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COMBATING ARMS TRAFFICKING IN NIGERIA: POSSIBILITIES AND CONSTRAINTS

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Abstract
This paper will examined the issue of arms trafficking in Nigeria, analyzing the possibilities and constraints associated with combating this illicit trade. The proliferation of small arms and light weapons has posed significant challenges to national security, stability and development in the country. This chapter will explored the underlying factors contributing to arms trafficking and assesses the efforts made by the Nigerian government and international stakeholders. The chapter discusses the possibilities of addressing arms trafficking in Nigeria through enhanced law enforcement, intelligence sharing and border control measures. Strengthening the capacity of security agencies, such as the police, customs and immigration is crucial for effective interdiction and prosecution of arms traffickers. The chapter talks of the need to leveraging technology and modernizing arms trafficking systems which aid in identifying illicit arms transfers and tracing their origins. However, there numerous constraints which hinder the success of combating arms trafficking in Nigeria, Institutional weakness, corruption, limited resources and inadequate legislation contribute to the challenges faced by law enforcement agencies. Furthermore, the vastness of Nigeria's borders and the presence of ungoverned spaces complicated efforts to monitor and control the flow of arms. International cooperation is essential in addressing arms trafficking in Nigeria. There is the need to enhance collaboration with neighboring countries, regional organizations and international partners can facilitate information sharing, intelligence gathering and joint operations. This will address the root causes of arms trafficking, such as poverty, inequality and political instability. It is crucial in achieving long-term success in combating this illicit trade. This paper adopts a qualitative descriptive research design to examine the possibilities and constraints associated with combating arms trafficking in Nigeria. The paper relies on secondary sources of data, including textbooks, scholarly journal articles, government publications, policy documents, reports from international organizations, and relevant web-based materials. Data are collected through documentary review and analyzed using content analysis. The method enables the researcher to identify and examine key themes relating to the causes of arms trafficking, institutional challenges, law enforcement responses, international cooperation, and policy measures aimed at curbing the proliferation of small arms

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and light weapons in Nigeria. The study acknowledges limitations associated with reliance on secondary data, including issues of data availability, reliability, and the absence of primary stakeholder perspectives.

Keywords: Combating, Arms Trafficking, National Security, Constraints, Nigeria

Introduction

Arms trafficking continues to pose a severe global threat, undermining peace, security, and development across many regions. In Nigeria, where internal security challenges are already widespread, the proliferation of illicit small arms and light weapons (SALWs) has intensified violent conflict, facilitated terrorism, and fueled various forms of criminality including armed robbery, kidnapping, and cult violence. These consequences endanger civilian lives, disrupt governance, and significantly hinder national development. Nigeria's recent history underscores the destructive role of illicit arms in exacerbating conflict. From the sectarian crises in Plateau State during the 1990s and 2000s, to the rise in youth militancy and gang violence in the Niger Delta, and the religious and insurgent violence in Kaduna, Borno, and Adamawa States (Human Rights Watch, 2005; Sampson, 2012; Aniche, 2019). Small arms have consistently played a central role in escalating violence. More recently, clashes between herders and farmers now spreading from the Middle Belt to the southern states further illustrate the security risks posed by unregulated arms flows.

Several structural and geopolitical factors have deepened Nigeria's vulnerability. Its porous borders, geographic location at the intersection of West and Central Africa, and proximity to the Sahel an area rife with instability have made it a key transit and destination country in regional arms trafficking networks. As the most populous and economically significant country in West Africa, Nigeria's internal dynamics inevitably influence broader regional security patterns. The root causes of arms proliferation in Nigeria are complex and interwoven. They include political rivalries, competition over land and natural resources, ethno-religious tensions, and weak institutions. Scholars have also identified the politicization of ethnicity, electoral violence, and the emergence of terrorist groups such as Boko Haram as critical drivers of armed violence (Abdu, 2013; Ayuba & Okafor, 2015; Best & Van Kemedi, 2005;Ebimboere. 2016). These factors fuel demand for arms, while systemic corruption, poor law enforcement, and weak regulatory frameworks facilitate their supply.

Tackling arms trafficking in Nigeria requires a holistic, multi-pronged approach. Strengthening border security, updating firearms legislation, and enhancing the capacity of law enforcement agencies are fundamental starting points. In addition, efforts must be made to improve intelligence-sharing mechanisms, modernize surveillance technologies, and promote community-based conflict resolution initiatives. International and regional cooperation is also essential. Nigeria cannot address this transnational threat in isolation. Working with ECOWAS, the African Union, and global partners can bolster efforts to disrupt arms trafficking networks. Initiatives such as joint patrols, coordinated intelligence operations, and harmonized legal frameworks across borders can improve enforcement and close existing gaps.

