



INSURGENCY, DISARMAMENT, AND INSECURITY IN NORTHERN MALI, 1990–2004

By Nicolas Florquin and Stéphanie Pézard

Introduction

Despite a ground-breaking approach to disarmament and peace, and a sustained engagement in regional and international small arms control initiatives, the proliferation of light weapons continues to threaten Mali's stability. In 1996 the 'Flame of Peace' ceremony in Timbuktu—which saw the symbolic incineration of 3,000 small arms—and the demobilization of some 12,000 ex-combatants formally marked the end of the 1990–96 Tuareg-Arab rebellion. Nevertheless, continued weapons trafficking, terrorist activity, and increased insecurity are reminders that the situation in northern Mali is still far from secure.

This chapter examines the roots of current small arms-related threats to Mali's internal stability. It documents how armed groups involved in the 1990–96 rebellion procured their armaments in an initially weapons-scarce environment. It also provides insights into how the groups managed and controlled their arsenals, and how levels of weapons supply and misuse may have shifted during the course of conflict. Finally, the chapter assesses the extent to which the disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) of Malian ex-combatants succeeded in re-establishing a climate of security in northern Mali, and how weapons used during the rebellion found their way into civilian and criminal stockpiles.

Available literature, as well as new field research conducted during the course of this project, informs the information and analysis contained herein. These include interviews and field research in Mali and Niger coordinated by

Mahamadou Nimaga for the Small Arms Survey in September 2004. The analysis also relies extensively on two-day focus group discussions with Malian ex-combatants that the Small Arms Survey organized in Bamako on 2–3 September 2004 with the support of the Malian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Firhouroun Mahamar Maiga, a former combatant of the Mouvement patriotique de Ganda Koy (MPGK) and now an active member of Malian civil society, travelled to Timbuktu, Gao, and Kidal in July 2004 to identify 25 potential participants. He then selected seven ex-combatants¹ based on their level of influence within particular armed groups and their ability to communicate in French. Discussions concentrated on what weapons are now available to armed groups, the role and traditional symbolism of guns, the use of small arms during combat, and the Malian DDR programme.²

Main findings are as follows:

- Since 1990, Mali has faced different degrees of armed violence perpetrated by insurgents and community-based militias involved in the 1990–96 Tuareg-Arab rebellion, as well as armed incursions undertaken by the Algerian Groupe Salafiste pour la prédication et le combat (GSPC) terrorist organization.
- At the outset of the insurgency, Malian armed groups relied almost exclusively on weapons captured during combat or seized from state armouries.
- Weapons and ammunition supply was of critical concern to Malian armed groups. Lack of weapons and ammunition forced them to undertake, at times, specific operations to seize or purchase material.
- Ammunition scarcity forced armed groups not to waste ammunition, thereby limiting the risk of collateral damage. Specific measures included setting assault rifles on single-shot mode and applying tough sanctions against combatants who wasted ammunition.
- As the conflict persisted, a number of weapons wound up in the hands of civilians and bandits who did not belong to armed groups. Weapons-trafficking networks, which had operated since the 1930s, expanded their reach and intensified.

- Failure to collect ammunition during DDR coupled with a widely available supply of weapons coming into Mali from West Africa's conflict hot spots have contributed to continued weapons proliferation in the north. Given recent GSPC incursions and the broader context of persistent inter-tribal tensions, this poses a serious threat to regional security.

Small arms in the insurgency (1990–1996)

Historical background

Frustration among nomadic Tuareg and Arabs who had long sought greater autonomy from Mali and Niger ignited the 1990–96 rebellion in the north. In 1963–64, the army defeated an earlier uprising, forcing rebel leaders into exile in Algeria and Libya. From the mid-1960s to the early 1980s, the worsening drought in the Sahel inspired additional numbers of Tuareg refugees to join guerrilla groups. A number of exiles subsequently volunteered and received training from the section general command of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine and during the 1980s' Libyan campaign in Chad (Lecocq, 2004). They also founded the Front populaire pour la libération du Sahara arabe central (later Armée de libération du Nord du Mali), an organization seeking independence for northern areas of Mali and Niger. In 1988, the Malian section split from its Nigerien counterpart to form the Mouvement populaire de libération de l'Azawad (MPLA) (Humphreys and ag Mohamed, 2003, p. 19). Under President Moussa Traoré's regime, government repression in the north led the MPLA to plan a new rebellion, initially scheduled for 1992 or 1993.

Following the end of the 1980s' oil boom, subsequent economic downturn, and the defeat of Libya's President Qadafy in Chad in 1986, Tuareg immigrants became increasingly unwelcome in Libya, which led a number to return home. The Malian army, informed of rebel activity and plans to launch a rebellion, harassed and arrested returnees in Gao and Kidal in May 1990 (Lecocq, 2002, p. 231). This increased pressure prompted rebels to launch early attacks on Malian government posts in June 1990, propelling the rebellion two years ahead of schedule. At the time, some experts believed numbers of insurgents to be relatively small at an estimated two hundred.³ Reports pinned Malian army personnel at about 7,000-strong (Heyman, 2000).

The first six months of the rebellion consisted of a series of successful, well-planned rebel attacks, which eventually forced the government to recognize that the insurgents would not be easily defeated. By the end of 1990, they numbered an estimated 2,000⁴ to 3,000 men (Humphreys and ag Mohamed, 2003, p. 20). On 5 and 6 January 1991, negotiations were held in Tamanrasset, Algeria (Lecocq, 2002, p. 236). The Tamanrasset Accords provided for more decentralization and the recognition of greater autonomy for the north and the integration of rebel combatants into the Malian army. The Accords were never applied, however, because two months later a popular uprising toppled the signatory Traoré government. A new round of negotiations led to the signing of the National Pact in April 1992. By then, the rebels had split into four movements based on tribal and clan affiliation: the Mouvement populaire de l'Azawad (MPA), the Front Islamique Arabe de l'Azawad (FIAA), the Front populaire pour la libération de l'Azawad (FPLA), and the Armée révolutionnaire pour la libération de l'Azawad (ARLA).

