SALAFI JIHADISTS IN THE CENTRAL SAHEL | ISSUE 01

FRONTLINE PERSPECTIVE

STRAY BULLETS

AMMUNITION RECOVERED FROM SALAFI JIHADIST GROUPS IN THE CENTRAL SAHEL

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

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SALAFI JIHADISTS IN THE CENTRAL SAHEL

The central Sahel—a large area of West Africa encompassing Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger—is experiencing an extended period of turmoil. Salafi jihadist groups have conducted attacks and expanded their territory across the region in recent years, in spite of extensive counterterrorism efforts.[1] These violent insurgencies are destabilising communities, spreading insecurity, and severely challenging state authority.

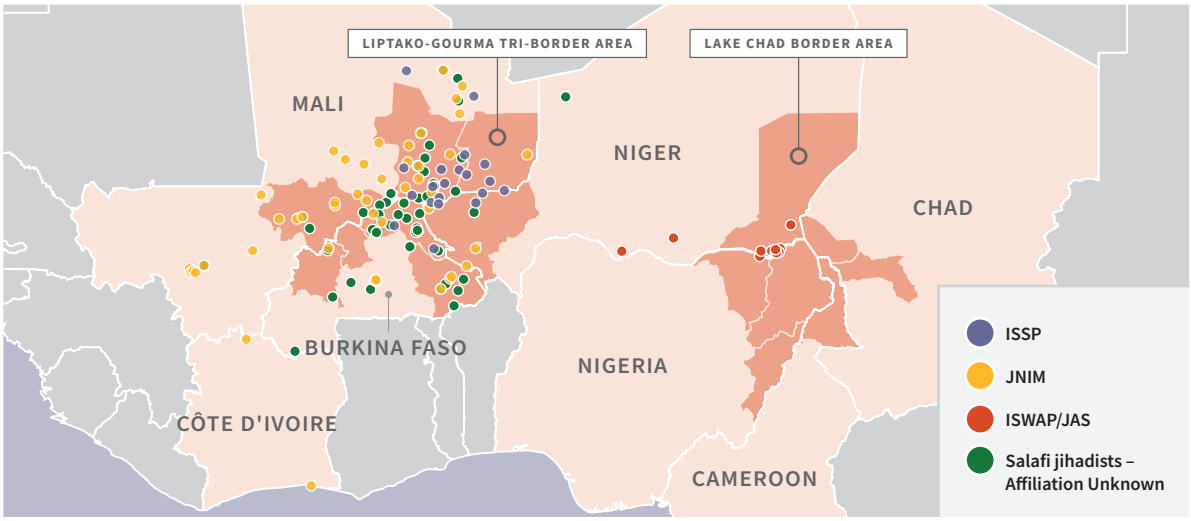
Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger have all experienced military coups since 2020, as well as the associated withdrawal of international security forces, including the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) in 2023. The three countries created the Alliance of Sahel States in September 2023 and, by January 2024, they had announced their withdrawal from the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS).[2]

Conflict Armament Research (CAR) field investigators have been documenting and tracing recovered weapons and ammunition in West Africa since 2015. In *Salafi jihadists in the central Sahel*, CAR's investigations focus specifically on four non-state armed groups that claim allegiance to Al-Qaeda or Islamic State (Da'esh), and some of their affiliates.[3] The United Nations Security Council has formally designated these groups for conducting acts of terrorism in the central Sahel.[4] As such, the supply, sale, or transfer of arms and related materiel to these groups is prohibited.

These groups are active in two different areas of the central Sahel (Map 1):

- in the tri-border area between Burkina Faso, Mali, and western Niger, referred to as Liptako-Gourma:
  - **JNIM:** Jama'a Nusrat ul-Islam wa al-Muslimin (Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims); and
  - **ISSP:** Islamic State Sahel Province;[5]
- in south-eastern Niger, centred around the Lake Chad border area:
  - **ISWAP:** Islamic State West Africa Province; and
  - **JAS:** Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'adati wal-Jihad (People Committed to the Prophet's Teachings for Propagation and Jihad), commonly called 'Boko Haram'.

This is the first in a series of Frontline Perspectives from CAR on its investigations into the weapons and ammunition recovered from these groups. In this issue, CAR analyses small-calibre ammunition recovered from these groups to identify the types of ammunition they access, determine their origin, and understand the mechanisms of diversion that enable their procurement.



Map 1

Locations where weapons and ammunition were recovered from Salafi jihadist groups in the Liptako-Gourma tri-border area and Lake Chad border area

ABBREVIATIONS

ACLED	Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project
CAR	Conflict Armament Research
ECOWAS	Economic Community of West African States
ISSP	Islamic State Sahel Province
ISWAP	Islamic State West Africa Province
JAS	Jama'atu Ahlis Sunnah Lidda'awati wal-Jihad
JNIM	Jama'a Nusrat ul-Islam wa al-Muslimin

KEY FINDINGS

- At least 13 per cent of the illicit ammunition recovered by security forces and documented by CAR investigators in the central Sahel between 2015 and 2023 is linked to Salafi jihadist groups affiliated with Al Qaeda or Islamic State (Da'esh).
- **A significant proportion of that ammunition was most likely to have been diverted from the custody of certain central Sahelian states, principally Burkina Faso, Mali, or Niger, as well as neighbouring Nigeria.** Salafi jihadist insurgencies have gained significant ground in these four countries in the past decade. CAR determines that the majority of the ammunition was obtained by Salafi jihadist groups opportunistically through diverse local sources and is not the result of deliberate diversion on behalf of any of these four states.
- **CAR data suggests that the proportion of analysed ammunition that was diverted from state custody in the region has significantly increased since 2019.** CAR investigators linked less than 7 per cent of the ammunition recovered between 2015 and 2018 to state custody. This proportion increases to 41 per cent with respect to recoveries conducted between 2019 and 2022.
- **Almost one-third of the ammunition is most likely to have originated in state custody and was diverted into the illicit sphere within a decade of manufacture and delivery to its first legal custodian.** In contrast, only 13 per cent of the ammunition in CAR's central Sahel data set relating to other non-state actors was manufactured after 2010. This discrepancy highlights Salafi jihadist groups' ability to access newer ammunition.
- **CAR's data set shows a sharp increase in the proportion of recently manufactured ammunition recovered from Salafi jihadists in the region.** Such rapid diversion—in one case within a year of delivery to the first legal consignee—highlights that Salafi jihadist groups exploit national defence and security forces operating in the central Sahel and use them as a main source of supply.

THE PROPORTION OF AMMUNITION DIVERTED FROM STATE CUSTODY IN THE REGION HAS SIGNIFICANTLY INCREASED SINCE 2019.

Small-calibre ammunition seized in Mali.

AMMUNITION IN THE CENTRAL SAHEL

This Frontline Perspective focuses exclusively on small-calibre ammunition recovered from Salafi jihadist groups in the three countries that are commonly defined as the central Sahel: Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger. Since 2015, CAR has documented a total of 115,034 individual cartridges of small calibre ammunition in the central Sahel, recovered from a wide range of actors (Box 1 provides guidance for assessing CAR's data set). At least 13 per cent of this small-calibre ammunition can be connected to Salafi jihadist groups in the region. CAR identified 15,455 rounds of ammunition that were seized or recovered in the context of Salafi jihadist attacks, military counterterrorism operations targeting these groups, or other related activity (see Graph 1).[6]

CAR's analysis of this data has identified two key findings:

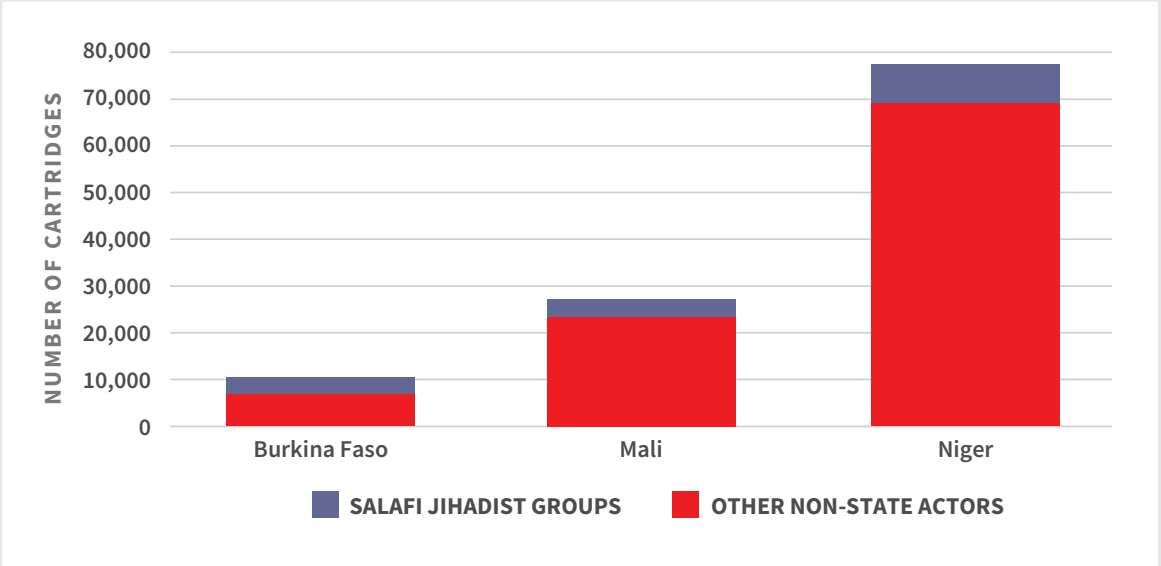
- the majority of the documented ammunition was most likely to have been diverted from the custody of states in the central Sahel region; and
- a significant proportion of small-calibre ammunition recovered from Salafi jihadist groups was manufactured within ten years of its recovery, and that proportion has increased over time.

