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Article

The Political Economy of Illicit Arms Flows in Nigeria: Trafficking Networks, State Weakness, and Armed Violence

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the persistence of illicit arms trafficking in Nigeria through the political economy of conflict framework. Using a qualitative explanatory case-study design, the study conducts a theory-guided thematic analysis of 95 documentary sources published between 2009 and 2026, including scholarly publications, institutional reports, policy documents, and investigative reports. The analysis identifies three principal themes, trafficking networks, conflict economies, and security governance, and a higher-order integrative theme of the self-reproducing political economy of illicit arms trafficking. The findings indicate that illicit arms trafficking persists through reinforcing interactions among trafficking networks, conflict economies, and security governance weaknesses. Conflict economies generate sustained demand for firearms, trafficking networks adapt to market opportunities, and security governance weaknesses, including corruption, institutional fragmentation, weak stockpile management, and inconsistent enforcement, limit the capacity of state institutions to detect, disrupt, and prosecute trafficking activities, enabling armed actors to sustain organised violence. The analysis suggests that illicit arms trafficking constitutes a structural feature of Nigeria's wider political economy of violence, in which firearms function as productive assets facilitating resource extraction, territorial control, and criminal accumulation. Because the study relies on secondary documentary evidence relating to a clandestine activity, the findings are constrained by the availability, quality, and verifiability of existing sources. The study contributes to debates on security governance and conflict economies by advancing an integrated explanation of the political and institutional processes that sustain illicit arms trafficking beyond accounts centred primarily on illegal supply, porous borders, or regional conflict spillovers. This explanation provides a basis for more coordinated research, policy formulation, and security governance responses in Nigeria and comparable conflict-affected settings.

KEYWORDS

Illicit arms trafficking, small arms and light weapons, conflict economy, security governance, armed violence, Nigeria.



1. Introduction

1.1. Background

Over the past two decades, Nigeria's security landscape has become increasingly fragmented as armed violence has spread across several regions and assumed more diverse organisational forms (Abdullahi & Salihu, 2024; Ojo, 2020). Multiple forms of organised violence now coexist across different parts of Nigeria, each with distinct historical and political trajectories but increasingly linked through illicit arms trafficking, overlapping criminal markets, and weaknesses in security governance (Ojo, Oyewole, & Aina, 2023; Balogun, 2024). The availability of small arms and light weapons (SALW) has not independently caused these conflicts, which are also rooted in political exclusion, contested authority, resource competition, weak local governance, and criminal accumulation. However, SALW have increased the capacity of insurgents, bandits, militias, separatist factions, and other armed actors to inflict violence, resist state enforcement, control populations, and sustain illicit economies (Ojo et al., 2023; Amali & Buthelezi, 2025). Nigeria's contemporary illicit arms-trafficking problem must therefore be situated within a broader transformation of armed violence in which locally rooted grievances interact with transregional weapon flows, institutional weaknesses, and expanding markets for coercion (Balogun, 2024).

Although illicit arms trafficking is not a new phenomenon in Nigeria, its contemporary scale, organisation, and security implications reflect important changes in the country's conflict environment. Beyond serving as instruments of violence, illicit weapons also function as assets within broader conflict economies that facilitate criminal accumulation (Okoli, 2021; Ojewale, 2024). Nigeria's illicit arms-trafficking challenge extends beyond conventional law enforcement to encompass broader questions of security governance.

Nigeria's vulnerability to illicit arms trafficking is frequently associated with its extensive borders and its position within a wider regional security environment shaped by instability across the Sahel and Lake Chad Basin. Its shared borders with Niger, Chad, Cameroon, and Benin connect the country to transnational corridors through which licit and illicit commodities, including weapons, circulate (Small Arms Survey, 2021). Regional arms availability increased following the collapse of Libya's security institutions in 2011, although flows are also sustained by diversion from national arsenals and established trafficking networks (Florquin, Lipott, & Wairagu, 2019). However, explaining Nigeria's illicit arms trafficking primarily through border porosity provides only a partial understanding of the problem. Extensive borders do not automatically become effective trafficking corridors; rather, illicit networks expand where weaknesses in governance, enforcement capacity, and institutional coordination create opportunities for unauthorised movement and exchange (Andreas, 2003). Weak surveillance infrastructure, corruption within security institutions, limited intelligence sharing, poor stockpile management, and inconsistent implementation of arms-control frameworks have undermined efforts to regulate illicit weapons circulation (Chuma-Okoro, 2011; Grip, 2017).

Nigeria is not without national, regional, and institutional mechanisms for regulating SALW. At the national level, the Firearms Act establishes the legal framework governing firearm possession, licensing, and transfers (Amali & Buthelezi, 2025). At the regional level, Nigeria is a party to the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) Convention on Small Arms and Light Weapons, which provides a framework for regional cooperation and arms control (ECOWAS, 2006; Chuma-Okoro, 2011). Implementation of these national and regional commitments rests with the country's security and arms-control institutions responsible for enforcement, border management, intelligence, and regulatory oversight. Nevertheless, illicit weapons remain accessible to insurgents, criminal networks, and other armed actors, revealing a persistent implementation gap between legal and policy frameworks and their institutional enforcement. Against this background, the present study examines how trafficking networks, conflict economies, and security governance weaknesses interact to sustain illicit arms trafficking in Nigeria.

1.2. Significance of the Study and Its Relevance to the Field

Illicit arms trafficking remains one of the principal enablers of contemporary armed violence in Nigeria, yet its persistence continues to challenge existing security governance and arms-control efforts despite the presence of national and regional regulatory frameworks. Understanding the factors that sustain illicit weapons circulation is therefore important for strengthening knowledge of security governance, conflict economies, and organised violence, as well as for informing evidence-based policy responses. Examining illicit arms trafficking through the political economy of conflict framework offers an integrated perspective on those factors and their implications for arms-control policy and conflict prevention. The study is therefore relevant to researchers, policymakers, and security practitioners working on these questions in Nigeria and comparable conflict-affected contexts.

1.3. Literature Review

The proliferation of illicit SALW has generated extensive scholarship across security studies, conflict research, criminology, and international political economy (Bourne, 2007; Greene & Marsh, 2012). Three broad debates dominate the literature: whether weapons availability drives armed violence or insecurity generates demand for weapons (Sa'ad & Idakwoji, 2021; Olamide & Emmanuel, 2018); whether illicit arms trafficking is principally a consequence of porous borders or failures in security governance (Onuoha, 2013; Tarasa, Musa, & Jelani, 2025); and how regional conflicts, particularly in Libya, the Sahel, and the Lake Chad Basin, have reshaped illicit arms flows into Nigeria (de TESSIÈRES, 2018; Florquin et al., 2019).

The first debate examines the relationship between arms availability and armed violence. While one perspective argues that widespread access to small arms intensifies and prolongs conflict (Small Arms Survey, 2021; Boutwell & Klare, 1999; Krause, 2002), another contends that insecurity, political instability, and weak state protection generate demand for illicit firearms (Sa'ad & Idakwoji, 2021; Olamide & Emmanuel, 2018). Recent scholarship views these processes as mutually reinforcing, with conflict creating demand for weapons and their continued availability sustaining armed violence. Nigerian studies similarly recognise this reciprocal relationship but largely examine specific conflict settings rather than the interaction between supply, demand, governance, and illicit markets (Okoli, 2021; Ojewale, 2024).

The second debate concerns whether illicit arms trafficking is primarily driven by porous borders or broader failures of security governance. Earlier studies emphasise weak border surveillance and informal crossing points (Onuoha, 2013; Mark & Iwebi, 2019), whereas more recent scholarship highlights corruption, weak law enforcement, poor stockpile management, fragmented intelligence systems, and ineffective implementation of arms-control measures as more fundamental drivers (Transparency International Defence & Security, 2024; Ijide, 2020; Gandi et al., 2024; Magadze & Ajah, 2025). While this governance perspective has gained increasing attention in the literature, studies on Nigeria pay comparatively less attention to its interaction with regional conflict dynamics and transnational trafficking systems (Amali & Buthelezi, 2025; Mohammed & Aboh, 2025).

The third debate situates Nigeria's illicit arms-trafficking challenge within the wider security dynamics of West Africa and the Sahel (de TESSIÈRES, 2018). Regional conflicts, particularly following the collapse of Libya's security institutions, have accelerated illicit arms flows (Africa Defense Forum, 2024), although contemporary trafficking networks also rely on diversion from national armouries, established smuggling routes, craft production, and recycled weapons from successive conflicts (Florquin et al., 2019; Awotayo, Oderinde, Olaniran, & Ogunmodede, 2024). The Sahel and the Lake Chad Basin have consequently become major trafficking corridors linking insecurity with transnational organised crime (Bøås, 2015; Mangan & Nowak, 2019). However, this literature places greater emphasis on external supply chains than on the domestic conflict economies, governance weaknesses, and conflict-generated demand that sustain illicit arms circulation within Nigeria (Okoli, 2021; Ojewale, 2024).