Failure to implement the National Pact, and internal divisions within the rebel movements, led to bitter internal fighting between armed groups, which in turn contributed to rampant insecurity and the creation in 1994 of the MPJK: an armed militia composed mainly of sedentary Songhoy and tacitly supported by the Malian army. Throughout 1994, unprecedented ethnic tensions and violence erupted between the army and the MPJK on the one hand, and rebel movements on the other. Unrest gradually ceased after Songhoy and Tuareg community leaders initiated a series of local peace and reconciliation initiatives, which led to a number of agreements between the different parties. These included the 27 March 1996 Flame of Peace ceremony in Timbuktu, and the demobilization of some 12,000 ex-combatants (Boukhari, 2000; Kivimaki, 2003). In 1999, the government also initiated further decentralization and increased autonomy for northern Mali (Lecocq, 2004).

Overcoming weapons scarcity⁵

At the outset of the rebellion Malian insurgents possessed few weapons. Some researchers even suggest that the MPLA initiated the uprising with a single AK-47 (Humphreys and ag Mohamed, 2003, p. 3). Indeed, rebels reportedly relied primarily on knives during the first series of attacks

(Humphreys and ag Mohamed, 2003, p. 3). During the opening six months of the rebellion, the primary aim of insurgents was to seize weapons, ammunition, petrol, cars, and food (Lecocq, 2002, p. 232). In its first attack on a government post in Tidaghmene on 29 June 1990, the MPLA captured a dozen assault rifles, while in a subsequent attack in Ménaka MPLA fighters netted approximately 500 weapons, including 124 assault rifles (Humphreys and ag Mohamed, 2003, p. 3).

Rebel arsenals largely comprised weapons seized and captured from Malian army stockpiles. This assertion is supported by the fact that the groups' weapons were primarily of Russian and Chinese origin (see Table 2.1), as Mali benefited from Soviet support during the 1970s and 1980s (Heyman, 2000, p. 460).⁶ Consequently, weapons such as the FN CAL Belgian assault rifle and its successor the FN FNC, which rebels purchased in small numbers in Mauritania, proved of little use because they required NATO-type ammunition (5.56 × 45 mm calibre). Such ammunition was unusual—and therefore hard to find—in Mali.

The Malian army also reportedly provided arms to the self-defence units that emerged in response to the Tuareg rebellion, later forming the MPGK (K. Keita, 1998, p. 20). Like their Tuareg counterparts, they counted among their ranks soldiers who had deserted from the Malian army (Lecocq, 2004) and had brought their weapons with them (Poulton and ag Youssouf, 1998, p. 71; K. Keita, 1998, p. 20; Baqué, 1995). Some soldiers also sold their weapons to MPGK combatants during the rebellion.

Broadly speaking, the rebel and MPGK arsenal included AK-47s, rifles, pistols, and a few grenade launchers, machine guns, and mortars (Poulton and ag Youssouf, 1998, pp. 116–117). The more detailed arsenal presented in Table 2.1 illustrates the overall scarcity of modern weapons, as well as the lack of light weapons (heavy machine guns, for instance) and light weapons ammunition (see also Table 2.2). Cartridges of 12.7 mm were more difficult to find than smaller calibres, limiting the use of weapons such as the Russian DShk or the Chinese Type 77 heavy machine guns. The most difficult type of ammunition to find, however, was that used for mortars and rocket-propelled grenade launchers (RPGs). This was because Malian armed forces possessed only a small number of these.

Table 2.1 Small arms and light weapons used by Malian armed groups during the rebellion (1990-1996)

Small arms (country of manufacture, years of production or service)	
Revolvers	Arminius Model 10 (Germany, 1895–1945), Astra 357 Police (Spain, 1980–), Manurhin MR73 (France, 1973–), Nagant: Russian Model 1895 (Belgium and the Russian Federation, 1895–1950)
Pistols	Astra A-50 (Spain, 1960–), Beretta Model 1931 (Italy, 1931–45), Beretta Model 1934 (Italy, 1934–45), Beretta M 951 (Italy, 1953–82), Browning 1903 (Belgium, 1903–), Browning 1910 (Belgium, 1910–), Browning high-power Model 1935 (Belgium, 1935–), MAB PA-15 (France, 1975–90), Makarov (Russian Federation, 1952–), Sauer M38H (Germany, 1938–45), Stechkin (Russian Federation, 1951–75), Tokarev (Russian Federation, 1930–)
Rifles and carbines	Mannlicher-Carcano TS (Italy, 1891–1918), MAS M1e 1936 (France, 1936–55), Mauser Karabiner 98k (Germany, 1935–45), Mosin-Nagant rifle (Russian Federation, 1892–1950)
Assault rifles	Chinese-type 68 rifle (China, 1970–), FN Cal (Belgium, 1966–75), FN FNC (Belgium, 1979–), FN Minimi (Belgium, 1982–), Heckler and Koch G3 (Germany, 1964–), Kalashnikov AK-47 (Romania and the Russian Federation, 1947–), Type 56 (China, 1958–), Simonov SKS (Russian Federation, 1946–)
Light machine guns	12.7 mm Gepard M2 (Hungary, 1994–), PK (Russian Federation, 1964–), RPK (Russian Federation, 1955–), 7.62 mm RPD (Russian Federation, 1962–)
Light weapons (country of manufacture, years of production or service)	
Heavy machine guns	DShK (Russian Federation, 1938–80), Type 77 (China, 1980–)
Portable anti-tank guns*	RPG-7
Mortars*	60 mm and 81/82 mm

* *In contrast with the other weapon entries, ex-combatants provided no further data which would help determine the country of manufacture and years of production or service of both mortars and portable anti-tank guns.*

Sources: Focus group discussions with Malian ex-combatants, Bamako, 2–3 September 2004. Country and date of production or service from Hogg (2002).

Army seizures and illegal sales by soldiers and Malian officers were the main sources of arms supply during the rebellion. Malian armed groups, by and large, lacked the material support of foreign governments during the conflict period. While some Tuareg fighters received training (but no arms⁷) from Libya in the 1980s (M. Keita, 2002, p. 9), such support had ceased by the time the rebellion broke out (Lecocq, 2004).