The sample of ammunition that CAR investigators have linked to Salafi jihadist groups in the central Sahel comprises 15 different calibres.

Notably however, the vast majority (97 per cent) of the documented items correspond to a handful of calibres widely used by militaries in the region: 7.62 × 39 mm, 7.62 × 51 mm, 7.62 × 54 mm R, 12.7 × 108 mm, 14.5 × 114 mm and 12.7 × 99 mm.

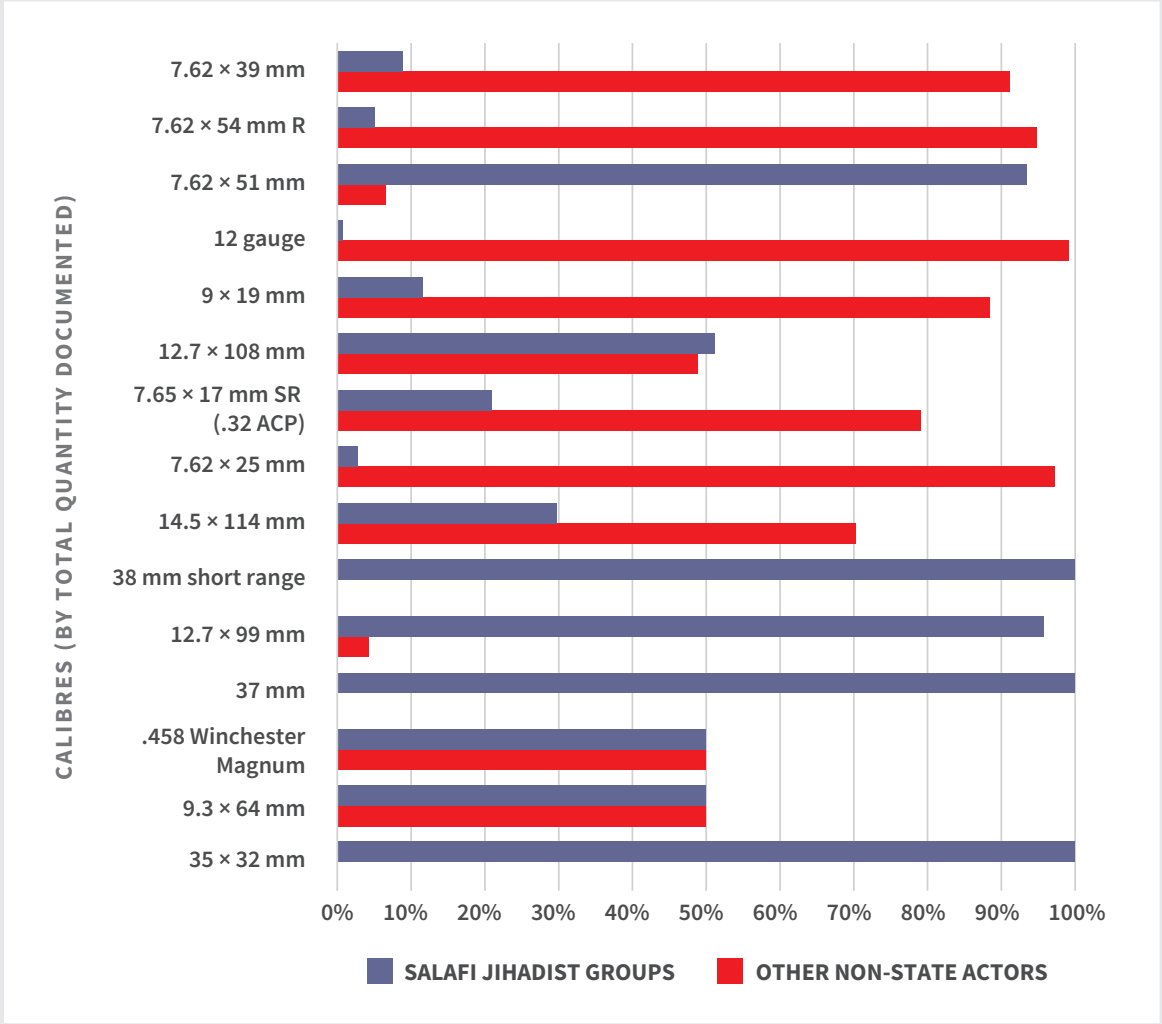
This is quite distinct from the ammunition holdings of other non-state actors in the region. As Graph 2 shows, the sample recovered from Salafi jihadist groups is characterised by a near absence of certain calibres that are prevalent throughout the region, such as 12-gauge shotgun ammunition and calibres used in handguns. This finding indicates that Salafi jihadist groups tend to rely on high-velocity weaponry rather than on firearms more commonly used by civilians, such as break- or bolt-action hunting rifles and shotguns.

SALAFI JIHADIST GROUPS TEND TO RELY ON HIGH-VELOCITY WEAPONRY RATHER THAN ON FIREARMS MORE COMMONLY USED BY CIVILIANS.



Graph 1

Small-calibre ammunition recovered in the central Sahel by total quantity documented by CAR (2015–23).



Graph 2

Ammunition calibres recovered in the central Sahel, and documented by CAR between 2015–23.

Niger Armed Forces patrolling in the north of the country, 2023.

BOX 1 — **CAR'S WEST AFRICA DATA SET**

Between 2015 and 2023 CAR field investigators documented illicit materiel recovered by national security forces in seven countries across West Africa: Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, and Senegal. To date, CAR has almost exclusively documented materiel linked to Salafi jihadist groups in three of these countries: Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger.[7] These are also the countries in West Africa where CAR has documented the most extensive sample of illicit materiel.

This Frontline Perspective considers only a portion of the ammunition that security forces recovered from Salafi jihadist groups in the central Sahel between 2014 and 2022, namely the materiel to which CAR field investigators were able to secure official access for documentation purposes.[8]

CAR's access to recovered materiel varies across its countries of operation, in line with logistical feasibility and the nature of its partnerships with national authorities. Furthermore, some of the items seized during counterterrorism operations or armed confrontations between defence forces and Salafi jihadist groups are either destroyed locally upon recovery or redistributed to equip frontline troops, rather than being systematically transferred to judicial or investigative authorities.

As a result, this publication does not present a comprehensive baseline analysis. Instead, it provides the first regional assessment of empirical data gathered over nearly a decade of recoveries.

DIVERSION FROM STATE CUSTODY IN THE REGION

A large proportion of the ammunition recovered from Salafi jihadist groups in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger was most likely to have been diverted from the custody of state forces operating in the central Sahel.

Ammunition—especially small-calibre ammunition—is produced in vast quantities, marked identically by year of manufacture, and transferred to multiple recipients. Since security forces tend to recover diverted small-calibre ammunition without its original packaging, it is often impossible to trace its pre-diversion chain of custody.[9] Most of the ammunition that CAR investigators documented in the central Sahel was recovered loose, without its original packaging.

In response to these challenges, CAR has developed a methodology for identifying matches between specific headstamps of small-calibre ammunition recovered from Salafi jihadist groups, and corresponding lots known to be present in the service of states in the central Sahel region. CAR formed its assessment in view of three key factors:

- CAR investigators documented some cartridges in their original packaging. As a result, CAR was able to undertake formal tracing of these items and identify their manufacturer and onward export.
- In some cases, on-the-ground cooperation with regional security forces allowed CAR investigators to confirm the presence of specific lots of manufacture among those in use by security forces in the region.
- CAR has access to transfer documentation which confirms that some of the recovered ammunition was previously present in state-owned stocks.[10]

These considerations helped CAR identify which lots of ammunition recovered in counterterrorism operations in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger had previously been in the custody of these states. To supplement its observations, CAR also analysed annual government reports on the export of military goods published between 2011 and 2021.

Identified matches do not necessarily suggest a causal relationship between legal transfers to the region and subsequent diversion, nor does the available information allow CAR to systematically determine how materiel may have been lost, stolen, or otherwise diverted from state custody.

As part of its analysis, CAR has analysed the different headstamps of ammunition recovered from Salafi jihadist groups active in the central Sahel (see Box 2 on page 9). The examination indicates that the groups engage in opportunistic procurement and that a large proportion of the ammunition under review was most likely to have been diverted from state custody in the region.