Collectively, existing scholarship has significantly advanced understanding of illicit arms trafficking in Nigeria by examining weapons supply, conflict-generated demand, security governance, and regional conflict spillovers (Felbab-Brown & Forest, 2012). However, these dimensions have largely been examined in relative isolation, with insufficient attention to how transnational trafficking networks, security governance weaknesses, conflict economies, and conflict-generated demand collectively sustain the persistence of illicit arms trafficking (Balogun, 2024; Bish et al., 2022). This study addresses this gap by analysing illicit arms trafficking through the political economy of conflict framework (Keen, 1998; Reno, 1998; Bayart et al., 1999).

1.4. Objectives of the Study

The primary objective of this study is to examine the persistence of illicit arms trafficking in Nigeria through the political economy of conflict framework. Specifically, the study seeks to explain how trafficking networks, conflict-generated demand within conflict economies, and security governance weaknesses interact to sustain illicit arms trafficking despite existing national and regional arms-control measures.

To address this objective, the study is guided by the following research question: why does illicit arms trafficking persist in Nigeria despite the existence of national and regional arms-control mechanisms, and through what interacting mechanisms do trafficking networks, conflict-generated demand, and security governance weaknesses reproduce illicit arms circulation over time?

1.5. Argument and Contribution

Using the political economy of conflict framework, this study argues that illicit arms trafficking in Nigeria is not adequately explained by border porosity, weapons availability, or governance failure considered independently. Rather, its persistence results from the interaction of three mutually reinforcing mechanisms: trafficking networks that sustain supply, conflict economies that generate recurring demand, and security governance weaknesses that reduce the risks and costs of illicit circulation.

The study contributes to debates on security governance and conflict economies by explaining how political and institutional processes sustain illicit arms trafficking in ways that supply-centred, border-centred, and spillover accounts do not. While existing scholarship has generated important insights into trafficking networks, conflict economies, and governance weaknesses, these dimensions have largely been examined separately. This study argues that their interaction provides a more comprehensive explanation of how illicit arms markets are reproduced and organised violence is sustained in Nigeria.

Accordingly, this study conceptualises the self-reproducing political economy of illicit arms trafficking as a higher-order feedback system rather than a separate causal factor. By integrating trafficking networks, conflict economies, and security governance within a single explanatory framework, the study extends political economy, conflict-market, arms-proliferation, and security-governance approaches to explain the persistence and adaptation of illicit arms trafficking, including where trafficking routes are disrupted or formal arms-control mechanisms remain in place.

1.6. Theoretical Framework

This study adopts the political economy of conflict theory as its analytical framework for explaining the persistence of illicit arms trafficking in Nigeria. The theory challenges interpretations of armed conflict that focus exclusively on political grievances, identity divisions, or security failures by drawing attention to the economic interests and incentive structures that emerge within conflict environments (Keen, 1998; Reno, 1998). From this perspective, armed violence is not only a manifes-

tation of political disorder but may also create opportunities through which different actors accumulate resources, exercise authority, and maintain influence.

Keen (1998) argues that war should not always be understood simply as a breakdown of order; rather, conflict may create alternative systems of profit, protection, and power. Armed actors may therefore have incentives to sustain violent conditions because instability provides opportunities for resource extraction, illicit trade, political bargaining, and economic accumulation. This perspective shifts the analysis from asking why conflicts begin to examining why they persist and how particular actors benefit from their continuation.

Reno's (1998) analysis of shadow networks further explains how weak formal institutions can facilitate the growth of informal systems of power and economic exchange. In contexts where state institutions are fragile or compromised, political elites, criminal actors, and armed groups may develop networks that operate outside formal regulatory structures. Similarly, Bayart et al.'s (1999) concept of the criminalisation of the state highlights the ways in which illicit economies may become connected to formal structures of authority. Rather than viewing state weakness merely as an absence of capacity, this perspective suggests that some actors within state institutions may benefit from disorder through direct participation, protection, or tolerance of illegal economic activities. Consequently, illicit markets persist not only because governments fail to eliminate them but also because certain actors may derive political or economic advantages from their continuation.

Drawing on these perspectives, this study conceptualises the persistence of illicit arms trafficking as the outcome of interactions among three interrelated mechanisms: trafficking networks, conflict economies, and security governance weaknesses. Trafficking networks move and distribute weapons through illicit markets; conflict economies generate continuous demand that reinforces the profitability of illicit arms circulation; and security governance weaknesses, including corruption and limited enforcement capacity, allow both to operate with limited risk of disruption.

In Nigeria, the continued circulation of illicit arms cannot be explained solely by porous borders or inadequate enforcement capacity. Instead, illicit arms flows are sustained by interactions among trafficking networks, corrupt intermediaries, armed organisations, and conflict economies that create continuous demand for weapons.

The theory therefore explains three interrelated dimensions of Nigeria's arms-trafficking challenge. First, weapons continue to circulate because they generate economic and strategic value for different actors, including traffickers, criminal organisations, and armed groups. Second, enforcement mechanisms remain limited because illicit networks may exploit institutional weaknesses, corruption, and gaps within the very systems responsible for controlling weapons circulation. Third, armed groups endure because illicit access to weapons enables economic and political activities, including territorial control, kidnapping, illegal taxation, resource exploitation, and political coercion, that sustain their operations, making violence economically and strategically productive.

1.6.1. Higher-order Feedback System

For analytical clarity, this study distinguishes between the primary explanatory mechanisms and the higher-order interpretation derived from their interaction. Trafficking networks, conflict-generated demand within conflict economies, and security governance weaknesses constitute the three primary mechanisms examined through thematic analysis. Their interaction produces what this study conceptualises as the self-reproducing political economy of illicit arms trafficking.

The self-reproducing political economy is therefore not treated as a fourth independent causal mechanism or a separate theoretical construct. Rather, it represents a higher-order feedback system emerging from the interaction of trafficking networks, conflict-generated demand within conflict economies, and security governance weaknesses. Through their reciprocal interaction, these mechanisms reinforce illicit arms markets and organised violence over time.

Figure 1 illustrates the higher-order feedback system proposed in this study and provides the analytical framework through which the findings are interpreted.

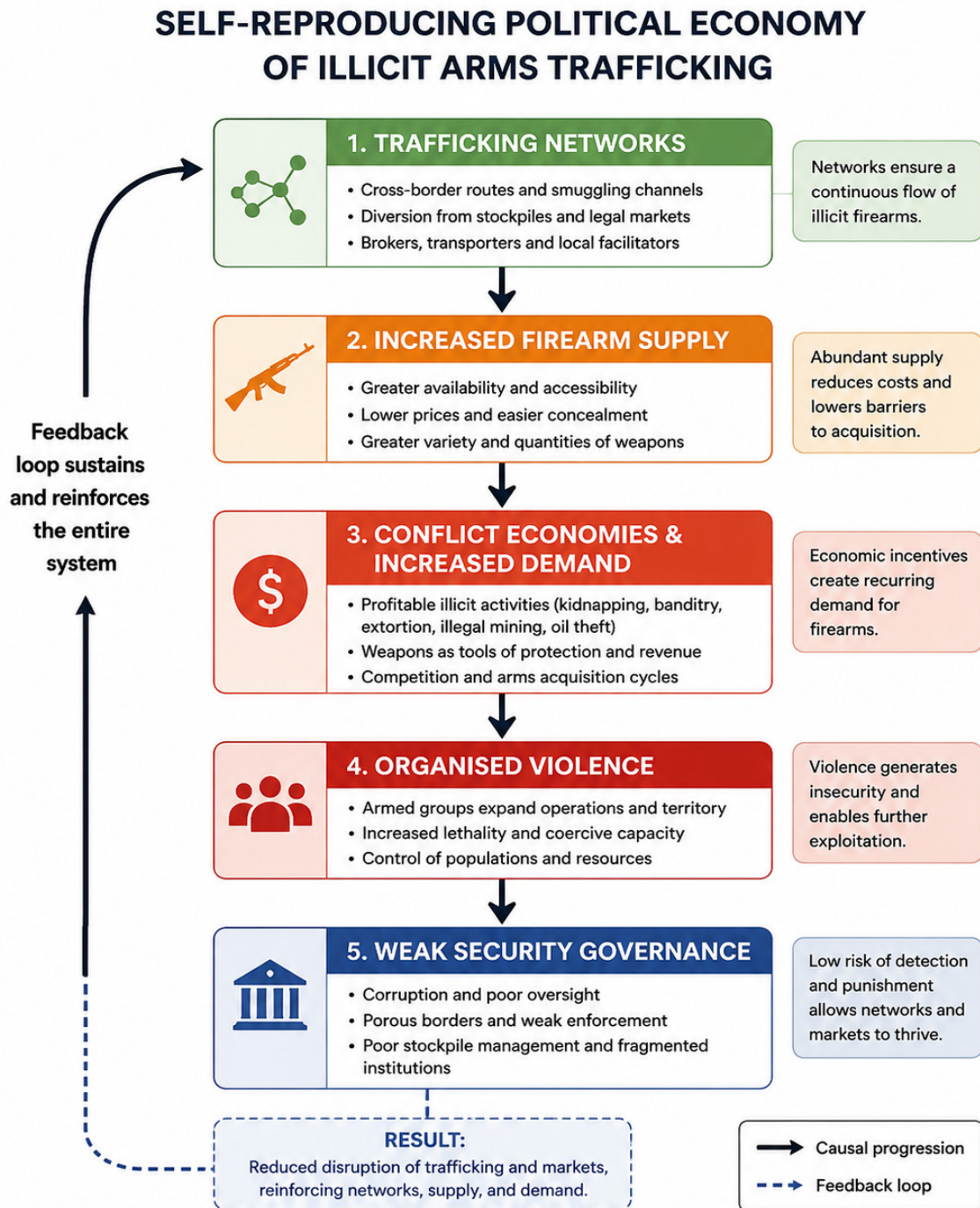


Figure 1. The Self-Reproducing Political Economy of Illicit Arms Trafficking as a Higher-Order Feedback System.