Many of the older revolvers, pistols, and carbines, notably the Mauser 98K, the MAS 36, and Berettas, as well as the Manlicher Carcano carbine, were typically a 'family possession'. Indeed, arms trafficking in the Sahara has historical depth far surpassing the rebellions. Mausers and Manlichers had been the object of a lively arms trade ever since the 1930s in the Sahara; it intensified during the 1940s and again during the Algerian war of independence, the end of which saw the release of large quantities of small arms. Colonial and early independence military and police forces used the MAS-36, which was favoured by rebels during the 1963 uprisings. In the 1980s, exiled fighters in Libya procured arms at the market at the Passe de Salvador on the Chad-Libya-Algeria border.⁸

Outside support for Malian armed groups provided only a minor weapons source during the rebellion, and was primarily limited to diaspora communities living in neighbouring countries. The Songhoy in Nigeria and Ghana reportedly provided arms to the MPGK (K. Keita, 1998, p. 20, fn. 54) and paid individual 'transporters' to carry and deliver weapons to members of the group in Gao. The Songhoy Diaspora in Benin, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Niger, and Nigeria offered active financial support (Lecocq, 2002, p. 273).

Tuareg and Arab groups dispatched special expeditions to buy weapons on the illicit market in Mauritania. Arms were transported by caravans of camels and donkeys or, when available, four-by-four vehicles. During the early stages of the rebellion, these trafficking expeditions were relatively insignificant and limited to traditional smuggling routes. Over the years, however, networks were expanded to include other countries in the region (including states in the Mano River Union basin). A number remain active today and contribute to continued weapons proliferation throughout the north.

Finally, rebels and the MPGK also seized a number of weapons from the civilian population. It is worth noting that, while reports indicate the existence of illicit workshops producing craft hunting rifles, shotguns, and pistols in Mali (Nimaga, 2003; Kante, 2004), Malian armed groups appeared to rely primarily on industrially produced weapons.

*Storage, use, and misuse*⁹

During the first years of the rebellion, the scarcity of weapons and ammunition forced Malian armed groups to maintain a certain discipline when it came to accounting for, distributing, and using weapons and ammunition.

When it came to weapons storage, each base appointed one person to be responsible for the systematic account of weapons as well as their distribution to combatants. The base kept rigorous watch over all small arms except when under a state of alert, in which case all combatants received a weapon for the purposes of defence. All arms acquired during combat became the *de facto* property of the movement—although it appears that not all operation leaders declared the totality of weapons seized to base commanders, but kept some for themselves. When a new recruit brought his personal weapon, it automatically became the property of the group.

Leaders provided combatants with different weapons and set amounts of ammunition depending on the type of operation they participated in (major attacks, ambushes, and sabotage operations) and the role assigned. Table 2.2 illustrates how, in the context of the Malian rebellion, different weapon categories had specific uses. Each combatant was responsible for arms provided, and the base kept records of his name and the number of his weapon. Group members who were not trusted or were poor shooters were not given weapons for fear that they would steal or misuse them.

The amount of ammunition commanders distributed depended on the type of weapon carried: combatants carrying a machine gun would need on average six belts of 30 cartridges each; an automatic pistol came with two magazines; and an RPG came with a maximum of two shells. Other selection criteria determining what weapons were most appropriate for combatants depended on their physical strength and the necessity not to overload them.

Table 2.2 Weapon uses in the Malian context, by category

Weapon category	Operation type	Advantages	Flaws
Revolvers and pistols	Small operations (looting, kidnapping, carjacking), guarding prisoners	Easy to conceal, availability of ammunition	None
Rifles and carbines	Short operations	Availability of ammunition, accuracy	Not resistant to long- and/or high-intensity combat
Assault rifles	Short and long operations, medium- and high-intensity combat	Availability of ammunition	Some makes (such as Chinese Type 56) not resistant to long operations
Light machine guns	Short and long operations, high-intensity combat	Availability of ammunition	Some models (DSHK/M, M2, M2A1) require a spare barrel
Heavy machine guns	Long operations, high-intensity combat	Firepower	Scarcity of ammunition
RPGs	Combat with armoured vehicles	Firepower	Short range, scarcity of ammunition
Mortars	Urban warfare, destruction of armoured vehicles and buildings	Firepower	Weight, lack of mobility, scarcity of ammunition

Sources: Focus group discussions with Malian ex-combatants, Bamako, 2–3 September 2004.

The way combatants wielded their weapons was heavily conditioned by the relative scarcity of arms and ammunition, and the need to avoid shortages. When out of ammunition, armed groups set their rifles on single-shot mode and undertook specific operations to replenish their stocks. When undertaking small assaults against police stations, for instance, they sent only their best shooters in order to waste as little ammunition as possible. They also systematically retrieved the weapons and ammunition of those who fell during

fighting. Some members of the group were specifically detailed to pick up dead and wounded combatants on the battlefield as well as all weapons and ammunition that could be recuperated.

The relative scarcity of ammunition also explains why armed groups enforced strict rules governing when and on what grounds combatants could open fire.¹⁰ Shooting in the air, for instance, amounted to wasting ammunition and was punished with sanctions that included temporary isolation (and being prohibited from going on mission), head shaving (considered a sign of shame), or even the infliction of severe pain.¹¹

On the misuse of weapons against civilians, it is interesting to note that in the early stages of the rebellion rebels actively sought civilian buy-in for their cause—the 1960s rebellion had lacked popular support and gave the rebels the image of ‘Tuareg bandits’ acting on their own. Strategies included making the location of their bases public and distinct from civilian areas in order to prevent the Malian army from harassing the population (Lecocq, 2002, p. 235). The rebels also applied tough sanctions (similar to those applied to group members who had wasted ammunition) against fighters who mistreated civilians. Furthermore, there are no reports of Malian armed groups using or recruiting child soldiers, although many combatants had entered Libyan training camps at a very young age.¹²

Tuareg war ethics and relative discipline in the deployment of weapons may explain why the human toll in the first years of the Malian rebellion was in no way comparable to that of armed conflicts in Liberia or Sierra Leone. Another explanation might be that the rebellion was motivated by political ideals, whereas the wars in Sierra Leone and Liberia were largely economic wars of plunder. It appears, however, that to a great extent Malian fighters applied their own rules of engagement (see also Lecocq, 2002, ch. 4). Although aware of the Geneva Conventions, as non-state actors they did not feel particularly bound by them.

