

# ICCT Situation Report

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The Use of Small Arms & Light Weapons by Terrorist Organisations as a Source of Finance in West Africa and the Horn of Africa



# ICCT Situation Report: The Use of Small Arms & Light Weapons by Terrorist Organisations as a Source of Finance in West Africa and the Horn of Africa

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## Introduction

As the current global security landscape is marked by the multiplication of intra-state conflicts, the rise of transnational organised crime, and the spread of violent extremism, the circulation of approximately one billion small arms and light weapons (SALW)<sup>1</sup> worldwide has become a major source of concerns for international and state stakeholders.<sup>2</sup> The United Nations Security Council has, in particular, repeatedly drawn global attention on the risk that “terrorists benefit from transnational organized crime in some regions, including from the trafficking of [SALW].”<sup>3</sup>

While arms trafficking is considered as one of the “most resilient factors of international organised crime that affect state security,”<sup>4</sup> weapons, including SALW, distinguish themselves from other illegally smuggled commodities in two important respects. In addition to being durable goods, their highly strategic value resides in their dual-purpose nature. While an important trafficked commodity, SALW also provide terrorist and other armed groups with the necessary means to carry out attacks (direct use) as well as to establish their control over populations and territories (indirect use).<sup>5</sup> In addition to the funds and proceeds derived from their sale (direct financing), SALW may furthermore facilitate the conduction of a wide range of other (illegal) income-generating activities such as racketeering, extortion, taxation, or kidnapping for ransom (indirect financing). The destabilising impact of the illicit trafficking in SALW—in which, as we have seen, terrorist groups may be directly or indirectly involved—thus, greatly surpasses its sole monetary value.<sup>6</sup>

Based on this distinctive nature, this situation report—the third in a wider series of publications exploring the use of SALW as a source of terrorism financing—will examine the acquisition, possession and use of SALW by terrorist organisations active in West Africa<sup>7</sup> and the Horn of Africa.<sup>8</sup> It will investigate the extent to which SALW may

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<sup>1</sup> For this paper, the authors have adopted the EU’s definition of small arms (i.e., revolvers and self-loading pistols, rifles and carbines, sub-machine guns, assault rifles, and light machine-guns) and light weapons (i.e., heavy machine-guns, hand-held under-barrel and mounted grenade launchers, portable anti-aircraft guns, portable anti-tank guns, recoilless rifles, portable launchers of anti-tank missile and rocket systems, portable launchers of anti-aircraft missile systems, mortars of calibres of less than 100 mm, ammunition and explosives, cartridges (rounds) for small arms, shells and missiles for light weapons, mobile containers with missiles or shells for single-action anti-aircraft and anti-tank systems, anti-personnel and anti-tank hand grenades, landmines, and explosives). See: [https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/e-library/glossary/small-arms-and-light-weapons-salw\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/e-library/glossary/small-arms-and-light-weapons-salw_en)

<sup>2</sup> United Nations Security Council. “Spread of 1 Billion Small Arms, Light Weapons Remains Major Threat Worldwide, High Representative for Disarmament Affairs Tells Security Council.” *Meeting Coverage, UNSC 8713<sup>th</sup> Meeting*, February 5, 2020. <https://www.un.org/press/en/2020/sc14098.doc.htm>

<sup>3</sup> UN Security Council Resolution 2195 (2014). <http://unscr.com/en/resolutions/doc/2195>

<sup>4</sup> Howard, Russell D., “The Nexus of Trafficking and Terrorism” in Itamara V. Lochard (ed.), *Senior Leadership Roundtable on Military and Defence Aspects of Border Security in South East Europe*, NATO Science for Peace and Security Series E: Human and Societal Dynamics, Volume 141, IOS Press, 2019: 74.

<sup>5</sup> Mangan, Fiona, and Matthias Nowak. “The West Africa-Sahel Connection. Mapping Cross-border Arms Trafficking.” *Small Arms Survey*, Briefing Paper, December 2019: 3.

<sup>6</sup> The Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, and RHIPTO. “Libya: a growing hub for Criminal Economies and Terrorist Financing in the Trans-Sahara.” *Policy Brief*, May 11, 2015: 2.

<sup>7</sup> While West Africa refers to ECOWAS member states (Benin, Burkina Faso, Cabo Verde, Côte d’Ivoire, The Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea Bissau, Liberia, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Togo) and Mauritania, this report will place particular emphasis on the two areas which have been the most affected by terrorism in recent years, namely the Western Sahel (including Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger) and the Lake Chad Basin (Nigeria, Niger as well as Cameroon and Chad).

<sup>8</sup> In the context of this paper, the Horn of Africa will be used to refer to a region located in East Africa which comprises Djibouti, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Somalia, and in its broader sense also includes Kenya, South Sudan, Sudan, and Uganda.

represent a direct source of funding and/or an enabler to conduct other profit-making activities for these groups. While presenting an overview of the situation and dynamics at work across each area, the following analysis will eventually aim to identify potential common patterns and/or discrepancies among and within the two regions.

## West Africa

In recent years, terrorist violence has continued to spread throughout West Africa and further destabilise already fragile states. Jihadists' presence in the region dates back to the late 1990s and early 2000s, when elements of the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (*Groupe Salafiste pour la Prédication et le Combat*, GSPC) settled in Northern Mali after having been expelled from Algeria during the civil war. Since then, the region has witnessed the emergence of a “patchwork of Islamic extremist groups,”<sup>9</sup> mainly located in two areas: the Western Sahel, and more specifically the tri-border area between Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso, and the Lake Chad riparian countries Nigeria, Niger, Cameroon, and Chad.

The Western Sahel region is currently facing a surge in terrorist violence, with more than four thousand deaths reported in 2019, representing a fivefold increase since 2016.<sup>10</sup> While initially concentrated in Northern Mali, terrorist attacks have gradually expanded south- and eastward to central regions of the country, as well as neighbouring Niger and *a fortiori* Burkina Faso. Moreover, the potential for spill-over violence throughout the broader region, including West African coastal states Benin,<sup>11</sup> Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana and Togo, raises serious concerns.<sup>12</sup> Two main terrorist networks are responsible for the bloodshed. The first one comprises all main al-Qaeda-aligned groups active in the region, including al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb's (AQIM) Sahara branch,<sup>13</sup> al Mourabitoun,<sup>14</sup> Ansar Dine<sup>15</sup> and Katiba Macina,<sup>16</sup> which merged in March 2017 to form the *Jama'at nusrat al-islam wal-muslimin* (JNIM), also known as the Group to Support Islam and Muslims (GSIM).<sup>17</sup> More recently, the region has also seen the emergence of an ISIS affiliate, the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS), founded in May 2015 by Adnan Abu Walid al-Sahrawi, a former al-Mourabitoun commander.<sup>18</sup> Declared as the new

<sup>9</sup> Associated Press. “AP Interview: Al-Qaida, IS Affiliates Team Up in West Africa.” *The New York Times*, February 27, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/aponline/2020/02/27/world/africa/ap-af-ap-interview-us-special-forces-africa.html>

<sup>10</sup> UN News. “‘Unprecedented terrorist violence’ in West Africa, Sahel region.” January 8, 2020. <https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/01/1054981>

<sup>11</sup> In early May 2019, two French tourists were kidnapped in the Pendjari National Park, in Northern Benin, before being rescued ten days later by French commando forces in Burkina Faso. (Sarah Maslin Nir. “Benin Awakens to the Threat of Terrorism After Safari Ends in a Nightmare.” *The New York Times*, August 20, 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/20/world/africa/safari-kidnapping-benin-terrorism.html>)

<sup>12</sup> International Crisis Group (ICG). *The Risk of Jihadist Contagion in West Africa*. Africa Briefing, N.149, December 20, 2019.

