

Illicit firearms circulation and the politics of upheaval in North Africa

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As a broad region, the whole of North Africa can be historically characterised by its porous national borders. Most state borders of North African countries are literally lines drawn in the sand in far-flung peripheral areas where policing and patrolling are difficult, while the legitimacy of central authorities is often contested.¹ Libya's borders, for example, have always been problematic, particularly in the remotest southern Saharan sub-regions. The capacity of states in the Sahel region to control their borders is quite limited: the rarefied and hostile desert environment is traditionally a space of circulation where the few official border-crossing points are easily bypassed by traditional smugglers and new types of traffickers. The past three decades have seen the gradual rise of trade in new illicit goods, including narcotics (e.g. cocaine) and counterfeit goods (e.g. medicines), compared to more traditional forms of smuggling based on tax avoidance and subsidised licit goods' price differentials. In this context, small arms and light weapons have featured as both a smuggled commodity and a key asset for smugglers, given the increasing risks facing the smuggling business and the need for protection along increasingly unsafe routes.

Although illicit commodities have always been a component of trans-Saharan informal trade,² recent developments in the region have altered both the structure of that trade and the nature of its participants.³ The availability and circulation of weapons in the black market in North Africa was substantially changed by the Libyan revolution and the subsequent conflicts in that country. Weapons dynamics since then can be regarded as a driver of regional instability. Soon after the collapse of the Qaddafi regime in 2011, Libya was described as 'the Tesco [supermarket] of the world's illegal arms trade'.⁴ According to the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) Panel of Experts (PoE) monitoring the arms embargo on Libya, arms,

ammunition and explosives from Libyan depots have been scattered across as many as 12 countries in the Maghreb, Sahel and Levant regions, and the Horn of Africa. While the bulk of this weaponry has flowed towards the Sahel and Egypt, there are also indications of transfers to the Gaza Strip and Syria.⁵ During the research process for the SAFTE Project, several national key actors highlighted in interviews that some of these weapons will eventually also end up in the European Union (EU). In 2015 Europol publicly stated for the first time that firearms originating from the conflicts in Libya, Syria and Mali were available on the European black market, and that these countries may emerge as major sources of illegal firearms trafficked to the EU.⁶

Box 1: Research design

When dealing with data on trafficking, above all on a sensitive topic such as firearms, one encounters significant capacity and disclosure problems in terms of the systematic collection and availability of official data. The lack of reliable statistics is such that it is extremely difficult – if not practically impossible – to provide an accurate and comprehensive appraisal of the illicit possession of and trade in firearms in North African countries. This affects the quality of data not only at the national level, but also in international databases. In this report, therefore, we attempt to make data available that allows ongoing dynamics and trends to be broadly identified.

The report offers a review and analysis of secondary sources mainly based on research carried out in the region by the UNSC PoE monitoring the arms embargo on Libya, researchers, and research organisations such as the Small Arms Survey and Conflict Armament Research. We also draw on data from two databases, the Norwegian Initiative on Small Arms Transfers (NISAT)⁷ and the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED),⁸ as well as additional news sources and articles retrieved from social media. The NISAT database, run by the Peace Research Institute Oslo, offers a systematic collection of news articles on small arms. The database was explored using its geographical search function to locate articles dealing with five states – Algeria, Egypt, Libya, Morocco and Tunisia – and searches were further narrowed down to the thematic category ‘black market’ that included episodes of firearms smuggling and misuse in the period 2014-mid 2017. This choice was motivated by the abundant literature on Libya’s arsenals and the arms flows in the region in the period 2011-2013.⁹

This report provides an overview of up-to-date available information and data on illicit arms circulation in the broad region of North Africa. Geopolitically, the UN definition of North Africa includes seven countries or territories: Algeria, Egypt, Libya, Morocco, Sudan, Tunisia and Western Sahara.¹⁰ However, in line with the EU's usual definition of North African countries as Europe's southern neighbours, this report will not focus on Sudan. Nonetheless, since arms recirculate from and to neighbouring countries, the report will touch on Sahelian countries when relevant.

1. Dynamics of firearms trafficking and proliferation

All the selected countries have severe laws regulating firearms possession. Generally speaking, the law does not guarantee the right to private gun ownership, and civilian possession is regulated through licensing systems and background checks on applicants. In Egypt and Tunisia, the applicant should also demonstrate a 'genuine reason' to hold a firearm. Civilian use of long guns is forbidden in Egypt.¹¹ In Libya, civilian gun ownership was entirely prohibited under Qaddafi,¹² and the selling or transfer of arms was prohibited. Despite gun ownership being illegal in Libya, in 2007 civilians owned nearly twice as many guns as the military and police: civilian firearms were numbered at about 900,000, military firearms at 535,200 and police firearms at 22,000.¹³ In 2010, estimated civilian gun possession rates in North Africa ranged from Africa's lowest in Tunisia (0.1 firearms per 100 people) to one of Africa's highest in Libya (15.5). The remainder range from 3.5 per 100 people in Egypt to 7.6 in Algeria – excluding Western Sahara, for which no figures are available.¹⁴ An important observation is that most of the firearms in circulation originate from outside the region: Egypt is the only known manufacturer of small arms in the region (it was categorised as a medium-sized small arms producer in 2001)¹⁵, while Algeria only manufactures ammunition. Libya, Morocco and Tunisia have no arms industries, while in Libya it is prohibited by law to produce arms.¹⁶

