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# Arms Management and Destruction in Sahel and Maghreb

Increased illicit weapons proliferation after the 2011 conflict in Libya has contributed to insecurity throughout the Sahel and Maghreb regions in Africa, which has led to demands for regional arms management and destruction programs such as one implemented by MAG (Mines Advisory Group).

by Chris Loughran, Julia Wittig and Greg Crowther [ MAG (Mines Advisory Group) ]

**H**uman security in the Sahel and Maghreb regions in Africa has deteriorated in recent years as a result of armed violence. The prevalence of non-state armed groups that often operate regionally has exacerbated weak state control over remote and border areas. For actors operating in the arms management and destruction sector, addressing fragility in this context requires innovative and integrated approaches to building stability and resilience.<sup>1</sup>

Instability and state fragility contributes to and enables the growing proliferation of weapons and ammunition in the Sahel and Maghreb regions. The increased availability of weapons to non-state armed groups allows them to engage more effectively with poorly equipped and poorly trained national armed forces, particularly in border areas, and to consolidate control over large swathes of countries such as Mali and Niger. Similarly, arms are more likely to be diverted to the illicit market when responsible institutions lack capacity and accountability. Criminal groups may seize weapons or security sector personnel may sell them.

In this complex and dynamic environment, considering fragility, stability and resilience at a regional level is increasingly important when analyzing the context and need for arms management and destruction in project design. Programs also have increased value when they link to security sector reform initiatives and complement civil society efforts to develop community based solutions to armed violence and illicit weapons.

## Conflict, Fragility and Proliferation

The flow of illicit weapons and ammunition across the Sahel and Maghreb regions is not a new phenomenon. Criminal groups have long exploited established transnational trading networks to assist in the movement of drugs, arms and other contraband.<sup>2</sup> These criminal networks are often



The Sahel and Maghreb regions are found in northern Africa. Map courtesy of the U.S. Library of Congress.

linked informally or formally to state actors and non-state armed groups.<sup>3</sup> This interrelationship between transnational organized crime, terrorism and conflict is a core enabler in the supply and demand of illicit weapons and ammunition throughout the region.

Libya's 2011 conflict increased instability in the region, especially in Mali. Significant numbers of trained fighters armed with Libyan weaponry crossed the border following the overthrow of Moammar Gadhafi's regime. In parallel, the inability of transitional authorities in Libya to establish

control over weapons stores and munition depots led to significant diversion and a rapid increase in the availability and quantity of illicit arms. Specific arms identified include BM-21 multiple-launch rocket systems, recoilless rifles and OG-82 rockets with anti-personnel warheads.<sup>4</sup>

The consequences of Mali's increased level of conflict include population displacement and escalating levels of political tension throughout the region. The situation remains volatile, despite the intervention of French military forces and subsequent deployment of the U.N. Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali under Security Council resolution 2100 in April 2013.<sup>5</sup>

The links between the conflicts in Libya and fragility in Mali are clear, but the flow of weapons across porous borders within the Sahel and Maghreb regions also has wide-ranging implications for broader regional stability. Human Rights Watch Emergency Director Peter Bouckaert noted in 2011 that "weapon(s) proliferation out of Libya is potentially one of the largest we have ever documented—2003 Iraq pales by comparison—and so the risks are equally much more significant."<sup>6</sup> The *In Amenas* terrorist attack in Algeria was launched in part from Libya using Libyan weapons.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, the ready availability of arms has exacerbated border clashes related to smuggling in recent years across the borders of Chad, Libya and Niger.<sup>8</sup> Increased terrorist activity in southern Tunisia and Egypt relies in part on the availability of significant amounts of weapons flowing out of Libya.<sup>9</sup>

### Arms Management and Destruction

Increased awareness of the regional implications of poorly managed national stockpiles and of the role illicit weapons play in sustaining and fueling armed violence has led to a growing focus on reducing illicit availability of arms. Many states request assistance from the international donor community and specialist agencies, such as MAG (Mines Advisory Group), to identify and implement projects aimed at improving weapons and ammunition management practices.

MAG has extensive experience implementing arms management and destruction programs in a range of countries including Burundi, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Libya, Somalia and South Sudan.<sup>10</sup> This includes the destruction of surplus weapons and munitions; rehabilitation, relocation and construction of armories and munitions stores; training of armorers and ammunition storage personnel; and capacity building of managers and leaders. Initial assistance projects often focus on low-cost, high-impact improvements that act as a basis for more sustained, long-term efforts to build national capacity and infrastructure.



Coast guard armory built by MAG in Berbera, Somaliland, in 2013. Armories are furnished with lockable gun racks and armory managers are trained in safety procedures. In this photo, an armory manager takes a coast guard officer's weapon card to the numbered slot in a gun rack to retrieve his assigned weapon.

Photo courtesy of Sean Sutton/MAG.

Weakened national infrastructure in some locations where MAG provides assistance means that society and community institutions take primary responsibility for daily security. In these cases, with approval of relevant authorities, MAG also works with communities to address the effects of unguarded weapons and munitions by delivering risk education, which reduces small arms and light weapons (SA/LW) associated risks and promotes safe storage. This form of support, pioneered in Somalia, normally includes initiatives that aim to reduce the risk of small arms accidents within communities. Both activities raise awareness of potential consequences and help reduce intentional and unintentional risk-taking behavior. While SA/LW risk education is relatively easy to adapt across regions and borders, other aspects of arms management and destruction programs are politically sensitive and need to be tailored according to local circumstances.

Context analysis and continued stakeholder engagement are central elements of successful assistance projects. Programs not rooted in these principles have little chance of delivering long-term successes. Prospects for sustainability are greatest when national authorities engage at multiple levels. Even when training is delivered at the local or small-unit level, senior leadership and political engagement and support are critical.

Furthermore, regions benefit from partnerships between actors involved in arms management and destruction,



Armory built by MAG for the police forces in Burundi.  
Photo courtesy of Sean Sutton/MAG.

particularly when their activities cover a broad range of expertise, ranging from technical assessment and advice to institutional capacity building.

MAG recently strengthened its partnership with the Bonn International Centre for Conversion (BICC), an organization specializing in long-term capacity building within states to adopt and implement regional and international treaties and declarations on arms management and destruction. In cooperation with BICC and Handicap International, MAG is conducting a series of technical assessments in the Sahel and Maghreb regions to design contextually appropriate technical assistance activities. This union forms a central part of a project funded by the Office of Weapons Removal and Abatement in the U.S. Department of State's Bureau of Political-Military Affairs (PM/WRA), under which MAG established a regional office in Dakar, Senegal.

### Conclusion

The Sahel and Maghreb regions present complex challenges and a dynamic operating environment for organizations involved in arms management and destruction. The extensive, remote and porous borders of these regions increase the scale of need that should be addressed. Governments providing assistance and organizations implementing programs must take a coordinated

approach in a complex region while also time-tailoring activities to the local circumstances. These are not, however, insurmountable. Principles of national ownership and context-relevant programming have proven to be key elements for success and sustainability at the national level.

MAG's work in the Sahel and Maghreb regions aims to develop projects founded on these principles, combining this approach with regional contextual analysis while exploring options for community level engagement, new strategic partnerships and increased links to international policy frameworks. This innovation solely aims to maximize the support that arms management and destruction activities can have on efforts to build stability and resilience at local, national and regional levels. ©

*See endnotes page 51*



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