Equally important is the need for long-term investment in good governance, justice

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reform, and socio-economic development. Reducing poverty, youth unemployment, and political exclusion will help address the root causes of violence and reduce the demand for illicit arms. Civil society organizations must also be empowered to raise awareness, monitor arms flows, and hold institutions accountable. This paper critically explores the prevalence, perception, and impact of arms trafficking in Nigeria. It assesses existing national efforts and the challenges they face including corruption, limited resources, and political inertia. By drawing comparative lessons from other nations, it aims to offer evidence-based strategies that can help Nigeria not only stem the tide of arms trafficking but also build a more secure, stable, and prosperous society**.**

Theoretical Framework

This paper is anchored on the State Fragility Theory. The theory explains how weak state institutions, poor governance, inadequate security structures, corruption, and limited capacity of government agencies create conditions that facilitate criminal activities, including arms trafficking. The theory emerged from studies on state failure and governance challenges, particularly in developing countries where governments struggle to maintain effective control over their territories and borders. According to Rotberg (2004), a state becomes fragile when it is unable to provide basic public goods such as security, law enforcement, political stability, and economic opportunities for its citizens. Fragile states often experience weakened institutional capacity, which undermines their ability to enforce laws, protect borders, and combat organized crime. In such environments, illicit networks exploit governance gaps to engage in illegal activities, including the trafficking of small arms and light weapons. The theory argues that when state institutions are weak, criminal groups can operate with minimal resistance. In Nigeria, challenges such as corruption, inadequate border surveillance, poor intelligence gathering, insufficient funding of security agencies, and political instability have contributed to the proliferation of illicit arms. These conditions create opportunities for arms traffickers to smuggle weapons across Nigeria's extensive land and maritime borders (Aning, 2007).

State Fragility Theory further posits that the effectiveness of efforts to combat transnational crimes depends largely on the strength of state institutions. Strong law enforcement agencies, effective judicial systems, accountable governance structures, and efficient border management mechanisms are essential for reducing the flow of illicit arms. Conversely, institutional weaknesses reduce the state's capacity to detect, intercept, and prosecute arms traffickers.

The theory is relevant to this paper because it provides a useful framework for understanding both the possibilities and constraints associated with combating arms trafficking in Nigeria. The possibilities lie in strengthening state institutions through improved law enforcement, enhanced intelligence sharing, technological modernization, and international cooperation. The constraints, however, stem from institutional deficiencies, corruption, inadequate legislation, resource limitations, and weak governance structures that continue to undermine anti-trafficking efforts. Therefore, State Fragility Theory offers an appropriate lens through which the paper examines the relationship between institutional capacity and the effectiveness of measures aimed at combating arms trafficking in Nigeria. The theory helps explain why illicit arms trafficking persists despite numerous national and international

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interventions and highlights the importance of institutional reforms in addressing the problem.The relevance of State Fragility Theory to this paper lies in its ability to explain the structural and institutional factors that facilitate arms trafficking in Nigeria. The theory emphasizes that weak governance, porous borders, corruption, and ineffective security institutions create opportunities for illicit arms networks to flourish. It also provides a basis for understanding how strengthening institutional capacity, improving border management, enhancing international cooperation, and promoting accountability can contribute to reducing the proliferation of arms and improving national security.

Methodology

The paper adopts a qualitative descriptive research design. It seeks to examine the issue of arms trafficking in Nigeria by analyzing the possibilities and constraints associated with combating the illicit trade. The paper is exploratory and analytical in nature, focusing on understanding the causes, consequences, challenges, and potential solutions to arms trafficking. The study relies on non-numerical data to analyze the phenomenon of arms trafficking in Nigeria. It emphasizes interpretation, explanation, and critical assessment of existing information rather than statistical analysis.The study employs secondary sources of data, including: Textbooks, Academic journal articles Governmentreports Policy documents, Web-based materials, Publications from international organizations and security agencies. Documentary research method is used. Information is gathered through the review of existing literature, reports, and published materials related to arms trafficking, national security, border management, and law enforcement efforts in Nigeria.Content analysis is the most appropriate analytical technique implied by the paper.

Literature Review

Arms trafficking remains one of the most significant threats to security and development in Nigeria. The proliferation of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW) has been closely associated with insurgency, terrorism, banditry, kidnapping, communal conflicts, and organized crime. Nigeria's strategic position within West Africa, combined with porous borders and weak regulatory mechanisms, has transformed the country into both a destination and transit hub for illicit arms. While scholars generally agree that SALW proliferation contributes significantly to insecurity, there is considerable debate regarding the relative importance of the factors that drive both the demand and supply of these weapons. SALW refer to weapons designed for individual or small-group use, including pistols, rifles, assault weapons, machine guns, grenade launchers, and portable anti-tank systems (United Nations, 2020). Their affordability, portability, and durability make them particularly attractive to criminal organizations, insurgent groups, and other non-state actors. The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) recognizes SALW proliferation as a major obstacle to regional peace and development, particularly in countries such as Nigeria where violent conflicts have become increasingly complex.

The literature identifies multiple factors contributing to the supply of SALW in Nigeria. One dominant explanation focuses on the country's extensive and poorly monitored borders with Niger, Chad, Cameroon, and Benin Republic. Waziri (2023) argues that these borders provide numerous entry points for traffickers, facilitating the movement of weapons into

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Nigeria. Similarly, Okeke and Oji (2013) contend that instability within the Sahel region has intensified transnational arms flows. While these arguments highlight important geographical vulnerabilities, they tend to overemphasize border porosity without adequately addressing the institutional factors that enable trafficking. Weak border surveillance alone cannot explain the persistence of illicit arms flows, particularly when corruption among security and customs officials frequently undermines enforcement efforts.