Interestingly, the proliferation and circulation patterns of weapons vary widely across North African countries. Each country features diverse dynamics mainly due to its geopolitical position and heterogeneous monopoly of force in each country, as well as the role of the army and government expenditure on firearms. In Egypt and Libya, the political and security situation remains unstable and volatile, with various armed groups in play and a consequent demand for weapons. The upswing of fighting in Libya in 2014 is still under way at the time of this writing,

with a multitude of armed groups active in various coalitions, an internationally recognised government that is unable to exert control beyond a small part of the capital city, and the attempt of General Khalifa Haftar's 'Libyan National Army' to acquire larger territorial control in the south (Fezzan) and west of the country, after 'reconquering' the east (Cyrenaica). In Egypt, Islamist militants and security forces continued to clash in the Sinai, while new armed groups appeared in 2016. In Tunisia, despite targeted political assassinations and armed clashes between violent extremists and security forces, the use of firearms has remained relatively low even after the revolution of 2011. Morocco and Algeria are both among the largest importers of arms in Africa. While Morocco does not report significant violent episodes or seizures of firearms, Algerian authorities regularly report on the numerous arms seizures and counter-terrorism operations in the country, especially along its borders with Libya, Mali and Niger. In Western Sahara, the Polisario Front maintains active armed forces and has a surplus of weaponry.¹⁷ Morocco has a heavy military presence in Western Sahara, but the area is not impervious to smuggling activities and small-arms trafficking.¹⁸

In recent years the civilian possession of firearms has increased significantly in some countries, mainly due to this unstable and volatile political and security situation. Determining how many weapons entered circulation after Qaddafi's fall is a very difficult exercise. The UN has estimated that Qaddafi's army was in control of 250,000 to 700,000 weapons as of 2011, of which 70-80% were assault rifles.¹⁹ According to British intelligence, more than one million tons of weapons were looted after Qaddafi fell.²⁰ And while the international community has made efforts to check the proliferation of weapons from post-Qaddafi Libya, those efforts are primarily focused on certain types of weapons, e.g. chemical weapons and man-portable air defence systems; less attention was (and still is) devoted to the proliferation of small arms. In the aftermath of 2011, Libyan authorities have implemented voluntary firearms surrender schemes and weapons seizure programmes in order to reduce the number of illicit firearms in circulation. Several small-scale civilian disarmament initiatives were launched in 2012, but with limited results, and the authorities have been slow to introduce control measures for civilian weapons ownership.²¹ Instead of a decline, there has been an alarming increase in the level of new weapons in the country.²²

As a general trend in illicit firearms markets, some of the weapons that reach terrorists and criminal organisations are produced by illegal manufacturers, but most firearms are diverted from legal production and at some point were leaked into the illegal market. Licit firearms can be diverted during transportation; by leakage from factories, government stockpiles or individual owners; trafficked from abroad; or converted to illicit, lethal-purpose firearms through reactivation, modification

or conversion. North Africa is no exception to this rule, and the dispersal of arms from Libyan government stockpiles after 2011 confirms this. Furthermore, armed conflicts have contributed to the creation of a vast arms market across the region fuelled by the circulation of recycled arms used in previous conflicts in the state concerned or in neighbouring countries, the provision of state-sponsored supplies to proxies, or strategic caches of arms stored in anticipation of conflict.

According to the 2017 UNSC PoE report, after 2011 arms were also supplied through the breaking of the UN arms embargo – among others, from Qatar via Tunisia, from the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and through an arms delivery from Italy ‘that had originated from the Balkans’.²³ A 2016 fieldwork-based report by Conflict Armament Research finds that stockpiles in Mali and Côte d’Ivoire have also nurtured illicit markets: *“Illicit weapon flows in the Sahel since 2011 have not stemmed exclusively, or even predominantly, from Libyan sources. The profile of illicit weapons in the region reflects the consequences of other state crises, particularly in Mali, and of weak control over national stockpiles in the Central African Republic and Cote d’Ivoire. The prevalence of Ivorian-origin small arms across the region is a particularly unexpected finding of this investigation. Weapons originating in Libyan stockpiles or trafficked by Libyan armed groups remain significant, but they are diminishing and, in some cases, being reversed”*.²⁴

Notwithstanding this finding, we can still conclude that the effects of arms proliferation from Libya have been the most significant in the region in the immediate post-2011 period. These weapons were obtained directly from Qaddafi-era stockpiles, captured from Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) forces in Sirte, and seized or purchased from local ethnic militias or smugglers.²⁵

In the following sections we will analyse the illicit firearms markets and proliferation dynamics in the various North African countries.

1.1 Libya

Libya under Muammar Qaddafi was a centre of weapons proliferation for more than forty years, while amassing in its depots one of the largest and most diverse conventional weapons stockpiles of any African country. Before 2011 weapons ownership had been severely restricted, with only certain groups close to the authorities permitted to own weapons. Throughout this period Libya was characterised by highly regulated informal trade concentrated in the hands of cartels that enjoyed the tacit support of the regimes on both sides of the border, be they in Tunisia, Egypt or Libya itself.²⁶ Under the Qaddafi regime the illicit economy was largely state

sponsored, and trafficking and smuggling remained largely in the hands of groups favoured by the regime. By selecting the participants in the arms trade, the regime was able to use continued participation as a guarantee of loyalty.²⁷ The regime used state subsidies to keep tribes dependent and too 'weak' to mobilise. For example, around the southern city of Sabha, in the Fezzan, on the route to Niger and Chad, the cartels of the Awlad Suleiman, Qadhadhfa, and Warfalla dominated. In contrast to these tribes, those who did not enjoy favoured status with the Qaddafi regime were marginalised, e.g. the Zuwari and Zintan on the Tunisian border, and the Tubu in the Fezzan. The pre-2011 Tunisian autocracy allowed the cartels to engage in large-scale informal trading with Libya in return for their pledge not to smuggle weapons or drugs, as well as to support the Tunisian government with their networks of informants.²⁸

