

UNGOVERNED SPACES AND THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF SMALL ARMS PROLIFERATION IN NORTHERN NIGERIA

Peter Luke Oyigebe¹, Abdullahi Mu'awiyya²

^{1,2}Department of Political Science, Federal University Lokoja, Kogi State, Nigeria

Corresponding author: peter.oyigebe@fulokoja.edu.ng

Cite this article as: Oyigebe, P. L. and Mu'awiyya, A. (2026). Ungoverned spaces and the political economy of small arms proliferation in Northern Nigeria. *Journal of Interdisciplinary Postgraduate Research*, 1(2), 245–253.

Abstract

This paper examines the intricate relationship between ungoverned spaces and the political economy of small arms proliferation in Northern Nigeria. Drawing on qualitative analysis of secondary sources, the study argues that ungoverned spaces, understood as territories marked by limited state presence and competing structures of authority, operate as critical enablers of armed violence by furnishing sanctuary for trafficking networks, operational bases for insurgents and bandits, and arenas in which the state monopoly on legitimate force is actively contested. A political economy framework is adopted to interrogate both the supply side, encompassing external sources from Libya and the wider Sahel, internal fabrication by artisanal blacksmiths, and leakages from security force arsenals, and the demand side, comprising resource conflicts, insurgency, criminal banditry, and communal self defence. Historical analysis traces arms circulation from pre-colonial gun societies through colonial regulation to post-independence militarisation, demonstrating that contemporary patterns are embedded in much longer processes of state formation and frontier neglect. The findings indicate that a substantial share of the illicit weapons in circulation entered the country through Sahelian corridors following the 2011 collapse of the Libyan state, with traffickers exploiting more than four thousand kilometres of porous borders of which only a small fraction of official crossings are effectively manned. The humanitarian consequences include mass displacement, livelihood destruction, and acute food insecurity affecting millions, while the political consequences encompass the erosion of state authority and the emergence of alternative governance structures that tax, adjudicate, and police. The study concludes that durable responses require comprehensive measures addressing both supply and demand, including regional cooperation, border management reform, investment in rural livelihoods, and the rebuilding of accountable governance in long neglected peripheries.

Keywords: ungoverned spaces; small arms and light weapons; political economy; Northern Nigeria; arms trafficking; banditry; insurgency; border security

1. Introduction

The nexus between ungoverned spaces and the proliferation of small arms and light weapons constitutes one of the most pressing security challenges confronting contemporary Nigeria, and the northern expanse of the country in particular. Rooted in the political economy of violence, the phenomenon has reshaped the security architecture of the region, converting what were once localised communal tensions into a dense web of armed conflicts with national and transnational reach. Grasping this relationship demands a careful examination of how territories with thin state presence have become at once incubators of armed violence and indispensable nodes in the illicit arms trade that sustains it.

The concept of ungoverned spaces gained prominence within global security discourse after the events of September 2001. The RAND Corporation describes ungoverned territories as areas in which states face substantial difficulty establishing control, including failed or failing states, poorly controlled land or maritime borders, and regions within otherwise viable states where central authority does not reach (Rabasa et al., 2007). Yet, as Fisher and Mercado (2014) argue, this state-centric framing fails to capture the reality that such spaces are rarely devoid of governance and are instead characterised by competing authority structures. Clunan and Trinkunas (2010) similarly contend that, in an era of softened sovereignty, numerous sites of authority discharge governance functions where state presence is limited or contested. These refinements are particularly germane to Northern Nigeria, where vast borderlands and remote territories have witnessed the emergence of hybrid arrangements involving traditional authorities, vigilante groups, and, increasingly, armed non-state actors.

The geography of the region renders it acutely susceptible to these dynamics. Northern Nigeria shares extensive and porous borders with Niger, Cameroon, Chad, and Benin, amounting to more than four thousand kilometres of land boundaries that remain inadequately monitored. As Bala (2025) notes, these weak frontiers have long served as conduits for arms trafficking, insurgent infiltration, and transnational crime. Research on West African borderlands indicates that such spaces facilitate not only legitimate cross-border herding, farming, and trading but also human smuggling, gun running, terrorism, and money laundering. The free movement protocol of the Economic Community of West African States, while economically beneficial, has been exploited by criminal networks that traverse these boundaries with impunity.

The supply of weaponry cannot be understood without reference to regional conflict. The 2011 collapse of the Libyan government under Muammar Gaddafi left vast arsenals unguarded, with the United Nations estimating that the country held as much as two hundred thousand tons of munitions at the time (ReliefWeb, 2012). These weapons flowed southward through the Sahel into Nigerian markets via smuggling networks operating through Niger Republic. A 2025 assessment notes that arms trafficking drives roughly eighty per cent of violent incidents in the Northwest (UNODC, 2025), while reporting attributed to the Small Arms Survey estimates that a large majority of the illicit weapons in circulation originated from post-conflict Libya (Leadership, 2026). This external supply intersects with local fabrication and security force leakages to produce a robust market that one official

described as resembling rice on the market in its accessibility (Tactics Institute, 2024).

The demand side is equally consequential. Across the north, multiple drivers fuel an appetite for small arms. Resource conflicts between farmers and herders, aggravated by climate-induced desertification and the dramatic shrinkage of Lake Chad, have transformed manageable disputes into armed confrontations. Oriniowo (2025) observes that the once-seasonal migration of pastoralists has hardened into semi-permanent southward resettlement, frequently without frameworks to manage new patterns of cohabitation. The Boko Haram insurgency and its Islamic State West Africa Province splinter have sustained a protracted conflict that, by one estimate, has caused approximately three hundred and fifty thousand deaths in the Northeast, directly or indirectly (UNDP, 2021). More recently, sophisticated criminal banditry in the Northwest has created fresh demand, with kidnapping for ransom, cattle rustling, and illegal mining turning bandit groups into major consumers of illicit weapons.