Indeed, corruption emerges as a competing explanation within the literature. Malami et al. (2021) argue that bribery, collusion, and political interference significantly weaken regulatory mechanisms designed to control arms movements. This perspective suggests that arms trafficking is not merely a consequence of weak borders but also a product of governance failures. Consequently, efforts that focus exclusively on strengthening border security may have limited impact unless accompanied by institutional reforms aimed at improving accountability and transparency. Another important supply-side factor is the spillover effect of regional conflicts. The collapse of state authority in Libya and the continuing instability across the Sahel have generated substantial quantities of surplus weapons that circulate throughout West Africa. Yahaya (2020) argues that transnational criminal networks have effectively exploited these conflicts to establish illicit supply routes into Nigeria. However, attributing arms proliferation solely to external conflicts risks overlooking domestic conditions that create receptive markets for these weapons. External supply sources become problematic largely because internal demand remains high.

On the demand side, insecurity represents one of the most significant drivers of weapon acquisition. As violent attacks by insurgents, bandits, and criminal groups have increased, many communities perceive state security institutions as unable to provide adequate protection. Aning and Abdallah (2013) argue that this security deficit encourages civilians to acquire firearms for self-defence. While such actions may provide short-term protection, they often contribute to a broader security dilemma in which rival groups respond by acquiring weapons of their own. Consequently, efforts to enhance personal security can unintentionally intensify insecurity at the community level.

The activities of Boko Haram and the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) have further increased demand for SALW. These organizations require a continuous supply of weapons to sustain insurgent operations and frequently acquire arms through smuggling networks, battlefield captures, and theft from security forces (International Crisis Group, 2021). Nevertheless, focusing exclusively on insurgent groups risks overlooking the broader social and economic factors that sustain demand. High levels of poverty, unemployment, and social exclusion create conditions in which armed groups can recruit members and expand their operations. As the United Nations Development Programme (2021) observes, socioeconomic deprivation increases vulnerability to radicalization and participation in violent activities.

Political factors also contribute significantly to SALW demand. Electoral violence has become a recurring feature of Nigeria's political landscape, with political actors often arming supporters and militias to gain strategic advantages. Onuoha (2019) argues that weapons distributed during election periods frequently remain in circulation long after political contests have ended, thereby

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contributing to criminal violence and communal conflicts. This observation highlights the important but often overlooked connection between political competition and arms proliferation. The interaction between demand and supply dynamics creates a self-reinforcing cycle. Rising insecurity generates greater demand for weapons among civilians, vigilante groups, and criminal organizations. This expanding demand creates profitable opportunities for traffickers, encouraging further supply. Increased weapon availability then facilitates additional violence, which in turn stimulates further demand. This cycle demonstrates that SALW proliferation cannot be understood solely through either supply-side or demand-side explanations. Instead, both dimensions operate simultaneously and reinforce one another.

Despite extensive research on the causes and consequences of SALW proliferation, significant gaps remain within the literature. Most studies focus on identifying drivers of arms trafficking rather than evaluating the effectiveness of existing interventions. Limited attention has been given to assessing the impact of the ECOWAS Convention on Small Arms and Light Weapons, the National Centre for the Control of Small Arms and Light Weapons, or recent border security initiatives. Furthermore, relatively little research has examined how community-based peacebuilding and economic development programmes might reduce demand for weapons. Addressing these gaps would contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of how arms trafficking can be effectively controlled.

The demand and supply dynamics of SALW in Nigeria are shaped by a complex interaction of border vulnerabilities, governance failures, regional conflicts, insecurity, political violence, and socioeconomic challenges. While existing literature has identified many of the factors contributing to arms proliferation, greater emphasis is needed on evaluating policy responses and understanding the relationship between supply and demand. Sustainable solutions will require a comprehensive approach that addresses both the sources of illicit weapons and the underlying conditions that create demand for them.

Overview of Arms Trafficking in Nigeria

The intensity and persistence of violent conflicts in Nigeria have been significantly amplified by the widespread availability and use of small arms and light weapons (SALWs). These weapons are both a cause and consequence of insecurity, enabling insurgent activities, organized crime, ethnic militancy, and political violence. According to a Premium Times report (2016), Nigeria is believed to host over 350 million SALWs, representing roughly 70% of the estimated 500 million weapons circulating in West Africa. The scale of arms proliferation in Nigeria is evident in the frequency of seizures by security agencies, the consistent use of firearms in violent crimes, and the devastating human and material costs. Onuoha (2011) identifies the sources of these weapons as diverse: locally fabricated arms, theft from government armories, cross-border smuggling by criminal syndicates, illicit importation by rogue importers, and direct supply from foreign entities including some multinational oil companies operating in the Niger Delta. A 2018 UNDP report estimated that West Africa harbors approximately eight million illegal SALWs, with Nigeria accounting for 5.6 million approximately 70%. These figures, though imperfect, highlight the alarming scale of the issue. Nigeria's borders land, sea, and air are notoriously porous.

DOI: https://doi.org/10.63725/jpsp.v14i1.19

As reported by Ojeme and Odiniya (2013), there are over 1,499 irregular and only 84 legal entry points into the country. These porous borders are routinely exploited by criminal networks to smuggle arms. Between 2010 and 2017, over 21.5 million weapons and rounds of ammunition were illegally shipped into Nigeria. Major seizures have occurred at the Lagos Port Complex and Tin Can Island Port, which together handle 75% of Nigeria's imports. For instance, in 2010, customs officials intercepted over 21 million rounds of live ammunition; in 2017, another 1,100 pump-action guns were confiscated. Arms also flow through Nigeria's inland waterways and international airports. The Lagoon, which connects Lagos to riverine communities, has become a major smuggling corridor. In 2022, a passenger arriving from Washington, D.C., was arrested at Murtala Mohammed International Airport with a firearm and 26 rounds of ammunition (Ogbolu, 2022). The regional fallout from the Libyan civil war (2011–2013) significantly increased the availability of military-grade weapons across the Sahel (Marsh, 2017). Hundreds of Tuareg fighters returned from Libya with anti-tank weapons, mortars, and machine guns, fueling insurgencies in northern Mali. This regional circulation of arms has created transnational networks linking armed groups across Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso, and northern Nigeria. In Nigeria's northwest, jihadi groups such as Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) and local bandits have begun to collaborate, creating a convergence of terrorism and organized crime. These groups often engage in arms trading, pointing to a sophisticated smuggling network stretching across the Sahel. Complicity by corrupt officials further complicates the situation. In May 2022, three Nigerian soldiers were arrested for supplying arms to bandits in Zamfara State (Saharareporters,2022).

