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'Tesco for Terrorists' Reconsidered: Arms and Conflict Dynamics in Libya and in the Sahara-Sahel Region

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Abstract How does arms availability affect armed conflict? What implications does increased arms availability have for the organisation of armed groups involved in war against the state? This article explores these questions by looking into the civil war in Libya and the subsequent proliferation of weapons in the broader Sahel/North Africa region. Its argument is based on secondary sources: online databases, international organisations reports and news media. First, we examine the question of firearms in Libya in order to understand how changing conditions of weapons availability affected the formation of armed groups during different phases of war hostilities (February–October 2011). We highlight that, as weapons became more readily available to fighters in the field during this period, a process of fragmentation occurred, hindering efforts to build mechanisms that would allow control of the direction of the revolutionary armed movement. Next, as security continued to be a primary challenge in the new Libya, we consider the way in which unaccountable firearms and light weapons have affected the post-war landscape in the period from October 2011 to the end of 2013. Finally, we put the regional and international dimensions under scrutiny, and consider how the proliferation of weapons to nearby insurgencies and armed groups has raised major concern among Libya's neighbours. Short of establishing any causal relationship *stricto sensu*, we underscore the ways in which weapons from Libya have rekindled or altered local conflicts, creating permissive conditions for new tactical options, and accelerating splintering processes within armed movements in the Sahara-Sahel region.

Keywords Arms · Disarmament · Insurgency · Militias · Statebuilding · Terrorism

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Introduction

Arms dynamics in contemporary civil wars puzzle policy makers and continue to pose serious challenges to scholarly research programs focused on understanding their nature and consequences. The heated debate about whether to supply arms to rebels in Syria (Bender and Bierman 2013) illustrates the uncertainty that surrounds what we know about the relationship between arms availability and the trajectory of today's armed conflicts, in which a myriad of international, state and non-state actors are typically involved (cf. Greene and Marsh 2012).

In this article we address the under-researched nexus between arms availability and conflict trajectory by analysing the effects of arms dynamics on the evolution and character of the war in Libya in 2011. We argue that increased general weapons availability tends to lead to a 'splintering' of armed movements, and thus to an increased number of armed actors engaged in the conflict. In the analysis we also include indications of how arms availability affects post-war political stability dynamics, looking into Libya and beyond its borders. We find that the overall argument applies not only to war modalities, but also to the aftermath of conflict, and to some – but not all – armed movements operating near sources of weapons proliferation.

While our research on Libyan arms dynamics is empirically grounded, a methodological caveat regarding data collection is nevertheless in order. Due to the often opaque, clandestine, and illegal nature of small arms transfers into conflict zones, our knowledge regarding the numbers and types of weapons used in the Libyan conflict, on the one hand, and the identity of the diverse set of non-state actors that took part in weapons transfers in Libya, on the other, is far from fully exhaustive. Thus, due to the practical constraints imposed on academic field research into this subject matter, this article is informed by a systematic analysis that we have conducted on all available online sources relating to Libyan weapons transfers. Data collection took place between May and November 2013, and was based on searches in the Norwegian Initiative on Small Arms Transfer (NISAT) database, as well as additional news media and special reports by international agencies dealing with weapons in Libya and the Sahara-Sahel region over the period 2011–2013.[1] We focus primarily on the availability of small arms and light weapons (SALW), as these were most widespread in the case of the Libyan rebels.[2] An exhaustive empirical investigation of the nexus between weapons transfers, conflict trajectories, and violent non-state actors in the Libyan civil war is beyond the ambition of this article. Rather, we aim to generate insights and offer a first theoretically informed analysis of these aspects of Libya's civil war arms dynamics by drawing on and extrapolating from an extensive review of existing sources.

The Problem in Context

Policy makers increasingly assume a correspondence between weapons proliferation and conflict intensity. Evidence of this emerging consensus can be found in the broad support within the United Nations for an international Arms Trade Treaty, and in many regional initiatives aimed at curbing the availability of weapons to (non-state) parties engaged in conflict (Bourne and Greene 2012; see also Garcia 2006). However, the exact dynamics whereby arms availability affects and alters civil wars are still largely unknown. As a

[1] The authors wish to thank PRIO for granting access to its NISAT database, as well as Patrick Cullen, Nicholas Marsh and the anonymous reviewers of this journal for particularly useful references and suggestions.

