of arms proliferation in the Sahel, assess ongoing disarmament initiatives, and propose actionable strategies to address these challenges.

Statement of Research Problems

Despite regional and international interventions, the proliferation of small arms and light weapons (SALWs) continues to drive and sustain insurgencies, banditry, inter-communal attacks, and state fragility in the Sahel region comprising Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, and Chad creating a vicious circle of insecurity and more demand for weapon hence, one of the most daunting challenges to the stability of the zones in contemporary Africa.

Several factors underpin arms proliferation and disarmament efforts in the region, which include: the fall of Libya in 2011, with unchecked vast stockpiles and proliferation of unsecured weapons into the hands of non-state armed groups. Other factors include porous borders, corruption within security institutions, and socio-economic marginalisation, all of which exacerbate the crisis. Despite international and regional disarmament initiatives, the persistence of arms proliferation underscores the need for a comprehensive understanding of its root causes and the obstacles to effective disarmament, thereby leading the Sahel to continue exhibiting one of the world’s highest concentrations of illicit small arms relative to state capacity.

This paper, therefore, seeks to understand and examine why arms proliferation lingers in the Sahel despite various disarmament efforts by addressing the following research problem:

1. What are the drivers of arms proliferation in the Sahel?

2. How effective are the current disarmament initiatives?
3. What policy measures can enhance arms control and promote stability in the region?

Empirical Review

Several empirical studies highlight the nexus between arms proliferation and conflict, such as Insurgency, criminality, and inter-communal violence in the Sahel region and neighbouring West African states. A cursory account from conflict-event datasets, UN and regional assessments, and focused research (Small Arms Survey, UNODC (2023), SIPRI (2024), ACLED (Ongoing), ISS/OCWAR-T (2023) indicates that arm proliferation in the region is driven by porous borders, state weakness and conflict spill over, legacy stockpiles (including Libyan caches), and illicit trafficking networks that link West Africa to North Africa and beyond. According to the Small Arms Survey (2019), Sahel's arms environment is currently dominated by small arms and light weapons (SALW) assault rifles, light machine guns, pistols, rocket-propelled grenades, and ammunition, which are the primary lethal tools of non-state armed groups, bandits, and militants. Multiple field studies and UN assessments report that SALW account for most battlefield lethality and community-level violence.

Dominant themes in post-2011 literature include the collapse of centralised armouries in Libya, which created one of the most significant surges of illicit SALW flowing south into the Sahel. Scholars attribute the widespread availability of SALWs to porous borders, inefficient regulatory enforcement, and deeply entrenched corruption (Afuzie, 2025; Atidoga, Yakubu, & Lamidi, 2024). These breaches have intensified transnational arms trafficking networks to blossom, worsening internal insecurity and contributing to a sequence of armed conflicts

A fundamental agreement among scholars is that challenges posed by SALW proliferation are not solely logistical or infrastructural. Many scholars argue that underlying socio-economic grievances, such as poverty, unemployment, and political exclusion, further exacerbate the misuse of these weapons (Usman, Matthew, & Aho, n.d.).

However, from the above literature review, a significant setback to providing a comprehensive account of causes, volume, and dynamics stems from challenges of under-reporting and bias, where seizures and conflict events are likely undercounted in remote areas. Again, the problem is the limited ballistic and serial tracing capacity, which reduces the ability to link recovered weapons to their supply chains. Consequently, there is a need for more panel data at the community level to quantify the causal impact of arms inflows on livelihoods and violence.

However, while several policy reports have called for improved national firearms registries and cross-border data sharing, it is important to note that efforts to regulate arms proliferation require a holistic approach, requiring a shift from solely militarised strategies to hybrid approaches combining community engagement, governance reforms, and intelligence-led security operations that address the physical flow of weapons and the socio-political environments that incentivise their use.

Theoretical Framework

The study of arms proliferation and disarmament as a challenge to the security and stability

of the Sahel region can be situated through the lens of Conflict theory.

Conflict Theory, rooted in the works of Karl Marx (1848), Coser (1956), and later Collier (2007), asserts that conflict emerges from structural inequalities, power struggles, competition over scarce resources, and the breakdown of social order.