This study therefore seeks to unravel the political economy of small arms proliferation within Northern Nigeria's ungoverned spaces, examining how the interaction of state weakness, regional conflict, local grievance, and criminal enterprise has produced a conflict system that perpetuates violence and undermines human security. By interrogating both the supply-side dynamics of trafficking and the demand-side drivers of acquisition, the research contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how ungoverned spaces function as sites of competing authority, and how policy might more effectively address the root causes of armed violence.

2. The Concept of Ungoverned Spaces

Ungoverned spaces have become a central analytical category in security studies, especially for understanding conflict across the Global South. A foundational definition characterises ungoverned territories as areas where states face significant challenges in establishing control, encompassing failed or failing states, poorly controlled borders, and regions within otherwise viable states where central authority does not extend (Rabasa et al., 2007). A subsequent defence report expanded this to include places where the state is unable or unwilling to extend control, effectively govern, or influence the local population owing to inadequate capacity, insufficient political will, legitimacy gaps, or the presence of conflict (Department of Defense, 2008).

Scholarly critique has nonetheless questioned the state-centric character of these definitions. Fisher and Mercado (2014) argue that such conceptualisations rest on anachronistic assumptions that treat sovereign states as the primary organised entities of geopolitics, implying that stability is maximised only when the state governs. This view, they contend, is flawed, because the notion of ungoverned space fails to capture the possibility of alternative forms of governance. Clunan and Trinkunas (2010) offer a more nuanced framework, arguing that numerous sites of authority provide governance functions where state presence is limited or contested. These alternative structures may include traditional authorities, religious institutions, customary legal systems, community-based organisations, and armed non-state actors who provide security and dispute resolution in exchange for loyalty or resources.

Rabasa et al. (2007) further distinguish between types of ungoverned space, noting that some areas are essentially ungoverned through state absence, while others experience contested governance where multiple actors vie for control, or exploitable governance where state institutions exist but are captured by criminal or insurgent networks. This refinement illuminates Northern Nigeria, where remote territories function less as anarchic voids than as complex ecosystems in which emirate structures, vigilante groups, and armed actors compete and cooperate to provide functions the state has failed to deliver (Oriniwo, 2025). The critical distinction lies not in the absence of governance but in the absence of legitimate, accountable, and rights-respecting state governance.

Emerging literature on hybrid governance in West Africa enriches this analysis by conceptualising such spaces as sites of hybrid political orders in which state and non-state actors negotiate authority through overlapping arrangements (Boas, 2020). In the Sahel, including Northern Nigeria, hybrid governance manifests as fluid interaction between formal institutions, traditional authorities, vigilante groups, and armed actors who collectively shape everyday governance, security provision, and resource allocation. As Bagayoko (2016) argues, such arrangements can both complement and undermine state authority, producing hybrid security orders that are neither fully state-controlled nor anarchic. This perspective moves beyond the limitations of the ungoverned spaces label by recognising the resilience of informal institutions while highlighting their capacity to perpetuate violence when they prioritise predatory extraction over accountable public goods.

3. The Political Economy of Conflict

The political economy approach moves beyond simplistic explanations of violence as irrational or purely ethnic and religious, examining instead how political and economic factors interact to create incentives for armed mobilisation and sustained violence. Collier and Hoeffler (2004) pioneered the greed versus grievance framework, distinguishing conflicts driven by economic opportunity, such as looting resources or controlling trade routes, from those motivated by grievance, including political exclusion, economic marginalisation, and identity-based discrimination. Their empirical work suggested that economic factors often prove more significant in predicting conflict onset than grievance measures alone.

Cramer (2006) advances this analysis by arguing that political economy must examine how violence becomes embedded in social relations and economic structures. Conflict, from this vantage, is not an aberration but frequently emerges from the normal functioning of political and economic systems marked by inequality, exclusion, and competition over scarce resources. This approach examines how armed actors construct war economies, that is, systems of production, accumulation, and exchange that thrive on instability. Keen (2008) demonstrates how conflict creates winners as well as losers, with violence serving as a means of accumulation for some and a survival strategy for others.

The political economy lens further interrogates how global, regional, and local dynamics interconnect. At the global level, demand for natural resources, illicit financial flows, and international arms markets shape conflict trajectories. Regionally,

cross-border trade networks, refugee flows, and the diffusion of armed groups create conflict systems that transcend state boundaries. Locally, land tenure systems, labour markets, and social hierarchies structure who benefits from and who bears the costs of armed violence. Reno (2011) shows how weak states in West Africa have become adept at manipulating these dynamics, at times deliberately fostering disorder in peripheral regions to extract resources or weaken political opponents.

3.1 Weak State Institutions and Informal Governance

The relationship between weak state institutions and the emergence of informal governance structures constitutes a central dynamic in the political economy of conflict. When states fail to provide basic public goods, that is, security, justice, dispute resolution, and economic opportunity, populations inevitably turn to alternative providers. This produces what Migdal (1988) terms weak states and strong societies, in which non-state actors accumulate social power that should theoretically reside with the state. In Northern Nigeria this dynamic is pronounced, as decades of underinvestment in the periphery, combined with corruption and elite capture, have eroded the legitimacy and capacity of the state.