As the conflict wore on and the rebels split into factions, in 1994 reports began to trickle in of the MPGK, FIAA, and MPLA looting and engaging in inter-tribal killings of civilians (Lecocq, 2002, pp. 275–76, citing various press and Amnesty International reports; see also Humphreys and ag Mohamed, 2003, p. 27). Group commanders argue that, while the core of each group con-

tinued to follow a strict code of honour, a number of bandits claiming to be affiliated with insurgents took advantage of the rebellion to loot villages.¹³ While this period did coincide with rising banditry (Humphreys and ag Mohamed, 2003, p. 26), divisions within the rebel movement itself over hierarchy and representation of the various clans overshadowed initial political goals, making abuses against civilians more likely.

The resulting inter-communal conflict and insecurity led to bitter fighting and unprecedented atrocities between the MPGK and the army on one side and the various rebel movements on the other. These ceased only after community leaders engaged in a series of local peace initiatives at the end of 2004 (Lecocq, 2002, pp. 265, 275–76). Overall, the rebellion led to 2,500–3,000 deaths,¹⁴ about 200,000 Malian refugees (Refugees International, 2003), and 50,000 IDPs (WFP, 1997).

Disarmament and persisting insecurity (1996–2004)

The Malian DDR or the limits of a success story

With local peace initiatives under way, the government, with the support of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), organized a donor roundtable in Timbuktu in July 1995. During the meeting, the government presented its Programme de normalisation et de réhabilitation du Nord, which set out an ambitious plan to demobilize and reintegrate ex-combatants and to provide development support for the northern region through the Programme d'appui à la réinsertion économique des ex-combattants du Nord Mali (PAREM). The meeting also put in place a DDR Trust Fund, which, by late 1997, had attracted USD 10 million in donor monies (see Poulton and ag Youssouf, 1998).

The disarmament effort relied on the voluntary surrender of arms. Ex-combatants handed in their weapons in exchange for the opportunity to participate in community development programmes. At the Timbuktu Flame of Peace a total of 3,000 weapons were destroyed in front of 10,000 spectators—a precursor for many such ceremonies now held around the world. Designed as a grandiose national event, the Flame of Peace was designed to symbolically mark the end of unrest, the reintegration of former rebels into the



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Meeting of Tuareg, Songhoy and other leaders to discuss peace and disarmament after the rebellion.

Malian nation, and the reconciliation of nomadic (Tuareg and Arab) and sedentary (Songhoy) communities (Poulton and ag Youssouf, 1998, pp. 120–22).

A total of 12,000 former group members¹⁵ benefited from Mali's DDR programme between 1995 and late 1997, when the programme officially ended.¹⁶ About 2,400 joined the Malian armed forces, while 9,530 others received three separate sums of 100,000 CFA Francs (approximately USD 200)¹⁷ to start up small businesses. These demobilization subsidies were sometimes supplemented by micro-credit loans designed to fund specific individual projects (Boukhari, 2000). The overall Malian peace process successfully halted the rebellion, dismantled the various armed groups involved, and laid the foundations for sustainable peace. Reintegration, in particular, was a relative success story. By 2000, 90 per cent of reintegrated former combatants were still earning a living from employment acquired during reintegration (Boukhari, 2000).

Questionable, however, was the efficacy of the disarmament component apart from the symbolic reconciliatory role of the Flame of Peace (see, for instance, Kopel, Gallant, and Eisen, 2003). Former combatants of all sides argue that only a fraction of the 3,000 weapons burnt in the Flame of Peace were actually used during the rebellion; some people handed in old, hardly usable weapons; others who had never fought at all proffered weapons for the express purpose of qualifying as ex-combatants and thus benefiting from the reintegration programme.¹⁸

As with most DDR programmes, many weapons did not find their way to the Flame of Peace. Some ended up in other conflict zones, with the borders of countries such as Mauritania, Sierra Leone, and Côte d'Ivoire particularly permeable to arms traffickers.¹⁹ Continued insecurity and distrust in the peace process led many ex-combatants and civilians to retain their weapons. A number of community leaders, in particular, remain heavily armed—undoubtedly to 'wait and see' whether hostilities resume. Relative disillusionment with the peace process and vestiges of tension between communities also led a number of civilians to keep weapons.²⁰ Most of the bandits who operated under the guise of fighters and took advantage of the rebellion to rob civilians and loot villages kept their arms and continued to pursue their illicit activities.

Also worth noting is that the disarmament process resulted in only small amounts of ammunition being collected. Weapons were typically handed in with only one cartridge, and most people kept their ammunition and stored it in a safe place.²¹ The Flame of Peace itself did not include the destruction of any ammunition, which was removed from the weapons prior to burning for security reasons (Poulton and ag Youssouf, 1998, p. 120, fn. 11). For former combatants and civilians, remaining stockpiles of ammunition became an incentive to acquire corresponding weapons—a trend that effectively negated efforts to disarm.²²

In addition to DDR, the government of Mali, with support from Belgium, conducted a weapons-for-development programme from December 2000 to June 2003.²³ Project personnel collected and destroyed 850 weapons, 12,548 rounds of ammunition, and 230 grenades (GoM, 2003). Five communes (Léré, Dianké, Soumpi, Tienkour, and Diré) in the Timbuktu region participated in the programme, and received community funds to establish small development projects as incentives for turning in their arms. All 850 weapons collected were destroyed during ‘mini-flames of peace’ in Léré (9 July 2001), Diré (10 July 2001), and Soumpi (3 May 2003) (GoM, 2003).