The core argument of the theory is that:

1. **Groups compete over scarce resources** (land, minerals, political control, and security).
2. **Uneven distribution of power** enables dominant groups in the state (elites, militias, ethnic factions) to enforce order through coercion or violence.
3. **Conflict is intrinsic and often rational**, as groups use available tools, including weapons, to pursue survival, dominance, or autonomy.
4. **Structural inequality**, such as marginalisation, poverty, and weak governance, produces frequent sequences of violence that cumulatively fuel instability.

Applicability of Functionalism to Insecurity

Connecting the tenet of conflict theory to the theme of this discourse in the Sahel region, Conflict theory provides a basis for deciphering how arms proliferation emerges as both a symbol and an instrument of power that creates and propels structural tensions among state actors, non-state groups, ethnic communities, and external powers.

Consequently, what emerges from a conflict-theoretical perspective in the region is that weapons flows are not accidental but an upshot of more profound structural inequalities, power struggles, resource competition, and state legitimacy crises, conditions that create latent conflict that manifests violently once armed groups acquire weapons. Effective disarmament thus requires more than weapons collection; it demands addressing root causes and structural enablers.

Methodology

This article adopts a qualitative research design and evaluation, relying on secondary sources, including textbooks, journals, newspapers, magazines, online publications, and articles from eminent scholars. It explores conversational-academic style to make the subject accessible to both scholarly and public audiences, while upholding objectivity through citations.

In employing the thematic analytical tool, this work identifies recurring themes: arms proliferation, conflict, and disarmament. It also employed comparative analysis, contrasting Sahel's experience with other West African contexts.

Drivers of Arms Proliferation in the Sahel

Security landscape in the Sahel is increasingly shaped by a mirage of persistent challenges that have emerged as a critical vector for the proliferation of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALWs). The surge in SALWs in the region typically arises from a combination of stressors, such as porous borders, weak governance and corruption, terrorism and armed groups, and socio-economic challenges. The Sahel region stands as a quintessential example of such dynamics.

Porous Borders; With vast, unguarded terrains and weak border control mechanisms Sahel

region is faced with persistent struggle to secure large swathes of its territory, particularly stretching from Senegal, Mauritania, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Chad to northern Nigeria where activities of jihadist groups, ethnic militias, criminal networks, and separatist movements have ensured since the fall of Libya in 2011. In this region, the inability of various nation-states to secure national borders has facilitated the inflow of SALW, often through porous routes, and its dissemination through informal networks, often illicit, transforming the military capabilities of non-state armed groups. Mali, in particular, is an example of a direct link between the Libyan fall and its internal conflict, where accessibility to advanced weaponry from Libya by the Tuareg group strengthened them to join forces with local separatists, contributing to the loss of control by the Malian armed forces in northern territories.

A study by Small Arms Survey (2019) noted that while not all illicit flows can be traced to Libya, the post-2011 wave is repeatedly cited by researchers as a structural shock that reset local markets and supply chains. This legacy both increased local inventories and reduced the marginal cost of arming non-state actors in the immediate post-2011 decade. The study also reveals that small arms and light weapons trafficking in West Africa is fed by easy access to stockpiles of arms and facilitated by weak responses from regional state security providers who often lack resources and capacity.

Weak Governance and Corruption: The comprehensive study by Small Arms Survey (2019) is replete with documents of how sizable quantities of small arms are trafficked across vast territories in West Africa and the Sahel, often via well-organised networks involving criminals, corrupt officials, tribal intermediaries, and low-level transporters. Many scholars attribute these scenarios to the lack of capacity of state institutions in the Sahel to enforce arms control laws effectively. Again, there are the issues of political instability and corruption among border officials and security personnel, which further undermine enforcement efforts in the region. In several instances, state actors have been implicated in facilitating or ignoring arms smuggling, either for financial gain or due to political alliances.

Political shocks (coups, military defeats, fragmentation of security forces) produce both sudden diversions of state stockpiles and shifts in diplomatic alignments that influence the types and quantities of legally acquired arms. Recent coups across the Sahel also altered external partnerships and assistance flows, which, in turn, can produce second-order effects on procurement channels and black-market demand (Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, 2024/2025).

Terrorism and Armed Groups: Demand for SALW is shaped by terrorism and armed groups (a) the expansion of jihadist groups (JNIM, IS-Sahel, and affiliates) and their local offshoots; (b) the rise of communal and resource-based violence (pastoralist–farmer conflicts, cattle theft, and land disputes). A case study of armed groups operating in the Sahel, such as Boko Haram, the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS), and Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), is a significant beneficiary of arms proliferation.