Olson (1993) provides a useful framework through his distinction between stationary and roving bandits. Stationary bandits, who establish control over a territory and provide rudimentary order to secure continued extraction, resemble the governance functions that armed groups sometimes perform. Roving bandits, who seize what they can and move on, represent purely predatory violence. The emergence of groups capable of stationary bandit governance poses a fundamental challenge to sovereignty, as they establish taxation systems, dispute resolution mechanisms, and security provision that parallel or supersede state institutions. Raineri and Strazzari (2022) describe similar patterns in Mali and Niger, where informal brokers and illicit economies sustain hybrid orders that challenge yet partially substitute for state functions.

This dynamic produces what the Tactics Institute (2024) describes as a vicious cycle of fluctuation, in which communities, feeling abandoned, resort to self-help security, forming vigilante groups that further proliferate arms in civilian hands. Such groups may begin as defensive formations but often evolve into predatory forces, blurring the line between community protection and criminal enterprise. The proliferation of armed actors thus represents not a breakdown of governance but a transformation of it, a shift from accountable institutions to informal and often violent structures that exercise meaningful control over populations and territories. Understanding this transformation is essential for designing responses that address not only the symptoms of violence but the governance deficits that produce and sustain it.

Figure 1 distils the argument developed across the preceding sections into a single schema. The diagram positions ungoverned space as the central node through which supply-side dynamics and demand-side drivers converge, generating a self-reinforcing cycle of armed violence. On the supply side, external inflows from Libya and the wider Sahel, local artisanal fabrication, leakages from state arsenals, and porous borders feed weaponry into the system. On the demand side, resource conflict, insurgency and banditry, and communal self defence sustain a persistent appetite for arms. The

schema underscores the central analytical claim of the paper, namely that proliferation is neither a purely external problem of trafficking nor a purely internal problem of grievance, but a systemic outcome of their interaction within spaces of contested authority.

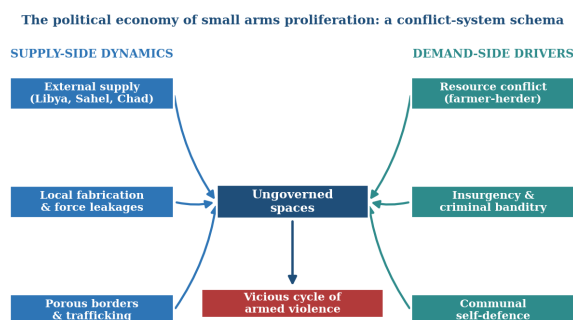


Figure 1: The political economy of small arms proliferation in Northern Nigeria, depicting the convergence of supply-side dynamics and demand-side drivers within ungoverned spaces.

Source: Authors' conceptual synthesis.

4. Evolution of Small Arms Proliferation

4.1 Pre-Colonial and Colonial Legacies

The proliferation of small arms in Northern Nigeria is deeply rooted in historical processes that long predate contemporary conflict. Aderinto (2018), in an authoritative study of guns and society in colonial Nigeria, establishes that firearms began playing a significant role in the region from at least the fifteenth century, with various gun technologies introduced through trans-Saharan and Atlantic trade networks. These early weapons, predominantly flintlock muskets known as Dane guns, became integral to the political economy of Nigerian societies. Aderinto defines a gun society as one that cannot do without firearms in its daily social, political, cultural, and religious life, a characterisation that fits many Northern Nigerian polities of the pre-colonial era. Firearms served not merely military purposes but functioned as ceremonial objects, status symbols, and hunting tools, embedding them within the social fabric.

The Sokoto Caliphate, which controlled much of Northern Nigeria before British conquest, maintained organised military forces equipped with cavalry and firearms, establishing patterns of armed mobilisation that persisted through subsequent periods. These pre-existing gun cultures meant that, when colonial rule ended, Northern Nigerian societies already possessed both cultural familiarity with firearms and the social structures through which weapons could be acquired and circulated.

The colonial period transformed the political economy of arms. Following the amalgamation of the Northern and Southern Protectorates in 1914, the British administration inherited and systematised patterns of circulation that served imperial interests. Colonial governance prioritised extraction over development and centralised authority while actively regulating indigenous access to firearms (Aderinto, 2018). The approach was inherently contradictory, since British officials and their auxiliaries possessed sophisticated weaponry as instruments of domination while colonial authorities restricted indigenous access through

increasingly stringent regulation. Access to firearms became a marker of social class and political privilege, creating a dualistic economy in which legally registered weapons coexisted with illicitly acquired ones and establishing patterns of smuggling and regulatory evasion that became permanent features of the arms landscape. Okeke and Oji (2014) argue that the contemporary crisis is fundamentally a product of historical governance failures, while Oriniwo (2025) observes that the borderlands now serving as trafficking corridors were themselves created by colonial boundary-making.

4.2 Post-Independence Militarisation

Independence in 1960 inaugurated a new era characterised by the progressive militarisation of social and political relations. The collapse of the First Republic and the 1966 military coup marked the beginning of nearly three decades of military rule, transforming the relationship between society and firearms. Ejiofor (2024), drawing on Hobsbawmian frameworks, demonstrates how post-colonial state formation itself generated conditions for insurgent violence. The Nigerian Civil War of 1967 to 1970 represented a watershed, as both federal forces and Biafran separatists mobilised massive quantities of weapons, many of which remained in circulation after the conflict ended.