[2] We have here excluded the availability of ammunition in Libya and the region at large. This is due to the even more serious methodological challenges in obtaining comprehensive sources, although an excellent study byN.R. Jenzen-Jones for the Small Arms Survey is a good starting point (Jenzen-Jones 2013).

consequence, a linear effect is often intuitively presumed, whereby increasing the numbers and types of weapons leads to the intensification of the fighting – irrespective of political decision-making and whether or not this is the desired intention. Arms researchers have looked into the relationship between arms and wars from various angles, including their role in conflict initiation and escalation (Sislin and Pearson 2001), the effectiveness of control tools (Boutwell and Klare 1999; Garcia 2006; Greene and Marsh 2012), the dynamics of regional weapons complexes (Bourne 2007), and patterns of supply and demand (cf. Florquin and Berman 2005).

While these works have proven instrumental in raising attention to the issue, few have attempted to formulate hypotheses whereby arms become determinants of specific modalities of warfare. Marsh (2007) puts forward the argument that the mode of weapons acquisition by armed groups corresponds to the type of insurgency, and he does so by operationalizing weapons acquisition as made up of availability of weapons, on the one hand, and control over the acquisition process, on the other. 'Availability' in this context involves more than the sheer number of weapons in the country: rather, it is operationalised in terms of the accessibility of weapons, which in turn is determined by factors such as groups' resources, goal, bravery, organisation, and external support (Marsh 2007, 60–62).

Augmented regional circulation of weapons thus does not automatically create a situation where all parties increase their arms. Instead, the control over the weapons acquisition process and the variety of available weapons sources form a complex inter-relationship. This process then moulds the character of warfare through reshaping the structure and organisation of armed actors. Marsh outlines three observable modalities: first, one with low levels of publicly available arms where a coherent leadership of an armed group or movement controls the acquisition and distribution of arms to its cadres; second, one with medium general arms availability where regional commanders or a sub-level leadership acquire and distribute weapons; and, third, one characterised by high overall arms availability in which a myriad of fractioned armed bands easily acquire weapons for diverse causes undergo splintering and fractionalisation processes (Marsh 2007, 63).

Testing and further elaborating on this basic framework, this article proceeds in three steps: First, we examine how arms availability has affected armed groups within Libya, and consider how the evolution of the 2011 civil war was influenced by the level of arms availability, from the largely spontaneous protests that broke out on 15 February 2011 to the killing of Colonel Gaddafi on 20 October 2011. The role of weapons available to armed groups changed significantly, following the trajectory of the civil war as it unfolded and escalated, and gradually involved new and diverse actors. We argue that while the dynamics observed in the Libyan case do corroborate the core of Marsh' hypothesis on the correspondence between the availability of weapons and the modality of the conflict, other aspects may induce to some reformulation. Second, since the war did not lead to conditions for stability in Libya, which instead saw the progressive deterioration of the security landscape into what can probably be described as a case of 'violent peace' (Duffield 2001), we extend our analysis to the post-war phase, and tentatively describe the complex landscape in mid/end 2013, characterised by diverse armed actors with dissimilar objectives and the subsequent challenges to reconstruct stable state institutions. Finally, we give an overview of how arms originating from Libya have had an impact on conflicts in other countries in the region, shedding light on how the proliferation of weapons and the multiplication of armed groups appear to have gone hand in hand also in the region at large.