The rise of communal and resource-based violence (pastoralist–farmer conflicts, cattle theft, land disputes in countries like Nigeria, Mali, and the central Sahel) illustrates how pastoralist/farmer tensions have escalated into deadly clashes when actors acquire SALW, previously non-violent banditry or raiding becomes more lethal and more sustained once firearms are readily available (Small Arms Survey, 2019).

These groups often acquire weapons through smuggling networks, theft from state arsenals, or black-market purchases. The proliferation of arms sustains their operations, enabling them to challenge state authority and perpetrate violence on a large scale.

Socio-Economic Challenges: ranked among the world's poorest regions, the Sahel faces some of the strongest underlying drivers of arms proliferation. Widespread unemployment, poverty, inequality, food insecurity, and collapsing agricultural livelihoods make many young men vulnerable to recruitment by armed groups, creating a steady demand for weapons.

It is estimated that almost 70% of the Sahel population is under 30 years old. Many are unemployed or underemployed, hence to survive, many of this young population join armed groups either for employment, income, status, and identity. Again, faced with an economy that is heavily reliant on informal trading routes with limited state oversight, smugglers can easily integrate weapons into existing informal supply chains (e.g., fuel, drugs, contraband, human trafficking). These unregulated markets make it extremely easy for armed groups and civilians to buy or barter arms. Economic collapse encourages criminal activities such as kidnapping-for-ransom, car and cattle theft, drug trafficking, and smuggling. This vicious cycle of poverty and increasing the demand for small arms and light weapons (SALWs) undermines development and perpetuates insecurity. These activities require armed protection, and proceeds from crime are used to purchase more weapons.

Disarmament Efforts in the Sahel

Faced with multiplicity of security challenges disarmament in the Sahel is hindered by structural, political, economic, and sociocultural constraints necessitating several regional and international interventions efforts through international laws, treaties and standards including the African Union (AU), ECOWAS, the G5 Sahel, the European Union (EU), and the United Nations aimed at reducing arms flows, progress remains uneven. Recognising that measures against SALW proliferation are critical at international, regional and national levels, major stakeholders in peace-building efforts on disarmament have made concerted efforts to stem the tide of arms proliferation in the Sahel through;

International Frameworks: Disarmament initiatives in the Sahel have been mainly shaped by international approaches. The United Nations Integrated Strategy for the Sahel (UNISS) adopts a comprehensive framework that combines security, governance, and development to address the root causes of instability. Through the UN Integrated Strategy for the Sahel, the EU Trust Fund for Africa, and bilateral donor programs from Germany, Canada, Denmark, and Norway, substantial financial and technical support is provided (UN, 2022). Coordinated donor strategies that prioritise governance reforms and community-based security are aimed at enhancing disarmament outcomes. The Arms Trade Treaty (ATT), ratified by several Sahelian countries, seeks to regulate the international arms trade and prevent the diversion of weapons into illicit markets. However, enforcement remains weak due to capacity constraints and limited political will.

Regional Initiatives: Regional organisations, particularly within the region, have also sought to address arms proliferation. The African Union's *Silencing the Guns by 2030* agenda emphasises conflict prevention and arms control through dialogue, capacity-building, and institutional reforms. The ECOWAS Convention on Small Arms and Light Weapons (2006) provides a robust legal framework for regulating weapons, through joint border patrols, arms tracing mechanisms, intelligence sharing, and harmonised legislation. However, implementation remains inconsistent and could significantly reduce cross-border arms flows (ECOWAS, 2020). For instance, the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF), comprising troops from Chad, Niger, Nigeria, and Cameroon, focuses on counter-terrorism and disarmament in the Lake Chad Basin.

In 2017, Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger pooled their resources and established a joint security force to fight terrorism and transnational organised crime in the Liptako-Gourma region, which covers south-Western 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 organisations. The G5 Sahel Joint Force operation, titled Sama, which seeks to control the border regions between Mali, Niger, and Nigeria, and neutralise armed extremist groups that operate there (Lederer, Edith, 2020). Despite these efforts, challenges such as inadequate funding, poor coordination, and logistical inefficiencies hinder their effectiveness.