On Nigeria's southern coast, arms trafficking are linked to separatist and militant groups. During the 2007–2008 Niger Delta crisis, ransom funds from kidnappings were used to procure weapons. Today, arms are being smuggled into separatist strongholds in southeastern Nigeria and southwestern Cameroon such as Abia, Imo, and Anambra States via maritime routes through the Gulf of Guinea. This has fueled secessionist movements like the Biafra campaign in Nigeria and the Ambazonia struggle in Cameroon. An emerging dimension of Nigeria's arms trafficking problem is the increasing involvement of women. Between December 2022 and February 2023, several female gunrunners were arrested in Zamfara for supplying arms to bandits (Sadiq&Ojewale,2023). In October 2021, a 30-year-old woman was arrested with 991 rounds of AK-47 ammunition (Olwafemi,2021). Another arrest in March 2022 led to the recovery of submachine guns and 400 rounds of ammunition (Ovat,2022). These cases highlight how economic hardship in northwest Nigeria is pushing women into the illicit arms trade. The Nigerian state continues to struggle with arms proliferation due to a combination of structural weaknesses, corruption, and geopolitical exposure. Despite efforts by national and international agencies, the complexity of trafficking routes and the embeddedness of arms in political and criminal economies make the problem difficult to solve.

Arms trafficking in Nigeria not only fuels violence but also undermines governance, accelerates state fragility, and threatens regional stability. A sustainable response must involve tightening border controls, reforming arms import regulations, rooting out corruption in security agencies, and strengthening regional cooperation. Without such comprehensive efforts, the proliferation

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of SALWs will remain a persistent threat to peace and security in Nigeria and West Africa at large.

With regards to the underlying causes for the high rate of proliferation of arms in Nigeria, Okunade (2017) avers that

'*even in the face of globalization and technological advancement, Nigerian borders aside from being largely porous, are often managed by limited personnel that is ill-equipped ,ill-trained and unmotivated to prevent cross-border crimes and to facilitate harmonious interactions between countries as a result of the mismanagement of these borders'.*

Beyond the shortcomings of security measures, Nigeria's socio-economic conditions serve as powerful enablers of the proliferation of small arms and light weapons (SALWs). As Weiss (n.d.) argues, the country's vast population of impoverished, disenfranchised, and undereducated youth provides a vulnerable pool for recruitment into insurgency and armed criminality. For many of these young people, engaging in violence becomes an alternative means of livelihood in the absence of viable economic opportunities. This points to a deeper issue systemic leadership failure, which has fostered an environment of persistent demand for SALWs. Key drivers of SALWs demand in Nigeria include high unemployment, endemic poverty, corruption, weak institutions, excessive militarization, and state-sponsored violence. The growing accessibility of these weapons has exacerbated violent crimes and conflicts, thereby undermining national security. The presence of SALWs empowers criminal elements to perpetrate various nefarious activities, threatening human security and disrupting socio-political and economic stability. The consequences are visible across all geopolitical zones nowhere in Nigeria is immune to the terror posed by both "known and unknown gunmen." Daily life has become fraught with fear, as citizens avoid markets, religious centers, schools, and farmlands due to the ever-present threat of armed violence.

These groups are well-armed, using a range of weapons including AK-47s, pump-action rifles, submachine guns, rocket-propelled grenades, and explosives. In response to this crisis, the Nigerian government has undertaken multiple initiatives both domestic and international to combat the illicit flow of SALWs. However, results have been mixed at best. On the international front, Nigeria ratified the UN Firearms Protocol in July 2004 and endorsed regional agreements such as the Bamako Declaration of 2000. These frameworks promote coordinated border control, intelligence sharing, and disarmament efforts across West Africa. Nigeria also supports the African Union's "Silencing the Guns" initiative under Agenda 2063. Domestically, the Nigerian government relies on the National Firearms Act of 1959 (amended in 1984) and has pushed forward several legislative bills aimed at regulating arms, including:

- The Control of Small Arms and Light Weapons Bill (2021)
- The Explosives Bill (2021)
- The National Commission for the Prohibition of Small Arms and Light Weapons Bill (2020)
- The National Commission on Small Arms and Light Weapons (Prohibition) Bill (2019)

These bills are designed to provide a robust legal framework for arms regulation, covering production, sale, and transfer.