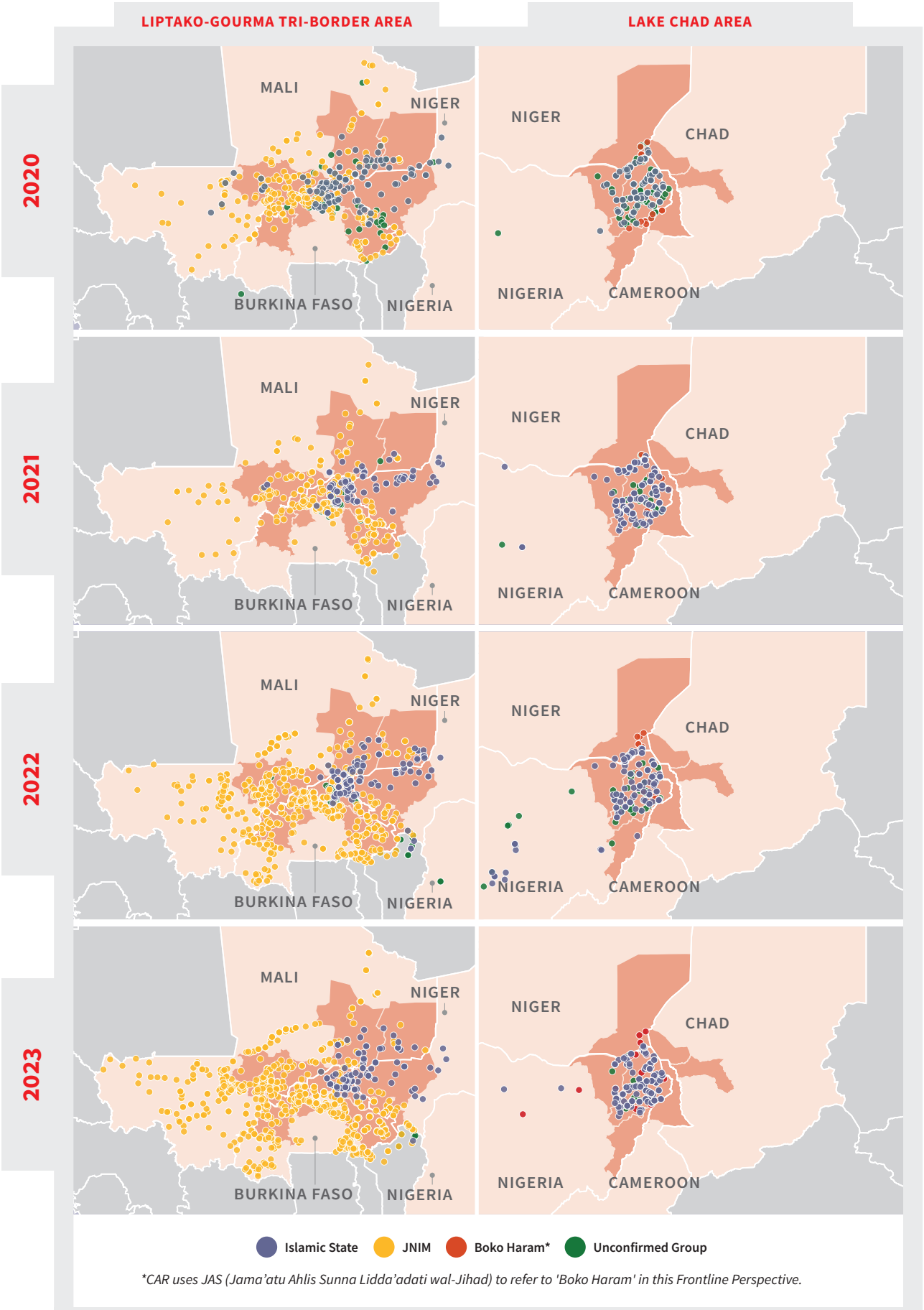
Mapping of political violence in the region, undertaken by the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED), shows that JNIM, ISSP, ISWAP, JAS and their affiliates have conducted—and often claimed—a high number of attacks and raids (see Map 2 on page 8). ACLED's data, taken in conjunction with CAR's analysis, suggests that these groups used violent means to capture much of this ammunition from security forces and facilities.

In the three case studies that follow, this assessment framework is applied to the central Sahelian states of Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger. Each illustrates how CAR identified linkages between transfers of ammunition to the region and the subsequent recovery of matching lots or headstamps in seizure data. All case studies highlight that Salafi jihadist groups acquire a variety of ammunition opportunistically, in large part by predating on national security forces in the central Sahel. The analysis calls attention to the rapidity of the diversion cycle from manufacture to state custody and into illicit circulation.

In 2023, partly in recognition of this challenge, states negotiated the Global Framework for Through-life Conventional Ammunition Management (UNGA, 2023). The framework recognises the need for the management of conventional ammunition to be addressed in a comprehensive manner to reduce the likelihood of diversion into illicit circulation. It includes measures to mitigate the risk of diversion and to deny unauthorised users access to serviceable caches and surplus stocks of conventional ammunition

A LARGE PROPORTION OF THE AMMUNITION UNDER REVIEW WAS MOST LIKELY TO HAVE BEEN DIVERTED FROM STATE CUSTODY IN THE REGION.

Small-calibre ammunition documentation in Niger.



Map 2

Evolution of violent acts attributed to the most active Salafi jihadist groups in the central Sahel, 2020–23.

Source: ACLED (Armed Conflict Location & Event Data). Data available at www.acleddata.com.[11]

BOX 2 — **UNIQUE HEADSTAMPS**

The ammunition sample that CAR analysed for this issue contains 329 unique headstamps, corresponding to ammunition produced by at least 71 different manufacturers in 36 countries.[12] It was common for the same headstamp to be recovered in more than one location.[13] However, there is a clear divide between the headstamps recovered in south-eastern Niger's Lake Chad conflict and those recovered in the conflict engulfing the Liptako-Gourma tri-border area shared by Burkina Faso, Mali, and western Niger. CAR investigators regularly came across identical headstamps in Burkina Faso and Mali, whereas they documented only a handful in both Niger and either Burkina Faso or Mali.[14] Just six unique headstamps were present in all three countries.

Considering that these two distinct conflict theatres are separated by hundreds of kilometres and involve different belligerents, these observations are not surprising. All the groups operating in the two separate regions rely on similar procurement mechanisms—which are mainly opportunistic—but predominantly on locally available sources shaped by local contexts.

Most of the headstamps were recovered in small quantities. A single recovery of 200 small-calibre cartridges might include 30 different headstamps. In CAR's total sample of small-calibre ammunition linked to Salafi jihadist groups in the central Sahel (15,455 cartridges), 6,833 units (44 per cent) bear 321 different headstamps. This observation supports CAR's assessment that a large proportion of this ammunition was probably sourced locally and opportunistically, as the presence of diverse holdings containing many manufacturing lots is a reflection of a reliance on multiple supply sources, such as illicit markets, trafficking networks, and diversion from security forces through targeted attacks and raids.

By contrast, a mere eight headstamps account for the remaining 8,622 cartridges, or nearly 56 per cent of the sample. Five of these were solely recovered in Niger (equivalent to 6,268 cartridges). CAR has previously reported on these five headstamps following its investigations in south-east Niger. Conflict had spread from Nigeria in 2014, as armed forces battled the JAS–ISWAP insurgency, drawing in the militaries of Cameroon, Chad, and Niger. CAR's investigations into this ammunition found that it could be linked to state custody in the region, including several that were captured from Nigeria's armed forces (CAR, 2022).[15]

The three remaining headstamps present in large quantities in CAR's data sample account for 2,354 cartridges and were mostly recovered in a single seizure, in a single country:

- 900 cartridges manufactured in present-day Czechia in 1987, bearing the headstamp bxn_87, and recovered in their original packaging in December 2019 in Toéni, northern Burkina Faso;[16]
- 830 cartridges of calibre 7.62 × 39 mm bearing the headstamp 861_71, recovered following a Salafi jihadist attack in Mali's Gao region in September 2015; and
- 592 cartridges of calibre 7.62 × 54 mm R bearing the headstamp 811_17, recovered in Sévaré, central Mali, in April 2022.

This observation suggests that a large proportion of the ammunition used by Salafi jihadists groups operating in the central Sahel probably originated from attacks against national security forces' convoys or facilities, where large quantities of cartridges bearing only a handful of unique headstamps are likely to be available.

A MERE EIGHT HEADSTAMPS ACCOUNT FOR 56 PER CENT OF CAR'S AMMUNITION SAMPLE.

CASE STUDY 1: A COUNTERTERRORISM OPERATION IN BURKINA FASO

In February 2022, CAR documented materiel seized one month earlier in the Sahel region of Burkina Faso. Security forces recovered the items from individuals linked to an unidentified Salafi jihadist group operating in Oudalan province, bordering Mali and Niger. In total, the seizure included three firearms and 331 cartridges of small-calibre ammunition, 266 of which were in 7.62 × 39 mm calibre.

Analysis of this recovered ammunition highlights the following characteristics:

- a large variety in the sample (34 different headstamps), which suggests these individuals accumulated the ammunition opportunistically via multiple diversion incidents;
- a significant number of cartridges (56 per cent or 185 cartridges) seized within ten years of being manufactured; and
- a large proportion (68 per cent or 224 cartridges) of the ammunition was most likely to have been diverted from state custody in the region.

