



Report Update: Unsecured Libyan Weapons – Regional Impact and Possible Threats

Comprehensive Information on Complex Issues

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*This document provides an update to the January 2012 CFC thematic report “[Unsecured Libyan Weapons: Regional Impact and Possible Threats](#)”. It examines the increased availability of Libyan weapons in the past year to Libyan militias as well as other insurgent forces, terrorist groups and criminal entities in the region. Related information is available at www.cimicweb.org. **Hyperlinks to source material are highlighted in blue and underlined in the text.***

Update: Unsecured Libyan Weapons

After gaining power during a 1969 coup, former Libyan leader [Moammar Gaddafi](#) began amassing a significant arsenal of small arms and light weapons to act as a deterrent to external and internal threats. However, as the opposition to Gaddafi grew over the years, former dictator randomly deposited caches of weapons in public places and office buildings without documenting their locations. During the 2011 civil war, these undocumented locations were abandoned by Gaddafi loyalists as his strongholds were captured by the rebels. Unguarded caches of weapons were subsequently looted by rebels, militias, ordinary civilians and other criminal groups, who took the weapons for various reasons ranging from self-protection to sale on black markets or for use in violent clashes elsewhere. Moreover, Libya’s porous borders allowed the weapons to be transferred to other countries, enabling conflicts in the surrounding regions.

A United Nations (UN) report on the regional impact of the Libyan civil war indicates that the weapons from Gaddafi’s arsenal were [smuggled through the Sahel](#), including Chad, Niger and Nigeria, and have been obtained by terrorist groups such as Boko Haram and al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). Some countries in the region reportedly suspect that weapons were smuggled by army regulars and mercenaries who fought for Gaddafi. Furthermore, several states within West Africa have reported an increase in the arms trade.

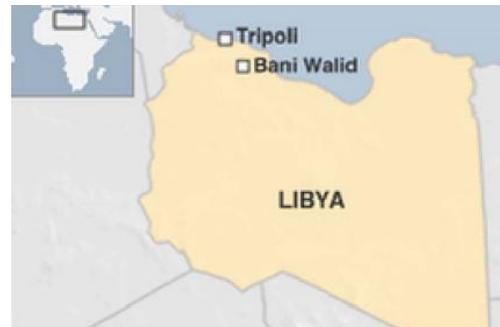
Situation in Libya

Within Libya, the most significant concern regarding unsecured weapons is the continued presence and power of the militias. The militias, who first laid their hands on weapons during their struggle against the former dictator, subsequently [competed with each other](#) to capture more of those weapons after Gaddafi’s death. In one such incident, two militia groups fought to gain access to 22 containers of weaponry at a police compound and a checkpoint in Ad Dafniyah in June 2012. One container was struck during the fighting and exploded, killing at least eleven people, scattering the munitions and explosives. One of the explosives killed a non-governmental organisation (NGO) worker, who was tasked to examine the munitions in the area the following day. However, the risks are not limited to such accidents, as heavily armed militias continue to pose a threat to civilians and foreigners alike.

The killing of the US Ambassador to Libya and three other Americans on 11 September 2012, by the armed Islamist militia group Ansar al Sharia, led to a [public outcry](#) and exerted pressure on the Libyan government to curb the militias’ power and return to the rule of law. On 22 September, the Libyan government [issued a ban](#) on all unauthorised militias. Moreover, a special unit called the [National Mobile Force](#) was established within the Libyan Army to disassemble the militia bases through non-violent initiatives. That same month, hundreds of militiamen reportedly handed over their weapons to authorities during [arms collection drives](#) in Tripoli and Benghazi. Despite the government’s efforts to dis-

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band such groups or integrate them in national forces, many militias continue to operate within the country with impunity. Some, such as the Libya Shield or Supreme Security Committee, are operating in [support of the government](#), while others, such as Ansar al Sharia¹, follow their own agenda. Among the most recent incidents in Libya are the clashes in the city of [Bani Walid](#) that took place during October 2012. Militias aligned with the Libyan government besieged the city, claiming to attack the “pro-Gaddafi forces”. However, as days passed, the attackers used heavy weapons, tanks and planes to destroy houses and there have been reports of [chemical weapons](#) used by the militia forces. The situation signifies not only the government’s inability to control the militias but also the extent of their armaments. Given the Libyan government’s current weakness and dependence on such militia groups for some essential public services such as policing or patrolling the borders, [total control or elimination](#) of the armed groups will remain a challenge for Libya for some time.