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However, the duplication and overlapping objectives among these bills have delayed their enactment, undermining efforts to consolidate Nigeria's legal stance on SALWs. In a related effort, the National Centre for the Control of Small Arms and Light Weapons was established under the Office of the National Security Adviser. This initiative aims to centralize coordination in line with Article 24 of the ECOWAS Convention and bolster Nigeria's credibility in the global fight against SALWs. In 2019, the Nigerian government implemented a controversial land border closure with neighboring countries like Benin, Chad, and Niger. Though the policy aimed primarily at curbing smuggling and economic sabotage, it was also touted as a measure to stem illegal arms flows. However, former President Muhammadu Buhari later admitted the border closure failed to halt SALWs smuggling due in large part to porous borders, inadequate surveillance, and insufficient manpower. The ongoing herder-farmer conflict in Nigeria's North and Southwest regions further demonstrates how arms proliferation exacerbates insecurity. Armed herdsmen continue to displace farmers, diminishing food production and triggering widespread food insecurity. These herders are often equipped with advanced weapons far beyond the tools required for pastoralism.

In the Southeast, the Eastern Security Network (ESN), the paramilitary wing of the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB), has engaged in targeted attacks against security forces, reportedly resulting in over 200 police deaths between December 2020 and September 2021 (.Amnesty.org, 2021). As insecurity escalates, communities have begun adopting self-defense measures. Individuals and vigilante groups are arming themselves, sometimes with encouragement from government officials. For example, in 2021, Katsina State Former Governor Aminu Masari publicly urged citizens to defend themselves against bandits (Thisdaynewspapers,2021). This reactionary self-armament trend has deepened the arms crisis, as both criminals and civilians now compete in the same arms market. In one operation, Nigerian police seized 520 firearms, over 4,000 rounds of ammunition, and nearly 300 stolen vehicles from 297 suspects (Sanusi,2023). The National Commission for the Coordination and Control of the Proliferation of SALWs disclosed that African countries imported arms worth $1.9 billion, highlighting the continental scope of the problem (Omolaoye, 2023).

Furthermore, a 2022 report by the International Action Network on Small Arms and the International Peace Information Service estimated that over 6 million illegal firearms are currently in circulation in Nigeria. The report ranked Nigeria 16th globally and the only African country among the top 25 countries with the highest rates of civilian-held firearms. Alongside countries like South Africa, Sudan, Ethiopia, and Kenya, Nigeria is also among Africa's hubs for local SALWs manufacturing. Finally, the United Nations estimates that Nigeria holds approximately 70% of the 500 million SALWs in West Africa. This staggering statistic underscores the urgency for a more coherent, forceful response. Despite routine seizures and occasional destruction of illegal firearms, the steady influx and circulation of SALWs show no signs of abating.

Possibilities in Combating Arms Trafficking in Nigeria

The challenges posed by arms trafficking in Nigeria are complex and deeply entrenched, threatening national security and regional stability. Factors such as porous borders, weak enforcement mechanisms, corruption,

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and political complicity have created an enabling environment for the proliferation of small arms and light weapons (SALWs). Unfortunately, the Nigerian government's response has been largely reactive, focusing on managing the consequences of arms proliferation rather than addressing its root causes. To combat this escalating threat, there is an urgent need for a comprehensive, national security strategy that integrates both preventive and responsive measures. Central to this approach is the governance-security nexus the idea that improving governance and addressing socio-economic grievances can reduce the demand for weapons. Issues like widespread poverty, youth unemployment, political exclusion, and weak democratic institutions must be tackled as part of any long-term effort to curb arms trafficking.

This strategic response must go beyond reliance on kinetic force. While military interventions remain important, they offer only partial solutions. A truly "grand strategy" should leverage all instruments of national power diplomatic, economic, informational, and military across Nigeria's diverse regions and demographics. Technological tools such as drones, biometric systems, surveillance sensors, GIS mapping, and radar systems should be deployed strategically, particularly at key border points. These tools will enhance real-time intelligence gathering and complement physical border patrols. Furthermore, enhancing the operational capacity of security agencies is vital. This includes better funding, modern weaponry, training in asymmetric warfare, and strict monitoring of service weapons to prevent internal leakage. Inter-agency collaboration must also be improved. A Joint Security Task Force comprising the Nigerian Armed Forces, Police, Department of State Services (DSS), Customs, and Immigration must be established with a unified chain of command and information-sharing framework.

Legal reform is equally essential. Current firearms legislation, including the outdated Firearms Act of 1959, does not reflect the modern realities of arms trafficking. The government must prioritize the enactment of the National Commission Against the Proliferation of Small Arms and Light Weapons (Establishment) Bill, 2020. Once passed, this will provide the necessary legal framework and institutional capacity to combat illicit arms trafficking effectively.

Additional measures should include:

- A nationwide disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) program.
- Public awareness campaigns to educate youth on the dangers of illicit arms.
- Community-based conflict resolution initiatives to reduce communal violence and the demand for weapons.
- Periodic audits of national and service armories to ensure accountability.

Moreover, Nigeria must foster stronger regional and international cooperation. Arms trafficking is a transnational issue; therefore, intelligence sharing and joint operations with neighboring states and partners such as ECOWAS, INTERPOL, and the United Nations are crucial. Finally, a cultural shift is needed. Citizens must resist the urge to resort to self-help in response to insecurity. The government must restore public confidence by reclaiming its monopoly on the legitimate use of force and ensuring that justice is served swiftly and impartially.

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Political actors must be held accountable for arming thugs and fueling violence during elections. SALWs often outlive the elections they were acquired for, perpetuating instability long after ballots are cast. Addressing the scourge of arms trafficking in Nigeria demands more than isolated efforts; it requires a coherent, multidimensional strategy built on sound governance, robust enforcement, and inclusive development.