Gun smuggling and insecurity

Despite the peace and disarmament process, the northern part of Mali, which borders Mauritania, Algeria, and Niger, is still plagued with gun trafficking and persistent insecurity. Small arms are now widely available. Anecdotal evidence suggests that every family in the region owns at least one weapon,²⁴ with some families and community leaders reportedly stockpiling several dozens of arms.²⁵

Although not a small arms-producing country, Mali appears to have become a recipient country for arms smuggled from elsewhere in the region. Recent examples include the 25 November 2004 seizure of a 32-weapon cache, including heavy machine guns and automatic rifles, located in a Bamako store (Maliweb, 2004). Since the rebellion, the number of networks and smuggling routes for small arms has increased. During the early 1990s, Mauritania and Nigerian criminal gangs were the main suppliers of illegal weapons to northern Mali, along with other syndicates that favoured older

smuggling routes originating in Chad. Due partly to networks established during and after the rebellion, illegal arms supply has now become more diversified, with weapons originating from several of West Africa's conflict zones, and trafficking networks stretching all the way to Sudan.²⁶

The main sources of smuggled weapons today include Mauritania, Algeria, Niger,²⁷ as well as Sierra Leone, Liberia, and Guinea (Maliweb, 2004). In Guinea, for instance, the most significant seizures of small arms in 2004 occurred on the border with Mali (Milner, 2004). From February to September 2004, authorities regularly confiscated minor shipments of small arms (typically six to twelve AK-47s) on the border en route to Bamako (Milner, 2004). Within Mali, sources include stolen stockpiles belonging to the Malian army (Maliweb, 2004), weapons sold by corrupt members of Malian security forces,²⁸ and craft production (Kante, 2004). The River Niger is a common route for arms smuggling: arms are packed into waterproof sacks attached under boats. The amount of traffic on the river and the ease with which some customs officers accept bribes explain the relative impunity smugglers enjoy (Boukari, 2000).

Continued underdevelopment, combined with the lack of administrative and governmental control over the Sahelian desert, has contributed to an increase in banditry in northern Mali. This part of the country has traditionally been a haven for bandits and smugglers—the difference being that they are now well armed owing to the remnants of the rebellion and persistent small arms proliferation (Nimaga, 2004). Criminal groups and bandits (*coupeurs de routes*) operating in northern Mali usually target property (such as cattle), vehicles, and individuals.

Criminality has hampered development prospects for the local population and proven problematic for the work of some humanitarian organizations. In 2004, vehicles belonging to the Malian Red Cross and the Canadian NGO Solidarity, Union, Cooperation (SUCO) were hijacked (IRIN, 2004b). Kidnappings have also taken place; for example, in December 2004 kidnapers abducted two men from Qatar and demanded a ransom of USD 375,000 from a Qatari prince in exchange for their release. The Malian army eventually liberated the two hostages (Sylla, 2005).

Alongside banditry, and sometimes concealed by it, are a number of inter-tribal small-scale armed conflicts fought over local natural resources and supported by local political and tribal leaders. These include the Arab-Kunta conflict and skirmishes between Fulani and Daoussahak herdsmen in north-east Mali. The former has been particularly active since 1999, resulting in the deaths of 40 people that same year (Boukhari, 2000). In September 2004, 16 Arabs and Kuntas imprisoned for their involvement in previous violence escaped from the Gao prison. Renewed fighting five days later ended with 13 people dead (IRIN, 2004b). In a separate incident in June 1999, ex-rebel Ibrahim Bahanga of the Iforgoumoussen clan violently abducted the entire electoral committee during communal elections following previous fights with rival clans at the Tejerert wells in 1997 and 1998. This move was the latest episode in a land dispute that has been simmering since the 1910s and was marked by violent clashes in 1948 and again in 1973.²⁹

Increasing unrest has triggered an arms race between communities attempting to stockpile more and more weapons for protection, which in turn is fuelling mutual suspicion and further insecurity.³⁰ One particularly worrying trend is not only the increasing proliferation of small-calibre weapons, but also the wider availability of larger, more damaging arms such as mortars and RPGs.³¹ Young people, even those uninvolved with banditry, are showing an increasing tendency towards arming themselves—sometimes heavily.³² Increasing numbers of armed civilians raise prospects of renewed inter-tribal fighting. Insecurity has led a number of northern region inhabitants to ask the government to reinstall, at least temporarily, the military posts dismantled following the 1991 peace process (Boukhari, 2000; IRIN, 2004b; ICG, 2005b, p. 19).

Small arms and terrorist activity in the Sahel

Insecurity and weapons availability have raised concerns that northern Mali in particular, and the Sahel in general may become a hub for North African terrorist activity. These fears have been justified by the recent activities of the Algerian Groupe salafiste pour la prédication et le combat (GSPC). The Sahel region is particularly attractive to terrorist groups such as the GSPC owing to the lack of state control over large areas of desert and the permeability of borders



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A Tuareg herdsman guarding his cattle with an AK-47 in the remote and insecure area north of Gao.

between Algeria, Mali, Niger, and Chad—both of which facilitate the movement of non-state groups and arms smuggling.

In 1997, Hassane Hatab broke with the Algerian *Groupe islamique armé* (GIA) and formed the GSPC. The GSPC aims to overthrow the Algerian government and establish an Islamic state in its place (BBC News, 2003). It is estimated to include between 300 (BBC News, 2003; ICG, 2005a)³³ and 4,000 fighters (Schanzer, 2003). Confronted with Algerian army repression and recruitment problems at home, some members have fled to northern Mali and Niger under the leadership of the group's second commander, Abderrazak El Para (RFI, 2005; Nimaga, 2004).