Source: Author's conceptualisation based on the political economy of conflict framework and the study's thematic analysis.

2. Methods

The study employs a qualitative explanatory case-study design grounded in political economy analysis. Given the clandestine nature of illicit arms trafficking, it relies on documentary analysis, secondary data synthesis, and triangulated evidence to examine the dynamics of Nigeria's illicit arms economy. Documentary analysis was selected because much of the available evidence on illicit arms trafficking is contained in publicly accessible academic publications, institutional reports, policy documents, and investigative studies rather than primary datasets. The approach enables the

structured examination and triangulation of diverse forms of documentary evidence, guided by explicit inclusion and exclusion criteria, to identify recurring patterns, mechanisms, and relationships relevant to the study's research question.

2.1. Research Design

The study adopts a qualitative explanatory case-study design guided by the political economy of conflict framework. The framework informs data selection and interpretation by providing an analytical basis for examining the relationships among trafficking networks, conflict economies, security governance, and armed violence. A qualitative explanatory design is appropriate because the study seeks to explain the mechanisms through which illicit arms trafficking persists rather than to measure the volume or frequency of illicit arms flows. The emphasis is therefore on identifying causal processes and interactions across multiple documentary sources through theory-guided thematic analysis and evidence triangulation.

2.2. Case Selection

Nigeria constitutes the primary case for examining the relationship between illicit arms trafficking, security governance, and contemporary armed violence. Despite possessing domestic firearms regulations, security institutions, and commitments under regional arms-control frameworks, including the ECOWAS Convention on Small Arms and Light Weapons, Nigeria continues to experience illicit weapons circulation among insurgents, criminal groups, militias, and other non-state armed actors.

Within this national case, the North-East, North-West, North-Central region, South-East, and Niger Delta are treated as embedded conflict contexts rather than as separate national cases. These contexts were selected because they represent distinct manifestations of armed violence, including insurgency, banditry and kidnapping, communal conflict, separatist-related violence, militancy, and maritime criminality, while sharing exposure to illicit arms trafficking and security-governance challenges. These embedded contexts are examined as interconnected components of a broader national system of armed violence shaped by domestic and transnational trafficking networks, institutional weaknesses, and conflict-generated demand.

Comparison across the embedded contexts was conducted using a structured analytical framework based on common dimensions: principal armed actors, conflict type, dominant documented weapons sources, principal trafficking or diversion mechanisms, the economic or strategic function of firearms, relevant security-governance conditions, and the strength of the available documentary evidence. Table 1 summarises these dimensions across the five embedded conflict contexts examined in this study.

Table 1. Analytical Comparison Framework for the Five Embedded Conflict Contexts.

Embedded conflict context	Conflict type and principal armed actors	Dominant weapon source and trafficking or diversion mechanism	Economic function of firearms	Governance weakness	Strength of evidence
North-East	Islamist insurgency involving Boko Haram and ISWAP	Cross-border trafficking through the Libya-Sahel and Lake Chad corridors, diversion from military stockpiles, and battlefield capture	Territorial control, extortion, protection of illicit markets, and enforcement of insurgent authority	Border insecurity, stockpile diversion, institutional weakness, and limited state control	Strong

North-West	Banditry involving organised armed groups	Cross-border trafficking, domestic diversion, local manufacture, and illicit domestic markets	Kidnapping for ransom, cattle rustling, illegal taxation, and territorial control	Weak border enforcement, corruption, and limited state presence	Strong
North-Central	Farmer-herder violence, communal militias, and criminal groups	Domestic diversion, local manufacture, and secondary circulation through informal markets	Community protection, territorial defence, and control of land and resources	Weak local policing, limited conflict management, and inadequate security provision	Moderate
South-East	Armed separatist factions and criminal groups operating under separatist labels	Domestic diversion, local manufacture, and informal brokerage networks	Enforcement of sit-at-home orders, extortion, and territorial influence	Weak law enforcement, arms diversion, and security coordination challenges	Moderate
Niger Delta	Militant groups and organised criminal networks	Legacy militant stockpiles, maritime trafficking through the Gulf of Guinea, and diversion from official stockpiles	Oil theft, illegal bunkering, kidnapping, and protection of illicit maritime economies	Corruption, maritime enforcement gaps, and political patronage	Strong

Note: Strength of evidence denotes the extent of corroboration across independent documentary source types. "Strong" indicates convergent evidence from peer-reviewed scholarship and official or institutional documentation, including seizure or tracing records; "Moderate" indicates evidence drawn predominantly from a single source type or from studies with limited methodological transparency. The sources underlying each rating are identified in Appendix C of the supplementary material.

2.3. Setting and Data Sources

The study is situated within Nigeria's contemporary security environment, focusing on developments between 2009 and 2026. The documentary evidence analysed relates principally to this empirical period, while earlier historical, regulatory, and contextual publications are incorporated where necessary to provide broader conceptual context. The study draws on secondary documentary sources, including scholarly publications, institutional reports, policy documents, and credible investigative and news reports relevant to illicit arms trafficking, security governance, and armed violence in Nigeria.

Academic sources were identified primarily through searches of major multidisciplinary and social science databases, including Scopus, Web of Science, JSTOR, Google Scholar, ProQuest, and African Journals Online (AJOL). Additional documentary sources were obtained from publicly accessible institutional repositories and organisational websites, including those of ECOWAS, the Small Arms Survey, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), the United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs (UNODA), the United Nations Department of Peace Operations (UNDPO), the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the Institute for Security Studies (ISS Africa), the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), the International Crisis Group (ICG), and relevant Nigerian government agencies responsible for security and arms-control policy.

Searches employed combinations of keywords using Boolean operators (AND and OR) where appropriate. Representative search strings included "illicit arms trafficking" AND Nigeria, "small arms and light weapons" AND Nigeria, "weapons diversion" AND "security governance", "conflict economy" AND Nigeria, and ("small arms" OR SALW) AND ("West Africa" OR Sahel). The search strategy was refined iteratively as additional relevant literature and references were identified. Only English-language sources directly relevant to illicit arms trafficking, security governance, and armed violence in Nigeria and the wider West African and Sahel region were included.

2.4. Data Collection

Documentary sources were collected through a structured but iterative process of identification, screening, and selection, applying consistent criteria at each stage. In addition to the database and repository searches described above, further sources were identified through reference-list screening and citation tracking. Duplicate records were removed where the same document was retrieved from multiple sources. Where several reports reproduced the same underlying claim, the earliest traceable source was cited and the derivative reports were not treated as independent corroboration.

Document selection followed purposive sampling guided by explicit inclusion and exclusion criteria. The study drew on English-language peer-reviewed journal articles, books and book chapters, doctoral theses, institutional reports, policy documents, and credible news and investigative reporting. The selected sources addressed illicit arms trafficking, SALW, trafficking networks, conflict economies, security governance, and armed violence in Nigeria and the wider West African and Sahel region. Documents lacking direct relevance to the research objectives, methodological transparency for empirical claims, or sufficient evidential support, as well as unsupported opinion or commentary, were excluded from the analysis. Methodological transparency was assessed by whether a document identified the basis of its empirical claims, including its sources of evidence, data-collection procedures, or analytical approach; documents advancing empirical claims without any traceable evidentiary basis were excluded.

Because document searching was conducted iteratively as part of the qualitative explanatory case study rather than as a formal systematic review, comprehensive numerical screening records and a single final search date were not maintained, and a PRISMA-style flow diagram is not reported. Documentary sources were further assessed against a hierarchy of evidence. Greater analytical weight was assigned to peer-reviewed scholarship and official institutional publications with clearly documented methodologies, together with weapons-tracing and seizure documentation. Policy reports, reputable investigative studies, and other documentary sources were used primarily to complement, contextualise, and triangulate the evidence where appropriate. Advocacy publications and unattributed security claims were assigned the least evidentiary weight, and media reporting was not relied upon as the principal source for a claim where peer-reviewed, official, judicial, parliamentary, or weapons-tracing documentation was available.

The composition of the final set of documents analysed is summarised in Table 2.

Table 2. Composition of the Documentary Evidence by Source Category and Period

Source category	Pre-2009	2009–2014	2015–2020	2021–2026	Total
Peer-reviewed journal articles	2	5	7	39	53
Books and book chapters	0	1	2	8	11
Doctoral theses	0	0	1	2	3
Institutional and policy reports	2	2	7	9	20
Conference papers	0	0	1	0	1
News and investigative reports	0	1	0	6	7
Total	4	9	18	64	95

Note: Conceptual and theoretical works informing the analytical framework are cited separately and are not included. Pre-2009 sources provide historical and regional context. The table reports the composition of the documents included in the analysis rather than screening or exclusion counts, which were not recorded. The full inventory of documentary sources analysed, recording the source type, geographical focus, evidence category, and analytical contribution of each, is provided as Appendix A of the supplementary material.