Constraints in Combating Arms Trafficking

The fight against arms trafficking in Nigeria faces formidable challenges rooted in a complex web of factors. From weak law enforcement and porous borders to the influence of corruption and persistent conflicts zones, the constraints are multifaceted One will delve into these obstacles, highlighting the intricate interplay of issues that hinders effective measures to curb the illicit trade of weapons within the country. Understanding these constraints is essential for developing comprehensive strategies to address and mitigate the impact of arms trafficking in Nigeria.

Corruption

Corruption within Nigeria's law enforcement agencies, particularly the police and military, has significantly compromised their effectiveness in maintaining law and order. Low salaries, poor motivation, and weak oversight contribute to a culture where bribery, extortion, and collusion with criminals are widespread. Reports frequently surface of officers demanding bribes to release suspects or ignore crimes. In some cases, security personnel have even leaked sensitive information to criminals, including terrorists, thereby sabotaging operations and emboldening other offenders. The judiciary, another pillar of national security, is not exempt from this rot. Bribery among judges is common, leading to delayed trials or the granting of bail to high-profile offenders. This erodes public trust and fosters a belief among criminals that justice can be bought. Such impunity perpetuates crime and deepens public disillusionment with the legal system.

A particularly alarming dimension of this corruption is its role in facilitating arms trafficking. Despite multiple interventions by the government and international partners, the illegal flow of weapons continues unabated. This is largely due to compromised border control and enforcement mechanisms. Security personnel at checkpoints and borders often accept bribes, allowing arms and ammunition to flow into the country with ease. Nigeria's porous borders especially those with Chad, Niger, and Cameroon have become major conduits for smuggled weapons. Arms trafficking fuels insurgency, criminal violence, and widespread insecurity. Between 2010 and 2017, an estimated 21.5 million weapons and rounds of ammunition were smuggled into Nigeria(Maritime Executive,2024). Research by the Institute for Security Studies identifies the country's seaports and waterways as key entry points, often enabled by collusion between corrupt officials and business interests.

The consequences are grave. In one instance, two police officers were arrested in 2017 for selling firearms to kidnappers and armed robbers (Thabit,2017). Such cases highlight how individuals entrusted with public safety can actively undermine it. Meanwhile, the judiciary often fails to prosecute traffickers effectively, either due to flawed investigations or judicial corruption, perpetuating a culture of impunity. Corruption also siphons resources meant for security. Funds allocated for surveillance, border control, and arms

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regulation are frequently misappropriated, leaving security agencies underfunded and ill-equipped. The Nigeria Police Force, Nigeria Customs Service, Immigration Service, and the Armed Forces have all been implicated in such practices, hampering inter-agency coordination and public confidence. Restoring security in Nigeria demands more than legislation or military interventions. It requires confronting corruption head-on through systemic reforms. Effective oversight, strict accountability, and transparency must be prioritized across all levels of government and law enforcement. Only then can public trust be rebuilt and the integrity of security institutions restored. Without decisive and sustained action, the cycle of corruption and insecurity will persist, threatening national stability and obstructing progress toward peace and development.

Porosity of Borders

Effective border management is vital to safeguarding national security. As Spencer (2007) aptly noted, “the border is the first line of a nation’s territorial integrity.” In Nigeria, however, the Boko Haram insurgency particularly in the North-East has been significantly exacerbated by the country’s porous borders with Cameroon (1,690 km), Niger (1,497 km), Benin (773 km), and Chad (87 km). While some of these terrains are mountainous or difficult to patrol, the consistent feature across Nigeria’s borders is their vulnerability to illegal crossings and transnational crime. The roots of Nigeria’s border challenges can be traced back to the colonial era. The arbitrary demarcation of African territories by colonial powers was not aimed at creating defensible national boundaries, but rather at asserting spheres of influence driven by economic and political interests. These borders often defined by geometric lines rather than cultural or ethnic realities divided cohesive communities and created administrative complications that persist today (James, 1989).

While this colonial legacy explains part of the problem, poor border governance in the post-independence era has significantly worsened the situation. As Okumu (2010) observed, "the high level of insecurity on African borders is largely due to the way they are administered and managed, and less to do with how colonialists drew them." In Nigeria, the presence of security personnel at border areas is minimal. Those deployed are often poorly trained, underpaid, and equipped with outdated tools, which severely limits their effectiveness. Compounding this is the neglect of border communities, which alienates residents and diminishes the government's ability to enlist local support against illicit activities. A revealing disclosure by former Minister of Interior, Abba Moro, highlighted that Nigeria has over 1,499 irregular (illegal) and only 84 regular (legal) entry routes. In Adamawa State alone, there are reportedly 25 illegal entry points from neighboring countries. These breaches in border control are routinely exploited by arms traffickers and insurgents. Consequently, Nigeria reportedly hosts over 70% of the estimated 8 million illicit weapons circulating in West Africa a statistic with dire implications for national stability.

The scale of small arms and light weapons (SALW) proliferation in Nigeria is evidenced by frequent seizures, their recurrent use in violent crimes, and the high casualty rates in conflict zones (Onuoha, 2011). Multiple factors contribute to this crisis: porous national borders, regional conflicts in Sub-Saharan and North Africa, a flourishing local arms industry, corrupt practices by security officials involved in gunrunning, and the absence of a robust

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regulatory and enforcement mechanism. These challenges have empowered non-state actors, weakened state control, and amplified insecurity across Nigeria. In a time of worsening economic hardship and political instability, the unchecked flow of illicit arms poses an existential threat to national cohesion. To address this, the Nigerian government must reclaim its monopoly over the legitimate use of force. This requires not only modernizing and professionalizing border security but also investing in local intelligence, community engagement, and regional cooperation. A strategic, well-funded, and corruption-resistant approach to border management is essential to curbing arms trafficking and restoring peace and stability in Nigeria.