CAR considers it likely that almost 61 per cent (163 of the 266) of the 7.62 × 39 mm cartridges originated in the custody of states in the central Sahel region. This ammunition was manufactured in Bulgaria, China, Romania, the Russian Federation, and Serbia between 2017 and 2020, meaning that it was diverted within just a few years of its delivery to a first legal consignee.

The most recently manufactured ammunition in this seizure bears the headstamp PPU20_7.62 × 39, indicating that it was produced in Serbia by Prvi Partizan A.D. in 2020 (see Figures 1 and 2). Given the extremely short timeframe from production to recovery, CAR deems it very unlikely that these

Figure 1

Left: Evidence bag containing cartridges seized in January 2022 in Burkina Faso.
Right: Twenty-eight cartridges manufactured by Prvi Partizan A.D. in Serbia in 2020.

Documented by CAR in Burkina Faso on 24 February 2022.

Figure 2

Ammunition bearing headstamp PPU20_7.62 × 39, seized in January 2022 in Burkina Faso, contained in the evidence bag shown in Figure 1.

Documented by CAR in Burkina Faso on 24 February 2022.

cartridges were the subject of further retransfer from one state to another before diversion; rather, they were probably lost from the custody of an initial legal recipient state.

CAR has documented 7.62 × 39 mm ammunition bearing the same headstamp and produced by Serbia in 2020 among cartridges recovered from Salafi jihadist groups operating in both Burkina Faso and Mali. While CAR was unable to trace this loose ammunition with authorities, national export records indicate that in 2020 Serbia granted export licences and delivered items compliant with category ML3[17] of the European Union Common Military List to only three West African countries: Burkina Faso, Nigeria, and Senegal (SEESAC, 2022). The values provided for Serbia's exports to Nigeria and Senegal (€559,300 and €213,510, respectively) are significantly smaller than the value of its export to Burkina Faso (€2,406,000), which implies considerably more materiel. It is therefore more likely that the ammunition was diverted from the legal custody of the security forces of Burkina Faso.

The seizure also included 32 loose cartridges of Romanian ammunition with the headstamp RSD 17_L 7.62 × 39, manufactured by Uzina Mecanica Sadu in 2017 (see Figure 3). Separately, in March 2022, CAR documented three metal tins (one with lot number A21/17 and two with lot number A25/17) containing a total of 2,100 cartridges bearing the same headstamp (see Figure 4). Security forces had seized these tins from an unauthorised civilian in the Tahoua region of Niger in February 2022, one month after the Oudalan seizure.

Figure 3

Cartridges bearing the headstamp RSD 17_L 7.62 × 39, seized from individuals linked to an unidentified Salafi jihadist group in Burkina Faso's Oudalan province in January 2022.

Documented by CAR in Burkina Faso on 24 February 2022.

Using the lot numbers on the tins CAR submitted a formal trace request to Romanian authorities. On 18 July 2022, the Government of Romania responded confirming that their export control department had authorised export of the tins to the United States.[18] Attempts to further trace this ammunition with US authorities were unsuccessful. Nevertheless, CAR considers it likely that the US government may have transferred both the tins seized in Niger and the cartridges seized in Burkina Faso to a West African state to support counterterrorism efforts in the Sahel. Alternatively, the tins may have formed part of the service equipment of US troops deployed in the central Sahel since 2013, under the framework of the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS.[19]

CAR investigators documented 80 cartridges of Bulgarian ammunition in the Oudalan province seizure. These cartridges—bearing the headstamps 10_17 and 10_18—were manufactured by Arsenal JSCo in 2017 and 2018. While it is not possible to undertake formal tracing of this loose, unpackaged ammunition with export authorities, CAR has determined that these cartridges were diverted from the custody of a state in the region. This assessment relies on information in end-user certificates related to the order of this ammunition,[20] confirmation from regional partners that these two headstamps are present in the service of at least one state in the region,[21] and Bulgarian annual export reports for 2018 and 2019, which provide specifics on the delivery of equipment consistent with the documented ammunition.[22]

The seizure also contained 15 cartridges with the headstamp 71_19, consistent with production by the Chinese state-run factory Harbin Longjiang Special Equipment Company Limited in 2019. CAR received confirmation from its regional partners that this headstamp is present in the service of at least one state in the region.[23] Separately, CAR also documented eight rounds of ammunition in this headstamp in Mali on 18 March 2022 after its recovery from groups aligned with JNIM.

Finally, one cartridge from the seizure bears the headstamp 3_17, indicating manufacture by Ulyanovsk Mechanical Plant in the Russian Federation in 2017. CAR previously documented 235 cartridges with this headstamp, following 14 seizures that occurred in Mali and Burkina Faso (eight of which were undertaken in counterterrorism operations).[24] CAR could not confirm the presence of this headstamp in Burkinabè service and therefore considers it possible that this cartridge was diverted from the custody of a different state in the region.

Figure 4

Metal tins containing cartridges bearing the headstamp RSD 17_L 7.62 × 39, seized from a civilian in the Tahoua region of Niger in February 2022.

Documented by CAR in Niger on 10 March 2022.

CASE STUDY 2: A SEIZURE FROM ISWAP OR JAS ELEMENTS IN NIGER

In March 2023, CAR documented ammunition seized in May 2022 from ISWAP or JAS in Niger's south-eastern Diffa region. Niger's security forces seized four weapons and 158 cartridges of small-calibre ammunition, including 152 cartridges in 7.62 × 39 mm calibre.

Close inspection of the seized ammunition brings to light the following features:

- a large variety in the sample (29 different headstamps), which suggests that these ISWAP or JAS affiliates had accumulated the ammunition via multiple diversion incidents and opportunistic acquisition, largely within their area of operation;
- a significant proportion of cartridges (44 per cent or 69 cartridges) seized within ten years of being manufactured; and
- a large proportion of cartridges (37 per cent) that had most likely been diverted from state custody in the region.

Of the 158 cartridges in the Diffa seizure, 58 had most likely been diverted from state custody in the region. In particular, CAR documented 31 cartridges of 7.62 × 39 mm ammunition manufactured in Nigeria by one or more ordnance factories for the state-run Defence Industries Corporation of Nigeria in 2016, 2019, and 2020. These cartridges bear the headstamps 7.62_16_OFN, 7.62_19_OFN, and 7.62_20_OFN (see Figure 5).

CAR understands that Nigeria has no significant export market for domestically produced high-velocity ammunition. Nigerian authorities have also previously acknowledged in trace responses to CAR that Salafi jihadist groups captured materiel on multiple occasions during combat with armed forces in the Lake Chad region, which encompasses Niger's Diffa region (CAR, 2022). CAR therefore considers it likely that the cartridges seized in Diffa in May 2022 were diverted from Nigerian state custody, in line with a trend that investigators first observed when analysing materiel seized between 2014 and 2019 in the same region.

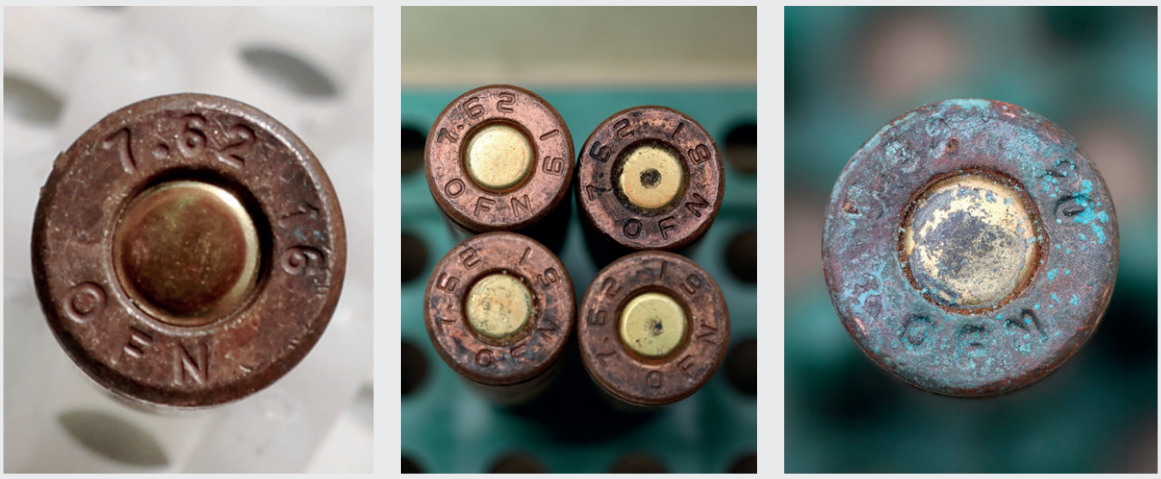


Figure 5

Cartridges with the headstamp 7.62_16_OFN, 7.62_19_OFN and 7.62_20_OFN, seized in Diffa from JAS- or ISWAP-affiliated elements in May 2022.

Documented by CAR in Niger on 29 March 2023.