Arms Availability and Conflict Modality in Libya

The rebellion that swept Libya in the spring of 2011 broke out on February 15 in the form of seemingly spontaneous street protests that quickly spread from Benghazi throughout the

Eastern part of the country, exposing the lingering resentment against the coercive one-man leadership of Muammar Gaddafi (cf. Vandewalle 2012). What started out as popular protests across Libyan towns and cities, gradually but rapidly morphed into a full-fledged armed conflict. Weapons were scarce in the early stages of street confrontation, whose protagonists were small groups of fighters sharing few firearms. Weapon ownership had been severely restricted in Gaddafi's Libya, with only certain groups close to the authorities permitted to own weapons, and the spontaneous character of the mobilisation that followed the violent repression of street protests in Tripoli meant that rebels could rely on no or very little prior accumulation of weapons. Thus, when protests flared up, Libyan forces were in full control of the vast weapons stockpiles amassed over four decades, while rebels had access to only a handful of weapons in civilian ownership. As a result of this, defections from armed state security forces became a critical aspect in the strengthening of the protesters' organisational and military capacities,[3] and differences between the East and the West of the country were quickly visible. Whereas Gaddafi's forces defected *en masse* and the remaining withdrew rapidly from Benghazi, allowing it to become the rebel capital, the Tripolitania region saw much fiercer fighting between loyalists and rebels, fewer defectors and less access to defectors' weapons and weapons depots. However, as defectors joined the rebels, and as fighting units developed into revolutionary brigades with the capacity to launch attacks, weapons that were seized from Gaddafi's forces elsewhere became available also in Western cities such as Misrata and Sirte through supply networks. Weapons rapidly moved from hand to hand, both between armed groups in different parts of the country, and from external sources. The UN Panel of Experts on Libya reported that despite the UN arms embargo arms were exported to Libyan revolutionary forces from, among others, Qatar, UAE, France, Albania and Sudan (UNSC 2013). The ambiguity of UN Security Council resolution 1973 gave way to different interpretations of supply to protect civilians, and sources on the ground reported French airdrops, US covert action, and above all massive Qatari arms deliveries, along with training by Qatari, UAE, Jordanian, Italian, Egyptian and American forces (Hilsum 2013, 208–209).

'Arms procurement' and 'organising armed groups' were thus two parallel processes of major concern to the anti-Gaddafi front. The process whereby arms availability shaped the insurgency can be identified along three phases: 1) the formation of the armed actors, which generally took place in a context of relative weapons shortage; 2) the development of increased coordination and cohesion, as weapons became more available to well connected Brigade commanders; and 3) a process towards fractionalisation and splintering, as weapons started to become available to individual insurgents in the field. These three phases might not always be easy to pin down with respect to time frame, and their sequence might not apply everywhere, as the empirical analysis conducted below reveals. Nonetheless, they describe a general trend that was witnessed across Libyan towns. In other words, we believe that a three-phase trajectory of the relationship between 'arms availability' and 'modality of organisation' remains a useful model through which we can understand the Libyan conflict.

Phase One: Weapons Scarcity and Bottom-Up Organisation

The first phase was characterised by relative weapons shortage among protesters turned rebels, and had a different duration depending on the locale. While in some cases – such as Benghazi,

[3] Libyan forces had grown particularly segmented, if not fragmented by design. The regular army was mainly made up of recruits from the East, where it was stationed, while elite corps were predominantly integrating recruits from other regions. Libya had no Defence Minister, and Col. Gaddafi was personally informed through an Interim Military Committee (Cole 2013, 44).

large numbers of army defectors changed the military balance after just a few weeks, in the loyalist strongholds in the West the process took months. In the early stage of the conflict, most cases of combat unit formation can be traced back to neighbourhood groups or extended family networks (McQuinn 2012), and this rapid and 'bottom-up' organisation can plausibly be explained by the lack of prior planning. The hastily established National Transitional Council (NTC) did not hold the reins of command of the uprising, and it lacked a determining presence on the ground. The NTC's main function consisted in gaining the international recognition the revolutionary forces needed vis-à-vis the regime. Thus within Libya the NTC was at best respected as a legitimizing body; distrusted and even contested by some, it certainly did not have control over fighting units on the ground (ICG 2011). Before the organisation of local or regional Military Councils, there were thus no overarching organisational body of the Libyan rebellion. Instead, groups formed spontaneously and in a bottom-up manner, made up of family or neighbourhood networks. Areas like Misrata, in the traditionally loyalist West of the country, is a case where we have evidence that illustrates the bottom-up formation of armed units: while in Benghazi early defections allowed the quick organisation of larger brigade structures, Misrata's rebels organised according to a more provisional formula. As one Misratan Brigade leader explained after the war: "The reason why we have so many brigades today is that in the beginning each street would organise its own group, street by street" (ICG 2011, 3).