From a virtually non-existent domestic market in Libya, the revolution and its aftermath paved the way for a large illicit trade in firearms to emerge in North Africa, with Libya as its epicentre. The 2014 UNSC PoE report states that a number of shops that openly sold small arms had been set up in several cities since the revolution. In the large Libyan cities, including Tripoli, a number of open-air markets are currently selling firearms. In Tripoli, for example, the Souk el Hout (fish market) on Al Rashid Street is well known for merchants who offer a range of firearms.²⁹

The proliferation and availability of weapons during different phases of the revolution gradually involved new and diverse armed actors. A general three-stage trend across Libya through which arms availability shaped the insurgency can be identified:

1. the formation of armed actors, which generally took place in the context of a relative weapons shortage;
2. the development of increased coordination and cohesion, as weapons became more available to well-connected brigade commanders; and
3. increasing fractionalisation and splintering, as weapons started to become available to individual insurgents in the field.³⁰

The significant case of Misrata shows how the fighting units began as small groups of uncoordinated street fighters and developed into organisations with tanks and heavy artillery. In 2012 the city contained nearly half the experienced fighters and weapons caches in Libya,³¹ with important contacts with Turkey and the Muslim Brotherhood.

1.1.1 Libya 2011-2013: a 'Tesco' for arms?

After the 2011 revolution non-state actors looted numerous military storage facilities of a wide range of weapons,³² many of which found their way into the domestic and international black markets.³³ Qaddafi's fall directly caused the explosive growth of arms smuggling in recent years through a combination of the increased availability of large numbers of weapons from the regime's stockpiles, the decreased formal and informal control of contraband flows, the emergence of (tribal) armed groups as dominant actors in trafficking networks, and the cross-border connections of actors fleeing post-Qaddafi Libya. The Fezzan region is probably the part of Libya where the most drastic changes to trafficking flows have been observed. Over the past few years the city of Sabha and surrounds have become an arms-trafficking hub, as both a point of collection and distribution. Sabha's importance in the weapons trade began with the end of the initial stage of armed conflict in 2011 due to its proximity to large military facilities from where arms were stolen. The Tubu gained control of the borders and started to feed surplus weapons into contraband routes through Kufra (south-eastern Libya) and Dongola (Sudan) to northern Egypt, the Sinai Peninsula or Yemen. The old routes that followed the traditional patterns of Tubu tribal alliances re-emerged.³⁴ There are also strong regional connections between the Tubu and Zaghawa from Chad and Darfur.³⁵

Arms trafficking to the south-west displays a similar dynamic. According to the 2013 UNSC PoE report, *"the western borders of Libya, from Tunisia in the north to Niger in the south, were the focus points for illicit trafficking from Libya quite early on in the uprising, with Algeria reporting its first seizure of weapons coming from Libya in April 2011"*.³⁶

Trafficking to Tunisia was limited, at least compared to other destinations such as Egypt or Mali, due to lower demand (resulting from lower levels of criminal and political violence) and Tunisian government attempts to prevent trafficking. More weapons were reported to have been seized in Algeria, since it lies on a direct route between Libya and Mali.³⁷

According to the 2013 UNSC PoE report, in 2011-2012 large-scale transfers of arms were also sent from Libya to Syria by sea or air through Turkey. In 2015 the PoE reported that 'While the Syrian Arab Republic was a significant destination for Libyan arms during the first two years of the conflict that trend appears to have faded in the past 12 to 24 months'.³⁸ A year later the PoE stated that it had 'found no information relating to recent transfers'.³⁹

Until August 2014 the import of large quantities of materiel was subject to the notification process in the exception framework included in the embargo, including more than 60,000 handguns, 65,000 assault rifles, 15,000 sub-machine guns and 4,000 machine guns of various calibres, as well as more than 60 million rounds of ammunition for small arms and machine guns. However, in the absence of any post-delivery notification system, with the procurement of materiel by authorities outside official military procurement channels, and the attraction of the Libyan market to arms brokers of dubious legality, it is difficult to assess how much notified materiel has actually been transferred to Libya and to which final user.⁴⁰ The UNSC PoE has reason to believe that most transfers to Libya since the revolution, in particular of small arms and light weapons and related ammunition, whether notified or not, have ended up with armed groups, either through direct transfers or diversions. Approved materiel transferred for the EU Border Assistance Mission was also diverted at airports controlled by brigades.⁴¹ For instance, from the end of the revolution to 24 August 2014 Tripoli International Airport was controlled by Zintani brigades, and there were cases of deliveries from Belarus being diverted.⁴²

1.1.2 Circular trafficking, 2014-2016

Libya's status as an important player and route for the illicit trade in small arms and light weapons has been recently reconsidered. While weapons continue to proliferate across North Africa, outflows from Libya have diminished since 2014. According to the last available UNSC PoE report (2017), *"arms have continued to be illicitly transferred to and from Libya on a regular basis. While outflows have continued to be moderate, consisting mainly of small arms and light weapons, materiel entering Libya has been of an increasingly sophisticated nature"*.⁴³