2.5. Operationalisation of Key Concepts

To ensure analytical consistency, the study operationalises its key concepts using the indicators presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Operational Indicators of Key Concepts.

Concept	Operational indicators
Illicit arms trafficking	Unauthorised transfer, brokerage, transport, distribution, diversion, or cross-border movement of firearms, ammunition, and related materiel outside applicable legal and regulatory frameworks
Trafficking networks	Cross-border routes, organised trafficking networks, domestic supply channels, brokers, intermediaries, opportunistic facilitators, smuggling networks, craft production, and diversion from legal stockpiles
Security governance weakness	Corruption, enforcement failures, weak border management, inadequate intelligence coordination, poor stockpile control, and gaps between arms-control policies and implementation
Conflict economy	Use of weapons for insurgency, kidnapping, territorial control, illegal taxation, resource extraction, political violence, and other forms of coercive accumulation

a) Disaggregating Illicit Arms Trafficking and Related Processes

For analytical clarity, this study distinguishes among the principal processes through which illicit weapons are produced, transferred, and circulated. Illicit manufacture refers to the unauthorised production of firearms. Illicit cross-border transfer refers to the unauthorised movement of firearms, ammunition, or related materiel across Nigeria's international borders in violation of national legislation or applicable regional and international instruments, including smuggling through both formal and informal crossing points. Diversion refers to the movement of legally held weapons into illicit circulation through theft, corruption, battlefield capture, inadequate stockpile management, or authorised weapons subsequently entering illicit markets. Domestic brokerage refers to the internal organisation and redistribution of illicit weapons. Illicit possession refers to unlawful ownership or control of firearms regardless of how they were acquired. Secondary circulation describes the subsequent movement of illicit weapons among armed actors after their initial diversion or transfer. Battlefield capture refers specifically to the acquisition of weapons through attacks on military or security formations, armed confrontations, or seizure from opposing armed actors. Theft from armouries refers to the unauthorised removal of firearms or ammunition from state-controlled stockpiles, police armouries, or military depots. These processes represent distinct pathways through which weapons are produced, transferred, and circulated within illicit markets rather than a single undifferentiated phenomenon.

b) Definition of Weapons Categories

Consistent with the ECOWAS Convention on Small Arms and Light Weapons (ECOWAS, 2006) and international small arms control literature, this study distinguishes among the principal categories of weapons and related materiel examined in the analysis.

Small arms refer to firearms designed for individual use, including pistols, revolvers, rifles, carbines, assault rifles, sub-machine guns, and light machine guns.

Light weapons refer to crew-served weapons, including heavy machine guns, grenade launchers, recoilless rifles, portable anti-tank weapons, and man-portable air-defence systems.

Ammunition comprises cartridges, propellant charges, projectiles, and explosive components required for the operation of SALW.

Craft-produced firearms refer to locally manufactured firearms produced outside licensed industrial production systems (Nowak & Gsell, 2018). Unless otherwise indicated, references to local manufacture in this study refer exclusively to such craft production rather than licensed industrial production, weapon conversion, repair, or assembly.

Military-grade weapons refer to weapons originally manufactured to military specification, including assault rifles, machine guns, and other military weapon systems that may subsequently enter illicit circulation through diversion, battlefield capture, or illicit transfer.

Explosive materials include explosive devices, propellants, detonators, grenades, and related materials capable of supporting armed violence.

The operational indicators, conceptual distinctions, and weapon classifications presented above are not treated as direct measurements of illicit arms flows. Rather, they provide consistent criteria for identifying, classifying, and comparing documentary evidence during thematic analysis, and for distinguishing among the different pathways through which weapons are produced, transferred, and circulated across the embedded conflict contexts.

2.6. Analytical Strategy

The analysis employs theory-guided thematic analysis informed by the political economy of conflict framework. The procedure follows the six-phase approach outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), comprising familiarisation with the documentary evidence, generation of initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and reporting. This approach was applied in its theoretical rather than inductive form, since the initial coding categories were derived from existing theory. The deductive coding framework comprised three principal themes: trafficking networks, conflict economies, and security governance. The complete codebook, setting out the definition, inclusion rule, exclusion rule, representative evidence, and a coded example for each code, is provided as supplementary material. Within each theme, documentary evidence was categorised according to recurring mechanisms, including trafficking routes, diversion, conflict-generated demand, institutional weaknesses, corruption, and state-linked facilitation. Documentary evidence was analysed only where it directly addressed the operational definitions presented in Section 2.5. Evidence falling outside the study's analytical scope was excluded from further analysis.

The analysis focused on identifying the mechanisms through which illicit arms trafficking persists rather than measuring the scale of illicit arms flows. The trafficking-networks theme examined the external and domestic channels through which illicit weapons circulate; the conflict-economies theme analysed how different forms of armed violence generate demand for weapons; and the security-governance theme assessed the institutional weaknesses and state-linked factors that enable trafficking networks to persist. These categories guided the organisation, comparison, and interpretation of evidence across the different documentary sources, allowing patterns and relationships to be identified. A fourth integrative theme, the self-reproduction of Nigeria's illicit arms political economy, emerged through cross-theme comparison of the relationships among the three analytical themes. It was therefore not treated as a separate initial coding category but as a higher-order interpretation of the recurring feedback processes connecting trafficking networks, conflict economies, and security governance.

Thematic analysis was conducted manually through iterative reading, coding, categorisation, comparison, and interpretation of documentary evidence; no specialised qualitative analysis software was employed. Conflicting evidence was assessed through triangulation across independent scholarly and institutional sources and retained where it contributed to a more nuanced interpretation of the findings. Triangulation was applied as a procedural component of the analysis rather than as a general methodological orientation. Greater analytical confidence was assigned to claims corroborated across two or more independent documentary source types, such as peer-reviewed scholarship and institutional reports. Claims supported by a single source type were interpreted more cautiously and are presented accordingly.

2.6.1. Reflexivity and Analytical Dependability

As the sole researcher, the author was responsible for the selection, analysis, and interpretation of the documentary evidence. The author has no professional affiliation with Nigerian security agencies and no prior field experience relating to Nigeria's security sector. Accordingly, the analysis was undertaken from the perspective of an independent researcher using documentary evidence rather than personal or institutional knowledge. Prior engagement with the scholarly literature on Nigerian security nonetheless carries a risk that interpretation may draw on existing assumptions rather than on the documentary record. To mitigate this risk, the documentary evidence was deliberately examined for potential disconfirming cases, as discussed in Section 3.4. Cases that ran counter to the study's central argument were reported rather than omitted. As no additional coder was involved, the study did not employ formal intercoder reliability or recoding procedures. Instead, analytical consistency was supported through iterative review of the thematic analysis, application of a theory-guided analytical framework, set out in full in the codebook provided as supplementary material, and triangulation across multiple documentary source types. Greater analytical confidence was assigned to findings corroborated by independent, higher-quality sources in accordance with the study's evidence hierarchy. The absence of independent coding nonetheless remains a limitation of the study, as acknowledged in Section 4.5.

2.7. Ethical Considerations

The study relies exclusively on publicly available secondary sources and therefore did not require formal institutional ethical approval or informed participant consent. The analysis was conducted through accurate citation, responsible interpretation of evidence, and the exclusion of operationally sensitive information that could compromise public safety or security operations.

3. Results

The thematic analysis identified three primary mechanisms that sustain illicit arms trafficking in Nigeria: trafficking networks, conflict economies, and security governance weaknesses. The analysis further identified a higher-order feedback system emerging from the interaction of these mechanisms, conceptualised as the self-reproducing political economy of illicit arms trafficking. Rather than operating independently, the findings indicate that illicit arms trafficking is sustained through mutually reinforcing relationships between the supply of weapons, conflict-generated demand, and institutional conditions that enable illicit arms markets to persist. The discussion interprets these findings through the political economy of conflict framework, relating the evidence to existing scholarship and considering how markets, institutions, and violent actors collectively shape the self-reproducing dynamics of illicit arms trafficking in Nigeria.

3.1. Trafficking Networks and the Political Economy of Illicit Arms Supply

Documentary evidence relating to trafficking networks was examined across the five embedded conflict contexts. The evidence identifies illicit arms trafficking in Nigeria as sustained by interconnected and partially overlapping transnational and domestic supply networks (Small Arms Survey, 2021; UNDPO & UNODA, 2022; Falode, 2021) rather than isolated smuggling routes. Although regional conflicts have increased the availability of illicit weapons across West Africa, their continued circulation within Nigeria depends on the interaction of cross-border trafficking corridors, domestic diversion, local manufacture, and informal distribution systems. The evidence further indicates that illicit arms supply is adaptive, with trafficking networks continually adjusting to enforcement efforts and changing conflict dynamics, thereby preserving the continuity of illicit arms markets despite attempts at disruption (UNDPO & UNODA, 2022; Oktutan, 2026; Hamidu, 2023).