At this initial point, access to weapons meant primarily getting hold of arms and ammunitions captured from Gaddafi's forces in skirmishes, or consisted of antiquated single-shot hunting rifles (McQuinn 2012, 43). To this one may add the weapons brought along by army defectors, which in the case of Misrata were less prominent, albeit certainly present, but which in the East of the country were significant. All together, the sources of weapons were relatively scarce. However, they multiplied rapidly and this permitted fighters in Misrata and other coastal towns in the West to engage in fighting with Gaddafi's forces for weeks and months, even before robust supply networks with Benghazi were set up. The initial process of forming armed factions took place in a period where weapons supplies were highly uncertain: the rebellion caught many by surprise, and organisation was largely based on family, kinship and neighbourhood loyalty.

Having been in and out of the allied fold of Russia and the West, and having had all the means of a rich oil state, the Libyan regime had purchased weapons from a variety of sources. As the UN Arms Embargo was lifted in 2003, new and more sophisticated weapons reached Libyan stockpiles: imports from Europe alone amounted to EUR 834.5 million over the period 2004–2009 (Council of the European Union 2011), even as much of this was not yet delivered as the war broke out, or otherwise of a nature that rendered it not useful to the type of urban warfare that unfolded. By the time the rebellion broke out, the warehouses were however fully stocked, and large quantities of small arms, a variety of light weapons such as the SA-7 missiles and mortars, as well as heavy weapons such as tanks and aircrafts were available (Wezeman 2011). However, stockpiles were at this point exclusively in the hands of loyalist forces. The first waves of defectors brought some weapons along, and others were confiscated in ambushes and battles, but weapons levels remained low, and fighting groups were formed on the basis of one or a few weapons only. As one commander in Misrata explained in an interview: "For every fighter, there were four fans" (McQuinn 2012, 37). To illustrate this modality of forming armed units, one can recall the description a war reporter offers of a hitchhiking Libyan rebel on a highway between Ajdabiya and Benghazi in April 2011:

> Mr. Insaiti, like many rebels at this stage in their war, had no weapon to fight with. Until recently he had been riding on a pickup truck, operating a heavy machine gun mounted

> to its bed. But the truck and the machine gun had been destroyed, leaving him with only a dead radio and the clothes that he wore. His plan was to hitchhike back to Benghazi, report to his old base and see who else from his unit might have also worked his way back. Then, he said, they would regroup into a new, smaller unit, find weapons and return to the fight (Chivers 2012a).

The initial phase of weapons scarcity was relatively short in most locales. Yet, it was arguably a crucial factor for the formation of the actors involved in the Libyan civil war, inasmuch as it conditioned the formation of units at the level of neighbourhoods or personal networks, and it moulded an operational mode based on sharing the few weapons available. The spontaneous nature of the uprising was determinant for this way of organising the conflict parties: this may explain the divergence from expectations derived from Marsh' model, which would predict a more coherent armed insurgency when weapons availability is low. The analysis of the Libyan case points to the need for a slight modification in the way the relation between arms availability and mode of conflict is understood. In a context where an organised political opposition is virtually absent from the initial phase of the war, a significant degree of spontaneity may be a factor that structurally affects the insurgency. The spontaneous character of a civil conflict may therefore be seen to affect organizational patterns, which are more likely to develop horizontally along several different, locally based units, rather than in the form of a hierarchical command structure.