Political Instability

Conflict-affected regions in Nigeria represent one of the most difficult challenges in the fight against the spread of small arms and light weapons (SALWs). Chronic instability, weak governance, and porous borders in these areas have created ideal conditions for the illicit arms trade. Armed groups exploit these vulnerabilities to sustain violence and consolidate power. In the North-East, terrorist organizations such as Boko Haram and the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) have capitalized on this environment to arm their fighters. Since 2009, these groups have launched deadly attacks on civilians, military personnel, and foreigners, using increasingly sophisticated weapons. The persistent availability of arms has prolonged Nigeria's counterterrorism efforts and destabilized entire communities.

In the North-West and North-Central regions, heavily armed bandits and kidnappers operate in remote, forested areas, routinely attacking villages, farmlands, and major roads. These criminals, driven by ransom and looting, have turned insecurity into an organized enterprise. The situation is so dire that foreign governments have issued travel warnings, advising their citizens against visiting northern Nigeria. The easy access to firearms has made armed crime a viable livelihood for disenfranchised youth. Many are recruited into gangs with promises of money, weapons, and protection. Abductions in Lafia and Kuje illustrate how criminal groups demand ransoms running into millions of naira, further normalizing violence as a means of survival(DailyTrust Newspapers, 2021).

Beyond insurgency and banditry, arms proliferation also undermines Nigeria's democratic processes. During elections, some politicians arm thugs to intimidate opponents and disrupt voting. These politically sponsored militias often operate with impunity, weakening democratic institutions and eroding public trust in electoral outcomes. Another dangerous dimension is the farmer-herder conflict, especially during harvest seasons. In the name of self-defense, some Fulani herders carry firearms to protect their cattle, which frequently results in violent clashes with farmers over destroyed crops. These incidents often lead to fatalities and extensive property damage, underscoring the need for targeted disarmament and conflict mediation in agricultural communities.

Cult-related violence in universities and polytechnics presents yet another front in this crisis. Rival cult groups, sometimes armed, engage in deadly confrontations and intimidate students and faculty. In some cases, politicians allegedly fund and arm these groups to serve as enforcers during elections, further entrenching the cycle of violence. Addressing the proliferation of illegal arms in Nigeria requires a multi-pronged approach. Solutions must include robust conflict resolution strategies,

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community-based policing, and stricter control over arms circulation, particularly in conflict-prone areas. Strengthening border security, enhancing intelligence gathering, and prosecuting political sponsors of violence are essential steps toward reversing this trend and restoring national stability**.**

Lack of resources

Arms trafficking remain a serious threat to Nigeria's national security, fueling terrorism, violent crime, and political instability. Despite repeated government efforts to curb the illicit flow of weapons, one of the biggest obstacles is the chronic under-resourcing of security and law enforcement agencies. Without adequate funding, modern equipment, or trained personnel, Nigeria struggles to effectively monitor its vast and porous borders. Most border posts lack essential surveillance technologies such as scanners, drones, and real-time tracking systems. This technological gap creates blind spots that traffickers exploit to smuggle arms into the country. Compounding the problem, outdated equipment and limited logistics restrict the mobility and responsiveness of border and security forces, leaving large areas virtually unguarded.

Human capital shortages further weaken the country's defense against arms trafficking. Many officers receive insufficient training, leaving them ill-prepared to handle sophisticated smuggling tactics or adapt to the evolving nature of illicit networks. Inter-agency coordination is also weak, with poor communication and limited data-sharing undermining joint operations and reducing the impact of security interventions. These gaps in resources and capabilities have severe consequences. Armed groups including terrorists, bandits, and politically backed militias take advantage of weak enforcement to acquire weapons and sustain violence. The resulting insecurity erodes public confidence in state institutions and threatens national stability.

To reverse this trend, Nigeria must make strategic and sustained investments in its security architecture. This includes upgrading border surveillance systems, expanding training and recruitment, modernizing equipment, and fostering inter-agency collaboration through integrated command and communication platforms. Without addressing these critical deficiencies, efforts to combat arms trafficking will remain fragmented, reactive, and ultimately ineffective.

Demand for Weapons

The persistent and growing demand for small arms and light weapons in Nigeria poses a fundamental challenge to efforts aimed at curbing arms trafficking. This demand is fueled by widespread insecurity including insurgency, communal violence, criminal activity, and political unrest which sustains a thriving black market for illicit weapons. In regions such as the North-East, North-West, and Middle Belt, groups like Boko Haram, ISWAP, and various bandit networks aggressively seek weapons to consolidate power and extend their reach. In the South-East and Niger Delta, separatist and militant movements maintain armed factions that further inflame regional instability. Compounding the problem, political actors have also fueled the arms trade by equipping thugs to intimidate opponents and disrupt elections.

The failure of state security forces to provide consistent protection has led many civilians to turn to self-armament. In rural communities affected by farmer-herder clashes and ethnic violence, as well as in urban centers grappling with cult-related unrest, owning a weapon is increasingly

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seen as necessary for survival. This normalization of civilian armament expands the market for traffickers and entrenches a culture of violence.