The oil boom of the 1970s financed unprecedented military expansion while transforming the political economy into a petro-state in which control of oil revenue became the primary prize of political competition. Turshen (2004) documents the link between oil and arms, noting that foreign capital bankrolled the petroleum industry, which in turn supplied military rulers with the means to purchase weapons. Political thuggery became institutionalised, with politicians arming youth supporters to intimidate opponents and capture electoral victories. Wunti (2012) examines this phenomenon in Bauchi State, showing how unemployed youth were mobilised for political and socio-religious disturbance. The street gangs that emerged in Kano during the 1970s and 1980s embodied the intersection of urban unemployment, political mobilisation, and arms proliferation, as politicians armed these groups for electoral purposes and then lost control of them.

The return to civilian rule in 1999 did not reverse these trends but transformed them. Democratic competition intensified demand for political thugs, while the relaxation of military control over peripheral regions allowed long-suppressed communal conflicts to re-emerge. The ethno-religious violence that erupted in Plateau State in 2001 and 2004 demonstrated how local grievances, combined with readily available firearms, could produce mass-casualty events. As rural governance structures broke down and criminal economies expanded, firearms became essential for both predation and protection. Okeke and Oji (2014) identify the critical failure of law enforcement to check supply factors, a weakness that created space for the emergence of parallel security arrangements and armed non-state actors.

Figure 2 presents the long historical arc within which contemporary proliferation must be situated. The timeline traces a continuous thread from the introduction of firearms through trans-Saharan and Atlantic trade, through colonial regulation and the mass mobilisation of the Civil War, to the supply shock of the Libyan collapse and the integrated arms economy of the present.

The visualisation makes plain that the present crisis is not a sudden rupture but the cumulative product of centuries of weapon circulation, frontier neglect, and the militarisation of political life.

Historical trajectory of small arms circulation in Northern Nigeria



Figure 2: Historical trajectory of small arms circulation in Northern Nigeria from the era of trans-Saharan trade to the contemporary integrated arms economy.

Source: Authors' synthesis from the historical literature.

5. Sources and Trafficking Networks

5.1 Sahel, Libya, and the Chad Basin

The external supply of illicit small arms to Northern Nigeria originates predominantly from the arc of instability spanning the Sahel and Lake Chad Basin. The 2011 collapse of the Libyan regime remains the most consequential supply shock, with reporting attributed to the Small Arms Survey indicating that a substantial majority of the illicit weapons in circulation entered through Sahelian routes from post-conflict Libya (Leadership, 2026). The United Nations documented that Libya held an estimated two hundred thousand tons of munitions at the time of Gaddafi's fall, vast quantities of which were looted and dispersed southward (Punch, 2024). The Tactics Institute (2024) reports that, beyond Libya's domestic reserves, weapons produced in Russia and brought to the region by mercenaries connected to the former Wagner Group now transit Libyan ports before reaching armed groups in northern Nigeria.

Chadian civil conflicts have similarly saturated the region. Delanga (2024) documents how numerous conflicts since the 1970s produced a proliferation of small arms, with weapons passing through N'Djamena and being smuggled through Cameroonian border towns before reaching Boko Haram in Nigeria. Mapping of trafficking corridors identifies surplus stocks from Libya, Chad, and Sudan funnelled through hubs such as Agadez, Sebha, Gao, Zamfara, and Maradi into Nigeria (African Security Analysis, 2025). It is important to record a note of analytical caution here. The widely repeated figure attributing seventy per cent of Nigeria's illicit weapons to Libyan stockpiles is not directly substantiated in the primary publications of the Small Arms Survey, whose 2021 national survey estimates civilian-held firearms at approximately six and a half million rather than the rounded ten million often cited. The attribution should therefore be treated as an indicative extrapolation rather than a forensically verified proportion.

5.2 Local Fabrication and Force Leakages

Domestic arms production has emerged as a significant and growing source of weaponry, with artisanal blacksmiths demonstrating a remarkable capacity to manufacture sophisticated firearms. Awotayo, Yusuf, and Arikewuyo (2024) highlight that the ability of blacksmiths to produce armed weapons represents a

critical concern, noting that firearms legislation contains multiple loopholes and that lenient penalties fail to deter manufacturers. Illegal factories operate across the country, producing copies of assault rifles, pistols, and cartridges, with some fabricated weapons of such quality that officials described them as scarcely believable (TRT Afrika, 2024).

Complementing local production is the persistent problem of security force leakages. HumAngle (2022) reports that shotguns and assault rifles captured or stolen from security forces, particularly the police, constitute a significant portion of the stockpiles held by non-state actors. Weapons commonly issued to police units, including Type 56-2 rifles and Galil Ace assault rifles, have been recovered from militant groups, indicating that state arsenals remain a critical supply source and that counter-insurgency operations themselves can contribute to proliferation when weapons are lost in the field.

5.3 Porous Borders and Smuggling

The geography of the country renders it exceptionally vulnerable to trafficking. Nigeria shares more than four thousand kilometres of land borders with Benin, Niger, Chad, and Cameroon, yet a report presented to the House of Representatives revealed that, of one thousand nine hundred and seventy-eight official entry points, only eighty-four are currently manned by security personnel (Leadership, 2025). This leaves vast numbers of unofficial routes unmonitored. The Defence Intelligence Agency estimates that there are approximately ten thousand unguarded routes through which trans-border criminals move at will (Discover Global Society, 2025). Analysts note that a large majority of arms seizures occur near borders, underscoring the centrality of border control to any effective disarmament strategy (Africa Defence Magazine, 2025). The recent crackdown by the Kaduna Police Command revealed syndicates transporting weapons from neighbouring states to bandit enclaves, with intelligence suggesting that a single disrupted syndicate could have armed approximately two hundred bandits (Leadership, 2025).