Source: [BBC](#)

Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM)

Robert Fowler, a former UN special envoy to Niger who was held hostage for four months in 2008-2009 by AQIM, said the group’s members are very focused on their goal and [committed](#) to jihad and pose a significant security threat to Europe, adding that “[t]hey are now equipped with enormous amounts of Libyan weapons and I mean sophisticated weapons such as 20,000 [shoulder-mounted] SA-24 missiles, heavy mortars, heavy artillery and thousands of anti-tank mines.” Regional instability caused by weak governance, rapid population growth, inter-state tensions and food insecurity has been exploited by AQIM, “spreading its influence south from Algeria and raising the prospect of transcontinental link-ups with Boko Haram militant Islamists in Nigeria and al-Shabaab in Somalia” according to the head of the Africa bureau of the French Ministry of Defence, Jerome Spinoza. AQIM, once a weak remote franchise of al Qaeda established by Algerian terrorists in 2006, became “probably the [best armed](#) al Qaeda franchise in the world” when it gained access to the Libyan arsenals, states Bruce Riedel, a senior fellow at the Saban Center for Middle East Policy.

In late 2011, large quantities of [Libyan weapons](#), including surface-to-air missiles (SAM), were reported missing and thought to have been smuggled out of the country. Similarly, in October 2011, Human Rights Watch (HRW) Emergencies Director Peter Bouckaert reported on a [weapons stockpile](#) the group found in Sirte, adding to the list of many other stockpiles discovered by journalists and NGOs. “I myself could have removed several hundred [missiles] if I wanted to, and people can literally drive up with pickup trucks or even 18 wheelers and take away whatever they want”, said Bouckaert, and added “[e]very time I arrive at one of these weapons facilities, the first thing we notice going missing is the surface-to-air missiles.” These surface-to-air and shoulder-to-air missiles (also known as man-portable air defence systems – MANPADs) are particularly concerning, as Libya had enough of these weapons to turn all of North Africa into a “no-fly zone”. The final destinations of the weapons were, for the most part, not clear. However, one of the leaders of AQIM, Mokhtar Belmokhtar, said that the group was one of the “main beneficiaries” of the civil war. In March 2012, Belmokhtar was reportedly in Libya for several weeks on a mission to [procure weapons](#).

Boko Haram

Boko Haram, an Islamic terrorist group operating [mainly within Nigeria](#), is believed to have links to AQIM and reportedly also obtained weapons from Libya. According to a UN report, some governments believe that Boko Haram is also active in Niger and its militants from Nigeria and Chad were trained in AQIM camps in Mali in 2011. Former Nigerian President Olusegun Obasanjo said that the toppling of the long-time Libyan dictator, the events in Mali and the US consulate attacks in Libya are all interlinked and added that the Libyan civil war produced many uncontrolled [trained and armed militants](#) who continue to fuel violence in the region, including the atrocities committed by Boko Haram in Nigeria.

In August 2012, Minister of State for Defence, Mrs. Olusola Obada [confirmed speculations](#) that Libyan weapons had found their way into Nigeria. She said that some of the looted weapons, including surface-to-air missiles, were transported to Nigeria and thought to be included in Boko Haram’s stockpiles. Although the country does not face any external threats, it struggles with several internal security problems such as arms smuggling, piracy and oil theft in addition

¹ For more detailed information on the Libyan Militias, see the In Focus excerpt from the [23 October CFC Mediterranean Basin Review](#): “*Libya’s Dilemma: Dependency on Militias and Reintegration Efforts*”.



to violence perpetrated by Boko Haram. Following [a major crackdown](#) on the militant group in September 2012, resulting in the killing of 35 militants and arrest of 60 others in Yobe state, Nigerian Forces seized many weapons, explosives and ammunition. Analysts believe Boko Haram acquired the weapons on the black market in Niger as well as from Libya following the civil war.

The government of Nigeria blamed Libya for [empowering Boko Haram](#), saying that most of the group's weapons come from Libyan stockpiles. Abba Moro, the Nigerian Minister of Interior, said the "[g]overnment believes that part of the problems that we have today, the challenges of internal security stemmed from the activities in Libya", and continued "It is indeed an open secret that even though, we did not share common border with Libya, arms and weapons have found their ways into Nigeria from that North African country".

Tuaregs

Another group which acquired Libyan weapons is the Tuareg rebels in Mali. The Tuareg who fought on behalf of Gaddafi [returned to Mali](#) with significant stockpiles of weapons. The Tuareg mercenaries then aligned themselves with the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA), a secessionist group in northern Mali. In February 2012, a US State Department travel warning stated that "[t]he situation is unpredictable and instability could spread. Private citizens have not been targeted, but the MNLA has indicated via its websites that it intends to conduct military operations across northern Mali". Moreover, the Tuaregs continued [smuggling weapons](#) from Libyan stockpiles to sell to the MNLA fighters in Mali in the following months.