Tackling arms trafficking in Nigeria requires more than disrupting supply chains. The root causes of demand must also be addressed. This includes investing in local governance, implementing effective conflict resolution mechanisms, improving law enforcement presence, and expanding economic opportunities in marginalized regions. Programs such as disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR), along with community-based violence prevention, are crucial for reducing the perceived need for weapons. Without a strategy that targets both the supply and demand for illicit arms, Nigeria's cycle of violence will persist undermining national stability and thwarting peace-building efforts.

Lack of international Cooperation

Arms trafficking in Nigeria is not merely a domestic security concern, it is a transnational crisis fueled by porous borders, weak regional enforcement, and fragmented international collaboration. While Nigeria bears the immediate consequences ranging from insurgency and terrorism to organized crime the flow of illicit weapons often originates far beyond its borders. Weapons commonly enter Nigeria through a network of smuggling routes linked to conflict zones in the Sahel, black markets in North Africa, and broader trafficking networks across West and Central Africa. Despite the scale of the threat, Nigeria's ability to intercept and disrupt these flows is hampered by limited intelligence-sharing, weak diplomatic coordination, and misaligned legal frameworks with its neighbors.

Although regional frameworks such as the ECOWAS Convention on Small Arms and Light Weapons exist, implementation across member states remains inconsistent. Many countries lack the political will, technical expertise, or resources to enforce agreed protocols. Furthermore, Nigeria's engagement with global mechanisms like the Arms Trade Treaty (ATT) is often undermined by bureaucratic delays and underdeveloped enforcement systems. Traffickers exploit these institutional gaps taking advantage of loosely monitored borders, regulatory inconsistencies, and jurisdictional loopholes. In the absence of coordinated cross-border action, Nigerian authorities are left to confront a transnational threat with predominantly domestic tools.

Addressing this challenge requires Nigeria to deepen its engagement with regional and global partners. Priorities should include expanding joint border patrols, harmonizing legal frameworks, improving real-time intelligence exchange, and investing in regional enforcement capacity. Only through sustained multilateral cooperation can Nigeria hope to disrupt the international arms pipelines that continue to fuel its internal conflicts and threaten long-term stability.

Weak Legal Framework

Weak and outdated legal frameworks remain a critical obstacle in Nigeria's struggle to curb arms trafficking. Despite the escalating threats posed by the illicit proliferation of small arms and light weapons (SALWs), Nigeria's legal and institutional architecture has failed to evolve in step with the sophistication of modern trafficking networks. The primary legislation governing firearms the Firearms Act of 1959 remains largely unchanged, offering limited relevance to contemporary realities such as transnational smuggling, organized criminal syndicates, and the online arms trade. This

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legislative stagnation has created significant gaps in enforcement. Many existing laws lack clear definitions, streamlined procedures, and proportional penalties, thereby reducing their deterrent effect. For example, provisions for weapons tracking, end-user certification, and real-time data sharing are either absent or poorly implemented. Consequently, law enforcement agencies often operate with ambiguous mandates, overlapping jurisdictions, and limited legal tools, hampering their ability to investigate and prosecute offenders effectively. Further compounding the problem is the sluggish pace of legal reform and the apparent lack of political will to prioritize arms control legislation. Judicial inefficiencies marked by lengthy trials, case backlogs, and limited technical capacity to handle complex cases further weaken the system. In many instances, traffickers exploit these vulnerabilities, either escaping prosecution altogether or receiving inadequate sentences**.**

A modernized legal framework is urgently needed one that reflects the changing nature of arms trafficking, aligns with international conventions such as the ECOWAS Convention on SALW and the UN Firearms Protocol, and provides robust enforcement mechanisms. This should include digital registries, coordinated intelligence-sharing protocols, and clearly defined prosecutorial guidelines. Only through comprehensive and enforceable legal reforms can Nigeria disrupt the networks fueling its insecurity and build the institutional resilience needed to sustain long-term arms control.

Conclusion

Effectively addressing arms trafficking in Nigeria requires a comprehensive, multidimensional strategy that targets both the supply and demand dynamics of the trade. This challenge cannot be tackled by security forces alone; it demands sustained commitment and collaboration among government institutions, civil society, regional partners, and the international community. The proliferation of small arms and light weapons (SALWs) is both a symptom and a driver of deeper societal fractures. For many armed groups, violence becomes a vehicle for expressing grievances tied to marginalization, poverty, unemployment, and governance failures. These conditions, often exacerbated by decades of neglect and exclusion, create fertile ground for arms trafficking and organized violence. As a result, communities experience economic disruption, humanitarian crises, infrastructure destruction, and a decline in national productivity all of which severely undermine Nigeria's development trajectory.

A lasting solution requires more than military operations or reactive enforcement. What Nigeria needs is a national strategy rooted in the governance-security nexus one that addresses the structural causes of insecurity while strengthening the operational capacity of its security forces. Promoting good governance, ensuring equitable development, and restoring public trust in state institutions can help reduce the demand for weapons by addressing the root causes of conflict. Moreover, this approach must include mechanisms for inclusive dialogue, justice, and alternative conflict resolution methods. These non-violent tools, when combined with strategic military and law enforcement capabilities, can form the backbone of a resilient national security framework. In sum, building a secure and peaceful Nigeria requires not just controlling the weapons but transforming the conditions that make them desirable. Only through coordinated, inclusive, and sustained action can the cycle of violence and arms trafficking be broken.

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