Eleven cartridges in the Diffa seizure were manufactured in Slovakia and bear the headstamp ZVS_7.62 × 39. Relevant end-user certificates dated April 2017 and seen by CAR indicate that these items were diverted from state custody in the region.[25] CAR corroborated the information contained in this documentation with local partners. CAR also received written confirmation in October 2019 that this specific headstamp was present in the service of at least one state in the region.[26] In addition, annual export reports detailing transfer licences granted and deliveries conducted in 2017 confirm that the Government of the Slovakian Republic granted an export licence in 2017 for items included in the category ML3 of the EU Military List to Burkina Faso. The items were delivered to Burkina Faso during the same year (EU Council, 2018). CAR corroborated this information with both local partners and the Slovak authorities. The Slovak government also granted export licences to Mali for items conforming to category ML3 in 2018, 2019, and 2020, but authorities informed CAR that these did not relate to transfers of 7.62 x 39 mm ammunition (EU Council, 2019, 2020, and 2021).[27]

CAR has observed ammunition bearing the headstamp ZVS_7.62 × 39 in West Africa on only two occasions: while documenting the Diffa seizure in May 2022 and following a targeted attack in northern Ghana in February 2019, which was perpetrated by suspected Salafi jihadists with a connection to Burkina Faso.

CAR has further identified that other cartridges in the Diffa seizure were also most likely to have been diverted from state custody in the region. These bear headstamps consistent with manufacture in China (produced in 2009),[28] Romania (produced in 2017),[29] and the Russian Federation (unknown date of manufacture).[30]

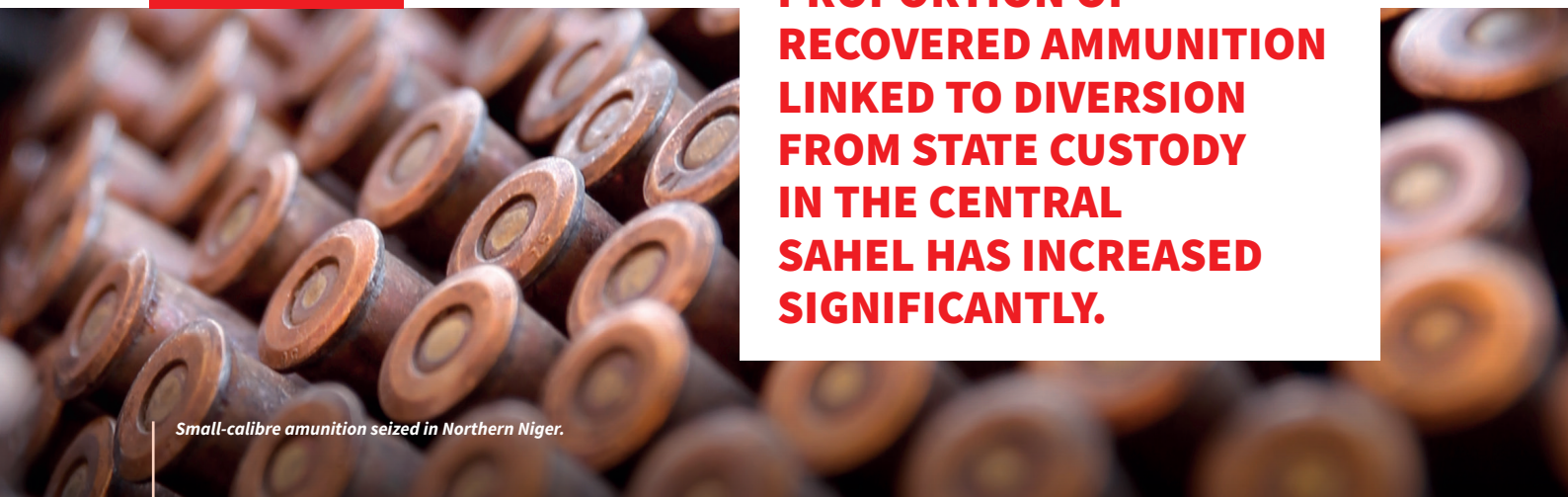
LOSS FROM STATE CUSTODY IN THE CENTRAL SAHEL: AN INCREASING CHALLENGE

Since 2019, the proportion of recovered ammunition linked to diversion from state custody in the central Sahel appears to have increased significantly throughout the region. CAR investigators were able to link less than 7 per cent of the ammunition recovered between 2015 and 2018 to state custody in the region. This proportion jumps to 41 per cent with reference to recoveries conducted between 2019 and 2022.

CAR is able to chart this change in Burkina Faso and Mali in particular.[31] In Burkina Faso, 11 per cent of the ammunition recovered from Salafi jihadists between 2015 and 2018 matched state service ammunition in the region. In Mali, that proportion was 3 per cent. For recoveries made between 2019 and 2022, the per centage increased to 67 per cent in Burkina Faso and 18 per cent in Mali.

From 2011 onwards, in response to the intensifying threat posed by insurgent Salafi jihadist groups, Sahelian states developed a variety of counterterrorism strategies, including large-scale military operations that have involved multinational participation. CAR's data set indicates that these efforts have not drastically affected Salafi jihadist groups' capacity to acquire ammunition and—more importantly—that diverted state-owned ammunition represents an increasing proportion of their supply. CAR's understanding of the conflict dynamics in the central Sahel suggest that this is most likely the result of violent attacks on security forces and facilities and is not the result of deliberate intent to divert in these cases.

SINCE 2019, THE PROPORTION OF RECOVERED AMMUNITION LINKED TO DIVERSION FROM STATE CUSTODY IN THE CENTRAL SAHEL HAS INCREASED SIGNIFICANTLY.



Small-calibre amunition seized in Northern Niger.

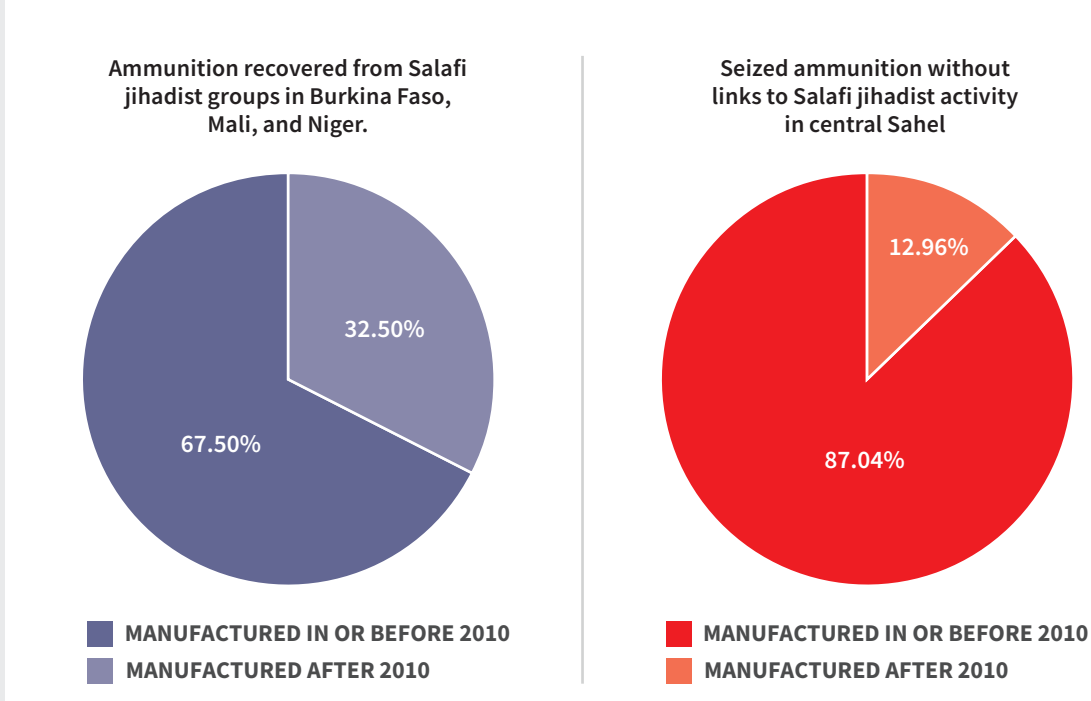
Small-calibre ammunition and magazines seized in Niger.

AMMUNITION OF RECENT MANUFACTURE

While individual weapons might remain serviceable for decades, ammunition is a consumable good that, once used, must be replaced. Regular—and large—supplies of ammunition are therefore required by belligerent parties that seek to sustain war (CAR, 2018a).

Of the small-calibre ammunition recovered from Salafi jihadist groups in the Liptako-Gourma tri-border region of Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger, and in the Lake Chad area of south-eastern Niger between 2015 and 2022, 4,552 units (33 per cent of the sample) were manufactured after 2010 (see Graph 3). In contrast, only 13 per cent of the ammunition in CAR's Central Sahel data set related to other, unaffiliated, actors was manufactured after 2010. The discrepancy highlights Salafi jihadist groups' ability to access newer ammunition.