Figure 3 disaggregates the estimated composition of the illicit stock by source. The visualisation presents the widely cited dominance of post-conflict Libyan inflows alongside the meaningful contributions of artisanal fabrication, security force leakages, and regional surplus from the Chad Basin. Consistent with the analytical caution registered above, the proportions are presented as indicative rather than forensically precise, and the figure is intended to convey the relative weight of supply channels rather than exact percentages.

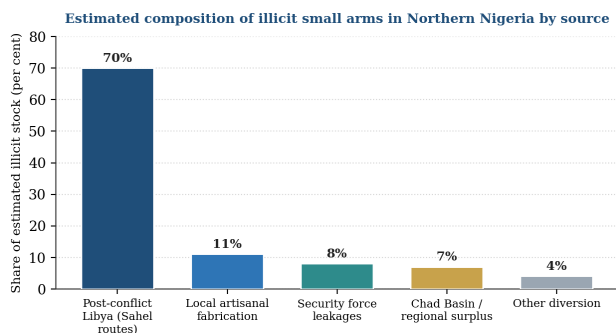


Figure 3: Estimated composition of illicit small arms in Northern Nigeria by source, illustrating the predominance of external Sahelian inflows alongside domestic fabrication and force leakages.

Source: Authors' synthesis from secondary estimates; proportions indicative.

Figure 4 renders the border management deficit in concrete terms. The left panel shows that only a small fraction of the nearly two thousand official entry points are manned, while the right panel sets the more than four thousand kilometres of land border against an estimated ten thousand unofficial routes. Together the panels demonstrate why interdiction at the frontier remains so difficult and why border management reform is indispensable to any credible supply-side response.

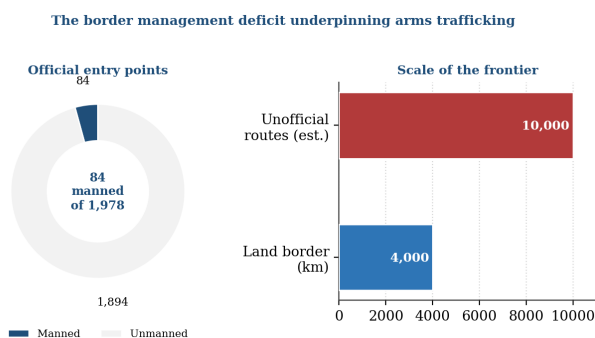


Figure 4: The border management deficit underpinning arms trafficking, contrasting the small number of manned official entry points with the scale of the frontier and the estimated number of unofficial routes.

Source: Authors' synthesis from official disclosures (Leadership, 2025; Discover Global Society, 2025).

6. Drivers of Arms Acquisition

Demand for small arms is driven by the convergence of multiple conflict systems. Resource conflicts between farmers and herders represent one of the most significant, as competition over land and water has intensified under the pressure of climate change. Okeke and Oji (2014) identify how desertification, drought, and other environmental factors combine with high population growth to worsen the struggle for scarce agricultural and water resources, transforming manageable disputes into armed confrontation. The Lake Chad Basin, once a thriving economic zone, has contracted by roughly ninety per cent since the 1960s, forcing pastoralists southward into farming communities with established tenure systems. Oriniowo (2025) observes that this once-seasonal migration has become semi-permanent resettlement, frequently without frameworks to manage cohabitation. Kwaja and Ademola-Aina (2024) note that these conflicts have grown more lethal precisely because of the availability of sophisticated

weaponry, producing a feedback loop in which violence begets acquisition and acquisition enables more devastating violence.

The Boko Haram insurgency and its splinter have altered the demand calculus across the region. What began in the early 2000s as a localised movement in Maiduguri escalated dramatically after 2009 into a full-scale insurgency drawing in regional and international actors. The group's access to Libyan weapons, facilitated by networks operating through Niger and Chad, enabled its transformation from a sect into a force capable of seizing and holding territory. The counter-insurgency effort, while necessary, has paradoxically intensified the weaponisation of the region, as operations displace populations, disrupt livelihoods, and generate grievances that insurgents exploit for recruitment (International Crisis Group, 2022).

Criminal banditry has emerged as perhaps the most dynamic driver. What began as low-level cattle rustling has evolved into a sophisticated criminal economy encompassing kidnapping for ransom, illegal mining, and highway robbery, with elaborate divisions of labour, supply chains, and revenue-sharing arrangements. Adejumo (2025) documents how these groups have developed symbiotic relationships with jihadist factions, exchanging logistical support for weapons and imposing taxes on farming communities to fund ammunition purchases. The economic logic is decisive, since firearms function not merely as tools of violence but as capital assets that enable accumulation. A single rifle can generate substantial returns through kidnapping proceeds, rendering weapons purchases rational investments rather than irrational acts.

Communal self defence constitutes perhaps the most tragic dimension of acquisition, representing a desperate response to state failure. Across the region, villages abandoned by security forces have formed vigilante groups that, while often effective locally, proliferate arms in civilian hands and blur the boundary between legitimate defence and predation. It is estimated that the country holds approximately six and a fifth million small arms in civilian possession compared with roughly five hundred and eighty thousand in the hands of security forces, a ratio that reflects the extent to which security has been privatised. The cycle is self-perpetuating, as state absence drives communities to arm, armed communities attract attacks from groups seeking to neutralise resistance, and escalating violence drives further acquisition. This dynamic challenges simplistic responses focused solely on disarmament, since communities asked to surrender weapons without receiving effective protection would be left wholly exposed.