<sup>13</sup> Mapping Militant Organizations. “Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb.” *Stanford University*. Last modified July 2018. <https://cisac.fsi.stanford.edu/mappingmilitants/profiles/aqim>

<sup>14</sup> Mapping Militant Organizations. “Al Mourabitoun.” *Stanford University*. Last modified June 2018. <https://cisac.fsi.stanford.edu/mappingmilitants/profiles/al-mourabitoun>

<sup>15</sup> Mapping Militant Organizations. “Ansar Dine.” *Stanford University*. Last modified July 2018. <https://cisac.fsi.stanford.edu/mappingmilitants/profiles/ansar-dine>

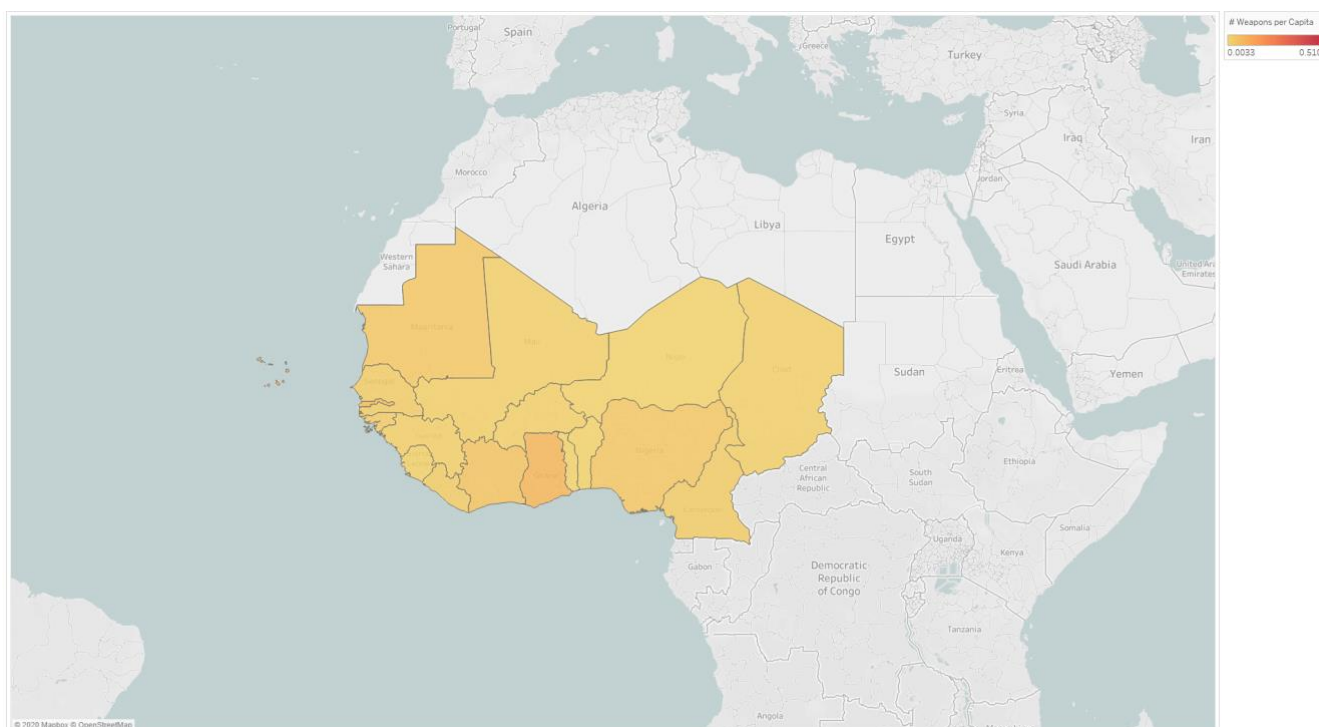
<sup>16</sup> Mapping Armed Groups in Mali and the Sahel. “Katiba Macina.” *European Council on Foreign Relations*. [https://www.ecfr.eu/mena/sahel\\_mapping/katibat\\_macina](https://www.ecfr.eu/mena/sahel_mapping/katibat_macina)

<sup>17</sup> Center for Strategic & International Studies (CSIS). “Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM).” *Backgrounder*, last updated September 25, 2018. <https://www.csis.org/programs/transnational-threats-project/terrorism-backgrounders/jamaat-nasr-al-islam-wal-muslimin>

<sup>18</sup> Mapping Militant Organizations. “The Islamic State in the Greater Sahara.” *Stanford University*. Last modified July 2018. <https://cisac.fsi.stanford.edu/mappingmilitants/profiles/islamic-state-greater-sahara>

priority target for counter-terrorism operations by both G5 Sahel countries and France during the Pau Summit held in January 2020,<sup>19</sup> this group is particularly active in the tri-border area between Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger.

The Lake Chad Basin has for its part been confronted with the decade-long Boko Haram insurgency which erupted in Northeast Nigeria in 2009, and has since spread to Cameroon, Chad, and Niger.<sup>20</sup> The military offensive—launched in 2015 with the support of neighbouring countries—enabled the Nigerian government to temporarily retake control of much of the territories held by Islamist militants.<sup>21</sup> Despite these efforts, the group proved its resilience and managed to regain power under its new name, the Islamic State in West Africa Province (ISWAP).<sup>22</sup> In March 2015, the terrorist group’s leader Abubakar Shekau swore allegiance to ISIS and received official recognition. As a result of ISIS central appointing Abu Musab al-Barnawi as ISWAP’s new leader in August 2016, Shekau split from the group along with some followers, forming a splinter faction that remains active in the region.<sup>23</sup> Both groups have since been carrying out relentless attacks against national armed forces as well as some raids against each other.<sup>24</sup>



**Figure 1. # of SALW per capita in West Africa.<sup>25</sup>**

<sup>19</sup> Courrier International. “Antiterrorisme. A Pau, les pays du G5 et la France redéfinissent les priorités au Sahel.” January 14, 2020. <https://www.courrierinternational.com/article/antiterrorisme-pau-les-pays-du-g5-et-la-france-redefinissent-les-priorites-au-sahel>

<sup>20</sup> International Crisis Group (ICG). “The Boko Haram Insurgency.” <https://www.crisisgroup.org/boko-haram-insurgency>

<sup>21</sup> Mapping Militant Organizations. “Boko Haram”. *Stanford University*. Last modified March 2018. <https://cisac.fsi.stanford.edu/mappingmilitants/profiles/boko-haram>

<sup>22</sup> International Crisis Group (ICG). *Facing the Challenge of the Islamic State in West Africa Province*. Africa Report, N. 273, May 16, 2019.

<sup>23</sup> Shekau’s faction adopted the original denomination of Boko Haram, *Jama’tu Ahlis Sunna Lidda’awati wal-Jihad* (JAS), while al-Barnawi’s group is still known as ISWAP. The following analysis will however use, for the sake of clarity, the more common appellation “Boko Haram” to refer to both factions.

<sup>24</sup> Jacob Zenn. “Islamic State in West Africa Province’s Factional Disputes and the Battle With Boko Haram.” *Terrorism Monitor*, Volume 18, Issue 6, March 20, 2020. <https://jamestown.org/program/islamic-state-in-west-africa-provinces-factional-disputes-and-the-battle-with-boko-haram/>

<sup>25</sup> Small Arms Survey, Global Firearms Holdings, June 2018, <http://www.smallarmssurvey.org/weapons-and-markets/tools/global-firearms-holdings.html>

## SALW possession and acquisition by terrorist organisations

The proliferation of jihadist groups in West Africa has increased the demand for SALW in a region where black markets had for decades already been fuelled by arms flows derived from diverse conflict and post-conflict surrounding areas, including Côte d'Ivoire, Liberia, Libya, and Sierra Leone.<sup>26</sup> Arms circulation—combined with social and political instability—have in turn fuelled a “vicious cycle of escalating tension and violence”, driving more and more civilians (as well as self-defence militias and vigilante groups) to procure arms for protection purposes.<sup>27</sup>

While the industrial production of arms is quite limited in the region, the number of firearms held legally or illicitly by civilians is estimated to be around 11 million, the highest number on the continent,<sup>28</sup> with Nigeria alone accounting for approximately six million.<sup>29</sup> Arms circulating throughout the region are mainly of two types, comprising both artisanal weapons such as hunting guns, and industrial arms like automatic assault rifles.<sup>30</sup> Whereas the first category is used by a wide range of non-state actors—including local militias, road bandits, and criminal gangs—terrorist groups operating in West Africa are mainly equipped with industrial SALW, including Chinese and Russian Kalashnikov-pattern assault rifles and light machine guns as well as rocket-propelled grenade (RPG) launchers and ammunition of various calibres.<sup>31</sup>

Jihadist groups have obtained this equipment from a variety of sources, most notably from the diversion of national stockpiles.<sup>32</sup> The majority of the SALW possessed by terrorist organisations were in fact diverted from state stocks either as a result of “the collapse of state control over arsenals, as in Libya [post-2011] or northern Mali [2012]”<sup>33</sup>, or following attacks on defence and security forces bases and convoys. Indeed, a significant part of the SALW possessed by terrorist groups originate from both Libyan state stocks built up by the Gaddafi regime and looted during the country’s civil war, and Malian stockpiles seized in 2012 when groups like AQIM, the Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (MOJWA), and Ansar Dine took advantage of the Tuareg insurrection to seize control of most of Northern Mali.<sup>34</sup>

Over time, these arsenals have been further complemented by large amounts of materiel captured from attacks on army positions. Security and defence forces have gradually been targeted by Sahel-based terrorist groups, especially in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger,<sup>35</sup> allowing them to acquire military equipment, including arms and ammunition.

<sup>26</sup> William Assanvo, et al. *Extrémisme violent, criminalité organisée et conflits locaux dans le Liptako-Gourma*. Institute for Security Studies (ISS), West Africa Report N.26, December 2019: 10.

<sup>27</sup> Fiona Mangan, and Matthias Nowak. *The West Africa-Sahel Connection: Mapping Cross-border Arms Trafficking*. Small Arms Survey (SAS), Briefing Paper, December 2019: 12.

<sup>28</sup> Small Arms Survey. *Weapons Compass. Mapping Illicit Small Arms Flows in Africa*. January 2019: 31.