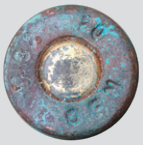
The most recently manufactured ammunition documented by CAR in the sample dates to 2020 and includes the calibres 7.62 × 39 mm and 7.62 × 54 mm R. Table 1 lists the headstamps of the 237 cartridges in this sub-sample.



Graph 3

Ammunition manufactured after 2010 as a proportion of recoveries made in 2015–22.

Table 1
Ammunition manufactured in 2020 and recovered from Salafi jihadist groups in the central Sahel, n=237

Photo	Headstamp	Quantity	Calibre	Country of manufacture	Country of recovery
	71_20	7	7.62 × 39 mm	China	Mali
	71_20	199	7.62 × 54 mm R	China	Mali
	811_20	1	7.62 × 39 mm	China	Niger
	7.62_20_OFN	1	7.62 × 39 mm	Nigeria	Niger
	PPU 20_7.62x39	28	7.62 × 39 mm	Serbia	Burkina Faso
	PPU 20_7.62x39	1	7.62 × 39 mm	Serbia	Mali

Items seized from Islamic State affiliated combatant in Niger, January 2023.

All the ammunition shown in Table 1 was recovered by national security forces in early to mid-2022 (see Case Study 1), meaning that the timeline from its manufacture in 2020, its transfers to the intended legal custodians, and its eventual diversion to Salafi jihadist groups' fighters in the central Sahel was at most 2.5 years. CAR additionally documented a larger number of cartridges produced in 2018 and 2019, including four different headstamps produced in China[32] and one headstamp from Kyrgyzstan.[33]

As discussed in Case study 3, the Mondoro attack in Mali in 2019 describes an even more rapid case of diversion, where ammunition transferred to a state in the region was used in a terrorist attack mere months after the original export.

CASE STUDY 3: A SALAFI JIHADIST ATTACK IN MONDORO, MALI

On 1 October 2019, Ansarul Islam, a Salafi jihadist group affiliated with JNIM, attacked a Malian armed forces camp in Mondoro, Mopti region. CAR received details of 503 spent cartridges used by the attackers.

Analysis of the recovered ammunition highlights the following characteristics:

- a large variety in the sample (50 unique headstamps), which suggests that Ansarul Islam opportunistically accumulated the ammunition via multiple diversion incidents and procurement mechanisms;
- a large number of cartridges used in the attack within ten years of their manufacture (274 cartridges, representing nearly 55 per cent); and
- a significant proportion of cartridges of calibre 7.62 × 39 mm (27 per cent) and 7.62 × 54 mm R (39 per cent) that were most likely to have been diverted from state custody in the region.

CAR identified 268 cartridges of calibre 7.62 × 54 mm R with 15 different headstamps and 235 cartridges of calibre 7.62 × 39 mm with 35 different headstamps.[34]

Investigators identified 28 cartridges that had been manufactured less than a year before the attack in Mondoro, a striking example of the speed with which ammunition can be diverted from state custody to Salafi jihadist groups. These cartridges had been manufactured in Bulgaria in 2018 (see an example in Figure 6) and, as elaborated in Case Study 1, were probably part of legal exports to a state in the region, although CAR is not able to confirm which state was the recipient of the specific ammunition used in Mondoro as it cannot be effectively traced in its documented condition.[35] During its field deployments, however, CAR verified that headstamp 10_18 was present among at least one state in the region, in both 7.62 × 54 mm R and 7.62 × 39 mm calibres. As detailed in Case Study 1, Bulgaria's national export reports for 2018 and 2019 also list the delivery of materiel consistent with the relevant ammunition to governments in the region.

Ansarul Islam's use of ammunition bearing the same headstamp on 1 October 2019 therefore suggests that the materiel was diverted within months of its delivery to the intended legitimate consignee. Analysis of the data also confirms that other Salafi jihadist groups operating in both Burkina Faso and Mali were also able to access this 2018-produced ammunition (see an example in Figure 7).[36]

Figure 6

Spent cartridges of calibre 7.62 × 39 mm with the headstamp 10_18, manufactured in Bulgaria in 2018 and used by perpetrators of the attack against a Malian armed forces camp in Mondoro, Mali, in October 2019.

Documented in Mali on 2 November 2019.

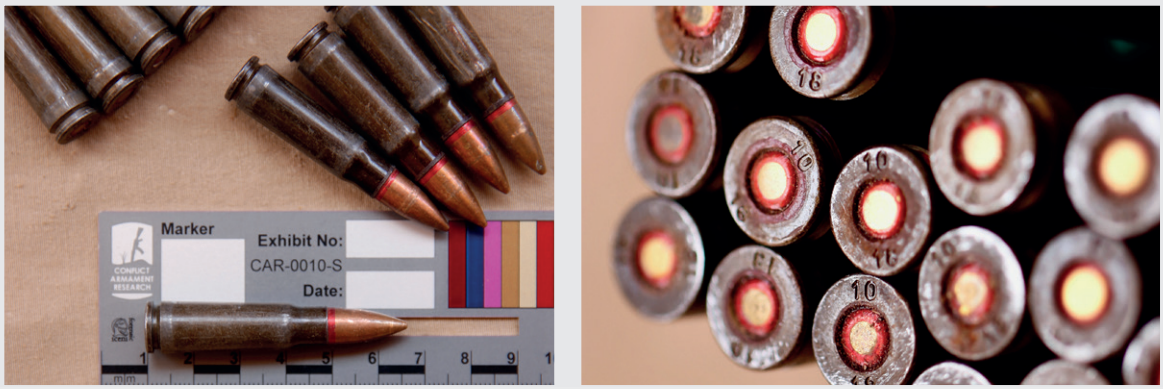


Figure 7

Recovered 7.62 × 39 mm cartridges with the headstamp 10_18, seized in January 2022 in Burkina Faso.

Documented by CAR in Burkina Faso on 24 February 2022.

The sample collected after the attack in Mondoro also includes 37 7.62 × 39 mm cartridges of Chinese,[37] Czech,[38] and Russian[39] manufacture. In addition, it contains 104 7.62 × 54 mm R cartridges manufactured in China in 2016 and bearing the headstamp 945_16 (see Figure 8). CAR is confident that this specific headstamp was diverted from the national custody of at least one country in the region, as CAR investigators documented 400 identical cartridges in the service of one of these countries in early March 2021. These cartridges had been seized one day before documentation, in their original packaging, marked with a contract number and a reference to the first legal recipient, the Malian Ministry of Home Security.

Figure 8

7.62 × 54 mm R cartridges with the headstamp 945_16, seized in March 2021 in Mali.

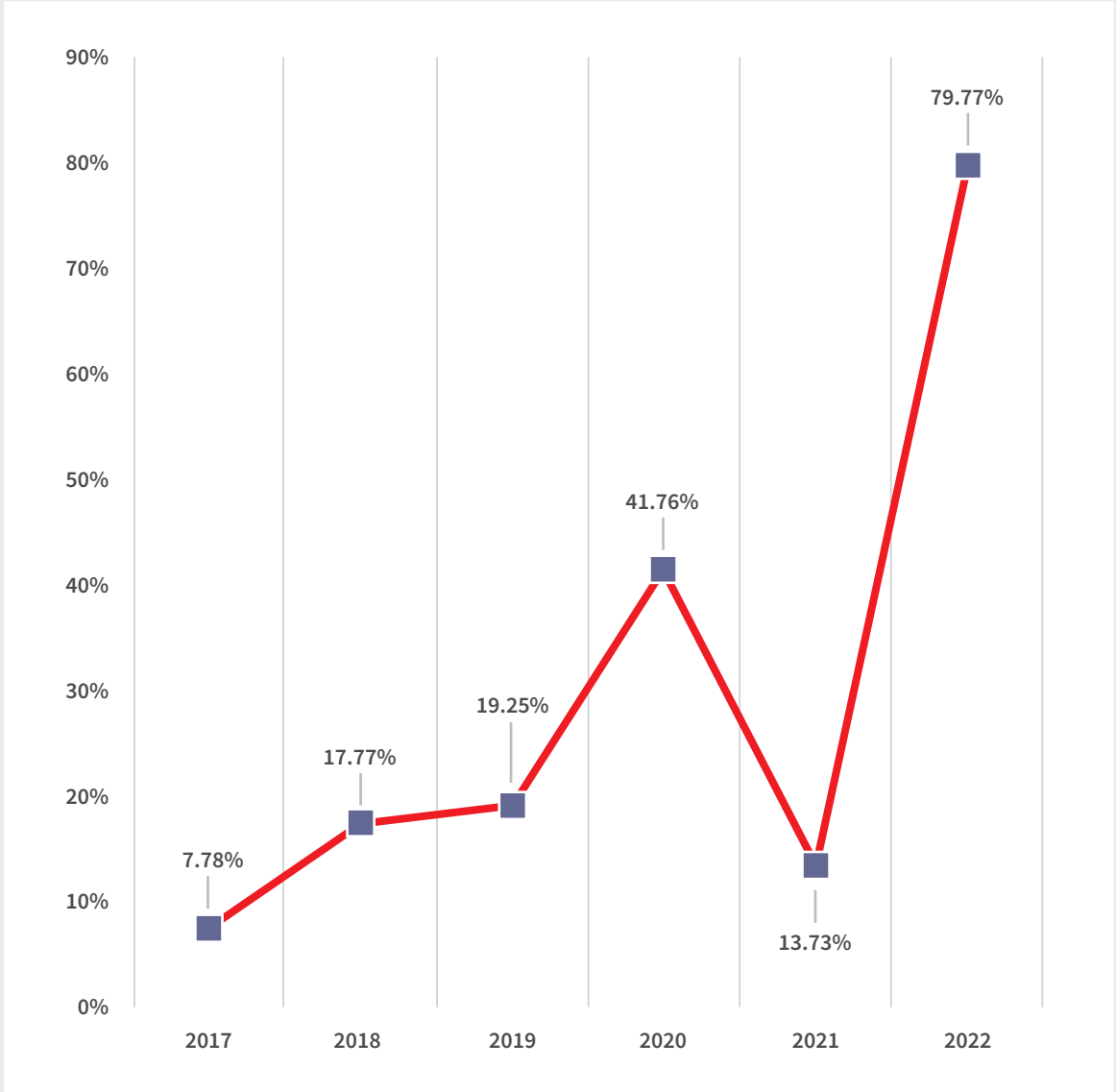
Documented by CAR in Mali on 2 March 2021.