Unlike weak previous attempts to confront the Malian Army, the latest rebellion in northern Mali by the MNLA has posed a serious threat to the country. The significant change in the [strength of the Tuareg](#) rebels shocked the Malian authorities. Malian Minister of Foreign Affairs Soumeylou Boubèye Maïga said: "All of a sudden we found ourselves face to face with a thousand men, heavily armed", and added that "[t]he stability of the entire region could be under threat". The well-armed Tuareg insurgents subsequently [allied with Islamist groups](#) such as Ansar al Dine, and expelled the Malian forces from the northern part of the country and declared the independence of "Azawad".

Somali Pirates

Pirates in the Gulf of Aden reportedly also gained access to Libyan weapons sold on the black market. Judith van der Merwe of the African Centre for the Study and Research on Terrorism said that Somali pirates are [purchasing smuggled weapons](#) in Sierra Leone, Liberia and other countries. Based on interviews with gun smugglers and pirates, she said that the pirates are buying sophisticated weaponry, including naval mines and hand-held missile launchers to be used against ships transiting the gulf. Regarding the proliferation of the pirates' weapons, Van der Merve said "[w]hat we are seeing is a decrease in the number of successful attacks, but an increase in the ransom amounts paid out, and the fear is that better armed pirates could risk more or pose a greater challenge when facing capture".

Syria

Libyan weapons also arrived in Syria over the past year. In April 2012, a ship carrying [weapons from Libya](#) was intercepted by Lebanese authorities. The ship was destined for the port of Tripoli, where the primarily Sunni population held several protests against Syrian leader Bashar al Assad. From here, the weapons could be smuggled to rebel fighters in Syria. Some weapons crates in the containers of the ship were reportedly labelled "Tripoli/Benghazi SPLAJ" the acronym for Socialist People's Libyan Arab Jamahiriya, the Gaddafi-era name of Libya, while some other crates carried the label Misrata, a Libyan town that served as a rebel base to overthrow Gaddafi.

In September 2012, another ship loaded with [Libyan weapons](#) reportedly docked in a Turkish port to deliver its cargo to Syrian rebels. A member of the Free Syrian Army (FSA) Abu Mohammad, was quoted as saying that he helped to move the weapons from warehouse to border and added that it was the "largest single delivery of assistance". Videos and photos confirmed the arrival of the weapons at the Syrian border and the transfer of over eighty per cent of the cargo into Syria.



Gaza Strip

Libyan weapons were also identified in the occupied Palestinian territory of Gaza. Israeli military intelligence reports suggest that the weapons looted by jihadists [made their way to Gaza](#) strip through the tunnels at Rafah. While most of the weaponry in Gaza is reportedly provided by Iran and transported via Sudan, Libyan weapons have been arriving in increasing quantities on land routes through Egypt. A variety of missiles, guns and ammunition from Libya had arrived in Gaza in the past, and it is believed that the same source also supplies the Islamist militants battling Egyptian forces in the Sinai Peninsula. Director of the Policy Institute for Counter-Terrorism Boaz Ganor said that “Sinai has become a freeway of arms into Gaza from various sources. It’s clear Egypt isn’t doing enough [to stop this]” and added that “[t]hey are preoccupied by other problems in Cairo. Egyptian military intelligence is concerned with internal security and [Sinai](#) has become a no-man’s land. It is a heaven for terror organisations, for training, deployment and smuggling purposes.” On the other hand, there have been several reports of an Egyptian crackdown on arms smugglers from Libya as well as Islamist militants in Sinai. Egyptian authorities are utilising helicopters and jet fighters to [eliminate radical militants](#) in the Sinai Peninsula and continues to honour the peace treaty with Israel. Moreover, on 25 October, Egyptian police [intercepted](#) al Qaeda-affiliated Libyans attempting to smuggle two truckloads of weapons from Libya. The seized cargo included 25 rockets, 102 rocket-propelled grenades and 102 mortar rounds.



Source: [Voice of America \(VOA\)](#)

Conclusion

The [unguarded weapons caches](#) scattered throughout Libya have shown to be a major threat not only to Libya itself, but also to the broader region. The availability of small arms, heavy weaponry and munitions strengthen Libyan militias as well as terrorist groups and insurgent forces in the region, which causes major security concerns within and outside of Libya. At the national level, such weapons continue to enable rogue militias, allowing them to refuse government control and pursue their own interests, increasing insecurity within the country. At the regional level, the weapons have consequently spread to many surrounding countries through black market sales to terrorist groups, insurgents, pirates or other criminal entities, which in turn incite profuse violent clashes in the Middle East, North Africa and Horn of Africa regions.