Community-Based Approaches: While international laws, treaties, and standards are without doubt necessary, these approaches are often criticized for their heavy emphasis on supply-side disarmament measures such as trade controls, embargos, disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR), and weapons collection schemes (Cooper, N. (2006). The above approaches leave out other dimensions of SALW control, including the sociocultural and historical issues that facilitate SALW misuse and abuse. Thus, the adoption of grassroots disarmament initiatives has shown promise in reducing arms proliferation. These include voluntary arms-surrender campaigns, community-mediated mediation of inter-communal conflicts, development incentives tied to disarmament (e.g., building clinics, schools, and livelihood support), and traditional-leader-led peace-building. For instance, Mali's *Weapons for Development* program encourages individuals to surrender weapons in exchange for economic incentives, such as agricultural tools and job training. According to reporting from the UN and other agencies, such approaches have led to the surrender of thousands of SALWs and contributed to rebuilding trust in some localities. These programs, though limited in scale, highlight the potential of community-driven solutions in addressing local security challenges.

The outcomes from Niger, Sierra Leone, South Sudan, and Northern Kenya validate the claim that community-driven disarmament fosters stronger compliance (Rolandsen, 2019). This indicates that Sahelian peace committees, if adequately supported, could serve as early-warning systems and mediators for local conflicts because when traditional authorities lead negotiations and communities receive tangible benefits, such as schools, health centres, and livelihood support, disarmament becomes more acceptable (UNDP, 2021).

Challenges to Effective Disarmament in the Sahel

Efforts to curtail arms proliferation in the Sahel faced numerous challenges. First among these challenges is the underlying condition of vast, porous borders, insurgency activities, and weak governance, including various forms of corruption and insufficient state capacity, which makes it easy for illicit arms circulation to thrive. Sahel border agencies, in particular, are often constrained by equipment shortages and officers' motivation, which impede effective, efficient work (Lamptey, 2013).

Again, the lack of sustainable funding for disarmament programs undermines their long-term impact. Additionally, fragmented coordination between international, regional, and national actors creates inefficiencies and overlaps. There is also a question of the globalised illicit networks, which are capable of outwitting any carefully crafted legal framework.

Cultural norms also pose significant obstacles. In many Sahelian communities, weapons are viewed as symbols of power and security, making voluntary disarmament

difficult to achieve. Furthermore, the entrenched influence of armed groups in some areas makes it risky for civilians to relinquish their weapons without adequate protection from the state.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The contemporary arms environment in the Sahel is riddled with small arms and light weapons (SALW), which are the primary lethal tools of non-state armed groups, bandits, and militants. Analyses combining ACLED event data with seizure reports show a statistical association between spikes in arms availability and increases in attacks, civilian casualties, and geographic spread of violent groups, transforming local disputes into deadly violence and undermining governance. Challenges to disarmament include: lack of sustained funding, political instability, limited institutional capacity to monitor surrendered weapons, fear among communities of reprisals, and persistent weak governance. However, there is no denying the fact that while existing disarmament initiatives have achieved some success, their impact has been limited by systemic weaknesses and contextual challenges. It is against this that the following recommendations are put forward;

Strengthen Border Security: Effective border management is critical to curtailing the flow of illicit arms. This requires deploying advanced surveillance technologies, enhancing the capacity of border enforcement agencies, and fostering cross-border collaboration among Sahelian states.

Enhance Regional Cooperation: There is a need for a robust, coordinated regional approach to address arms proliferation. Sahelian countries should establish a joint arms control mechanism under the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) to harmonise policies, share intelligence, and counter defence.

Invest in Socio-Economic Development: Addressing the root causes of violence requires significant investments in education, healthcare, and economic development. Creating jobs and empowering marginalised communities can reduce the appeal of armed groups and diminish the demand for weapons.

Empower Local Communities: Community-driven disarmament initiatives should be scaled up and integrated into national disarmament strategies. Providing alternative livelihoods, ensuring local participation, and addressing security concerns and confidence-building can encourage voluntary disarmament.

Engage International Stakeholders: Global powers and international organisations must play a more active role in supporting arms control in the Sahel. This includes providing technical assistance, funding disarmament programs, and pressuring arms-exporting countries to adhere to international regulations.

Essentially, these recommendations are anchored in the need for a more integrated and inclusive approach that combines socio-economic development, regional collaboration, and community-based interventions, rather than a one-sided supply-based approach, to achieve lasting peace and security in the region.

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