Documentary evidence identifies the Libya-Sahel corridor as a major external source of military-grade firearms and other conflict weapons entering northern Nigeria following the collapse of Libya's security institutions in 2011 (Small Arms Survey, 2021; UNODC, 2023; Marsh, 2017). The collapse released large quantities of military-grade weapons into regional illicit markets, accelerating their movement through Niger and other Sahelian transit states towards northern Nigeria (Small Arms Survey, 2021; Balogun, 2024; Mohammed & Aboh, 2025; Onuoha et al., 2021). Weapons trafficked from Libyan stockpiles, including newly produced AK-pattern rifles documented in Sahelian illicit markets, reached armed groups operating in northern Nigeria (UNODC, 2023; Africa Defense Forum, 2024). Nigerian defence officials have similarly identified instability across Libya and the Sahel, particularly the role of Niger as a key transit corridor, as facilitating the movement of Libyan-origin weapons into Nigeria, where they have supplied terrorist organisations and intensified insurgency (Oladimeji, 2022; Africa Defense Forum, 2024). These regional trafficking patterns are further corroborated by Nigeria-specific studies documenting the acquisition of Libyan-origin weapons by insurgent groups through Sahelian trafficking networks (Balogun, 2024; Mohammed & Aboh, 2025; Onuoha et al., 2021).

The Lake Chad Basin similarly functions as an important trafficking corridor, where insecurity across Chad, Cameroon, Niger, and northeastern Nigeria facilitates the movement of weapons among insurgent organisations and criminal networks (UNDPO & UNODA, 2022; Felbab-Brown & Forest, 2012). Boko Haram and the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) acquire firearms through cross-border trafficking, battlefield captures, raids on military installations, diversion from national stockpiles, and purchases within regional illicit markets (UNDPO & UNODA, 2022; Berman, 2021). Their arsenals include small arms, light weapons, RPGs, ammunition, IED-related materiel, Libyan-origin assault rifles, and, following repeated overruns of military bases, heavier systems such as heavy mortars, artillery, multiple-launch rocket systems, and armoured vehicles (UNDPO & UNODA, 2022; Berman, 2021).

In western Nigeria, available evidence identifies porous borders with Benin Republic and maritime routes through the Gulf of Guinea as additional channels through which firearms move alongside other illicit commodities, although the literature provides considerably greater operational detail for maritime trafficking than for land-based movements across the Benin-Nigeria border (Odey, Bassey, Ikhwan, & Santyaningtyas, 2022; Ishola et al., 2026). Maritime trafficking through the Gulf of Guinea provides an additional supply route for weapons originating from Turkey, Iran, and other West African transit states into Nigeria through offshore transfers and maritime entry points (SBM Intel, 2020; Adesanya, 2023). Interdictions have recovered AK-47 rifles, Benelli MR1 rifles, pump-action and semi-automatic shotguns, and thousands of rounds of ammunition, while studies of maritime insecurity further document the continued circulation of AK-47, SA Vz. 58, Heckler & Koch G3, FN FAL, and FN FNC rifles within the Gulf of Guinea's criminal networks (SBM Intel, 2020; Adesanya, 2023).

The documentary evidence also indicates that enforcement measures have, in some instances, temporarily disrupted particular trafficking routes and resulted in weapons seizures, including cases where Nigerian security agencies temporarily blocked cross-border flows and intercepted consignments moving through northern land routes and seaports (Aja, 2024; Ugwuibe, Idoko, Nwogbo, & Ezinna, 2023; Ufoh, 2026; Kuta, Abubakar, Muhammad, & Habibu, 2024; The Maritime Executive, 2024). These cases indicate that trafficking networks are not uniformly resilient and that targeted enforcement can temporarily constrain illicit arms movements, as also reflected in studies documenting short-term reductions in circulation following government-led disarmament and seizure operations in the Niger Delta (Aghedo, 2013; Aghedo & Osumah, 2015). However, the available evidence suggests that such disruptions have generally displaced rather than eliminated trafficking activities, as alternative routes and domestic sources of supply continue to sustain illicit arms circulation (Danjuma & Ali, 2025; Obafemi & Orhero, 2025), particularly given Nigeria's extensive network of unmonitored border crossings and persistent governance weaknesses that enable rapid route substitution by criminal networks (Nkatomba & Kabari, 2021; Udoh, 2025; Bearzotti, Geranio, Keresztes, & Müllerová, 2015).

Beyond the availability of alternative trafficking routes, diversion from state armouries through corruption, theft, battlefield losses, and attacks on security installations has supplied weapons to insurgent groups, bandits, and other armed actors (Small Arms Survey, 2021; Awotayo, Akinrinde, & Oyebade, 2022). Locally fabricated firearms produced by informal gunsmiths also supplement illicit markets, particularly in rural communities where industrially manufactured weapons are less accessible (Utibe & Ogundiya, 2024; Awotayo et al., 2022; Nowak & Gsell, 2018).

Price evidence indicates that affordability and geographical variation shape access to illicit firearms within Nigeria. The most detailed such data derive from institutional field research based on interviews with gun manufacturers, gunrunners, and smugglers conducted across Plateau, southern Kaduna, Benue, Abia, Akwa Ibom, and Enugu States in 2021 (Bish et al., 2022). Locally manufactured weapons may cost up to four times less than imported equivalents, with an entry-level handgun reportedly available for as little as NGN3,500 against the official monthly minimum wage of NGN30,000 at the time of the research (Nowak & Gsell, 2018; Bish et al., 2022). Prices varied by state, weapon type, and origin. In Plateau State, imported AK-pattern rifles reportedly sold for NGN300,000–NGN450,000 compared with NGN80,000–NGN200,000 for locally manufactured versions, while in the South East imported AK-pattern rifles ranged from NGN350,000–NGN1,500,000 compared with NGN250,000–NGN400,000 for locally manufactured equivalents. Imported pistols in Benue reportedly sold for NGN150,000–NGN300,000 compared with NGN50,000–NGN150,000 for locally manufactured versions, while Dane guns in Kaduna sold for NGN8,000–NGN18,000 (Bish et al., 2022).

Ammunition adds a recurring operational cost, with 9 mm rounds reportedly selling for approximately NGN400 and AK-pattern rounds for NGN1,000 each, and cartridges in neighbouring Sahelian markets for around USD 0.70 (Bish et al., 2022; UNODC, 2023). One interviewee attributed these price differentials partly to production complexity, estimating that manufacturing an AK-pattern rifle required approximately one month compared with three days for a pistol (Bish et al., 2022). Although these figures reflect 2021 market conditions and should be interpreted as indicative rather than current prices, the price differential itself is independently corroborated by earlier institutional fieldwork conducted by the Small Arms Survey, which reported craft-produced AK-pattern rifles selling for NGN45,000–NGN60,000 compared with NGN350,000–NGN450,000 for industrially manufactured equivalents (Nowak & Gsell, 2018). Because ammunition is consumed in use, this cost recurs, tying armed actors into continuing rather than episodic dependence on illicit supply networks.

Although ammunition is essential to the operational capacity of armed groups, the documentary evidence reviewed addresses ammunition trafficking primarily through seizure reports and references to illicit supply rather than through detailed analyses of ammunition production and distribution. Accordingly, the present analysis focuses on the trafficking networks through which firearms and ammunition circulate, while recognising that the organisation and sustainment of ammunition supply chains remain comparatively underexplored in the available literature and warrant further empirical investigation. Weapon maintenance, repair, replacement parts, and technical support are likely to influence long-term operational sustainment, but the available sources provide only limited information on these activities, which therefore fall outside the primary scope of the present analysis.

Affordability alone does not explain the scale of local production, as reported transaction volumes indicate a commercially organised trade rather than sporadic exchange. Interview evidence records that one manufacturer in Jos reported selling 180 home-made AK-pattern rifles at NGN80,000 each over a three-year period, while a gunrunner operating across Plateau, Kaduna, and Bauchi States claimed to sell up to ten firearms and 1,000 rounds of ammunition in a single day when trade was brisk (Bish et al., 2022). Low barriers to entry and reported profitability have made craft firearm manufacturing an attractive occupation for some young people (Bish et al., 2022).

Evidence on the resulting market share is consistent in direction, if imprecise in magnitude. Nationally representative household survey data indicate that craft-produced firearms account for 17% of rural and 10% of urban civilian holdings, while the same institutional study reports that specialist informants estimated that they were used in between 32% and 69% of firearm-related crimes across selected states, although the authors caution that these estimates are based on a limited sample (Nowak & Gsell, 2018). A comparable estimate by the Presidential Committee on Small Arms and

Light Weapons placed the share of locally fabricated firearms in the illicit market in the South East at approximately 60% in 2015 (Bish et al., 2022). These findings indicate that locally manufactured firearms are not merely substitutes for trafficked weapons but constitute an economically significant component of Nigeria's illicit arms market, sustaining firearm availability where industrially manufactured weapons are less readily obtainable.