Phase Two: Consolidation of Brigades, and Increased Availability of Weapons

As revolutionary forces gained traction vis-à-vis loyalists, weapons became more readily available. However, most of the weapons came from seizures from the regime's security apparatus, and the rapidly assembled rebel fighters lacked training in warfare, not to speak of the use and maintenance of sophisticated light and heavy weapons. An important factor in the rebels' growing firepower was therefore the ability of local craftsmen to modify weapons manufactured to be operated remotely on aircraft and tanks so as to fit manual use. This process of adaptation taking place in workshops across Misrata and other towns besieged by Gaddafi's forces proved to be decisive. The fact that inexperienced metal workers and other civilians experimented their skills by working on the heavy weapons headed for the front line, was a clear symptom of a supply problem for the rebel forces. New York Times reporter C.J. Chivers spent time with a makeshift armoury in Misrata in May 2011, and reported the challenges in the process:

> "If we had enough weapons, I would not be here," said Ahmed Shirksy, a welder fitting an armored plate to a pickup truck's bed on Monday morning, as shells fell in neighborhoods nearby. "I would be fighting at the front lines, with two of my sons" (Chivers 2011a).

During this phase, weapons were also supplied from sources other than confiscation. In the West, shipments from Benghazi were vital to withstand the attacks and eventually force out Gaddafi's loyalist forces. Hilsum reports that during the siege of Misrata, already in March "fishing boats full of weapons started to arrive from Benghazi" (Hilsum 2013, 202), and this happened in spite of the arms embargo NATO was monitoring over the Gulf of Sirte. The fighting units began grouping into brigade structures, but they remained autonomous and loyal to their brigade commander. McQuinn's thorough study notes how coordination was carried out through consensus both within and between brigades: in Misrata, brigade commanders – whether their group had several hundred or just a handful of fighters – would meet after dark

and discuss and decide the tactical aspects of the fighting based on a consensus-based modality (McQuinn 2012, 18–19). In other words, no formal command structure was in place: war was directed from the bottom, and executed according to a common goal rather than through a closely coordinated tactical effort.

Loosely coordinating bodies known as Military Councils emerged in Libyan cities. These were not directing the war effort, but served instead as providing an overarching legitimacy to the many brigades. Regarding weapons supply, the Military Councils had a logistical role as a facilitator. McQuinn observes that "Brigades would travel to Benghazi to purchase weapons but the delivery of those weapons to Misrata was usually organised by the [Misrata Military Council]" (McQuinn 2012, 17). In this period, rebels were becoming more professional as fighters, and they learned to coordinate on the battleground. The Berbers in the Nafousa Mountains, west of Tripoli, for example, were coordinating their attacks with the "rebel high command in Benghazi" (Hilsum 2013, 206). As professionalism on the battleground grew, however, so did each group's ambitions to control and dominate both the war and the politics that followed.

During phase two, one can generally observe the transformation of the revolutionary actors, originating from spontaneous neighbourhood groups and growing into a somewhat more coordinated movement structured by brigades, whose commanders gain access to weapons shipments from Benghazi and elsewhere. In other words, weapons supply became more centralised, with individual brigade commanders purchasing/ordering, and with delivery facilitated by the Military Council. While it has not been possible to obtain conclusive evidence for this period, secondary sources such as McQuinn's fine-grained study on Misrata strongly indicate the existence of such a trajectory. The Benghazi case fits the same pattern, but as defections early on ensured that the city would be the bedrock of the opposition, Benghazi entered phase two at an early stage of the war, and the consolidation of robust brigade structures soon revealed itself to be more advanced than elsewhere in the country.

Phase Three: High Weapons Availability, Fractionalisation and Splintering

The last phase one can discern looking at the insurgency through weapons availability began as weapons became widely accessible to organised rebel forces as well as ordinary citizens. While the existing brigades increased their supply capacities in this phase, other actors too had the chance to enter the field. It is difficult to say with certainty when such a moment occurred in the different cities: in Misrata one can identify June 2011 as a watershed, due to the fact that stockpiles in Zlitan and Tripoli became available. McQuinn registers a spike in weapons availability after the fall/liberation of these two cities, allowing Soviet-era T-55 tanks, Grad rocket launchers, small arms and ammunition to became available:

> Senior commanders admitted that after the fall of Tripoli they no longer had an accurate count of the total small arms and light weapons in Misrata, largely because each brigade transported material back separately. Moreover, most brigades have not conducted systematic accounting of their arsenal, preferring instead to speak in terms of the number of shipping containers full of ammunition and armaments. Conservative estimates put the total small arms in Misrata at more than 30,000 (McQuinn 2012, 46).