<sup>29</sup> Arnaud Jouve. “Sahel : d’où viennent les armes et les munitions ?” *RFI*, April 9, 2020.

<http://www.rfi.fr/fr/afrique/20200409-sahel-do%C3%B9-viennent-les-armes-et-les-munitions>

<sup>30</sup> Arnaud Jouve. “Sahel : d’où viennent les armes et les munitions ?” *RFI*, April 9, 2020.

<sup>31</sup> Arnaud Jouve. “Sahel : d’où viennent les armes et les munitions ?” *RFI*, April 9, 2020.

<sup>32</sup> Savannah de Tessières. *At the crossroads of Sahelian Conflicts. Insecurity, Terrorism, and Arms Trafficking in Niger*. Small Arms Survey (SAS), Report, January 2018: 10.

<sup>33</sup> Savannah de Tessières. January 2018: 54.

<sup>34</sup> Savannah de Tessières. January 2018: 54.

<sup>35</sup> Attacks against security and defence forces have dramatically increased in the Sahel region, particularly since late 2019 with attacks conducted in Boulikessi (30 September 2019), Mondoro (1 October 2019) and Indelimane (1 November 2019) in Mali; in Arbinda (24 December 2019), Namissiguia (25 December 2019), and Djibo (31 December 2019) in Burkina Faso; as well as in Inates (10 December 2019), and Chinérogar (9 January 2020) in Niger.

Similarly, Boko Haram has reportedly obtained arms and ammunition from Nigerian, Nigerien, Cameroonian, and Chadian state forces during clashes and attacks,<sup>36</sup> sometimes specifically aimed at capturing military equipment.<sup>37</sup> In addition, rampant corruption is believed to have facilitated, to some extent, the acquisition of SALW by terrorist groups. While Boko Haram has reportedly obtained equipment through the intermediary of corrupt officers,<sup>38</sup> such practices are believed to have benefited other groups, including terrorist organisations, in Mali and Niger.<sup>39</sup>

In addition, craft production across the continent contributes to the proliferation of weapons, a production that is “particularly concentrated in West Africa, where most countries appear to host craft producers”.<sup>40</sup> While the small-scale production of weapons is hardly a new phenomenon in the region, locally produced firearms appear to be increasingly used by a diverse array of armed groups, most probably due to their



relatively low price.<sup>41</sup> Although this type of SALW seems to be predominantly used for self-defence by individuals as well as community-based militias, it may also provide an additional source of weaponry for terrorist organisations, including Boko Haram.<sup>42</sup> In addition, and while some terrorist groups may only acquire these weapons once crafted, some others have also developed their own production facilities, such as Boko Haram which has reportedly produced home-made explosives in local workshops in Bauchi State.<sup>43</sup>

**Image 1.** Craft-produced handgun in an undisclosed location in Nigeria.<sup>44</sup>

Finally, the combination of porous borders, poor—and contested—governance, and lack of economic opportunities has allowed for all kinds of illicit trafficking to flourish in vast remote areas of the West African region, including SALW trafficking. Though transcontinental arms transfers are believed to have significantly decreased in recent years, as compared to the period of the civil wars in Liberia and Sierra Leone, cross-border arms flows still represents a serious challenge.<sup>45</sup> A recent report published by Small Arms Survey shed light on a number of important dynamics governing arms

<sup>36</sup> An attack conducted by al-Barnawi forces in Bouma in Chad on 23 March 2020, which resulted in the death of 98 soldiers and allowed terrorists to seize weapons, is a recent example of such attacks (RFI. “Le Tchad endeuillé par la mort de 98 soldats dans une attaque de Boko Haram.” March 25, 2020. <http://www.rfi.fr/fr/afrique/20200325-le-tchad-endeuill%C3%A9-la-mort-98-soldats-une-attaque-boko-haram>)

<sup>37</sup> Notable examples of these attacks occurred, inter alia, in Boso (July 2016), Tazalit (October 2016), Tiloa (February 2017), Abala (May 2017), Ayorou (May and October 2017), Midal (July 2017), Toumour and Chetimari (January 2018).

<sup>38</sup> In 2013, a prison director in the Diffa region was found to have sold his entire store of weapons to Boko Haram with the aid of a member of the armed forces working for the military central weapons stores in Niamey. (Fiona Mangan, and Matthias Nowak. December 2019: 11.)

<sup>39</sup> Arnaud Jouve. “Sahel : d’où viennent les armes et les munitions ?” RFI, April 9, 2020.

<sup>40</sup> Small Arms Survey (SAS). *Weapons Compass: Mapping Illicit Small Arms Flows in Africa*. January 2019: 57.

<sup>41</sup> William Assanvo. “Are West Africa’s gunsmiths making violence cheap?” ENACT, October 18, 2017. <https://globalinitiative.net/are-west-africas-gunsmiths-making-violence-cheap/>

<sup>42</sup> Small Arms Survey (SAS). January 2019: 57.

<sup>43</sup> Inter-Governmental Action Group against Money Laundering in West Africa (GABIA). *The Nexus between Small Arms and Light Weapons and Money Laundering and Terrorist Financing in West Africa*. Report, 2013.

<sup>44</sup> Small Arms Survey (SAS). January 2019: 57.

<sup>45</sup> Arnaud Jouve. “Sahel : d’où viennent les armes et les munitions ?” RFI, April 9, 2020.



trafficking in West Africa and the Sahel, including the “connections [that] exist between illicit arms trafficking and other types of illicit flows” which “result mainly from an overlap of the actors involved and the trafficking routes used.”<sup>46</sup> The region is indeed crossed by centuries-old Trans-Saharan routes connecting Sahelian states to the Gulf of Guinea to the South and Maghreb countries to the North. This important network of traditional trade routes have increasingly been used for smuggling not only arms but also people, drugs and contraband.<sup>47</sup> In such a context where “illicit arms trafficking forms part of a complex web of interconnected criminal markets extending through West Africa”,<sup>48</sup> jihadist groups seem to have forged mutually beneficial links with organised crime networks “in order to obtain the weapons and ammunition needed for their activities”.<sup>49</sup> It then remains to determine the nature and level of involvement of terrorist organisations in trafficking of SALW, and their use as a source of terrorist funding.

## SALW as a source of terrorist funding

The proliferation of arms seems to have transformed the dynamics of illicit trafficking in the region, with the flows becoming more intense and the actors involved more numerous.<sup>50</sup> Among the wide range of actors involved in arms trafficking, to varying extents, jihadist organisations appear to be part of a network of “more sophisticated and organised armed groups” able to engage in smuggling arms and other illicit goods in order not only to equip themselves but also to generate financial income.<sup>51</sup> This does not necessarily mean terrorist groups obtain funding from the direct sale of SALW. Despite regular claims that terrorist groups operating throughout West Africa, such as AQIM, get revenue from arms trafficking,<sup>52</sup> their involvement generally appears to be rather indirect, in that they are often not involved in SALW trade itself but rather benefit from the development of a “burgeoning protection economy”,<sup>53</sup> positioning themselves as “service providers or regulators”.<sup>54</sup>

Terrorist groups can take advantage of the growing insecurity and benefit from illicit trafficking “by collecting taxes on convoys of goods [carrying weapons or other illicit goods] transiting through an area under their control, by providing escort, protection or transportation services”.<sup>55</sup> The increased access of terrorist organisations to SALW, especially following the Libyan crisis, is indeed believed to have “strengthened their position to offer protection”<sup>56</sup>—not only to arm traffickers but also to criminal networks engaged in other types of traffics. Sahel-based terrorist groups AQIM, al Mourabitoun, and Ansar Dine, for instance, “are now increasingly changing how they finance themselves, shifting their attention away from kidnapping for ransom and cigarette smuggling to protection-taxing of drugs [...] an activity that pays much higher dividends,”

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<sup>46</sup> Fiona Mangan, and Matthias Nowak. *The West Africa-Sahel Connection: Mapping Cross-border Arms Trafficking*. Small Arms Survey (SAS), Briefing Paper, December 2019: 3.

<sup>47</sup> Fiona Mangan, and Matthias Nowak. December 2019: 3.

<sup>48</sup> Fiona Mangan, and Matthias Nowak. December 2019: 3.

<sup>49</sup> Djallil Lounnas. “The Links Between Jihadi Organizations and Illegal Trafficking in the Sahel. *MENARA Working Papers*, N.25, November 2018: 5.

<sup>50</sup> Fiona Mangan, and Matthias Nowak. December 2019: 10.

<sup>51</sup> Fiona Mangan, and Matthias Nowak. December 2019: 20.

<sup>52</sup> Zachary Laub, and Jonathan Masters. “Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb.” *Backgrounder*, Council on Foreign Relations, Last updated March 27, 2015. <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/al-qaeda-islamic-maghreb>

<sup>53</sup> Fiona Mangan, and Matthias Nowak. December 2019: 10.

<sup>54</sup> William Assanvo et al. December 2019: 9.

<sup>55</sup> William Assanvo et al. December 2019: 9.