It is important to distinguish GSPC activity from 'Dawa', which is made up of Pakistani and Bangladeshi preachers who undertake Islamic missionary work in order to promote their vision of Islam in Mali and elsewhere (Anderson, 2004). Dawa preachers are members of the Muslim grass-roots movement *Tabligh I Jama'at* and dedicate a year of their lives travelling and preaching their movement's principles abroad. Although the *Tabligh I Jama'at* is fundamentalist, it explicitly refrains from engaging in politics and does not preach or practise violence. However, its teachings are perceived by some to be a stepping-stone towards a more violent and radical form of Islam, and the *Tabligh I Jama'at* is believed by some to have connections to the GSPC (Anderson, 2004, quoting the US ambassador to Mali). In Mali, this religious movement has been very active in enrolling Tuareg men, and more particularly, former leaders of the Tuareg rebellion (ICG, 2005b, pp. 9, 17). Following 9/11, the Malian government sought to extradite all Pakistani preachers active in the country.³⁴

The GSPC, on the other hand, has been listed as a terrorist organization by the US Department of State since 2002 and is on the US Treasury Department's list of organizations whose assets should be blocked (US Department of the Treasury, 2001; BBC News, 2003; US Department of State, 2004). The GSPC is believed to have links with Al-Qaeda³⁵ and released a statement on 11 September 2003 in which it declared its allegiance to Taleban leader Mullah Omar (Schanzer, 2004; ICG, 2005b, p. 1, fn. 9). The United Nations lists the group under Security Council Resolution 1333 alongside several organizations believed to be associated with Usama Bin Laden (UNSC, 2000, para. 8c; UN, 2001).

In 2001 an Al-Qaeda operative, Imad Alwan (also known as Abu Mohamed), met with Mokhtar Belmokhtar, a smuggler of cigarettes, arms, and cars based in southern Algeria and linked with GSPC,³⁶ to establish a possible zone of operations for Al-Qaeda in northern Mali and Niger. Such a zone was to constitute a haven for Al-Qaeda operatives fleeing Afghanistan and the Middle East (Nimaga, 2004). The two men allegedly planned a truck bomb attack against the US embassy in Bamako (Belida, 2003; Debat, 2003; Smith, 2004). Other individuals, such as the London-based Sheikh Omar Mahmud Muhammad Othman (also known as Abu Qatada), are considered associated with both the GSPC and the Al-Qaeda network (Australia, 2005). GSPC units in northern Mali were made up of Algerians from the Batna region, northern Algeria, and were not local Saharan peoples from either Algeria or Mali. This, however, does not exclude the possibility that some local inhabitants sympathetic to Salafist ideas have later joined the GSPC.³⁷

The GSPC made headlines in early 2003 when it kidnapped 31 tourists in the Sahara desert. The Algerian army freed one group of hostages during a raid, but the other 14 (nine Germans, four Swiss, and one Dutch) were held captive for five months in the Taoudenit area of northern Mali. It was during the hot season and one German died of heatstroke.³⁸ Germany allegedly paid a ransom of USD 6 million for the release of the hostages (Smith, 2004; Anderson, 2004).

The group reportedly used the ransom money to purchase four-wheel drive vehicles and arms, including mortar launchers, RPGs, and surface-to-air missiles (Duteil, 2004; Smith, 2004). The GSPC also bought weaponry with money obtained through other types of smuggling, such as cigarettes (Boukhari, 2000). In early 2004, the GSPC's arsenal included automatic pistols, AK-47 assault rifles, heavy machine guns (12.7 mm and 14.5 mm calibres), RPGs, and surface-to-air missiles (Smith, 2004). Many weapons were purchased in Mali and allegedly smuggled from neighbouring countries such as Mauritania,³⁹ Sierra Leone, Liberia, and Chad (Nimaga, 2004). Weapons leaked from Malian security forces were another likely source.⁴⁰

In March 2004, 35 GSPC members of Algerian, Nigerien, Malian, Chadian, Mauritanian, and Burkinabe origin, including El Para, crossed from Mali into northern Niger and Chad, where they clashed with Nigerien and Chadian armed forces. They lost about twenty men and left behind them 14.5 mm anti-

aircraft guns, six mortars, AK-47s, and other weapons and ammunition (IRIN, 2004a; *Le Quotidien d'Oran*, 2004; Smith, 2004). Nigerien authorities reported that GSPC members had been collaborating with Nigerien armed bandits and were 'using hideouts and caches left over from the Tuareg rebellion' (IRIN, 2004a).

This incident was a serious setback for the GSPC. Chadian rebels belonging to the Mouvement pour la démocratie et la justice au Tchad (MDJT) captured several survivors, including El Para. Libya, acting as an intermediary, eventually handed El Para over to the Algerian authorities in October 2004 after months of speculation and captivity in Chad (RFI, 2005). Despite El Para's capture, recent reports suggest that the GSPC is still active in the regions of Gao and Timbuktu. Mokhtar Belmokhtar was reportedly seen north of Timbuktu in late August 2004 heading a convoy made up of six vehicles and about 40 men (*Le Quotidien d'Oran*, 2004, citing AFP). Since then, however, he is reported to have returned to Algeria to launch new GSPC-inspired attacks in the Biskra region (ICG, 2005a).

The US government considers GSPC activity serious enough to include the Sahel in its global counter-terrorism activities. Through the so-called Pan Sahel Initiative (PSI), which was allocated USD 6.25 million in 2004, the US State Department provides training and material support (vehicles, radios, Global Positioning System [GPS] equipment) to police and military forces in Mali, Niger, Chad, and Mauritania (Smith, 2004; ICG, 2005b, p. 30). Mali is the largest recipient of the PSI, with USD 3.5 million (Harris, 2004b). The initiative, launched in 2002, assists countries in 'detecting and responding to suspicious movements of people and goods across and within their borders' (US Department of State, 2002) and is designed to improve cooperation between participating nations.

PSI headquarters are located in a base near Gao, in northern Mali (Ulmer, 2004). Two hundred American soldiers have been assigned to Mali and Mauritania. In Mali, the 1st Battalion, 10th Special Forces group from Special Operations Command Europe (SOCEUR) is training 120 local troops (Harris, 2004a). These Special Forces training teams also operate in Bamako and Timbuktu (Ulmer, 2004; ICG, 2005b, p. 30). In collaboration with the Malian customs and the Algerian army, they undertake patrols, which in early 2004

were supported by reconnaissance planes (Smith, 2004).⁴¹ The US forces also provide intelligence support. In December 2003 Malian forces acting on US intelligence were able to intercept a group of about 100 GSPC fighters who had just crossed the Malian border in 20 Toyota pick-ups (Harris, 2004b).