Figure 5 quantifies the privatisation of security that lies at the heart of the demand-side argument. The chart contrasts the estimated stock of small arms in civilian possession with that held by security forces, revealing a ratio of roughly eleven to one. This imbalance is not merely a statistic but a measure of how comprehensively the state has ceded its monopoly on legitimate force, and it explains why communities are so reluctant to disarm in the absence of credible protection.

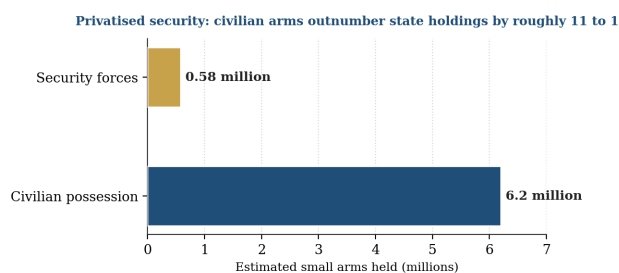


Figure 5: Estimated civilian versus security force small arms holdings in Nigeria, illustrating the privatisation of security in conditions of state weakness.

Source: Authors' synthesis from the *Nigeria National Small Arms and Light Weapons Survey (Small Arms Survey, 2021)*.

Figure 6 consolidates the human cost of the crisis. The three panels juxtapose the cumulative fatalities attributed to farmer-herder conflict since 2001, the death toll of the insurgency in the Northeast, and the scale of displacement across the wider north. Presented together, these figures convey the magnitude of suffering that the political economy of proliferation has generated and lend urgency to the policy analysis that follows.

The humanitarian toll of armed violence across Northern Nigeria

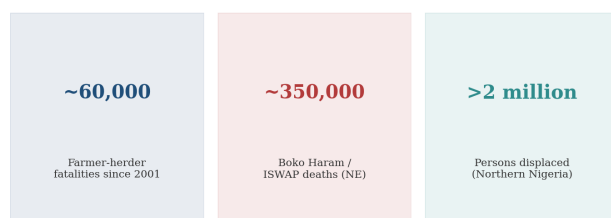


Figure 6: The humanitarian toll of armed violence across Northern Nigeria, summarising fatalities from farmer-herder conflict and insurgency alongside the scale of displacement.

Source: Authors' synthesis from UNDP (2021), International Crisis Group (2022), and parliamentary disclosures.

7. Funding, Conflicts of Interest, and Evidentiary Caution

Discussions of illicit small arms in Nigeria, including claims about Libyan origins and violence impacts, rely heavily on reports from organisations such as the Small Arms Survey, the Tactics Institute for Security and Counter-Terrorism, and the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime. The funding structures of these bodies warrant scrutiny, since they may influence research priorities, framing, and specific statistical attributions. The Small Arms Survey, a leading independent project hosted in Geneva, depends entirely on external funding from governments and project-specific funders. While this model supports rigorous data collection, it raises questions about donor influence on areas of emphasis such as Sahel trafficking routes. No evidence suggests direct manipulation of the data, yet reliance on Western governmental funding could subtly privilege narratives aligned with donor interests in counter-terrorism and regional stability (Small Arms Survey, 2021).

The Tactics Institute, which popularised the metaphor of weapons being as available as rice on the market, operates as a think tank whose funding base is less transparent than that of established institutions. This opacity introduces risks of bias, particularly where reports amplify specific threat narratives that align with counter-terrorism agendas. Reports from the United

Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, including those linking arms trafficking to roughly eighty per cent of violent incidents in the Northwest, are financed largely through earmarked voluntary contributions, which can create alignment with donor priorities by emphasising external smuggling routes while under-emphasising domestic diversion and artisanal production (UNODC, 2025).

These observations do not invalidate the core findings on arms accessibility and violence. They do, however, underscore the need for transparency, diversified funding, and rigorous methodological disclosure to mitigate perceived or actual conflicts of interest. The present paper relies on secondary sources and has critically evaluated their claims, noting contested statistics, such as the seventy per cent Libyan-origin figure, where direct verification in primary sources is lacking. This evidentiary caution is itself a contribution, since the uncritical repetition of unverified proportions risks distorting policy by privileging supply interdiction over the structural drivers of demand.

8. Consequences and Policy Responses

The proliferation of small arms has produced catastrophic humanitarian consequences across every dimension of human security. The most visible is mass displacement, as communities flee violence that has rendered their homes uninhabitable. Investigative reporting documents abandoned farming communities along the Kaduna to Birnin Gwari road, where residents relocated because of constant attacks and abductions, leaving once-thriving settlements overgrown as sobering memorials (ICIR, 2025). The scale is staggering, with senior defence officials disclosing that a substantial share of West Africa's illicit small arms circulate within Nigeria, empowering terrorists, bandits, and militias who have turned vast rural areas into no-go zones (Daily Post, 2025).

Livelihood destruction constitutes a second pillar of the catastrophe, with food systems collapsing under the weight of violence. The West Africa Action Network on Small Arms warns that the north is experiencing a food security crisis directly attributable to the inability of farmers to reach their farmlands (Daily Post, 2025). This finds concrete validation in Zamfara State, where the gold mining sector has become both a driver and a beneficiary of armed violence, with bandits controlling mining sites and extorting proceeds from artisanal miners, producing a war economy in which violence and extraction are inextricably linked (International Crisis Group, 2022).