<sup>56</sup> C. Nellemann, R. Henriksen, R. Pravettoni, D. Stewart, M. Kotsoyova, M.A.J. Schlingemann, M. Shaw, and T. Reitano (Eds). *World atlas of illicit flows*. A RHIPTO-INTERPOL-GI Assessment, 2018: 79.



thereby potentially earning several millions a year.<sup>57</sup> Applying similar methods to migrant trafficking,<sup>58</sup> terrorist networks such as JNIM are believed to generate significant amounts of money by providing shotguns and collecting illicit protection taxes—funds which may then be invested in traffickers’ infrastructure in exchange for a cut on their profits.<sup>59</sup> Observers thus argue that terrorist groups throughout West Africa, in particular in the Sahel, “have demonstrated the ability to create a financing system based on the control of illicit traffics”.<sup>60</sup>

However, existing research indicates that violent extremist groups are at least partially involved as arms suppliers.<sup>61</sup> Weapons seized from violent extremist groups or used to carry out terrorist attacks in different locations throughout West Africa demonstrated that exchanges of SALW were taking place between different terrorist groups operating across the region.<sup>62</sup> For instance, links established between Mali-based Katiba Macina and the Burkinabe group Ansarul Islam has taken the form of cooperation for logistical purposes, including supply of SALW.<sup>63</sup> According to some observers, AQIM may have similarly exchanged arms with other groups, including Boko Haram and Somalia-based al-Shabaab.<sup>64</sup> However, it remains unclear whether terrorist groups obtain any financial benefit from these arms transfers with other jihadist groups. While evidence-based research demonstrating the sale of weapons by terrorist groups to other actors is still lacking, similarities witnessed between weapons used by violent extremists and some other non-state actors suggest the use of similar illegal supply networks, even though the existence of a robust arms trade organised by jihadist groups cannot be proven. For instance, Iraqi-manufactured Tabuk rifles with close serial numbers, and markings erased in the exact same manner, were discovered in the hands of groups involved in inter-communal conflict between herders and farmers in Nigeria, while having also been used by Katiba Macina in an attack in central Mali in January 2016.<sup>65</sup>

Finally, the possession of SALW enables terrorist groups to commit miscellaneous criminal acts aimed at obtaining financial resources, such as kidnapping for ransom,<sup>66</sup> extortion, or robberies, which often takes the form of livestock thefts and cattle raids across this region. The abduction and subsequent sale of cattle on markets throughout the region has become an important source of funding for extremist groups, especially in the Sahel.<sup>67</sup> More recently, the development of small-scale gold mining in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger has also provided “armed groups, in some cases including

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<sup>57</sup> C. Nellemann, et al. *World atlas of illicit flows*. A RHIPTO-INTERPOL-GI Assessment, 2018: 79.

<sup>58</sup> For more information on human smuggling in the region, see: Kevin Sieff. “A smugglers’ haven in the Sahara.” *The Washington Post*, July 20, 2015. [https://www.washingtonpost.com/sf/world/2015/07/20/a-remote-city-of-smugglers/?utm\\_term=.1a13393e2733](https://www.washingtonpost.com/sf/world/2015/07/20/a-remote-city-of-smugglers/?utm_term=.1a13393e2733)

<sup>59</sup> C. Nellemann, et al. *World atlas of illicit flows*. A RHIPTO-INTERPOL-GI Assessment, 2018: 79.

<sup>60</sup> Marco Di Liddo. “The instability in the Sahel.” in Lorenzo Marinone (ed.). “The evolution of radicalisation in the Maghreb in the aftermath of the defeat of Daesh.” *C.e.S.I. and ITSTIME*, March 2019: 43.

<sup>61</sup> William Assanvo et al. December 2019: 11.

<sup>62</sup> William Assanvo et al. December 2019: 11.

<sup>63</sup> William Assanvo et al. December 2019: 11.

<sup>64</sup> Zachary Laub, and Jonathan Masters. “Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb.” *Backgrounder*, Council on Foreign Relations, Last updated March 27, 2015. <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/al-qaeda-islamic-maghreb>

<sup>65</sup> Conflict Armament Research (CAR). *Nigeria’s Herder-Farmer Conflict: Domestic, Regional, and Transnational Weapon Sources*. January 2020: 18.

<sup>66</sup> Kidnapping for ransom has been extensively used by al-Qaeda-affiliated groups as a source of income and is still used by terrorist groups, including Boko Haram which is believed to have abducted several hundred people over the past five years, including more than 1,000 children, in Nigeria, Niger and Cameroon.

<sup>67</sup> William Assanvo et al. December 2019: 16.

jihadists, with a new source of funding”.<sup>68</sup> Gold mines, both industrial and artisanal, which are located in areas where the state presence is thin, have become key targets for extortion operations and attacks carried out by terrorist groups, in particular in Niger and Burkina Faso.<sup>69</sup>

It thus seems that, in West Africa, “illicit activities are essential to the establishment, expansion and ultimate survival of terrorist groups”.<sup>70</sup> For instance, research has highlighted links, which are “often vital”, between violent extremist groups operating in the Liptako-Gourma and various illicit activities, including, but not limited to, arms trafficking.<sup>71</sup> Terrorist groups in this area have been able to survive and expand, not only by exploiting local conflicts but also by engaging in criminal activities to acquire means of subsistence, operational means, and to generate income.<sup>72</sup> Therefore, when considering the relative strategic importance of different illicit flows occurring in the region, experts estimate that “weapons are positioned at the top of [the] strategic order, serving as both an important trafficked commodity and a means of buying protection and maintaining control over populations and key trafficking routes, flows and hubs.”

## Horn of Africa

Jihadist violence remains a significant threat across East Africa, and more particularly in the Horn of Africa. Terrorist groups have worked assiduously to establish a presence in this area since the early 1990s, a period both characterised by the relocation of longtime al-Qaeda leader Osama Bin Laden along with some of his followers in Sudan,<sup>73</sup> and by the instability that followed the collapse of Siad Barre’s regime in Somalia in 1991.<sup>74</sup> This context has allowed Islamic extremist groups to flourish. In recent years, the region has confronted a rise in jihadist violence, due in no small part to the presence of a myriad of terrorist organisations coupled with the extension of their areas of operation.

Although jihadist violence used to be mostly centred in Somalia—where the terrorist threat still remains high—jihadist groups have now spread to other countries in the region including Ethiopia, Kenya, and Uganda, and have extended their operations as far as the Democratic Republic of Congo, Tanzania, and Mozambique. This extension is primarily due to two major developments. First, the al-Qaeda affiliated *Harakaat al-Shabaab al-Mujahedeen*, better known as al-Shabaab,<sup>75</sup> which “has been by far the most

<sup>68</sup> International Crisis Group (ICG). *Getting a Grip on Central Sahel’s Gold Rush*. Africa Report, n.282, November 3, 2019: i.

<sup>69</sup> Claire Fages. “Or: le Burkina Faso et son industrie minière face au défi du terrorisme.” *RFI*, November 11, 2019.

<http://www.rfi.fr/emission/20191111-burkina-faso-terrorisme-industrie-mini-ere-or>. See also: Sophie Douce. “Au Burkina Faso, les mines d’or sous la menace djihadiste.” *Le Monde Afrique*, November 21, 2019. [https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2019/11/21/au-burkina-faso-les-mines-d-or-sous-la-menace-djihadiste\\_6020049\\_3212.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2019/11/21/au-burkina-faso-les-mines-d-or-sous-la-menace-djihadiste_6020049_3212.html)

<sup>70</sup> Pauline Bax, and Katarina Hojje. “West Africa turning into Islamic State’s new breeding ground.” *Hindustan Times*, December 14, 2019. <https://www.hindustantimes.com/world-news/west-africa-could-be-next-hotbed-for-islamic-state/story-CsPLh1wyTGQWiWZoOV1vJN.html>

<sup>71</sup> William Assanvo et al. December 2019: 10.

<sup>72</sup> William Assanvo et al. December 2019: 9.

<sup>73</sup> Matt Bryden, and Premdeep Bahra. “East Africa’s Terrorist Triple Helix: The Dusit Hotel Attack and the Historical Evolution of the Jihadi Threat.” *CTC Sentinel*, volume 12, issue 6, July 2019: 2.

<sup>74</sup> Although the Somali jihadi organisation al-Ittihad al-Islami (AIAI) was founded as an underground salafi organization in the 1980s, it openly materialised as a jihadi movement following the collapse of the Siyaad Barre regime in January 1991.