The decrease in weapons flowing from Libya to other countries in the region is mainly the result of two factors. Firstly, domestic demand (and the economic means to pay for it) has increased as a result of the increased fighting. In 2014-2016 the violence was partly due to clashes between the Tuareg and Tubu for the control of Ubari and Ghat.⁴⁴ In addition, the ACLED database indicates that important parts of the violent events between 2014-2016 are connected to ISIS and Ansar al-Shaaria, while a number of other political militias were also involved in a significant number of incidents.⁴⁵ Another development that is worth noting is that by 2016 urban clashes among militias in Libya escalated to exchanges using heavy weapons.⁴⁶ Secondly, the success of a number of international initiatives to tackle arms trafficking affected the flow of weapons, as well as improved interdiction efforts on traditional transit routes, particularly in Chad and along the Nigerien and Algerian

borders.⁴⁷ More specifically, since 2014 the French-led Operation Barkhane has been blocking the transfer of weapons and terrorists, coupled with G5 Sahel initiatives to strengthen cross-border patrolling.⁴⁸

As Shaw and Mangan note, the proliferation of illicit arms has transformed all other criminal markets, and weapons and protection have become a feature of the smuggling trade: *“As violence increases, so does the criminal market for arms and for protection, perpetuating a cycle that is becoming an entrenched feature of the political debate. The pervasive presence of weapons has combined with the absence of state control to ensure the growth of the protection market for legitimate trade as well as for illicit activities. Because weapons are available to all groups, the facilitation of movement of any kind of goods with value requires ensuring a transaction either with those who can ensure safety by providing the necessary firepower or with those who control specific areas and can thus ensure safe passage. Providing protection has thus become key to regulating both the criminal market and the broader Libyan economy”*.⁴⁹

In its initial phases, the development of the arms trade in Libya was marked by violent struggles between armed groups associated with the Awlad Suleiman and Tubu tribes over control of informal trade routes and urban markets. The Tubu groups were largely successful, resuming control over the tribe's past trafficking networks in the south of the country and isolating the Awlad Suleiman. They are involved in the profound reconfiguration of tribal trafficking networks in the Fezzan, which shares borders with Algeria, Niger, Chad and Sudan.⁵⁰ The Zintani brigade controlled most of the Libya's western border until the summer of 2014, while the Awled Ali tribe gained control of Libya's eastern border with Egypt.

According to the 2017 UNSC PoE report, the arms trade in Libya has become an important source of income for various armed groups, and active arms trading has been reported at markets in Zintan, Misrata, Ajdabiya and Waw. The materiel offered includes heavier and more sophisticated systems. For example, in Libya a functioning Milan anti-tank system, including four missiles, is available for US\$9,000 (€7,500). In some cases fighters and arms are offered together.⁵¹ Interestingly, a recent Small Arms Survey study has indicated that local arms trading is also organised through virtual, online markets, highlighting their use by armed groups and their members.⁵² In April 2016 Facebook closed six accounts that had been used for arms sales in Libya.⁵³ The UNSC PoE also continues to observe weapons being offered for sale on Libyan Facebook sites,⁵⁴ and its monitoring of social media indicates that *“arms dealers within Libya continue to use online markets to sell and/or acquire material such as RPG launchers, recoilless rifles, anti-tank guided missile systems, heavy machine guns (12.7 mm and 14.5 mm), and man-portable*

air-defence systems (MANPADS). Among the weapons for sale on a Libyan Facebook page there were also two Zastava Arms M-93 'Black Arrow' anti-materiel rifles".⁵⁵

These rifles were likely diverted from a notified Serbian shipment of imported weapons.⁵⁶

There are also a few indications of arms supplies being sent from Italy to Libya in exchange for Libyan artefacts in 2016.⁵⁷ The EUNAVFOR MED Operation Sophia, which has been active since 2015, has, among other things, the additional task of implementing the arms embargo off the coast of Libya, and it has thus placed surveillance boats off the cities of Derna and Sirte. In general, weapons appear not be trafficked on this route, with the exception of the seizures of 'several types of weapons, including Machine Guns, AK47 rifles, RPG bullets, RPG launchers, [and] mortar grenades' in international waters in May 2017.⁵⁸

1.2 Tunisia

Tunisia is a peripheral market for small arms and light weapons. Firearms trafficking currently exists in the form of small-scale smuggling in the Tunisian-Libyan border region, notably the Jefara, and in particular the two official border crossings at Ras Jdir in the north and Dehiba to the south in the Nafusa Mountains. In 2011 firearms also arrived in Tunisia with refugees from Libya, in particular members of forces loyal to Qaddafi, who sold their possessions, including Kalashnikovs, when they arrived in the country.⁵⁹

The end of the Libyan armed conflict had a dramatic impact on informal trade and trafficking in the Jefara. Demand increased on both sides of the border, especially for basic foodstuffs, as traders sought to maximise profit. As the 2013 UNSC PoE report suggests, firearms circulation in the Ben Gardane region (near the Libyan border) may be characterised as an 'ant trade': traffickers conceal single items in their other goods, but do not attempt to smuggle larger quantities of weapons. However, there have been exceptions. The discovery of an arms cache in Medenine in 2013, for instance, highlighted the attempts of a few violent groups and jihadists to smuggle firearms and explosives in modest quantities (about one pick-up load) through the Ben Gardane border region.⁶⁰ However, most of recent reported trafficking incidents at the border reflected the ant-trade dynamic, with only a few arms seized from individuals crossing the Tunisian border.⁶¹