3.2. Conflict Economies and the Demand for Illicit Weapons

Documentary evidence relating to conflict economies was examined across the five embedded conflict contexts. The evidence shows that the persistence of illicit arms trafficking in Nigeria cannot be explained by supply networks alone (Balogun, 2024; Felbab-Brown & Forest, 2012). Rather, sustained demand generated by diverse conflict economies creates the conditions under which illicit arms markets continue to expand (Sa'ad & Idakwoji, 2021; Bish et al., 2022; Unaam, 2025a). The evidence further indicates that across insurgency, banditry, communal conflicts, separatist violence, militancy, and political violence, firearms function not merely as instruments of coercion but as productive assets that enable armed actors to generate income, exercise territorial authority, protect illicit enterprises, and strengthen their bargaining power (Oyigebe, 2026; Piate, 2026).

The evidence indicates that insurgent organisations such as Boko Haram and the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) rely on illicit firearms to sustain military operations, expand territorial influence, and resist state security forces (Zenn, 2020; Thurston, 2017; Ejiofor, 2025). Access to weapons enables attacks on civilian and military targets, facilitates recruitment by projecting organisational strength, and supports taxation and extortion within territories under insurgent influence (Ejiofor, 2025). Similarly, armed bandit groups operating across northwestern Nigeria depend on sophisticated firearms to sustain kidnapping-for-ransom, cattle rustling, illegal mining, and protection rackets that have become significant sources of economic accumulation (Adiele & Uvere, 2025; ENACT Africa, 2024). Documentary evidence indicates that revenues generated through kidnapping-for-ransom, illegal mining, oil theft, extortion, and related illicit activities are used to acquire replacement firearms, ammunition, and other logistical support, reinforcing the continuing economic value of weapons within these conflict economies (ENACT Africa, 2024; Piate, 2026; Utibe & Ogundiya, 2024). Whereas insurgent organisations derive strategic and political value from firearms through territorial control, taxation, and organisational survival, bandit groups depend on weapons primarily as economic assets that generate revenue, protect illicit enterprises, and reinforce coercive bargaining power (Piate, 2026; Osaghae, Ikelegbe, Olarinmoye, & Okhomina, 2011).

Comparable dynamics are evident in communal conflicts, separatist-related violence, and militancy. In communities experiencing recurrent farmer-herder conflicts or weak state protection, firearms are acquired by different armed actors for varying purposes, including to defend livelihoods, protect territory, and deter rival groups, often creating localised arms races that reinforce insecurity (Adetiba, 2012; Olamide & Emmanuel, 2018). Although initially acquired for self-protection, such weapons frequently become embedded in cycles of retaliation that increase local demand for replacement and additional firearms, thereby sustaining illicit arms markets even in the absence of organised insurgent groups (Adetiba, 2012; Olamide & Emmanuel, 2018). Although separatist mobilisation in southeastern Nigeria has not been uniformly violent, armed separatist factions and criminal groups operating under separatist labels similarly rely on illicit weapons to challenge state authority and enforce compliance within areas under their influence (Ojo, 2024). The relationship between illicit firearms and conflict economies is also evident in the Niger Delta, where armed militancy developed through the interaction of resource governance disputes, environmental grievances, political competition, and illicit oil economies. Although the origins of militancy cannot be reduced to weapons availability, access to illicit firearms strengthened the capacity of armed groups to attack oil infrastructure, confront security forces, participate in illegal extraction networks, and negotiate political and economic concessions (Watts, 2007; Obi, 2010). Militant organisations in the Niger Delta have historically used firearms to secure oil installations, protect illegal bunkering activities, and strengthen their negotiating position with the state (Osaghae et al., 2011; Isiaka, 2010; Hazen & Horner, 2007).

Political violence further reinforces demand where armed groups are mobilised for electoral intimidation, local power struggles, or patronage networks, with weapons frequently remaining in circulation long after elections have concluded (Yoroms, 2015; Nwolise, 2007; Carboni & Serwat, 2023). These patterns also suggest that demand for illicit firearms is not uniform. Whereas organised criminal groups acquire weapons primarily to sustain profit-generating activities, expand coercive control, and protect illicit enterprises, communities affected by persistent insecurity often acquire firearms defensively to protect lives, livelihoods, and territory, even though such acquisitions may subsequently contribute to escalating cycles of violence and renewed demand.

3.3. Security Governance and the Persistence of Illicit Arms Markets

Documentary evidence relating to security governance was examined across the five embedded conflict contexts. The evidence indicates that the persistence of illicit arms trafficking in Nigeria is sustained not only by supply networks and conflict-generated demand but also by weaknesses in security governance (Transparency International Defence & Security, 2024, p. 3; Magaji, 2026; Tarasa et al., 2025). Rather than merely reflecting failures of state capacity, corruption, institutional fragmentation, weak intelligence systems, inadequate stockpile management, and inconsistent border enforcement create conditions under which trafficking networks can operate more efficiently, adapt to enforcement measures, and maintain access to illicit markets (Magaji, 2026; Unaam, 2025b; Adamu, 2026; Idris & Tutumlu, 2022).

The evidence indicates that corruption remains one of the principal mechanisms through which illicit arms markets are sustained (Usang & Enemuoh, 2021; Mark & Iwebi, 2019). Reports of bribery, collusion between traffickers and public officials, diversion of seized weapons, and the illicit transfer of firearms from state armouries have repeatedly undermined arms-control efforts (Dike, 2025; Magadze & Ajah, 2025). Institutional analysis and investigative reporting indicate that attacks on military formations and armouries, together with battlefield losses, have further contributed to the diversion of state-owned weapons into illicit circulation, enabling insurgent groups, bandits, and other armed actors to replenish their arsenals (Berman, 2021; The Guardian, 2022; Premium Times, 2014). These patterns indicate that illicit arms markets are reinforced not only through external trafficking but also through weaknesses in the management and protection of state weapons stockpiles (Berman, 2021; Idris & Tutumlu, 2022; Daily Trust, 2025).

Institutional fragmentation further constrains the effectiveness of arms-control efforts. Responsibility for border security, customs administration, policing, intelligence, and military operations is dispersed across multiple agencies whose mandates frequently overlap, while information sharing and operational coordination remain inconsistent (Ijide, 2020; Izge & Onu, 2025; Chuma-Okoro, 2011). These overlapping mandates create coordination gaps that fragment accountability, allowing trafficking networks to exploit inconsistencies in enforcement and intelligence sharing across institutions (Izge & Onu, 2025; Kuta et al., 2024). Weak intelligence capabilities, limited firearms tracing systems, inadequate surveillance infrastructure, and uneven implementation of regulatory frameworks collectively reduce the probability of detecting and disrupting trafficking networks, allowing illicit supply chains to adapt more rapidly than enforcement responses (Mbaso, 2021; Amali & Buthelezi, 2025). Similarly, Nigeria's extensive land borders with Niger, Chad, Cameroon, and Benin Republic continue to provide opportunities for illicit cross-border movements where enforcement capacity remains uneven (Onuoha, 2013; ENACT Africa, 2024).

Beyond institutional incapacity, documentary evidence also suggests that illicit arms markets are, in some contexts, sustained by political patronage, informal protection networks, elite incentives, state-linked intermediaries, and actors who benefit from continued disorder, although evidence for these dynamics remains uneven across the different conflict contexts (Abdulyakeen & Mumuni, 2025). Evidence from the Niger Delta illustrates these dynamics most directly. Documentary accounts indicate that youth militias were armed and financed by political actors during periods of electoral competition, and that some of these groups subsequently converted political sponsorship into autonomous participation in oil theft, illegal bunkering, and protection economies (Osaghae

et al., 2011; Watts, 2007). In this context, oil rents and the coercive capacity conferred by firearms became mutually reinforcing, as access to weapons enabled participation in illicit extraction while the proceeds of that extraction financed further weapons acquisition (Watts, 2007; Obi, 2010). Rather than attributing governance failures solely to limited institutional capacity, the evidence suggests that rents associated with conflict, illicit markets, and coercive authority may create incentives for some actors to tolerate or inadequately challenge illicit arms circulation. These dynamics should not be interpreted as evidence of systematic state complicity; rather, they indicate that political protection and patronage may, in particular contexts, interact with institutional weaknesses to reduce the effectiveness of formal arms-control measures. These patterns indicate that political sponsorship and the deliberate protection of illicit actors are analytically distinct from weak enforcement, bureaucratic rivalry, and resource constraints, and require correspondingly different forms of evidence. Whereas institutional incapacity can be inferred from recurring patterns of enforcement failure, claims of political sponsorship or protection require documentation of specific relationships between identifiable state actors and armed groups, which the reviewed literature provides more consistently for the Niger Delta than for other conflict contexts.

3.4. The Self-Reproduction of Nigeria's Illicit Arms Political Economy

The findings indicate that illicit arms trafficking in Nigeria operates as a self-reproducing political economy: rather than arising from any single mechanism, illicit arms markets persist through reinforcing feedback among trafficking networks, conflict economies, and security governance weaknesses (Bourne, 2007; Greene & Marsh, 2012). This fourth integrative theme emerged through cross-theme comparison of the relationships among the three analytical themes rather than from a separately coded analytical category. Although the five embedded conflict contexts differ in their political objectives, organisational structures, and historical trajectories, the documentary evidence identifies common patterns of illicit weapons circulation, trafficking mechanisms, and governance vulnerabilities (Bish et al., 2022; Ojo, 2024; Small Arms Survey, 2021). What it does not identify is systematic organisational cooperation among insurgent groups, bandits, separatist movements, militants, political actors, and communal militias. These recurring patterns indicate that diverse armed actors operate within overlapping illicit arms markets and governance conditions that facilitate weapons circulation across multiple conflict settings (ENACT Africa, 2024; Tagziria & Bird, 2025; UNODC, 2023). This fourth integrative theme therefore reflects the higher-order feedback system identified through the analysis rather than a single unified network of armed actors.