In March 2004, shortly after the Madrid bombings, the United States European Command (EUCOM) convened a meeting with the defence chiefs of seven nations of the Maghreb and Sahel (Algeria, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, Morocco, Niger, and Tunisia) in addition to Senegal. The purpose of this meeting was to promote pan-Saharan counter-terrorism cooperation in what could become the Trans-Saharan Counter Terrorism Initiative (TSCTI) (Cherfaoui, 2004; Powell, 2004; Whitmore, 2004). TSCTI would be a continuation of PSI—extended to a larger number of countries and involving closer collaboration (ICG, 2005b, p. 30). EUCOM has requested USD 125m for the entire region over five years (Smith, 2004).

Between 1995 and 2003, the Malian government, with support from France, created five 'Unités Méharistes', or camel brigades, and recruited men from among the local population to patrol the northern desert regions. Each unit is composed of 100–140 men equipped with modern equipment such as GPS (*Frères d'Armes*, 2003, pp. 32–33). Mali and Niger are also participating in a series of bilateral meetings on border security and the circulation of goods and people between the two countries (Nimaga, 2004). It is also worth noting that Mali, Niger, Algeria, and Mauritania have adopted regional measures such as the creation of a bureau for intelligence gathering in Tamanrasset, Algeria, in addition to the establishment of bilateral initiatives that aim to improve border monitoring (ICG, 2005b, p. 30).⁴²

Conclusion

What was previously a relatively weapon-scarce area, forcing armed groups involved in the rebellion to gear much of their early military strategy towards capturing military equipment, has become an integral part of regional gun smuggling networks. While underdevelopment and traditional banditry are certainly contributing factors, the legacy of the 1990–96 rebellion also deserves attention.

Had the conflict been settled by the 1991 Tamanrasset agreement, at a time when the rebel movement was strongly united and disciplined and weapons relatively hard to come by, today's picture might look very different. It was only as the rebels faced internal fractures that insecurity and inter-tribal conflicts appeared, pushing the region into unprecedented levels of insecurity and violence in 1994. This insecurity, in turn, created a favourable environment for the proliferation of armed bandits and smugglers operating in the area.

While the Malian peace process successfully dismantled rebel movements and put a stop to bitter inter-tribal violence, it did not restore security in northern Mali. The remoteness of the area, which makes law enforcement a particularly challenging and resource-consuming task, and instability in neighbouring countries help explain the situation. Additional contributing factors lie in Mali's DDR experience and, more specifically, in the shortfalls of the disarmament process. The failure to collect ammunition, in particular, served as an incentive for ex-combatants and civilians alike to acquire new weapons. Persisting insecurity also contributed to the armament of civilians for protection purposes.

Following recent GSPC incursions, increased international attention should be welcomed. It remains unclear, however, whether local populations, whose limited wealth comes primarily from international smuggling and transport, will appreciate the presence of US troops. The majority of the population is unfavourably disposed towards the GSPC, whose presence is feared. On the other hand, US actions that disrupt traditional smuggling activities might also lead to anger and motivate locals to volunteer for GSPC recruitment.⁴³

Continued weapons proliferation and insecurity in northern Mali can have explosive outcomes. Infiltrations by the Algerian GSPC terrorist movement and renewed tribal tensions between Kuntas and Arabs should serve as a reminder that, nearly a decade after the Timbuktu ceremony, northern Mali requires continued attention and support if peace is to be sustainable.

List of abbreviations

ARLA	Armée révolutionnaire de libération de l’Azawad
DDR	Disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration
EUCOM	United States European Command
FIAA	Front Islamique Arabe de l’Azawad
FPLA	Front populaire de libération de l’Azawad
GIA	Groupe Islamique armé
GPS	Global Positioning System
GSPC	Groupe Salafiste pour la prédication et le combat
IDP	Internally Displaced Person
MPA	Mouvement populaire de l’Azawad
MDJT	Mouvement pour la démocratie et la justice au Tchad
MPGK	Mouvement patriotique de Ganda Koy
MPLA	Mouvement populaire de libération de l’Azawad
PAREM	Programme d’appui à la réinsertion économique des ex-combattants du Nord Mali
PSI	Pan Sahel Initiative
RPG	Rocket-propelled grenade launcher
SOCEUR	Special Operations Command Europe
SUCO	Solidarity, Union, Cooperation
TSCTI	Trans-Saharan Counter Terrorism Initiative
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNOWA	United Nations Office for West Africa

Endnotes

- 1 Groups represented included: Mouvement populaire de l’Azawad (MPA, one representative), Front Islamique Arabe de l’Azawad (FIAA, two representatives), Armée révolutionnaire de libération de l’Azawad (ARLA, one representative), Front populaire de libération de l’Azawad (FPLA, one representative), and Mouvement patriotique de Ganda Koy (MPGK, two representatives). Ex-combatants asked that their names be kept confidential.
- 2 Methodological note: All participants had important responsibilities within their respective groups, the majority being former unit commanders. M. Mahamar Maiga moderated the meeting, which three Small Arms Survey staff members attended (Nicolas Florquin, Stéphanie

Pézard, and Christina Wille). Mahamadou Nimaga from the Malian Ministry of Foreign Affairs was present during opening and closing sessions but left during substantive discussions to guarantee the participants the free space necessary to speak on sensitive issues. The Small Arms Survey team and M. Mahamar Maiga jointly put together a list of questions to be addressed during each thematic session. The participants received a copy of these questions at the opening of the meeting and were given a chance to review and comment upon them. During focus group sessions each participant had the opportunity to answer the questions.