According to Kartas, 'there is only one main route for smuggling small arms and light weapons into Tunisia without the complicity of the Tunisian traffickers,

namely through the oueds (dry river beds) that wind through the eastern Tunisian Sahara'.⁶² River beds offer terrain that can be crossed by vehicles and a route free of the checkpoints in the centre of the country. The routes are challenging and long, and thus there are no established 'contraband structures', and only well-trained groups with sufficient capital resources – such as *khatibas* (battalions) linked to al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) or other violent organisations – are able to navigate them. It seems far more likely that weapons are transported from Libya directly to Algeria, where they eventually find their way into Tunisia over the smuggling paths in the mountains.⁶³ In 2012-2015 there was a strong AQIM presence in western Tunisia in the Chaambi Mountains area on the border with Algeria, and many weapons were circulating, coming from both Mali (according to some, from the former *khatiba* of Abou Zeid), and from Libya.⁶⁴ The insecurity and terrorist threats that have plagued Libya since 2013 have compelled Tunisia to tighten its historical 'open door' policy toward its neighbour.⁶⁵ While Tunisia has increased security cooperation with Algeria, it is still difficult to identify cooperation counterparts in Libya, since the security sector is weak and brigades are running most border control activities.

Terrorists and self-proclaimed 'jihadi salafists' are believed to be the groups most likely to seek firearms in Tunisia.⁶⁶ Tunisian authorities identified two main trends that are not mutually exclusive: seizures from those involved in trafficking for profit, for which several people have been prosecuted; and those from individuals or groups associated with terrorism. Most of the latter are Tunisian nationals, although cases involving Algerians and Libyans are under investigation.⁶⁷ Smuggling operations have also been tied to Algeria-based violent extremist networks, such as AQIM, that have infiltrated the country. Among the perpetrators of violent attacks are Soldiers of the Caliphate, Ansar al-Shaaria, the Okba Ibn Nafaa Brigade and allegedly ISIS affiliates.

In 2016, following a major attack on police stations and national guard outposts, as well as an ISIS attack on a military camp in Ben Gardane in March, the Tunisian security forces seized a considerable number of weapons and, as a result of the ensuing investigations, located over six arms caches in the wider region of Ben Gardane. In May 2016 the security forces found a cache of weapons and ammunition in the town of Ben Gardane (20 km from the Libyan border) containing 130 machine guns and 29 AK-pattern assault rifles; and in November 2016 four caches were found in the same area containing 50 guns, including 27 Kalashnikov assault rifles and dozens of missiles.⁶⁸ Among the arms seized in March 2016 after the attack in Ben Gardane and among those smuggled into the country from Libya, the 2017 UNSC PoE report identified a series of over-under shotguns produced by Torun Silah Sanayi, a Turkish company.⁶⁹ Following the PoE's enquiry to Turkish

authorities, Torun Silah Sanayi claims to have sold the shotguns to the ‘Yassine Middle East Company’, a shotgun reseller in Beirut. According to the Turkish authorities, the customs declaration states that these shotguns were loaded onto the vessel *Haddad I*, which was intercepted by the Greek coastguard in September 2015 and the materiel on board seized.⁷⁰ However, the serial numbers documented by the PoE in Tunisia do not seem to match the packing lists provided by Torun Silah Sanayi through the Turkish authorities. The PoE concluded that it seems unlikely that the shotguns were transferred to Libya after they had been seized by Greece on board the *Haddad I*.⁷¹

1.3 Algeria

The Algerian Ministry of Defence (MoD) provides regular news updates and figures on arms seizures and counter-terrorist operations.⁷² Each month it publishes in its magazine *El Djeich* (the army) an overview of the materiel seized in the previous month. The total seizures in Algeria in 2016 and the first half of 2017 are shown in Tables 1 and 2. According to the 2017 UNSC PoE report, it is probable that a large share was smuggled from Libya in violation of the embargo. It is worth noting that the PoE reviewed Algerian reports of seizures, but could not physically inspect the materiel.

Our analysis of Algerian MoD official press notes⁷³ indicated that seizures mostly occur in the south of the country: Tamanrasset, on the border with Niger; Bordj Badji Mokhtar, bordering Mali; and In Amenas, on the border with Libya. Some seizures are also reported on the northern coast, i.e. at Aïn Defla, Tipaza and Bouira. Since the attack in In Amenas in January 2013, Algeria has greatly strengthened military patrols of the desert.⁷⁴ Besides Libyan-sourced materiel, Algerian small arms ammunition – specifically, 7.62 x 39 mm and 7.62 x 54R mm cartridges produced at the *Entreprise des Réalisations Industrielles de Seriana* in 1999, 2007 and 2009 – have been found in use by both the National Army and armed groups in northern Mali.⁷⁵

Table 1: Seizures in Algeria, 2016

Firearms	
Kalashnikov automatic rifles	668
FMPK machine guns	48
Mortars	37
Hunting rifles	82
Semi-automatic rifles with telescopic sight	35
Shotguns	26
Simonov semi-automatic rifles	64
RPG-7 rocket propelled grenade	18
RPK machine guns	16
Machine guns 12.7 mm	13
Machine guns 14.5 mm	7
Repeating rifle	36
PKT machine guns	9
PSH machine guns	2
Dictariov machine guns	5
M16 machine guns	1
MAT44 machine guns	4
3-cannons rocket launcher	1
Strela rocket launcher	1
RPG-5 rocket propelled grenade	5
RPG-2 rocket launcher	2
Anti-aircraft missile	6
Artisanal hand-crafted rifles	56
Automatic pistols of various types	35
RPD machine gun	1
MAT-49 machine gun	1
MAS-36 rifles	3
Grenades	792