The evidence further indicates that conflict economies and trafficking networks operate reciprocally rather than in sequence. Insurgent and bandit groups acquire firearms for different purposes, as Section 3.2 establishes, but both generate continuous demand to which partially overlapping trafficking networks adapt in response to changing patterns of violence and enforcement (Zenn, 2020; Ejiofor, 2023, 2025; Nwambuko, Njoku, & Ugwu, 2026; ENACT Africa, 2024; Adeola Aderayo et al., 2026). As firearms acquire strategic and economic value within these economies, trafficking itself becomes more profitable, drawing brokers, smugglers, local manufacturers, and other intermediaries into expanding supply networks (Balogun, 2024; Awotayo et al., 2024). This dynamic is evident in northwestern Nigeria, where revenues from kidnapping and illegal mining finance further weapons acquisition, strengthening the operational capacity of armed groups (Utibe & Ogundiya, 2024). That capacity enables further violence and resource extraction, generating income for renewed procurement, so that each cycle reproduces the conditions that sustain subsequent illicit arms trafficking (Utibe & Ogundiya, 2024; ENACT Africa, 2024).

Security governance weaknesses also enable this process to reproduce itself over time. Corruption, stockpile diversion, fragmented institutional mandates, weak intelligence coordination, and inconsistent border enforcement reduce the likelihood that trafficking networks will be effectively disrupted (Transparency International Defence & Security, 2024; Magaji, 2026; Shedrack & Kelechi, 2025). Rather than preventing illicit arms circulation, these conditions lower the operational costs and risks associated with trafficking while allowing armed groups to replace seized or lost weapons and maintain operational capacity. Consequently, governance weaknesses do not merely coexist

with illicit arms markets; they become integral to the conditions that sustain their continued operation (Gandi et al., 2024).

The evidence reviewed also bears on three alternative explanations of this persistence. The first attributes circulation to weapons availability alone, but availability does not account for the adaptation of supply networks following enforcement disruption, nor for the price differentials reported in Section 3.1, which indicate that access is shaped by cost as well as by supply. The second treats the problem as one of border management, yet domestic diversion and craft production sustain illicit markets independently of cross-border movement. The third attributes governance failure to limited institutional capacity, which does not account for the documented instances of political sponsorship reported in Section 3.3.

The documentary evidence was examined for potential disconfirming cases involving sustained improvements in stockpile management, declining conflict-generated weapons demand, conflict de-escalation, reduced trafficking incentives, or evidence that a particular trafficking corridor was less significant than commonly claimed. The clearest instances identified, discussed in Section 3.1, involved enforcement operations, border interdictions, and disarmament initiatives that produced localised or temporary reductions in illicit arms circulation. However, the reviewed evidence did not identify enduring cases in which these developments fundamentally disrupted the broader dynamics of illicit arms trafficking. Instead, the evidence consistently indicated that any improvements were localised, temporary, or offset by continuing governance weaknesses, conflict economies, and adaptive trafficking networks (Bish et al., 2022; Small Arms Survey, 2021; ENACT Africa, 2024; Transparency International Defence & Security, 2024; Tagziria & Bird, 2025). These cases are consistent with the explanatory framework, indicating that isolated improvements in individual mechanisms were insufficient to interrupt the higher-order feedback system sustaining illicit arms trafficking.

4. Discussion

The following discussion interprets the evidence reported in Section 3, addressing each mechanism in turn before considering the limitations of the analysis. The subsections correspond to those of the Results, so that the interpretation of each mechanism can be read against the evidence on which it rests.

4.1. *Trafficking Networks and the Political Economy of Illicit Arms Supply*

The patterns reported in Section 3.1 indicate that, rather than being a consequence of porous borders alone, illicit arms trafficking is more appropriately understood as embedded within wider systems of informal exchange and economic opportunity. Reno's (1998) conception of shadow networks explains how informal relationships linking traffickers, intermediaries, corrupt officials, and armed groups facilitate the movement of weapons beyond formal regulatory structures. Nigeria's illicit arms supply is therefore sustained through the integration of the Libya-Sahel, Lake Chad, and Benin-Gulf of Guinea trafficking corridors with domestic sources of diversion and local manufacture, and constitutes a resilient political economy of supply rather than a simple problem of cross-border smuggling. While these networks ensure the continued availability of weapons, their persistence ultimately depends on the conflict environments that generate sustained demand for illicit firearms (Danjuma & Ali, 2025; Ejiofor, 2025), an issue examined in the next subsection.

4.2. *Conflict Economies and the Demand for Illicit Weapons*

Across the embedded conflict contexts, the evidence points to illicit weapons acquiring value through the economic and political opportunities they create within conflict environments. Keen's (1998) argument that conflict generates systems of profit and power is reflected in the way firearms enable armed actors to sustain illicit markets, extract resources, and maintain authority. Rather than

representing a temporary response to insecurity, demand for weapons becomes embedded within conflict economies that reward continued violence (Piate, 2026). Consequently, the persistence of illicit arms trafficking is driven not only by the availability of supply but also by conflict economies that continually generate incentives for renewed weapons acquisition (Sa'ad & Idakwoji, 2021). This demand-side dynamic complements the supply networks identified earlier in the analysis and suggests that disrupting illicit trafficking requires attention not only to the movement of weapons but also to the economic and political conditions that sustain demand. However, demand alone cannot fully explain the resilience of illicit arms markets, which also depends on the security governance weaknesses that enable trafficking networks and illicit exchanges to endure.

4.3. Security Governance and the Persistence of Illicit Arms Markets

The cumulative effect is that governance weaknesses do more than permit illicit arms trafficking; they reshape the incentives within which trafficking networks operate. Bayart et al.'s (1999) concept of the criminalisation of the state highlights how illicit economic activities may become embedded within structures of political authority. From this perspective, corruption, fragmented institutions, and weak enforcement reduce the likelihood that illicit arms trafficking will be detected, disrupted, and prosecuted while increasing its profitability, thereby strengthening the incentives that enable illicit arms markets to adapt, expand, and persist despite the existence of formal national and regional arms-control mechanisms. Accordingly, governance weaknesses function not merely as permissive conditions but as structural features of Nigeria's illicit arms political economy, reinforcing the interaction between supply networks and conflict-generated demand and sustaining the feedback processes through which illicit arms markets reproduce themselves over time.

4.4. The Self-Reproduction of Nigeria's Illicit Arms Political Economy

Taken together, these findings bear out the political-economic dynamics set out in Section 1.6: conflict economies that generate incentives for illicit arms acquisition, shadow networks that facilitate trafficking beyond formal regulatory structures, and the embedding of illicit activity within structures of political authority (Keen, 1998; Reno, 1998; Bayart et al., 1999). The three analytical mechanisms operate cumulatively: as conflict expands demand for weapons, overlapping trafficking networks and associated illicit markets become increasingly profitable; as governance weaknesses reduce the likelihood that illicit arms trafficking will be detected and disrupted, armed actors gain continued access to firearms; and as violence persists, new demand is generated (Ameh, 2026; Adeola Aderayo et al., 2026; ENACT Africa, 2024). These reinforcing feedback processes recreate the conditions for illicit arms trafficking across interconnected, but not necessarily organisationally integrated, conflict contexts, making its persistence a property of the wider political economy rather than simply a problem of illegal weapons movement (Nwambuko et al., 2026; Gandi et al., 2024; Tarasa et al., 2025).

4.5. Limitations and Future Research

This study is based on documentary evidence and therefore relies on the quality, scope, and availability of existing scholarly publications, institutional reports, policy documents, and other publicly available sources. Although this approach enabled the synthesis of evidence across multiple conflict contexts, it did not incorporate primary data from traffickers, security personnel, affected communities, or policymakers. The covert nature of illicit arms trafficking and the secrecy surrounding illicit arms markets limited the availability of reliable evidence on weapons volumes, financial flows, trafficking actors, and weapons-tracing data, making direct empirical verification difficult. The available literature also exhibits geographical variation in coverage, with some conflict contexts receiving greater scholarly and institutional attention than others. In addition, dependence

on media and institutional reporting introduces the possibility of reporting bias and the repetition of original claims across multiple secondary sources, despite efforts to triangulate evidence.

As the thematic analysis involved manual coding and interpretation by a single researcher, without independent coding or intercoder reliability testing, the organisation and interpretation of documentary evidence inevitably involved researcher judgement. Accordingly, the study focuses on identifying recurring patterns and explanatory mechanisms rather than establishing the magnitude of causal relationships or providing definitive estimates of illicit arms flows. Because the documentary search was conducted iteratively rather than as a formal systematic review, numerical screening records and a final search date were not preserved. Consequently, the findings should be interpreted as an analytical explanation derived from existing documentary evidence rather than as direct empirical observation of illicit arms trafficking networks.