- 3 Written correspondence with Robin Edward Poulton, International Consultant and Senior Research Fellow at the United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research, February 2005.
- 4 Written correspondence with Baz Lecocq, Zentrum Moderner Orient, Berlin, July 2004.
- 5 Unless stated otherwise, this section is based on focus group discussions with Malian ex-combatants, Bamako, 2–3 September 2004.
- 6 Despite the weapon losses suffered by the Malian Army in the course of the conflict, there are no reports confirming Mali's acquisition of new small arms during this period (Heyman, 2000, pp. 461–62). While such procurement cannot be ruled out, it appears that the Malian military relied to a great extent on arms the country acquired from the Soviet Union and Eastern Bloc states in the 1970s and 1980s, as well as stocks remaining from the French colonial era.
- 7 Written correspondence with Baz Lecocq, Zentrum Moderner Orient, Berlin, January 2005.
- 8 Written correspondence with Baz Lecocq, Zentrum Moderner Orient, Berlin, January 2005.
- 9 Unless stated otherwise, this section is based on focus group discussions with Malian ex-combatants, Bamako, 2–3 September 2004.
- 10 Malian groups' tight control over ammunition seems to contrast with what happened elsewhere in the region. In Liberia for instance, the availability of ammunition (in particular light weapon ammunition) among armed groups coincided with large numbers of indiscriminate killings of civilians (see, for instance, HRW, 2003).
- 11 One such technique involved making cuts and depositing salt on the wounded scalp, which had the effect of making the body swell.
- 12 Written correspondence with Baz Lecocq, Zentrum Moderner Orient, Berlin, January 2005.
- 13 Ex-combatants further argued that these loose criminal groups represented a threat for rebel groups to the extent that they attracted some combatants who then deserted the rebel ranks, often taking their weapon with them. Furthermore, ex-combatants expressed frustration at being wrongly associated with criminals in the eyes of the population.
- 14 According to Klute (2001, Annex: 'Opferzahlen'), the general breakdown of deaths is as follows: at least 500 were army soldiers; about 150 came from the different rebel movements; at least 300

- civilian victims were among the Songhoy population; and at least 1,500 victims were Arab and Tuareg civilians. These numbers refer to those who died during the fighting and directly as a result of the use of weapons. They do not include those people who died later (as a result of their injuries) or indirectly (due to a lack in food or medicine), and the actual number of direct conflict deaths is likely to be somewhat less than 4,000.
- 15 Lode (1997, ch. 8) estimates the number of people who benefited from the DDR programme to be around 10,000.
 - 16 Phone interview with Colonel Sirakoro Sangaré, President of the Malian National Commission on Small Arms, 22 March 2005.
 - 17 If their project was not proceeding, they were refused the second payment. PAREM coordinators in Gao and Kidal, for instance, complained in 1996 that former combatants saw the premiums as theirs by right to be used how they wished. Some used their first payment to marry instead and had nothing to show when claiming their second payment, which they subsequently did not receive. Written correspondence with Baz Lecocq, Zentrum Moderner Orient, Berlin, January 2005.
 - 18 Focus group discussions with Malian ex-combatants, Bamako, 2–3 September 2004.
 - 19 Focus group discussions with Malian ex-combatants, Bamako, 2–3 September 2004.
 - 20 Focus group discussions with Malian ex-combatants, Bamako, 2–3 September 2004.
 - 21 Focus group discussions with Malian ex-combatants, Bamako, 2–3 September 2004.
 - 22 Focus group discussions with Malian ex-combatants, Bamako, 2–3 September 2004.
 - 23 Phone interview with Colonel Sirakoro Sangaré, President of the Malian National Commission on Small Arms, 22 March 2005.
 - 24 Confidential written correspondence with several international researchers with expertise on northern Mali, February 2005. A recent report notes that ‘Every head of family throughout the Kidal area is said to have an automatic weapon, hardly surprising given that many participated in the rebellion and most still participate to some extent in nomadic herding, where the threats of theft of livestock or attack by wild animals are ever-present.’ (ICG, 2005b, p. 19).
 - 25 Focus group discussions with Malian ex-combatants, Bamako, 2–3 September 2004.
 - 26 Focus group discussions with Malian ex-combatants, Bamako, 2–3 September 2004.
 - 27 Focus group discussions with Malian ex-combatants, Bamako, 2–3 September 2004.
 - 28 In particular, weapons are said to have ‘disappeared’ from the Sévaré and Kidal armouries. Confidential written correspondence with several international researchers with expertise on northern Mali, January and February 2005.
 - 29 Written correspondence with Baz Lecocq, Zentrum Moderner Orient, Berlin, January 2005.

- 30 Focus group discussions with Malian ex-combatants, Bamako, 2–3 September 2004.
- 31 Interviews with Malian ex-combatants (ARLA, FIAA, and MPA), Bamako, 3 September 2004.
- 32 Focus group discussions with Malian ex-combatants, Bamako, 2–3 September 2004.
- 33 Estimates of Anderson (2004) are even lower (between 50 and 80 fighters).
- 34 Written correspondence with Baz Lecocq, Zentrum Moderner Orient, Berlin, January 2005.
- 35 UN (2001); Schanzer (2003); Nimaga (2004); Australia (2005).
- 36 BBC News (2003); Nimaga (2004); Abdoun (2004); Ghioua (2004); *Le Quotidien d'Oran* (2004).
- 37 Written correspondence with Baz Lecocq, Zentrum Moderner Orient, Berlin, January 2005.
- 38 Written correspondence with Baz Lecocq, Zentrum Moderner Orient, Berlin, January 2005, and Connolly (2003).
- 39 Focus group discussions with Malian ex-combatants, Bamako, 2–3 September 2004.
- 40 Confidential written correspondence with international researchers with expertise on northern Mali, January and February 2005. A recent report by the International Crisis Group mentions that 'Several officers at the Malian army garrison were punished in 2003 when commanders from Bamako discovered that most of its armoury had been sold' (ICG, 2005b, p. 19).
- 41 Written correspondence with Baz Lecocq, Zentrum Moderner Orient, Berlin, January 2005.
- 42 As this book was going to press, the United Nations Office for West Africa (UNOWA) convened a meeting of officials from Mali, Mauritania and Niger, as well as key development partners, on 19–20 April 2005 in Timbuktu. The intention of the meeting was to devise an integrated, cross-border approach to tackle the wide variety of pressing issues facing these border zones, including the cross-border nature of security problems and the relationship between lack of security and lack of development in these areas.
- 43 Written correspondence with Baz Lecocq, Zentrum Moderner Orient, Berlin, January 2005.

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