Source: UNSC Panel of Experts (2017, annex 47)

Table 2: Seizures in Algeria, 1st semester 2016

Arms	
Grad missiles	2
Mortars	6
RPG-7 rocket propelled grenade	3
RPG-2 rocket propelled grenade	3
SPG-9 cannons	2
Machine guns 14.5 mm	7
Machine guns 12.7 mm	6
FMPK machine guns	12
PKT machine guns	4
Kalashnikov automatic rifles	167
RPK machine guns	5
Simonov semi-automatic rifles	26
MAT-49 machine guns	1
MAS-39 rifles	2
Dictariov machine guns	4
Automatic pistols	15
Sniper rifles	3
Shotguns	1
Hunting rifles	46
Repeating rifles	15
Artisanal hand-crafted rifles	3

Source: El Djeich n.648, July 2017

According to Algerian authorities, petty criminals, terrorists and criminal networks carry out trafficking.⁷⁶ In our analysis of news sources, the subjects involved in seizures are often unidentified 'smugglers' or 'terrorists'. In terms of active armed groups, in 2016 AQIM, Soldiers of the Caliphate (Jund al-Khilafa), and Islamist militias were involved in violent incidents, mostly attacks on security forces. While AQIM has been active in Algeria since the 1990s, with attacks peaking in 2010-2013, the Soldiers of the Caliphate armed group has been active more recently, since 2014. In previous years there were a few violent incidents involving the Mouvement pour l'unicité et le jihad en Afrique de l'Ouest (MUJAO), the Polisario Front and Ansar Dine.⁷⁷

1.4 Egypt

Widespread firearm ownership and smuggling by Bedouin through Sinai to Gaza and Israel has been reported for many years, but it intensified and involved Libyan weapons after 2011. After the fall of President Mubarak, police stations were reported to be empty in Sinai and their weapons looted.⁷⁸ Those involved in the conflict in Sinai could also have access to the copious arms being trafficked to Gaza via Rafah, the Egyptian town at the border. The smugglers avoided detection by transporting weapons through unpopulated desert areas, and Egypt's western border, which was already being used for drug smuggling, became a trafficking hub for weapons, including heavy weapons such as large-calibre anti-aircraft guns and rocket-propelled grenades (RPGs).

In 2011-2012 the Rafah border crossing point was crucial for the smuggling routes between Sinai and Gaza.⁷⁹ In February 2013, and then again in 2015, Egypt flooded tunnels used to smuggle goods under the border to Gaza.⁸⁰ The 2014 UNSC PoE report stated that arms transfers from Libya to Gaza occurred, but 'the shipments had slowed with an increased effort by Egypt to track and seize weapons'. This is also due to the better border control by General Haftar's self-established government in eastern Libya, and the fact that Libya's eastern border with Egypt is also blocked by a 380 km minefield running south from Musaid, with transfers likely being moved further southward through the desert into Egypt or by sea, rather than through the minefields.⁸¹

Interestingly, a Small Arms Survey's analysis of some of the weapons featured in the publications of the Hasm Movement in Egypt indicates that the group possibly uses Kalashnikov-pattern rifles that are likely of Albanian or Chinese origin. Other weapons used by both Hasm and Liwaa al-Thawra include standard-issue Egyptian rifles probably looted from government forces after successful attacks. Overall, the weapons used by both groups do not appear to differ much from those used by the group Revolutionary Punishment before them.⁸²

1.5 Mali and Niger

Since before Qaddafi's fall the primary transit route of weapons and armed groups between Libya and northern Mali has historically run along the Algerian and Nigerien borders. This route then crosses western Niger, entering Mali around the Niger-Mali-Burkina Faso tri-border area. Tuareg fighters and civilians in particular have used this route to move between Ubari and Sebha in southern Libya, and to the Kidal region of northern Mali.⁸³ Numerous Tuareg who had migrated to Libya before

2011 and fought in Libyan armed groups under Qaddafi returned to Mali at the end of 2011 and the beginning of 2012 with large numbers of weapons, which resulted in a decrease in local prices and widespread access to firearms.⁸⁴

According to Conflict Armament Research interviews with Tuareg members of both loyalist and separatist armed groups, transit through this route has become more difficult due to increased surveillance and seizures by international forces. The 2015 UNSC PoE report states that most of the arms from Libya 'destined for terrorist groups in Mali [were] seized or destroyed on several occasions in 2014 in Niger by the French-led Opération Barkhane'.⁸⁵ Similarly, the 2016 UNSC PoE report states that 'transfers of arms from Libya to Mali and the Niger have decreased in intensity thanks in large part to Operation Barkhane though seizures continued'.⁸⁶ It seems that the French intervention to prevent trafficking also prompted traffickers transporting combatants, weapons, and other supplies to use smaller convoys that are harder to detect.⁸⁷ However, many have kept their firearms, and caches are often discovered in the region.

As regards Niger, in 2011-2012 Tuareg brought weapons into the country, notably former rebels who had found refuge under Qaddafi since 2009. When they returned to Niger they were disarmed and co-opted by the regime, which made them mayors or presidential counsellors.

According to Pellerin, now weapons are allegedly smuggled into Niger by Tubu smugglers from Libya or members of Arab tribes with ties to that country. The smugglers are said to import the weapons as a sideline to their main smuggling business. For example, a Tubu smuggler whose business was second-hand vehicles was also said to be offering new AK-pattern rifles for sale that were sold with three or four ammunition clips per weapon.⁸⁸ According to the UNSC PoE 2017 report, the Nigerien authorities reported a reduction in the scale of weapons trafficking from Libya in 2017⁸⁹ and commented that some Tubu groups are a link between ISIS and Boko Haram in Nigeria, and control most of the supply route from Libya to Diffa in south-east Niger.