These limitations, together with the scope of the present study, indicate important directions for future research. Primary empirical investigations involving security agencies, border communities, policymakers, and other relevant stakeholders would provide deeper insight into the operation and adaptation of trafficking networks. Comparative analyses across Nigeria's geopolitical regions could further examine how variations in conflict economies and security governance shape patterns of illicit arms trafficking, thereby refining understanding of the mechanisms sustaining illicit arms markets. Future research could also employ systematic review methodologies or mixed-methods designs combining documentary analysis with interviews, field observation, or quantitative weapons-tracing data to strengthen empirical verification, assess the magnitude of causal relationships, and extend understanding of illicit arms trafficking dynamics.

5. Conclusions

This study examined the persistence of illicit arms trafficking in Nigeria through the political economy of conflict framework, drawing on a qualitative thematic analysis of documentary evidence. The findings indicate that illicit arms trafficking is sustained not by a single factor but through the interaction of trafficking networks, conflict economies, and security governance weaknesses, whose reciprocal relationships reproduce the conditions for illicit arms circulation over time. Regional trafficking networks, domestic arms diversion, and local firearms production sustain the supply of illicit weapons, while diverse conflict economies generate persistent demand for their circulation. At the same time, corruption, institutional fragmentation, weak intelligence coordination, inadequate stockpile management, and uneven border enforcement weaken the capacity of state institutions to detect, disrupt, and prosecute illicit arms trafficking, allowing illicit markets to adapt and endure.

The analysis suggests that illicit arms trafficking in Nigeria is better understood as a political economy of violence than as a problem of border insecurity or weapons availability alone. The persistence of illicit arms markets reflects the reinforcing feedback among supply, demand, and governance conditions, creating a system in which armed violence, illicit economic incentives, and institutional weaknesses reinforce one another over time. This integrated understanding contributes to broader debates in contemporary security studies by showing that persistent security threats are often sustained through interactions among governance institutions, illicit economies, and organised violence rather than through isolated criminal or military dynamics. Addressing one dimension in isolation is therefore unlikely to produce lasting reductions in illicit arms circulation.

The importance of this study lies in showing that effective responses to illicit arms trafficking require a shift from fragmented interventions towards a more holistic understanding of the political, economic, and institutional dynamics sustaining illicit arms markets. By explaining how trafficking networks, conflict economies, and security governance weaknesses interact to reproduce persistent arms circulation, the study provides a more comprehensive basis for research, policy formulation, and security governance aimed at addressing illicit arms trafficking in Nigeria and comparable conflict-affected settings across West Africa.

5.1. Implications for Scholarship

The three mechanisms examined here are not alternative explanations to be weighed against one another but components of a single self-reproducing system. Two implications follow for scholarship. First, studies that examine supply, demand, or governance in isolation may attribute effects to one mechanism when those effects arise from the interaction of all three. Second, the effectiveness of arms-control measures cannot be judged solely by their immediate outputs, since interventions that disrupt one mechanism may leave the wider system intact. Conceptualising illicit arms trafficking as a higher-order feedback system provides a basis for comparative research in other conflict-affected settings where illicit arms markets persist despite formal arms-control mechanisms.

5.2. Recommendations

To disrupt the self-reproducing dynamics of illicit arms trafficking in Nigeria, the following strategies are recommended:

(i) Institutionalise inter-agency intelligence coordination by establishing formal mechanisms for intelligence sharing, joint threat assessments, and coordinated border and law-enforcement operations among the Nigeria Customs Service, Nigeria Immigration Service, Nigeria Police Force, the Armed Forces, intelligence agencies, and other relevant institutions (Unaam, 2025b). These arrangements should be supported by clearly defined institutional mandates, standardised intelligence-sharing protocols, data-protection safeguards, accountability mechanisms, periodic performance evaluations, and oversight measures to minimise duplication, strengthen operational effectiveness, and prevent political misuse of intelligence (Unaam, 2025b; Chukwunka, 2025).

(ii) Improve stockpile security and weapons accountability through routine independent audits, secure armoury infrastructure, digital inventory and tracing systems, and strengthened oversight of firearms acquisition, storage, transfer, and disposal (Beriša et al., 2024). These measures should incorporate comprehensive weapons marking, record keeping, loss-reporting procedures, secure physical storage, independent verification of stockpile management, accountable disposal processes, and strengthened accountability for weapons lost through battlefield capture or diversion.

(iii) Strengthen institutional integrity within security and border management agencies by enhancing independent oversight, personnel vetting, whistleblower protection, internal accountability mechanisms, and sanctions for corruption and collusion associated with illicit arms trafficking. Regular integrity assessments, transparent disciplinary procedures, and independent monitoring should support sustained institutional accountability.

(iv) Adopt conflict-sensitive security strategies that address both the supply of illicit firearms and the conflict economies that sustain demand by integrating arms-control initiatives with conflict prevention, livelihood protection, community security, local justice mechanisms, demobilisation and reintegration programmes where appropriate, economic recovery, and interventions targeting insurgency, banditry, illegal mining, and communal violence (Chukwunka, 2025). Measures should also target the disruption of illicit revenue systems that finance armed groups and sustain demand for illicit weapons.

(v) Deepen regional cooperation under ECOWAS and related regional frameworks through coordinated border operations, intelligence exchange, harmonised firearms tracing and information-sharing systems, and joint action against transnational trafficking networks operating across West Africa and the Sahel. Regional cooperation should be supported by compatible legal frameworks, secure information-sharing arrangements, institutional capacity building, mutual accountability mechanisms, and confidence-building measures to strengthen political trust and operational feasibility among participating states (Unaam, 2025b).

Table 4. Implementation Matrix for Recommended Policy Measures.

Recommended measure	Lead institution(s)	Indicative time frame	Resource requirement	Operational risk	Performance indicator
Establish formal inter-agency mechanisms for intelligence sharing, joint threat assessment, and coordinated border and law-enforcement operations, supported by defined mandates, standardised protocols, data-protection safeguards, and periodic performance evaluation	Office of the National Security Adviser (ONSA), intelligence agencies, Nigeria Police Force, Nigeria Customs Service, Nigeria Immigration Service, Armed Forces	Short to medium term	Moderate to high	Institutional rivalry, information leakage, political interference	Number of joint operations, intelligence products, and trafficking disruptions
Introduce routine independent audits, secure armoury infrastructure, and digital inventory and tracing systems, with comprehensive weapons marking, record keeping, loss-reporting procedures, accountable disposal, and accountability for weapons lost through battlefield capture or diversion	Armed Forces, Nigeria Police Force, Ministry of Defence	Medium term	High	Resource constraints, corruption, weak compliance	Reduction in documented diversion incidents, audit completion, stock-pile compliance
Strengthen independent oversight, personnel vetting, whistleblower protection, and internal accountability within security and border management agencies, supported by regular integrity assessments and transparent disciplinary procedures	Ministry of Interior, Ministry of Defence, anti-corruption agencies, security institutions	Medium to long term	Moderate	Institutional resistance, political influence	Corruption investigations, disciplinary actions, institutional compliance
Integrate arms-control initiatives with conflict prevention, livelihood protection, community security, local justice mechanisms, and demobilisation and reintegration programmes, and disrupt the illicit revenue systems that finance armed groups	Federal and State Governments, National Commission for Refugees, Migrants, and Internally Displaced Persons, humanitarian agencies, security institutions	Medium to long term	High	Persistent insecurity, inadequate funding	Reduced conflict intensity, participation in reintegration programmes, reduced recruitment into armed groups
Coordinate border operations, intelligence exchange, and harmonised firearms tracing and information-sharing systems under ECOWAS and related regional frameworks, supported by compatible legal frameworks, institutional capacity building, and confidence-building measures	ECOWAS, Nigeria, neighbouring states, regional security institutions	Medium to long term	Moderate to high	Weak political trust, legal incompatibility, limited institutional capacity	Joint border operations, tracing requests, intelligence exchanges, coordinated enforcement actions

Note: Indicative time frames denote short term as up to two years, medium term as two to five years, and long term as beyond five years, measured from the commencement of implementation. Resource requirement denotes moderate where measures are implementable within existing institutional budgets and high where dedicated appropriation or external funding would be required. Performance indicators are stated as measurable institutional outputs against which implementation can be assessed.

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Data Availability Statement: This study did not generate or collect primary data. The analysis is based on 95 publicly available documentary sources identified and selected according to the procedures described in Sections 2.3 and 2.4. Conceptual and theoretical works informing the analytical framework are cited separately and do not form part of the documentary sources analysed. The inventory of analysed documentary sources is provided in the supplementary material as Appendix A, Documentary Corpus Analysed in the Study, which records the source type, geographical focus, evidence category, and analytical contribution of each. Appendix B, Codebook, provides the coding framework applied in the thematic analysis, and Appendix C, Evidence Matrix by Theme and Embedded Conflict Context, shows the distribution of coded evidence across the four analytical themes and the five embedded conflict contexts. All documentary sources are publicly accessible.

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