Small-calibre ammunition seized in Burkina Faso.

DIVERSION OF NEW SUPPLIES: A WORSENING TREND

CAR's data sample clearly shows not only decades-old ammunition in recent circulation with Salafi jihadist groups, but also the growing presence of ammunition seized within ten years of being manufactured.[40] The proportion of ammunition manufactured after 2007 represents less than 8 per cent of all recoveries made during 2017 in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger combined (see Graph 4). By 2019, the proportion of ammunition seized within a decade of being manufactured (in this case since 2009) reached almost 20 per cent. A dramatic spike followed: cartridges manufactured after 2012 comprise more than three-quarters (80 per cent) of the recoveries made in 2022.[41]

CAR's investigations in the central Sahel and farther afield show that diversion of materiel through battlefield losses and violent raids on security facilities and personnel is often a predictable by-product of conflict, and that it can occur within a very short timeframe from its initial transfer and receipt (CAR, 2018b). As demand grows and becomes more urgent amid unfolding insecurity, so too does the risk that states will face challenges to their ability to secure and control new supplies.



Graph 4

Proportion of ammunition seized from Salafi jihadist groups in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger within ten years of manufacture, by seizure year, 2017–22[42]

CONCLUSION

Two key trends emerge from CAR's analysis of its data on recoveries of small-calibre ammunition from Salafi jihadist groups in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger between 2014 and 2022:

- a significant proportion of the ammunition used by these groups was most likely to have been diverted from state custody in the region; and
- a growing proportion of ammunition obtained by these groups was diverted within ten years of being manufactured.

Both trends point to challenges for security forces in terms of maintaining control of state-issued weapons and ammunition, particularly during active operations. As such, CAR's observations of its small-calibre ammunition data highlight the risk that members of JNIM, ISSP, and ISWAP or JAS may seek to supply themselves opportunistically, using state stocks as a regular, accessible procurement source. CAR's analysis of the conflict dynamics in the central Sahel indicates that a large proportion of the Salafist jihadist groups' procurements are a result of violent attacks on security forces and facilities and are not originated through deliberate diversions from state custody. In practical terms, however, materiel captured from national security forces, particularly from 2019 onwards, has enabled these groups and others to reinforce their positions, expand their arsenals, and widen their territorial control. The threat to state authority and local communities in the central Sahel has grown as a result.

The findings presented in this Frontline Perspective underscore the need to improve states' capacity to maintain control of weapons and ammunition in their custody, including through the implementation of new and innovative strategies to enhance the effectiveness of ammunition registration, monitoring, marking, and tracing. The recently adopted Global Framework for Through-life Conventional Ammunition Management provides a relevant framework for this approach, as well as opportunities for states to seek technical assistance and international support to achieve these collectively endorsed global objectives.

In this context, CAR supports the development of technical solutions as a means of enhancing the marking, management, and tracing of conventional ammunition, the collection of related data, and comprehensive analysis of diversion, as well as cooperation among relevant stakeholders.

THE FINDINGS PRESENTED UNDERSCORE THE NEED TO IMPROVE STATES' CAPACITY TO MAINTAIN CONTROL OF WEAPONS AND AMMUNITION IN THEIR CUSTODY.

Seized rifles at the CT Unit in Bamako, Mali, March 2022.

ENDNOTES

1 For example, in January 2024 the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team pursuant to UN Security Council resolutions 1267 (1999), 1989 (2011), and 2253 (2015) reported that Jama'a Nusrat ul-Islam wa al-Muslimin (the Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims, or JNIM) had 'expanded its presence in Burkina Faso, doubling since 2022 and consolidating in the south where it attacked security forces and civilian populations' (UNSC, 2024, para. 34). In Niger, the Team observed a notable increase in violence since July 2023 and documented an expansion of territorial control for the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (UNSC, 2024).

2 For more information, see Obasi (2024).

3 Numerous insurgent Salafi jihadist groups operate in the central Sahel. It is not always possible for CAR field investigators to obtain reliable information regarding which group was in possession of which weapons at the time the materiel was recovered. CAR specifies whatever relevant information is known.

4 The United Nations designated Islamic State Sahel Province (as Islamic State in the Greater Sahara) as entity QDe.164 on 23 February 2020; Islamic State West Africa Province as QDe.162 on 23 February 2020; Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'adati wal-Jihad (People Committed to the Prophet's Teachings for Propagation and Jihad, commonly called 'Boko Haram') as QDe.138 on 22 May 2014; and JNIM as QDe.159 on 4 October 2018 (UNSC, 2021). The UN also sanctioned related groups, including Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) as QDe.014; Ansar Eddine as QDe.135; and Al-Mourabitoun as QDe.141 (UN, n.d.).

Security analysts, national and local security forces, and others in CAR's operational context commonly use the term 'Salafi jihadists' to describe these listed groups. Accordingly, this CAR series uses the term as a collective reference to groups aligned with Al-Qaeda or Islamic State forces, as distinct from other non-state armed actors in CAR's wider data set in the region. For definitional guidance on this term, see EUROPOL (2020).

5 After Islamic State forces declared the Sahel province autonomous in March 2022, their combatants operating in the region became known as 'Islamic State Sahel Province'. The group largely mirrors the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS), integrated in March 2019 within the structure of the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP). ISWAP resulted from a split in the ranks of Al-Mourabitoun, a group that had pledged allegiance to Al Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), in December 2015.

6 These determinations are typically based on information that national security partners provide to CAR field investigators during documentation. Since such information tends to be partial or incomplete, assessments presented in this report are likely to underestimate the true proportion of CAR's sample that can be linked to Salafi jihadist groups in the region.

7 In addition, CAR documented a small amount of materiel in Ghana. Although the sample of ammunition seized in connection with these groups in Ghana appears to be consistent with the findings of this report, it cannot be considered representative given its small size. The sample comprises 1,388 seized cartridges, including 1,300 for blank-firing pistols; it contains only 12 cartridges of 7.62 × 39 mm ammunition that were seized in connection with a terrorist attack perpetrated in 2019. As a result, data from Ghana is not considered in the report analysis.

8 CAR field investigation teams document illicit weapons, ammunition, and related materiel in conflict-affected regions and trace their supply sources. The teams document all items photographically, date and geo-reference the documentation sites, and incorporate contextual interview data gathered from the national authorities in control of the items at the time of documentation. For the full methodology, see www.conflictarm.com.

9 While ammunition packaging is often marked with specific lot and batch numbers, headstamps on individual cartridges provide limited information and cannot be considered unique identifiers. As the majority of the cartridges of small-calibre ammunition are recovered by security forces without any packaging, it is often impossible to trace their pre-diversion chain of custody.

10 The documentation includes copies of end-user certificates issued by states in the region and received by confidential sources. CAR verified the veracity of the information contained in the documentation with local partners and retains the documentation on file.

11 Map 2 shows battles, explosions/remote violence, violence against civilians, and riots, as recorded by ACLED in West Africa between 2020 and 2023. Data accessed on 3 June 2024.

12 CAR identified the manufacturer, country of manufacture, or date of manufacture for the large majority of the documented cartridges. A small minority (less than 1 per cent) remains unidentified because the manufacturer code is illegible or because the cartridge is completely unmarked.

13 Of the 329 unique headstamps, 105 were recovered in two or more locations, while only nine were associated with 10 or more separate seizures.

14 CAR recorded 65 unique headstamps that were recovered in both Burkina Faso and Mali (corresponding to 3,435 cartridges), 4 unique headstamps that were recovered in both Burkina Faso and Niger (corresponding to 68 rounds of ammunition), 5 unique headstamps recovered in both Mali and Niger (corresponding to 102 rounds of ammunition), and 6 unique headstamps recovered in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger (corresponding to 395 rounds of ammunition).