In 2017 the UNSC PoE received repeated reports from within the Tuareg community in Mali of arms transfers from Ansar el Haqq (headed by Mohammed Ingtallah and based in Awbari in south-west Libya) to Ansar Dine in Mali. The deliveries allegedly consist of light weapons, such as Zastava M80 assault rifles, anti-tank weapons and explosives. The operations are supposedly coordinated by Ingtallah's son.⁹⁰

1.6 Morocco and Western Sahara

According to our analysis of press articles, there are only a few cases of arms seizures in Morocco/Western Sahara, and they point to ISIS affiliates. Less than 50 violent incidents⁹¹ were reported by ACLED in the period 2010-2016, involving MUJAO, AQIM, al-Qaeda and the Polisario Front.

The ceasefire negotiated by the UN and accepted by Morocco and the Polisario Front in 1991 is still in force, despite a number of occasional minor violations on both sides. Due to the support of certain states, notably Algeria and Libya, the Polisario Front was equipped with a relatively large arsenal, and this has been expanded further with weapons seized from the Moroccan Army. The movement has now enough weapons of its own to be able to sell some and to supply the regional market. In the absence of a settlement of the conflict in Western Sahara, the Polisario Front has kept most of its weapons, and the months that followed the 1991 ceasefire saw hundreds of Polisario fighters cross the border to sell their excess weapons in Mauritania. According to an official Mauritanian source, the Polisario Front represents one of the leading suppliers of illegal weapons to Mauritania.⁹² In the north of Mauritania, cross-border trafficking of Soviet-type weapons with Western Sahara operates in both directions: automatic weapons (Kalashnikovs, Simonovs and G3s) enter Mauritania illegally from Western Sahara, while weapons such as Mausers and MAS-36s travel in the opposite direction.⁹³ In 2017 the Mauritanian government reported actions against all types of smuggling in its northern regions.

2. Availability and prices of firearms

Information on types of arms can be inferred by analysing recent seizures. While several organisations, including the 2017 UNSC PoE, have documented firearms seizures in various countries in the region, the lack of access to seizure data in other countries makes it difficult to keep track of the origins and types of the firearms available in the region. In general, we can conclude that for reasons of training, ammunition availability and habit, Warsaw Pact weaponry continues to be preferred two decades after the end of the Cold War. Consequently, most of the assault rifles detected across North African countries are of the Kalashnikov variety. Firearms from Libya seized in Tunisia, for example, have mostly identified AK-47 and AK 103-2 self-loading rifles from Russia (delivered to Libya in 2005 and 2008).⁹⁴ Kalashnikov-type firearms are also the most commonly seized type in Algeria (see Tables 2 and 3). Arms from the Balkans were also identified in Libya in late 2011 and in 2013, i.e. AR-M9 rifles manufactured by Arsenal (a Bulgarian arms

manufacturer) and originally exported from Bulgaria to the UAE before ending up in Libya.⁹⁵ Today, though, newer weapons are also of Chinese manufacture.

In 2014 the UNSC PoE report concluded that handguns and related ammunition are still the weapon of choice in Libya, costing between 2,000 and 5,000 Libyan dinars. The PoE stated that 'Importing such materiel is therefore a lucrative business and seizures bound for Libya made in 2013 clearly reflect that trend'.⁹⁶ Pistols come from a great variety of sources, including modern commercial varieties of Taurus and Beretta pistols.⁹⁷ Interestingly, pistols generally tend to be seized in much smaller batches than long arms. In addition, shotguns and hunting rifles are also in high demand in Libya and neighbouring countries for self-defence purposes.

An interesting observation is the availability of Turkish-made replica handguns in Libya and the region at large. Since 2013 Libyan markets are replete with these weapons (in many cases blank-firing 6 mm to 9 mm versions), some of which are converted to lethal-purpose firearms.⁹⁸ These weapons have become quite popular in Libya for self-defence purposes because they are very cheap and can be easily (though at some risk) modified to fire live ammunition.⁹⁹ The 2014 UNSC PoE report attributed their popularity to their cheap prices: 'Blank-firing pistols are also very popular in Libya, particularly in urban areas, where they are sold on the streets for 150 Libyan dinars'.¹⁰⁰ Interestingly, there does not appear to be a standard conversion method for these blank-firing handguns and the conversion process is often carried out by individual traders seeking to maximise profits. Occasionally small groups are also involved in the conversion process.¹⁰¹

The availability of converted blank-firing guns is not limited to Libya; these guns are traded throughout the region. Considerable quantities of these guns have also been seized in Egypt. The principal entry point for these types of firearms is the port of Misrata, from where they are sent to the markets and warehouses of Sebha, where traders and armed groups sort and prepare them for further distribution. This form of collection and distribution has been one of the factors making Sebha a regional hub for small arms and light weapons.¹⁰² In Niger, the two most popular weapons are self-loading AK-pattern rifles and converted blank-firing handguns mostly from Turkey and known locally as 'Turkiya'.¹⁰³

A 2016 Conflict Armament Research report indicates that, in addition to commonly documented legacy weapons that have been circulating for decades, new types of weapons were in use among Islamist armed groups in the southern Sahel.¹⁰⁴

¹ Until the summer of 2014, however, the main types of small arms and light weapons consisted of assault rifles, machine guns and RPGs, as well as all kinds of ammunition.