<sup>75</sup> Mapping Militant Organizations. “Al Shabaab.” *Stanford University*. Last modified January 2019. <https://cisac.fsi.stanford.edu/mappingmilitants/profiles/al-shabaab>. See also: Claire Felter, Jonathan

dominant violent extremist group in East Africa since its emergence in Somalia in 2007”,<sup>76</sup> has progressively extended its activities beyond Somali borders. Following its first major operation outside Somalia in July 2010, killing 74 people in Kampala,<sup>77</sup> the group has continued to conduct devastating attacks in neighbouring countries such as Djibouti, Ethiopia, and Uganda, even though its primary target remains Kenya<sup>78</sup> where it operates through its local affiliate al-Hijra.<sup>79</sup>

Second, the region has seen the emergence of several other new groups, predominantly ISIS-affiliates,<sup>80</sup> including *Abnaa ul-Calipha*—also called the Islamic State in Somalia (ISS)—founded in October 2015 by Sheikh Abdul Qadir Mumin.<sup>81</sup> Based in Northern Somalia’s Puntland region, ISS has demonstrated increasing operational capacities as of 2018.<sup>82</sup> This was followed by the formation of various other groups, including *Jahba East Africa*, also known as the Islamic State in Somalia, Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda (ISISSKTU), even though their operational capacity is not always clearly established.<sup>83</sup>

In addition, terrorist violence has more recently spread outside the Horn of Africa to reach East African countries located further west and south. Since April 2019, ISIS’ central propaganda outlets have started to claim attacks perpetrated by both the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF), active in the North Kivu region of the Democratic Republic of the Congo,<sup>84</sup> and *Ahlu Sunnah Wa-Jama* (ASWJ), located in the restive northern province of Cabo Delgado in Mozambique,<sup>85</sup> under the name of its Central African Province (ISCAP),<sup>86</sup> though the existence of actual links among these groups and with global terrorist networks is still under debate.<sup>87</sup>

Finally, it is worth noting that violent extremism in the region has not only taken the form of jihadism, but other forms of terrorism as well, as demonstrated by the lasting

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Masters, and Mohammed Aly Sergie. “Al-Shabab.” *Backgrounder*, Council on Foreign Relations. Last updated January 10, 2020. <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/al-shabab>

<sup>76</sup> European Institute of Peace (EIP). *The Islamic State in East Africa*. September 2018: 5.

<sup>77</sup> Bryden, Matt, and Premdeep Bahra. July 2019: 5.

<sup>78</sup> Interpol. *Overview of Serious and Organized Crime in East Africa*. ENACT Analytical Report, September 30, 2018: 10.

<sup>79</sup> Founded in 2008, and known as the Muslim Youth Center until 2012, , Al-Hijra has carried out some of the most destructive terror attacks in Kenya, including the attacks on the Westgate Mall in 2013 and the Garissa University in 2015.

<sup>80</sup> See: European Institute of Peace (EIP). *The Islamic State in East Africa*. September 2018.

<sup>81</sup> Jason Warner. “Sub-Saharan Africa’s Three “New” Islamic State Affiliates.” *CTC Sentinel*, Volume 10, Issue 1, January 2017: 30. See also: Jason Warner, and Charlotte Hulme. “The Islamic State in Africa: Estimating Fighter Numbers in Cells Across the Continent.” *CTC Sentinel*, Volume 11, Issue 7, August 2018: 25.

<sup>82</sup> European Institute of Peace (EIP). *The Islamic State in East Africa*. September 2018: 4.

<sup>83</sup> Camillo Casola. “The Islamic State in Sub-Saharan Africa.” *ISPI Commentary*, June 28, 2019. <https://www.ispionline.it/en/pubblicazione/islamic-state-sub-saharan-africa-23404>

<sup>84</sup> Robert Postings. “Islamic State recognizes new Central Africa Province, deepening ties with DR Congo militants.” *The Defense Post*, April 30, 2019. <https://www.thedefensepost.com/2019/04/30/islamic-state-new-central-africa-province/>. See also: Tim Cocks. “Islamic State claims its first Congo attack.” *Reuters*, April 19, 2019. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-congo-security/islamic-state-claims-its-first-congo-attack-idUSKCN1RU2KD>

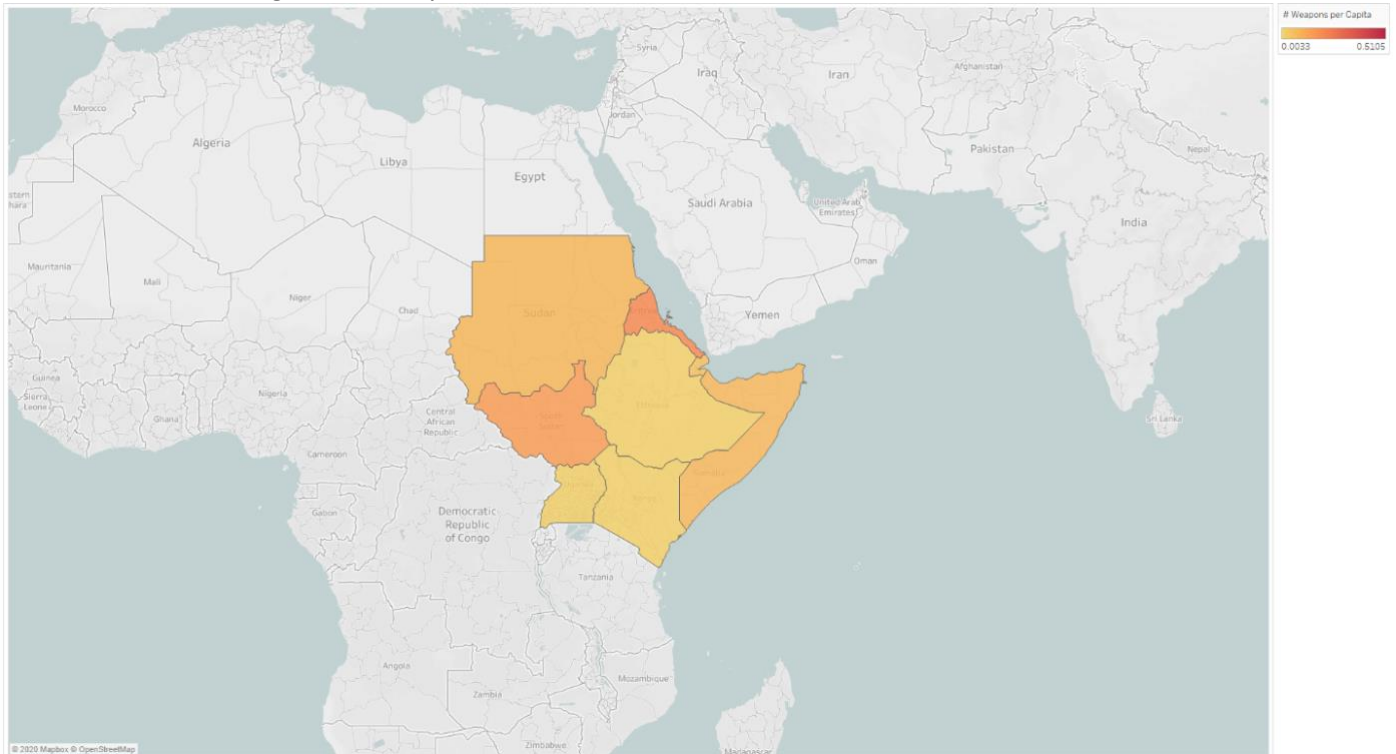
<sup>85</sup> Robert Postings. “Islamic State arrival in Mozambique further complicates Cabo Delgado violence.” *The Defense Post*, June 13, 2019. <https://www.thedefensepost.com/2019/06/13/islamic-state-mozambique-cabo-delgado-iscap/>

<sup>86</sup> Eleanor Beevor, and Flore Berger. “ISIS militants pose growing threat across Africa.” *IISS Analysis*, June 2, 2020. <https://www.iiss.org/blogs/analysis/2020/06/csdp-isis-militants-africa>

<sup>87</sup> BBC. “Mozambique: Is Cabo Delgado the latest Islamic State outpost?” May 5, 2020. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-52532741>



presence of the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), founded by Joseph Kony, in Northern Uganda as early as the 1980s.<sup>88</sup>



**Figure 2. # of SALW per capita in the Horn of Africa.<sup>89</sup>**

## SALW possession and acquisition by terrorist organisations

Though on smaller scale than in West Africa, the trade in SALW remains an important concern in East Africa, which is reportedly awash in 7.8 million of licit and illicit civilian-held firearms.<sup>90</sup> Illicit SALW circulating across the Horn of Africa, and most particularly in Somalia, which include AK-pattern and other types of assault rifles, machine guns, RPGs, and ammunition,<sup>91</sup> originate from both internal and external sources. Interestingly, the characteristics of the possession of SALW however seems to differ from one group to another. Research underlines that “ISS’ access to arms and explosives is somewhat limited”,<sup>92</sup> with arms seized from the group appearing to be “old and unsophisticated”.<sup>93</sup>

Among domestic sources, weapons and ammunition originating from national stockpiles have reportedly been sold in illicit markets in Somalia, and purchased by al-Shabaab.<sup>94</sup> Arms were also diverted by terrorist organisations following attacks on both national armies and peacekeeping missions. For instance, al-Shabaab has repeatedly targeted military positions and troops from both national armed forces of the countries in which the group operates and the African Union force in Somalia (AMISOM) deployed since

<sup>88</sup> United Nations Security Council. “Lord’s Resistance Army.” March 7, 2016.