15 On 26 January 2021, the Government of Nigeria responded to a formal trace request issued by CAR on 23 March 2020. This response confirmed that: 1) the Nigerian Army was in possession of the L5A3 tracer rounds bearing lot numbers 196, 198 and, 199, the subjects of CAR's trace request; 2) between 2013 and 2017, Boko Haram seized the item from Nigerian troops during encounters in the North East and South East of Nigeria; and 3) neither the Federal Government of Nigeria nor the Nigerian Army authorised the export or transfer of this item. For additional information on the ammunition seized from JAS/ISPAW affiliated elements in south-eastern Niger, see CAR (2022).

16 CAR documented a total of 932 cartridges bearing the headstamp bxn_87. However, aside from the Toéni recovery, the other rounds were recovered in smaller quantities, on multiple operations in Burkina Faso and Mali.

17 ML3 covers ammunition and fuze setting devices, and specially designed components.

18 On 18 July 2022, the Government of Romania responded to a formal trace request issued by CAR on 4 July 2022. This response confirms that: 1) Uzina Mecanica Sadu manufactured the 7.62 x 39 mm ammunition bearing the lot number 'LOT A25/17', the subject of CAR's trace request, in 2017; 2) the Romanian export control department authorised the export of the item to the Department of the Army, United States of America, the declared end user; 3) the export licence was supported by an end-user certificate issued by the Department of the Army on 20 November 2015; 4) a Romanian company delivered the item as part of a larger consignment in 2017; and 5) the Department of the Army provided the Romanian export control authority with a delivery verification certificate dated 1 November 2018.

On 18 July 2022, the Government of Romania responded to a formal trace request issued by CAR on 4 July 2022. This response confirms that: 1) Uzina Mecanica Sadu manufactured the 7.62 x 39 mm ammunition bearing the lot number 'LOT A21/17', the subject of CAR's trace request, in 2017; 2) the Romanian export control department authorised the export of the item to the Department of the Army, United States of America, the declared end user; 3) the export licence was supported by an end-user certificate issued by the Department of the Army on 20 November 2015; 4) a Romanian company delivered the item as part of a larger consignment in 2017; and 5) the Department of the Army provided the Romanian export control authority with a delivery verification certificate dated 1 November 2018.

19 CAR confirmed with several partners in Niger that military cooperation between Niger and the United States included the provision of some military equipment to Niger's armed forces. In their annual reports on arms exports (referred to as 'Section 655 reports') for the years 2016 to 2022, the US State Department and Department of Defense also make references to authorisations for export to Niger (USDoS, n.d.).

20 Documentation dated December 2018 and February 2019, received from confidential sources. CAR verified the veracity of the information contained in the documentation with local partners and retains the documentation on file.

21 CAR received written confirmation in an email on 5 April 2022. Confidential source on file with CAR.

22 According to the 2018 annual report on arms exports published by Bulgaria's Ministry of Economy and Energy, the Bulgarian government granted one export licence for a transfer of equipment consistent with items included in the category ML3 of the EU Military List to Burkina Faso and Niger (for commercial values equivalent to €5,543,516 and €820,000, respectively). The 2019 annual report confirms that, in the course of the year, the Bulgarian government granted two export licences for transfers of equipment consistent with items included in the category ML3 of the EU Military List to Burkina Faso (for a commercial value equivalent to €3,180,000) and delivered equipment of the same category for an equivalent commercial value. The report also confirms that the government granted one export licence for a transfer of equipment consistent with items included in the category ML3 of the EU Military List to Mali (for a commercial value equivalent to €4,199,000) and delivered equipment of the same category for a commercial value of €3,683,463 (Bulgaria Ministry for Economy and Energy, 2018 and 2019).

23 CAR received written confirmation in an email on 5 April 2022. Confidential source on file with CAR.

24 A small number of these cartridges (three) were seized in March 2019, in Burkina Faso's Sahel region, inside the magazine of an AK-103 assault rifle manufactured in 2017 and marked in compliance with ECOWAS standards. The code marked on the weapon—ML FAMA EMAT—indicates that the weapon was diverted from the custody of the Malian armed forces. ML corresponds to Mali's ISO-code; FAMA stands for Forces armées maliennes (Malian armed forces); and EMAT identifies the état-major de l'armée de terre (the army) as the force in possession of the weapon at the time of marking.

25 Documentation dated April 2017, received by confidential sources. CAR verified the veracity of the information contained in the documentation with local partners and retains the documentation on file.

26 CAR received written confirmation by email on 9 October 2019. Confidential source on file with CAR.

27 In response to an Advance Notification issued by CAR on 4 July 2024, the Government of the Slovak Republic confirmed that: 1) in 2017, the Ministry of Economy of the Slovak Republic granted an export license to Burkina Faso, for 7.62 × 39 mm ammunition; 2) the Ministry of Territorial Administration was the declared end user; and 3) in 2018, 2019, and 2020, the Ministry of Economy of the Slovak Republic did not grant any export licenses for 7.62 × 39 mm ammunition to Burkina Faso or Mali.

28 Three cartridges bear the headstamp 811_09. During field deployments in the central Sahel, CAR investigators confirmed the presence of this specific lot of manufacture among those in use by some security forces in the region.

29 Two cartridges bear the headstamp RSD 17_L 7.62 × 39. For additional information about how CAR linked this headstamp to state custody in the region, see Case Study 1.

30 Eleven cartridges bear the headstamp БПЭ_7,62x39. On 5 April 2022, CAR received an email containing written confirmation that this specific headstamp is present in the service of at least one state in the region. Confidential source on file with CAR.

31 A similar analysis is not possible for seizures made in south-eastern Niger. Since CAR's field investigation teams have limited access to contextual information and cannot date most seizures with any precision, they are not able to estimate changes in the proportion of ammunition that originated in state service in the region.

32 The four Chinese headstamps were 61_19, 71_18, 71_19, and 821_19.

33 Headstamp 60_19.

34 Four of the 7.62 × 39 mm cartridges bear illegible headstamp codes.

35 This includes ammunition in both 7.62 × 39 mm and 7.62 × 54 mm R calibre, both marked with headstamp 10_18.

36 Overall, CAR has documented 20 cartridges of the calibre 7.62 × 54 mm R and 152 cartridges of the calibre 7.62 × 39 mm, all manufactured in Bulgaria in 2018 and bearing the headstamp 10_18. These items were recovered during seven seizures conducted between October 2019 and April 2022 in Burkina Faso and Mali.

37 Sixteen of the Chinese cartridges bear the headstamp 311_7.62x39_16 and another three display the headstamp 811_09. CAR has linked the ammunition with both headstamps to state custody in the region, as CAR field investigators confirmed the presence of these headstamps among the service of at least one state in the region.

38 CAR documented four cartridges bearing the headstamp bxn_87. Based on the methodology used in this report, CAR infers that these cartridges were most likely to have been diverted from state custody in the region.

39 The sample contains 14 Russian 7.62 × 39 mm cartridges bearing the headstamp БПЭ_7,62x39. On 5 April 2022, CAR received an email from a confidential source with written confirmation that this specific headstamp was present in the service of at least one state in the region. A copy of the correspondence is retained on file.

40 CAR's analysis used a rolling baseline to assess if the proportion of ammunition produced within ten years of its subsequent recovery has increased over time, i.e. for ammunition recovered in 2017, CAR looked at the proportion of recovered ammunition had been manufactured since 2007; 2008 for 2018-recovered ammunition; 2009 for 2019-recovered ammunition, etc.

41 These percentages most probably underestimate the real proportion of ammunition that was manufactured within a decade of being seized, in part due to two factors:

Of the 14,162 cartridges seized in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger between 2017 and 2022, 1,170 (about 9 per cent) bear headstamp codes that do not refer to the year of manufacture. While these cartridges were not factored into the estimates, it is possible that some of them were indeed manufactured within ten years of being seized.

At the time of documentation, detailed contextual information was not available for a large proportion of the data set CAR collected in Niger. As a result, CAR was unable to precisely date seizures conducted in the Diffa region. These seizures could have taken place at any point in discrete periods: between January 2014 and October 2019 for the sample documented in 2019, and between November 2019 and June 2021 for the sample documented in 2021. When isolating the recently manufactured cartridges from the sample collected in 2019, CAR considered only the ones manufactured after 2009. It is possible, however, that this conservative methodology resulted in the exclusion of cartridges that were seized within ten years of manufacture. Based on the information available, CAR was not able to determine whether any of the cartridges manufactured in 2008, for instance, were seized in 2017; consequently, CAR excluded all of them. Similarly, when analysing the sample documented in 2021, CAR included only cartridges manufactured after 2011.

42 The ammunition seized in the 2014-2016 period that CAR documented represent a small proportion of the overall sample discussed in this Frontline Perspective. In addition, between 2014 and 2016, the Salafi jihadist groups' area of operations in central Sahel was much smaller when compared to the period between 2017 and 2022, and the states facing this threat had not yet developed strategies and capacities to respond to the challenge. CAR has therefore not included data from this time period for comparison in this graph.

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Front cover image: Small-calibre ammunition seized from Salafi jihadist groups, and documented by CAR in Burkina Faso on 24 February 2022.

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