The erosion of the state monopoly on violence represents the most profound political consequence. The classic Weberian definition of the state as the entity that successfully claims a monopoly of legitimate force becomes increasingly tenuous where armed actors contest and supersede state power daily. Across the region, bandit groups impose taxation, establish courts, and enforce behavioural codes on populations that once looked to the state for governance. The International Crisis Group (2022) documents how criminal networks in Zamfara have developed elaborate governance structures, taxing mining proceeds, adjudicating disputes, and providing security guarantees to compliant communities. This represents not state collapse in the sense of anarchy but state replacement in the sense of alternative authority structures displacing formal institutions.

The state's response has been characterised by tension between kinetic operations and structural interventions. Operation Safe Corridor, established in 2015 to deradicalise and reintegrate surrendered fighters, represents one approach, though its reach remains limited relative to the scale of the problem. Amnesty programmes have achieved temporary successes but often founder on the contradiction that heavily armed groups have little incentive to surrender weapons when the state cannot guarantee their security or provide alternative livelihoods (International Crisis Group, 2022). Policy must therefore engage substantively with hybrid governance realities rather than pursuing purely state-centric models. As the literature on hybrid political orders demonstrates, successful interventions in contested spaces require recognising and strategically partnering with legitimate non-state authorities while gradually strengthening accountable institutions (Bagayoko, 2016; Boas, 2020). Ojo (2020) argues that the co-optation of constructive local actors, combined with targeted reform to address predatory elements, offers a pragmatic pathway toward strengthening the state.

Effective responses must address both supply and demand. On the supply side, regional cooperation offers the only viable means of interdicting networks that operate across borders. Delanga (2024) emphasises that the security services of Cameroon, Nigeria, Chad, and the Central African Republic require a significant boost in logistical capacity and a collaborative mechanism enabling rapid coordinated action. The Multinational Joint Task Force represents an existing framework that could be strengthened, though its mandate would need broadening to encompass the full spectrum of transnational organised crime. Border management reform, including modern surveillance and increased personnel at official crossings, must be complemented by development investment in border communities that reduces incentives for participation in smuggling economies. On the demand side, policy must address the structural conditions that make acquisition rational, through investment in rural livelihoods, the strengthening of formal dispute resolution, and the rebuilding of state legitimacy through service delivery in long-neglected regions.

9. Summary and Conclusion

This paper has examined the relationship between ungoverned spaces and the political economy of small arms proliferation in Northern Nigeria. The conceptual framework established that ungoverned spaces are not anarchic voids but territories characterised by competing authority structures where the capacity of the state to exercise control is limited. The historical analysis traced proliferation from pre-colonial gun societies through colonial regulation to post-independence militarisation, demonstrating that contemporary patterns are embedded in much longer processes. Regional dynamics proved decisive, with the 2011 Libyan collapse flooding the Sahel with munitions, Chadian conflicts and the insurgency further saturating the region, and local fabrication and force leakages providing additional supply. Demand is driven by resource conflict, insurgency, criminal banditry, and communal self defence, producing a conflict system that perpetuates violence.

The proliferation of small arms represents not merely a security challenge but a fundamental crisis of governance with

profound humanitarian and political consequences. Ungoverned spaces function as critical enablers of armed violence, providing sanctuary for trafficking networks, operational bases for insurgents and bandits, and arenas where the state monopoly on violence is contested and increasingly displaced. The political economy approach reveals that acquisition is rational behaviour within contexts of state failure, resource scarcity, and competing authority. Communities arm because the state cannot protect them, young men join armed groups because criminal economies offer better prospects than formal-sector unemployment, and insurgents capture territory because governance vacuums create opportunity. Addressing the crisis requires confronting these structural realities rather than treating symptoms through military operations alone.

9.1 Recommendations

On the supply side, the focus must fall on disrupting trafficking networks, securing entry points, and neutralising domestic production and leakage. Intelligence-driven operations should target networks at their sources and along key transit routes, particularly the Sahel corridors, while the National Centre for the Control of Small Arms and Light Weapons is strengthened with technical capacity, personnel, and inter-agency coordination. Border management reform is a critical priority, requiring additional personnel, strategic infrastructure, and scanning equipment, alongside deepened regional cooperation through an expanded Multinational Joint Task Force mandate and bilateral agreements for joint patrols and intelligence sharing. Internal sources must also be addressed through systematic raids on illegal manufacturing sites, mandatory minimum sentences for manufacturers, and enhanced accountability for state stockpiles through digital tracking and regular audit.

On the demand side, interventions must reduce the incentives for communities and individuals to acquire arms by addressing livelihood deficits, governance failures, and insecurity. Investment in rural livelihoods, including agricultural extension, farmer security guarantees, and effective mechanisms for resolving farmer-herder conflict, is essential, as is the restoration of the Lake Chad Basin to mitigate environmental drivers. Disarmament, demobilisation, and reintegration programmes require redesign to overcome the prevailing trust deficit through credible security guarantees and comprehensive economic reintegration. Governance reform is fundamental to lowering long-term demand, with priority given to basic services in marginalised areas, the integration of traditional authorities into accountable security governance, and local government reform to prevent elite capture. Until the state can provide security, justice, and opportunity across its northern expanse, the demand for arms will persist, and the networks that supply them will continue to thrive in the ungoverned spaces that state weakness has created.

References

- [1] Adejumo, T. (2025). *Boko Haram, ISWAP building stronger ties with herder-affiliated armed groups*. HumAngle.
- [2] Aderinto, S. (2018). *Guns and society in colonial Nigeria: Firearms, culture, and public order*. Indiana University Press.
- [3] Africa Defence Magazine. (2025). Border seizures and the geography of arms trafficking in West Africa. *Africa Defence Magazine*.
- [4] African Security Analysis. (2025). Libya-Sahel arms pipeline fuels Nigeria's banditry crisis. *African Security Analysis*.

