

# Expanding Arsenals

## INSURGENT ARMS IN NORTHERN MALI

Despite a preliminary peace agreement in June 2013, armed violence persisted in northern Mali in 2014. The Malian army and secessionist rebels engaged in armed confrontation. Armed groups clashed in violent competition over resources and influence. Jihadists targeted national and international forces with roadside bombs and in suicide attacks. This chapter considers the multi-layered and often interconnected sources of insecurity in northern Mali in their historical perspective—with a specific focus on the origins and sources of arms and ammunition that fuel it.

**Northern Mali's security situation remained precarious towards the end of 2014.**

The chapter demonstrates that armed insurgency is not a new phenomenon in northern Mali, underscoring that it takes place against a background of complex competition between and within ethnic groups and tribes as well as networks that traffic drugs and other contraband. A notable aspect of the unresolved insurgency that began in 2012 and triggered international intervention in 2013 is the degree to which insurgent arms holdings have grown. In addition to small arms, their materiel includes larger-calibre weapons such as recoilless guns, auto-cannon, and rocket launch systems. Posing a previously unknown challenge in northern Mali, jihadists now follow an al-Qaeda-inspired agenda against 'Crusader' aggression and 'enemies of Islam'—with a view to establishing Islamic laws and institutions in the areas under their control. In this context, they make frequent use of improvised explosive devices at roadsides and near airstrips in northern Mali, not least in attacks against the Malian army, French forces, and UN peacekeepers.

The chapter finds that armed groups in northern Mali are better armed now than they were a decade ago, including with larger-calibre weapons. In particular, jihadists possess man-portable air defence system (MANPADS), which tend to be inoperable. Nevertheless, two MANPADS that French forces recovered from jihadists in northern Mali in 2013 were found to be fully operational despite rustic storage and poor handling. Much of the materiel used by insurgents was produced in the Soviet Union and China during the cold war era. But insurgents also possess more recently produced materiel, including ammunition produced in Bulgaria in 2011 and in China in 2010.



A woman walks down a demolished street in Gao, north-eastern Mali, following an attack by armed groups, February 2013. © Joel Saget/AFP Photo

Insurgents sourced much of their materiel from Malian stockpiles through capture on the battlefield, looting, and other forms of diversion. In May 2014, the Malian army and insurgents clashed in the town of Kidal in northern Mali. Routing the Malian army, insurgents reportedly captured several tonnes of arms and ammunition as well as 50 new 4×4 vehicles that the European Union had provided to the Malian army as part of its support for military training.

While far fewer in numbers, NATO-standard arms and ammunition are also present in northern Mali. They include Belgian- and Portuguese-produced assault rifles as well as Belgian-produced machine guns and ammunition. The source of some of this and other materiel is Libya, where arms and ammunition have been widely available since the dispersal of Qaddafi-era arsenals. Tribal links and established trade routes across the Sahara facilitate cross-border trafficking of arms and ammunition and their constant supply to northern Mali in trans-Saharan convoys of trucks and all-terrain vehicles—a modern version of the caravan trade. Supplies from Libya appear to include larger-calibre weapons as well as MANPADS. More limited quantities of ammunition may have been sourced in Algeria, Burkina Faso, and other states in the region. Research conducted for this chapter has not yielded evidence that any foreign state is supplying arms or ammunition to insurgents in northern Mali, including to al-Qaeda-linked actors who are under a UN Security Council embargo.

The findings suggest that a negotiated peace agreement between rebels and the Malian government is necessary to reduce violence over the long term. At the same time, and in light of the prominence of Malian stockpiles as a source of arms and ammunition for insurgents, the need for improvements to the army's physical security and stockpile management appears to be urgent. Measures should also be put in place to prevent weapons throughout the region from reaching northern Mali. Such efforts may require regional initiatives beyond the UN embargo on jihadists—which has been largely ineffective to date. This challenge is complicated by the fact that many of the border areas are controlled by non-state or semi-autonomous groups. Since falling out with secessionist rebels, jihadists have emerged as perhaps the most pressing security concern in northern Mali. Countering these groups will require dynamic responses from the international community. ■