<https://www.un.org/securitycouncil/sanctions/2127/materials/summaries/entity/lord%E2%80%99s-resistance-army>

<sup>89</sup> Small Arms Survey, *Global Firearms Holdings*, June 2018, <http://www.smallarmssurvey.org/weapons-and-markets/tools/global-firearms-holdings.html>

<sup>90</sup> Interpol. *Overview of Serious and Organized Crime in East Africa*. September 30, 2018: 26.

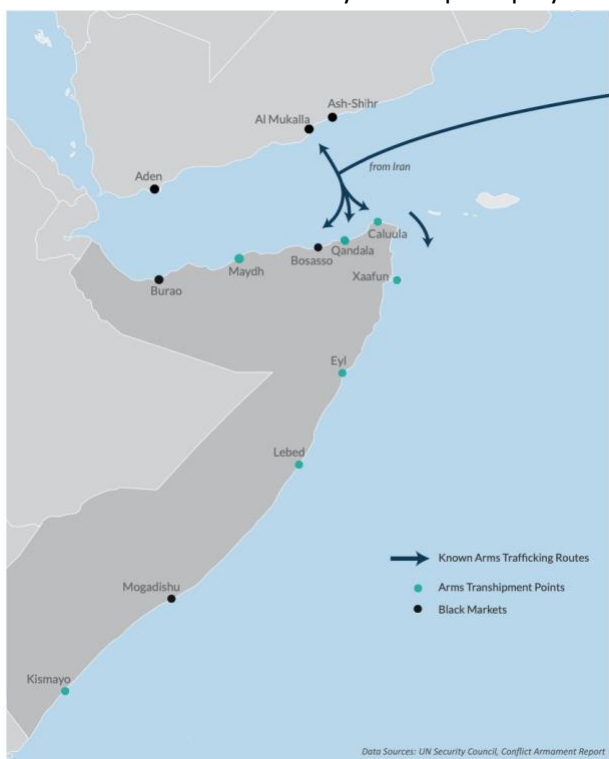
<sup>91</sup> Khristopher Carlson. *Measuring Illicit Arms Flows: Somalia*. Small Arms Survey (SAS), Research Notes, N. 61, October 2016: 1.

<sup>92</sup> European Institute of Peace (EIP). *The Islamic State in East Africa*. September 2018: 20.

<sup>93</sup> European Institute of Peace (EIP). *The Islamic State in East Africa*. September 2018: 20.

<sup>94</sup> Khristopher Carlson. *Measuring Illicit Arms Flows: Somalia*. October 2016: 2.

2007, in order to seize large amounts of military equipment, weapons, and ammunition.<sup>95</sup> There are several examples of such attacks, including al-Shabaab's raid on the El Adde camp in January 2016 which allowed the groups to seize "more than 150 assault rifles, 26 machine guns, five mortars and 140,000 rounds of ammunition" from Kenyan troops deployed as part of the AMISOM contingent.<sup>96</sup> More recently, the al-Qaeda-aligned group has continued acquiring more weapons and ammunition following assaults on military positions, as demonstrated by the attack against the Somali army base located in El Salini, near the capital Mogadishu in September 2019, which resulted in more arms, including anti-aircraft guns, to be looted.<sup>97</sup>



Countries in the Horn of Africa have also witnessed an influx of arms coming from neighbouring regions, including diverted weapons from Libyan stockpiles, which have transited through Sudan to South Sudan, as well as flows originating from the conflict in Yemen, which have reached the Somali coastline.<sup>98</sup> Research has indeed revealed "the existence of a weapon pipeline extending from Iran to Somalia and Yemen, which involves the transfer, by *dhow*, of significant quantities of Iranian-manufactured weapons and weapons that plausibly derive from Iranian stockpiles."<sup>99</sup> In addition, Somalia has been a major destination for "readily convertible alarm weapons"<sup>100</sup> originating from Turkey, with around 25,000 alarm pistols being seized at the Port of Kismayo in 2017.<sup>101</sup>

**Image 2.** Map of Somali and Yemeni ports known to receive illicit weapon shipments<sup>102</sup>

It seems that terrorist groups, such as al-Shabaab and ISS, have benefited from these illicit flows, enabling them to procure light weaponry through maritime smuggling networks based in Northeast Somalia, and operating across the Red Sea.<sup>103</sup> Local security forces have seized boatloads of arms originating in Yemen and destined for ISS and al-

<sup>95</sup> Interpol. *Overview of Serious and Organized Crime in East Africa*. September 30, 2018: 10.

<sup>96</sup> James Reinl. "How stolen weapons keep groups like Boko Haram in business." *PRI*, April 19, 2019.

<https://www.pri.org/stories/2019-04-19/how-stolen-weapons-keep-groups-boko-haram-business>

<sup>97</sup> Reuters. "Somalia's al Shabaab raid military base, loot weapons." September 22, 2019.

<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-somalia-violence/somalias-al-shabaab-raid-military-base-loot-weapons-idUSKBN1W70CG>

<sup>98</sup> Fred Oluoch. "Illicit arms flow fuelling terror, poaching, conflict in the region." *The East African*, September 1, 2019. <https://www.theeastafrican.co.ke/news/ea/Illicit-arms-flow-fuelling-terror-poaching-conflict/4552908-5256210-bcgspz/index.html>

<sup>99</sup> Conflict Armament Research (CAR). *Maritime interdictions of weapon supplies to Somalia and Yemen: Deciphering a link to Iran*. November 2016: 4.

<sup>100</sup> Imitation firearms are "objects that resemble real weapons, especially handguns, in both appearance and action, but are designed to serve non-lethal purposes. Some, such as alarm weapons, can fire blank rounds of ammunition, while others might fire small pellets made of plastic or light metals. Some models of imitation firearms have proved to be easy to convert for firing live ammunition without access to specialized skills or tools. Such models are commonly described as being 'readily convertible.'" (Small Arms Survey (SAS). *Weapons Compass: Mapping Illicit Small Arms Flows in Africa*. January 2019: 58.)

<sup>101</sup> Small Arms Survey. January 2019: 5.

<sup>102</sup> One Earth Future (OEF) Research. *Stable Seas: Somali Waters*. May 2017: 20.

<sup>103</sup> European Institute of Peace (EIP). *The Islamic State in East Africa*. September 2018: 20.

Shabaab forces in Somalia.<sup>104</sup> Although maritime trafficking may have diminished since the imposition of a naval blockade by Saudi Arabia in 2015,<sup>105</sup> it appears that flows of weapons and ammunition continue to take place both from and to Somalia, thereby violating the UN arms embargo.<sup>106</sup> In addition, terrorist groups, including al-Shabaab and ISS, seem to have “reached agreements with clan elders and smugglers that allow them to [continue to] operate across the Red Sea in exchange for a certain percentage of smuggled weaponry”.<sup>107</sup> Somalia-based terror groups seem to have established privileged links with criminal syndicates operating throughout the region, oftentimes based on clan affiliation, relying on them to acquire the necessary equipment to pursue their activities. Research moreover indicates that “most of the smuggled arms are light and medium weaponry (AK-47s and variants, PKM machine guns, RPGs, pistols, DShK heavy machine guns, and explosives)”.<sup>108</sup> Another interesting point to highlight is that SALW trafficking is furthermore believed to be “connected to piracy and migrant smuggling, as the same groups expand their activities and thus their influence in the region”.<sup>109</sup>

Finally, craft-production likely also plays a role in the acquisition of arms by terrorist groups throughout the Horn of Africa. According to the final report of the Panel of Experts on Somalia released in November 2019,<sup>110</sup> there is clear evidence that al-Shabaab is now manufacturing homemade explosive devices, and has probably done so since at least mid-2017.<sup>111</sup> The group’s increasing use of improvised explosive devices (IEDs), which has resulted in some of the deadliest attacks the region has faced in recent years,<sup>112</sup> has led the United Nations Security Council to extend the arms embargo on Somalia to explosive components.<sup>113</sup> However, some observers have however underlined that the group possesses the required expertise and access to local material to continue producing IEDs—even if deprived from foreign supply.<sup>114</sup>

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<sup>104</sup> Reuters. “Somalia’s Puntland region captures weapons-laden boat from Yemen.” September 23, 2017. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-somalia-arms/somalias-puntland-region-captures-weapons-laden-boat-from-yemen-idUSKCN1BYOPY>

<sup>105</sup> European Institute of Peace (EIP). *The Islamic State in East Africa*. September 2018: 43.

<sup>106</sup> The arms embargo imposed by the UN Security Council, in January 1992, has been amended on several occasions to allow arms supplies to government forces and has, in November 2019, been extended to “prevent the supply a list of specified explosive materials, explosives precursors, explosive-related equipment, and related technology to Somalia if there is sufficient evidence that these will be used, or a significant risk they may be used, in the manufacture of improvised explosive devices.” (Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI). “UN arms embargo on Somalia.” Last updated on December 20, 2019. [https://www.sipri.org/databases/embargoes/un\\_arms\\_embargoes/somalia](https://www.sipri.org/databases/embargoes/un_arms_embargoes/somalia))

<sup>107</sup> European Institute of Peace (EIP). *The Islamic State in East Africa*. September 2018: 20.