Iraqi-origin assault rifles and Chinese rifles. This suggests linkages between ISIS fighters' sources of supply in West Africa and the Middle East, since these groups "used a common set of small arms unlike any previously documented in the sub-region. These include Iraqi-origin assault rifles and a batch of Chinese rifles manufactured in 2011 whose serial numbers interleave with matching rifles that Syrian Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) seized from IS[IS] fighters in Syria in 2015. These findings indicate that the Islamist groups responsible for the Sahelian attacks have a common source of supply or constitute a single cell, and point tentatively to possible links or commonalities of supply sources between Islamist fighters in West Africa and those operating in Iraq and Syria".¹⁰⁵

Little research has been done on the prices of the various types of firearms that are available across North Africa. The most comprehensive analysis of firearms prices in the region was published in 2017 and was focused on Libya. Table 3 gives an overview of the average asking price of small arms and light weapons. This study concluded that 'throughout all Libyan regions, pricing seemed to remain standard despite minor outliers (likely from package deals, items in high demand, or insincere offers both high and low)'.¹⁰⁶

3. Conclusions

Revolution and descent into civil conflict in Libya are key drivers of weapons circulation and instability in North Africa. While remaining a supermarket for arms along smuggling channels that have reached various groups from the western Sahel to the Middle East, drastically altering the supply of such weapons, Libya has de facto also acted as a sponge, and since 2015 has been creating new demand, 'reabsorbing' weapons for its internal conflict. Since 2014, outflows from Libya have also diminished due to international initiatives to tackle arms trafficking in North Africa and the Sahel. As for illicit flows to EU countries, the EUNAVFOR MED Operation Sophia monitors arms flows off the coast of Libya across the Mediterranean Sea. Despite large numbers of people being smuggled from Libya into Europe, significant flows of arms from Libya across the Mediterranean have not been detected.

Weapons' circulation patterns vary widely across countries, mainly due to the varied nature of the monopoly of force held by governments in the region. On the one hand, one finds effective government monopolies of force that are intent on fighting terrorist cells in urban or remote areas of the region (i.e. in Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia); while, on the other hand, one finds a situation like that in Libya, where force is scattered among different actors (city states, militias, tribal

coalitions, jihadist groups, etc.) and where legality is virtually absent and political legitimacy is also territorially disrupted. Finally, Egypt lies somewhere between these two extremes, with a military regime fighting in an actual war zone (i.e. the Sinai Peninsula), but also facing urban terrorist attacks.

The role of light weapons has long been underestimated; even in the Libyan case, external observers have been hoping that their extreme diffusion would entail a 'diffused deterrence effect'. This has not been the case: the pervasive presence of weapons has constituted the political capital of armed groups providing protection and extracting resources that has allowed them to play a political role in their own right in a complex mosaic of shifting alliances and territorial depredation. Libyan armed groups still engage in arms trafficking both within the country and across its borders, but arms trafficking is mostly embedded in regional and local networks and conflict economies.¹⁰⁷ In the absence of the capacity to properly manage fire-arms and ammunition, the risk of diversion also remains a major concern for national and international security agencies.

Table 3: Libya – Dataset pricing data

Weapon	Historical pricing data			Average dataset pricing
	2012	2013	2014	Mid-Nov. 2014–mid-Nov. 2015
AK-type rifle	(No data)	LYD 1, 1,100–1,300 LYD 1, 1,020–1,200	LYD 1,070–1,240	LYD 1,820 (112 examples)
AK-103 rifle	(No data)	LYD 1,700	LYD 1,500 LYD 1,400	LYD 1,840 (30)
FAL-type rifle	USD 500–800	LYD 2,050–2,130	LYD 2,070–2,730	LYD 3970
F2000 rifle	(No data)	(No data)	LYD 9,930	LYD 15,500 (3)
Browning HI-Power handgun	USD 2,400–3,200	(No data)	LYD 3,970	LYD 6,000 (17)
USP-handgun	(No data)	(No data)	LYD 5,000–6,000	LYD 7,300 (2)
SA vz. 61 Škorpion sub-machine gun	(No data)	LYD 1, 2,500	(No data)	LYD 2,010 (5)
RPG-7-type recoilless weapon	(No data)	LYD 1,020	LYD 2,000	LYD 6,500 (3)
7.62 x 54R mm	LYD 0.50	(No data)	(No data)	LYD 2.80 (6)
7.62 x 51 mm	LYD 0.50	(No data)	(No data)	LYD 2.70 (11)
7.62 x 39 mm	LYD 0.25	(No data)	LYD 1	LYD 1.80 (15)
7.62 x 45 mm	LYD 8+	(No data)	(No data)	LYD 6.20 (4)
9 x 19 mm	LYD 8	(No data)	(No data)	LYD 5.10 (14)

Source: Jenzen-Jones & McCollum (2017)

ENDNOTES

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- 2 There is a significant literature on “border economies” and illicit trafficking in North Africa and across the Saharan. Until the middle of the first decade of the 21st century, states in the North-African region did exert control on the flow of arms, but control could never be considered absolute (Scheele J. 2011 “Circulations Marchandes Au Sahara: Entre Licite et Illicite”. *Hérodote*, n. 142, pp. 143-162; Cole 2013 “Borderline Chaos? Stabilizing Libya’s Periphery”. In *Perilous Desert. Insecurity in the Sahara*, edited by F. Wehrey and A. Boukhars: 35–59. Washington DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace).
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- 30 Strazzari, Tholens 2014.
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