- [5] Awotayo, O., Yusuf, A., and Arikewuyo, K. (2024). Proliferation of illegal arms in Nigeria: A critical analysis of blacksmith operations. *Journal of African Security Studies*, 12(3), 45–62.
- [6] Bagayoko, N. (2016). Hybrid security governance in Africa. *IDS Bulletin*, 47(2), 1–18.
- [7] Bala, S. (2025). Porous borders and arms trafficking in Northern Nigeria. *Daily Trust*.
- [8] Boas, M. (2020). The Sahel and hybrid political orders. *African Affairs*, 119(476), 1–20.
- [9] Clunan, A. L., and Trinkunas, H. A. (2010). *Ungoverned spaces: Alternatives to state authority in an era of softened sovereignty*. Stanford University Press.
- [10] Collier, P., and Hoeffler, A. (2004). Greed and grievance in civil war. *Oxford Economic Papers*, 56(4), 563–595.
- [11] Cramer, C. (2006). *Civil war is not a stupid thing: Accounting for violence in developing countries*. Hurst and Company.
- [12] Daily Post. (2025). 40% of West Africa's 500 million illicit small arms in Nigeria. *Daily Post*.
- [13] Delanga, C. (2024). *Small arms trafficking in the Lake Chad Basin: Routes and networks*. Institute for Security Studies.
- [14] Department of Defense. (2008). *Military support to stabilisation, security, transition, and reconstruction operations*. United States Department of Defense.
- [15] Discover Global Society. (2025). Nigeria's ten thousand unguarded border routes: A national security crisis. *Discover Global Society*.
- [16] Ejiofor, P. F. (2024). The political economy of armed conflicts in Northern Nigeria: A Hobsbawmian analysis. *African Conflict and Peacebuilding Review*, 14(1), 78–102.
- [17] Fisher, J., and Mercado, S. (2014). Ungoverned spaces: A new framework for analysis. *Strategic Studies Quarterly*, 8(2), 114–135.
- [18] HumAngle. (2022). Weapons used by Nigerian police recovered from militant groups. *HumAngle*.
- [19] ICIR. (2025). *Abandoned communities: The human cost of banditry in Northern Nigeria*. International Centre for Investigative Reporting.
- [20] International Crisis Group. (2022). *An avoidable war: Politics and armed conflict in Nigeria's North-west*. Crisis Group Africa Report No. 317.
- [21] Keen, D. (2008). *Complex emergencies*. Polity Press.
- [22] Kwaja, C., and Ademola-Aina, A. (2024). *Farmer-herder conflicts and small arms proliferation in Nigeria's Middle Belt*. West Africa Network for Peacebuilding.
- [23] Leadership. (2025). Kaduna police crackdown on gunrunning syndicate. *Leadership Newspaper*.
- [24] Leadership. (2026). 70% of Nigeria's illicit weapons from Libya, Small Arms Survey. *Leadership Newspaper*.
- [25] Migdal, J. S. (1988). *Strong societies and weak states: State-society relations and state capabilities in the Third World*. Princeton University Press.
- [26] Ojo, J. S. (2020). Governing ungoverned spaces in the Lake Chad Basin. *African Security*, 13(1), 77–103.
- [27] Okeke, V. O. S., and Oji, R. O. (2014). The Nigerian state and the proliferation of small arms and light weapons in the Northern part of Nigeria. *Journal of Educational and Social Research*, 4(1), 415–428.
- [28] Olson, M. (1993). Dictatorship, democracy, and development. *American Political Science Review*, 87(3), 567–576.
- [29] Oriniowo, A. (2025). Fulani migration patterns and governance deficits in Northern Nigeria. *African Affairs*, 124(495), 89–112.
- [30] Punch. (2024). Libya's munitions and Nigeria's insecurity crisis. *The Punch*.
- [31] Rabasa, A., Boraz, S., Chalk, P., Cragin, K., Karasik, T. W., Moroney, J. D. P., O'Brien, K. A., and Peters, J. E. (2007). *Ungoverned territories: Understanding and reducing terrorism risks*. RAND Corporation.
- [32] Raineri, L., and Strazzari, F. (2022). Drug smuggling and the stability of fragile states. *Third World Quarterly*, 43(1), 1–19.
- [33] ReliefWeb. (2012). *Libya's weapons: A regional threat*. United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs.
- [34] Reno, W. (2011). *Warfare in independent Africa*. Cambridge University Press.
- [35] Small Arms Survey. (2021). *Nigeria national small arms and light weapons survey*. Small Arms Survey.
- [36] Tactics Institute. (2024). *Small arms proliferation and banditry in Northwest Nigeria*. Tactics Institute for Security and Counter-Terrorism.
- [37] TRT Afrika. (2024). Inside Nigeria's illegal arms factories. *TRT Afrika*.
- [38] Turshen, M. (2004). Militarism and the arms trade in Africa. *African Studies Review*, 47(2), 145–162.
- [39] UNDP. (2021). *Assessing the impact of conflict in Northeast Nigeria*. United Nations Development Programme.
- [40] UNODC. (2025). *Arms trafficking and violent crime in West Africa*. United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime.
- [41] Wunti, I. (2012). Political thuggery and youth unemployment in Bauchi State. *Journal of African Political Studies*, 3(2), 112–128.