<sup>108</sup> European Institute of Peace (EIP). *The Islamic State in East Africa*. September 2018: 20.

<sup>109</sup> UNODC. *Organised Crime and Trafficking in Eastern Africa*. Discussion Paper, 2009: 3.

<sup>110</sup> Final Report of the Panel of Experts on Somalia (S/2019/858). [https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/S\\_2019\\_858\\_E.pdf](https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/S_2019_858_E.pdf)

<sup>111</sup> Associated Press. “UN: Al-Shabab Remains ‘Potent Threat’ in Somalia and Region.” VOA News, November 12, 2019. <https://www.voanews.com/africa/un-al-shabab-remains-potent-threat-somalia-and-region>

<sup>112</sup> Hussein Mohamed, Eric Schmitt, and Mohamed Ibrahim. “Mogadishu Truck Bombings Are Deadliest Attack in Decades.” *The New York Times*, October 15, 2017. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/15/world/africa/somalia-bombing-mogadishu.html>

<sup>113</sup> Edith M. Lederer. “UN adds explosive components ban to Somalia arms embargo.” *ABC News*, November 16, 2019. <https://abcnews.go.com/US/wireStory/adds-explosive-components-ban-somalia-arms-embargo-67045863>

<sup>114</sup> Daisy Muibu, and Benjamin Nickels. “Foreign Technology or Local Expertise? Al-Shabaab’s IED Capability.” *CTC Sentinel*, Volume 10, Issue 10, November 2017: 33-36.



## SALW as a source of terrorist funding

Throughout the Horn of Africa, terrorist organisations and activities “are highly suspected to be funded by financial proceeds derived from other transnational organized crime activities”,<sup>115</sup> ranging from human and drugs trafficking to trading in illicit petroleum, illegal poaching, smuggling of contraband sugar,<sup>116</sup> or acts of piracy—even if this latter activity seems to have decreased in recent years.<sup>117</sup> Al-Shabaab, for instance, has earned millions of dollars from the illicit charcoal trade,<sup>118</sup> a business reportedly facilitated by some military officials.<sup>119</sup> Nonetheless, this practice has significantly decreased in recent years, due to the ban on charcoal exports imposed by the UN in early 2012.<sup>120</sup> Still, this measure is not believed to have had a critical impact on al Shabaab's income,<sup>121</sup> as the group has expanded and diversified its revenue sources<sup>122</sup> with its “fighters go[ing] for alternative, albeit illegal, sources of money”.<sup>123</sup>

In addition to having certainly facilitated their involvement in all kinds of trafficking, the possession of SALW has moreover enabled terrorist groups to establish their control on territories and populations, which in turn represents a significant source of funding. The prominent Somalia-based group al-Shabaab is indeed believed to have generated income from the “taxation of all aspects of Somalia’s economy”.<sup>124</sup> The group has been able to acquire significant amount of money “by taxing vehicles and goods through a network of checkpoints, by taxing business and agriculture, and through alms levies”.<sup>125</sup> It has employed “mafia-style tactics”<sup>126</sup> to raise funds through racketeering and extortion of local populations and aid groups.<sup>127</sup> Following the progressive decrease of financial support received from ISIS, ISS is also believed to have increasingly relied on illicit taxation of large companies.<sup>128</sup> Among other criminal activities, actors with links to violent extremist groups have also been involved in several cases of kidnapping for ransom across the region.<sup>129</sup> As the possession of arms and weapons undoubtedly represents a critical factor in the perpetration of all these miscellaneous criminal

<sup>115</sup> Interpol. *Overview of Serious and Organized Crime in East Africa*. September 30, 2018: 9.

<sup>116</sup> Tom Keatinge. “Gimme Some Sugar. The Real Source of Al-Shabab’s Income.” *Foreign Affairs*, December 3, 2015. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2015-12-03/gimme-some-sugar>

<sup>117</sup> Interpol. *Overview of Serious and Organized Crime in East Africa*. September 30, 2018: 11.

<sup>118</sup> Katharine Petrich. “Cows, Charcoal, and Cocaine: Al-Shabaab’s Criminal Activities in the Horn of Africa.” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 2019: 1-22. See also: “Illegal trade & exploitation of fuel: Oil and charcoal.” in C. Nellemann, et al. *World atlas of illicit flows*. A RHIPTO-INTERPOL-GI Assessment, 2018: 18-42.

<sup>119</sup> Louis Charbonneau. “Exclusive: Kenyan peacekeepers aided illegal Somalia charcoal export - U.N.” *Reuters*, July 14, 2013. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-somalia-charcoal-un-idUSBRE96D01A20130714>

<sup>120</sup> UN Security Council Resolution 2036 (2012). <http://unscr.com/en/resolutions/doc/2036>

<sup>121</sup> Abuga Makori. “Somalia: Al-Shabaab abandons charcoal trade, resorts to mafia-style taxation.” *Garowe Online*, November 13, 2019. <https://www.garoweonline.com/en/news/somalia/somalia-al-shabaab-abandons-charcoal-trade-resorts-to-mafia-style-taxation>

<sup>122</sup> Associated Press. “UN: Al-Shabab Remains ‘Potent Threat’ in Somalia and Region.” November 12, 2019.

<sup>123</sup> Aggrey Mutambo. “Al-Shabaab ‘outgrows’ illegal charcoal trade in move likely to benefit KDF.” *Daily Nation*, November 13, 2019. <https://www.nation.co.ke/news/Al-Shabaab-outgrows-illegal-charcoal-trade/1056-5347024-bhqij/index.html>

<sup>124</sup> Associated Press. “UN: Al-Shabab Remains ‘Potent Threat’ in Somalia and Region.” November 12, 2019.

<sup>125</sup> Katharine Petrich. “Guns, pirates and charcoal.” *Global Initiative against Transnational Organized Crime*, December 18, 2018. [https://globalinitiative.net/somalia\\_untocwatch/](https://globalinitiative.net/somalia_untocwatch/)

<sup>126</sup> Katharine Petrich. “Guns, pirates and charcoal.” *Global Initiative against Transnational Organized Crime*, December 18, 2018.

<sup>127</sup> Sam Kiley. “Funding al-Shabaab: How aid money ends up in terror group’s hands.” *CNN*, February 12, 2018. <https://edition.cnn.com/2018/02/12/africa/somalia-al-shabaab-foreign-aid-intl/index.html>

<sup>128</sup> European Institute of Peace (EIP). *The Islamic State in East Africa*. September 2018: 19.

<sup>129</sup> Interpol. *Overview of Serious and Organized Crime in East Africa*. September 30, 2018: 12.

offences aimed at generating profit, SALW may have indirectly facilitated terrorist organisations' funding in the Horn of Africa.

In addition, groups like al-Shabaab have allegedly been involved more directly in SALW trafficking. While arms diverted from national stockpiles are used to perpetrate further attacks, it is believed that al-Shabaab may “sell between a quarter and a half of their haul to businessmen and give that money to their troops as bonuses to boost morale”.<sup>130</sup> Furthermore, some observers underline that al-Shabaab fighters may also be one of the numerous actors smuggling weapons through the Somalia-Kenya border in order to supply local civilians who then barter or sell stolen livestock in exchange for these weapons.<sup>131</sup>

## Conclusion

In recent years, West Africa and the Horn of Africa have experienced increased instability and faced some similar security challenges. Coming on top of political instability, lack of effective governance and trust in central institutions, as well as already existing local tensions, the growing terrorist threat has further deteriorated both regions' security landscapes since late 1990s and early 2000s.

In the light of this report, it appears that West Africa and the Horn of Africa also share similar trends as regard to the nature of SALW supply sources and acquisition methods used by violent extremist groups. These include diversion of national stockpiles following various conflicts, including the civil wars in Liberia, Sierra Leone, Côte d'Ivoire and the 2012 Malian crisis, as well as conflicts in Sudan and Yemen—with arms depots of post-2011 Libya standing as a common supply source. Terrorist groups' arsenals have also been fuelled by large quantities of SALW diverted from national and international security and defence forces following attacks, as well as through arms trafficking and, to a lesser extent, craft-production.

Some common patterns also appear as regards SALW trafficking, with two important (interlinked) dynamics being observed in both regions. The combination of porous national borders, lack of state control and economic opportunities have facilitated the development informal—and often illegal—economies in vast remote and ungoverned areas, notably based on various forms of illicit smuggling. In this context, it first appears that, in both of the researched regions, connections exist between trafficking in SALW and smuggling of other illicit commodities, such as drugs or contraband, as well as migrants. This pattern is largely explained by the second common feature observed, namely the involvement of similar actors and the use of already established trafficking networks and traditional trade routes connecting the respective regions to surrounding areas. This is the case throughout both West Africa, crossed by the trans-Saharan routes connecting Sahelian states to the Maghreb to the North and the Gulf of Guinea to the South, and in the Horn of Africa which is connected to the Arabian Peninsula by longstanding maritime informal trade routes. These dynamics furthermore illustrate the strong links that exist between terrorist and criminal networks active in the two regions. These links appear to take various forms when it comes to SALW trafficking. While

<sup>130</sup> James Reinl. “How stolen weapons keep groups like Boko Haram in business.” *PRI*, April 19, 2019. <https://www.pri.org/stories/2019-04-19/how-stolen-weapons-keep-groups-boko-haram-business>

<sup>131</sup> Duncan E. Omondi Gumba, and Guyo Chepe Turi. “Cross-border arms trafficking inflames northern Kenya's conflict.” *ISS Today*, November 18, 2019. <https://issafrica.org/iss-today/cross-border-arms-trafficking-inflames-northern-kenyas-conflict>

terrorist organisations sometimes appear to rely on criminal networks to acquire SALW, they also seem to provide (arms) traffickers with protection and transport services.

As for the use of SALW as a source of funding, although terrorist groups may in some instances get directly involved in arms smuggling (as providers generating income from the sale of SALW), they more generally appear to be indirectly involved, benefitting *inter alia* from taxes and transit fees collected on illicitly smuggled goods. In addition, the possession of SALW enables these groups to carry out various activities, including robberies, extortion or kidnapping for ransom. In addition to representing a serious security challenge as such, trafficking in SALW thus also serve as an “enabling crime”.

Overall, the issue of SALW trafficking in West Africa and the Horn of Africa thus appears as “a complex and multi-faceted problem” deeply entrenched in the crime-terror nexus, or what has more recently been referred to as a “terrorism-arms-crime nexus”.<sup>132</sup> While underscoring the great complexity of addressing such an issue, these findings also underline the potential positive impact that reducing the illicit proliferation of SALW throughout both regions could have on the multiple intertwined security challenges they face—by denying groups the access to a valuable trafficked commodity as well as the necessary means to conduct attacks and miscellaneous income-generating activities.

Indicator	West Africa	Horn of Africa
<i>Estimated # of firearms in the region held</i> <sup>133</sup>	<b>12,759,425</b> (1,124,425 / 11,635,000)	<b>9,413,272</b> (2,736,272 / 6,677,000)
<b>Total (# held by state actors / non-state actors)</b>		
<i>Ongoing conflicts</i> <sup>134</sup>	Destabilization in Mali; Boko Haram in Nigeria	Civil War in South Sudan; Al-Shabaab in Somalia
<i>Sources of SALW</i>	Post-conflict diversion (mainly Libya, Mali); national stockpiles diversion following attacks on military positions and/or through corrupted practices; cross-border arms trafficking; craft-production	Post-conflict diversion (mainly Libya, Sudan, Yemen); diversion following attacks on national and international armed forces; maritime arms trafficking; craft production
<i>SALW-related sources of income</i>	Provision of protection and transport services; taxes and transit fees; involvement in other illicit trafficking (i.e. migrants, drugs, contraband cigarettes); robberies (e.g. cattle abduction); extortion	Sale of arms; taxes and transit fees; involvement in other illicit trafficking (i.e. charcoal, sugar, oil); racketeering and extortion (e.g. local population, aid groups), taxation (e.g. businesses,

<sup>132</sup> UN News. “UN launches new project to address the link between terrorism, arms and crime.” *Peace and Security*, February 21, 2020. <https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/02/1057891>. UNCCT. “Terrorism arms crime nexus.” <https://www.un.org/counterterrorism/cct/terrorism-arms-crime-nexus>

<sup>133</sup> Small Arms Survey, *Global Firearms Holdings* (2018). Data retrieved from: [http://www.smallarmssurvey.org/fileadmin/docs/Weapons\\_and\\_Markets/Tools/Firearms\\_holdings/SAS-BP-Law-enforcement-firearms-annexe.pdf](http://www.smallarmssurvey.org/fileadmin/docs/Weapons_and_Markets/Tools/Firearms_holdings/SAS-BP-Law-enforcement-firearms-annexe.pdf); <http://www.smallarmssurvey.org/weapons-and-markets/tools/global-firearms-holdings.html>; and [http://www.smallarmssurvey.org/fileadmin/docs/Weapons\\_and\\_Markets/Tools/Firearms\\_holdings/SAS-BP-Civilian-held-firearms-annexe.pdf](http://www.smallarmssurvey.org/fileadmin/docs/Weapons_and_Markets/Tools/Firearms_holdings/SAS-BP-Civilian-held-firearms-annexe.pdf). Last visited on 18 May 2020. *Firearms* are a subgroup of small arms and light weapons, referring only to small arms and heavy machine guns.

<sup>134</sup> Council of Foreign Relations, *Global Conflict Tracker* (14 May 2020), <https://www.cfr.org/interactive/global-conflict-tracker?category=us>. Last visited on 18 May 2020.



	(e.g. gold mines); taxation; kidnapping for ransom	agriculture); piracy; kidnapping for ransom
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## About the Authors

### Méryl Demuynck

Méryl Demuynck joined the International Centre for Counter-Terrorism as Project Assistant in November 2019. Her work currently focuses on the prevention of radicalization and violent extremism in Mali, both inside and outside the prison context. She is also involved in a research project exploring the trafficking of small arms and light weapons as a source of financing for terrorist organisations.

Prior to joining ICCT, Méryl contributed to various research projects in the area of international peace and security. In addition to a Master thesis on the Line of Control (LoC) in Kashmir, she conducted research for the Council of Europe Counter-Terrorism Division on the radicalisation of women and children in terrorist organisations. Combining desk-based and fieldwork research, she also carried out a prospective study on the impact of nomadic peoples on the security environment in the ECOWAS region for the French armed forces positioned in Dakar, Senegal. She holds a multidisciplinary BA in Political Science, History, Economics and Law as well as a MA in European and International Relations — *Internal and External Security of the European Union* — from the Institute of Political Science of Strasbourg. She also completed a specialisation degree on Contemporary Sub-Saharan Africa at the Institute of Political Science of Lyon.

### Tanya Mehra

Tanya Mehra LL.M is Senior Project Leader/Senior Research Fellow at the International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague. With a background in international law Tanya is involved in conducting research, providing evidence-based policy advice, advising governments on a rule of a law approach in countering terrorism. Previously she worked at the T.M.C. Asser Instituut where she was engaged with conducting needs assessment missions, capacity building projects and training activities.

At ICCT, Tanya is currently leading a project exploring the criminal justice responses to the linkage between terrorism, transnational organized crimes and international crimes, developing a training and policy kit on a RoL base use of administrative measures within a CT context and involved in a research project exploring the trafficking of small arms and lights weapons as source of financing for terrorist organisations.

### Reinier Bergema

Reinier Bergema is a Research Fellow and Project Manager at the ICCT. Over the past five years, he worked at the interface of (actionable) research and policy for a wide variety of clients, including, but not limited to, the Netherlands' Ministries of Defense and Foreign Affairs, the Netherlands' National Police, NATO, and Europol. He holds a dual Master's degree in Political Science (International Relations) and Public Administration (Crisis and Security Management), both from Leiden University. His research interests include, inter alia, foreign terrorist fighters, the terrorist threat across Europe, and quantitative research methods.

Over the years, he frequently commented and published on a variety of terrorism- and counterterrorism-related topics in different outlets, including Foreign Policy, The

Independent, NRC, De Volkskrant, the International Peace Institute (IPI), Bellingcat, Studies in Conflict & Terrorism, and Clingendael's Planetary Security Initiative. In addition to his work at the ICCT, he is part of the editorial team of Perspectives on Terrorism and a member of the General Board of the JASON Institute. Prior to the ICCT, Reinier was a strategic analyst at The Hague Centre for Strategic Studies (HCSS) and a research assistant at Leiden University's Centre for Terrorism and Counterterrorism (CTC). He is an alumnus of the U.S. Department of State's International Visitor Leadership Program (IVLP) and a 2018 GLOBSEC Young Leader.

# ICCT Situation Report: The Use of Small Arms & Light Weapons by Terrorist Organisations as a Source of Finance in West Africa and the Horn of Africa

Méryl Demuynck, Tanya Mehra, & Reinier Bergema  
30 June 2020

## About ICCT

ICCT The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague (ICCT) is an independent think and do tank providing multidisciplinary policy advice and practical, solution-oriented implementation support on prevention and the rule of law, two vital pillars of effective counterterrorism.

ICCT's work focuses on themes at the intersection of countering violent extremism and criminal justice sector responses, as well as human rights-related aspects of counterterrorism. The major project areas concern countering violent extremism, rule of law, foreign fighters, country and regional analysis, rehabilitation, civil society engagement and victims' voices.

Functioning as a nucleus within the international counter-terrorism network, ICCT connects experts, policymakers, civil society actors and practitioners from different fields by providing a platform for productive collaboration, practical analysis, and exchange of experiences and expertise, with the ultimate aim of identifying innovative and comprehensive approaches to preventing and countering terrorism.

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