Readily available weapons influenced the cohesion of the revolutionary forces in that it rendered it easier to form new off-shots from existing formations, as well as to organise militias with other objectives than revolution. More and more shipments of arms from external sources, and particularly the flow of Qatari arms through refugee camps in Tunisia, was undoubtedly a factor behind the increased fractionalisation observable among Libyan rebels

(Hilsum 2013, 208–209). The role of small arms is to be singled out in this context, given the difficulty to control them: they fell under the responsibility of the individual fighters, while light weapons were under the control of brigade commanders (McQuinn 2012, 54).

This final phase of the war was characterised by last-ditch fighting between remaining loyalist forces and revolutionary brigades from different regions, including a plethora of different actors who typically would not know each other (ICG 2011). After the fall of Tripoli in August 2011, remaining towns by the border with Tunisia witnessed attacks by well-armed, young, disorganised and inexperienced fighters, who "enthusiastically went after 'wanted individuals'" (ICG 2012, 4). In this period, the proliferation of armed groups filled the vacuum that followed the withdrawal of loyalist forces. Many of these groups were in fact civilian-led groups that had been acquiring weapons, and that organised themselves in local defence forces protecting their community, whether of a pro-loyalist or a pro-rebel leaning. Their allegiance and interests were diverse and uncertain (ICG 2012), but their access to the 'hardware of force' enabled their assertion in neighbourhoods, towns and regions. One can concede that such a degree of fractionalisation may have been the subject of 'media hype'. Still, both the fact that brigade commanders admitted to no longer having control over the weapons in their holdings, and the emergence of certain armed rogue elements, illustrate that the emerging coherent organisation of the rebellion was at least under pressure during this phase. This is not to say that there was no organisation and command in place – in fact, many brigades were increasingly tightly structured – but that this phase witnessed also the emergence of a new set of actors that may have had other objectives in engaging in armed combat that the existing brigades and councils.[4]

As rebels caught and killed Muammar Gaddafi on 20 October 2011, Libya was declared liberated. The civil war was officially over, even if certain towns and borderlands would still see fighting and opposition to the new Libya over the coming months. In those days it became clear to all external observers that an enormous amount of weapons had slipped into the hands of civilians and armed groups, and that no one had the overview of who they were, how many they were, nor of who was in control of the remaining stockpiles. According to British intelligence sources, more than one million tonnes of weapons belonging to Colonel Gaddafi were looted from arms dumps after the dictator was toppled in October 2011 (Drury 2013). This announced a chaotic situation in which the previously centralised and coercive state crumbled, and not a single actor had the means to control the others.

Arms Availability and the Aftermath of War in Libya

The situation in Libya at the end of the war – i.e. the liberation of the country proclaimed by the National Transitional Council on 23 October 2011 – can be described as one characterised by high levels of arms availability. According to our leading hypothesis, under such circumstances a large number of armed actors can be expected to appear, each operating according to different rules and objectives. We do not argue that the situation in Libya and the region at large is worse than prior to Gaddafi's fall.[5] On the contrary, we believe that it is only by taking seriously the emerging challenges that we can understand the future of stability in the new

[4] We would like to thank an anonymous reviewer for helping us clarify this point.

[5] One should not forget the leading role that Col. Gaddafi played for decades in supplying weapons shipments to embargoed countries such as Liberia and Angola, as well as in supporting insurgents throughout the Sahel. While uncontrolled weapons proliferation has certainly made stability problems more acute, one should not forget that Gaddafi's rationale for arming both rebel groups and the governments they were fighting was certainly not one of contributing to regional security.

Libya. Different attempts have been made at categorizing the actors involved in the fast-changing security/insecurity sphere in post-war Libya. In mid-2013 we may identify at least three different groups.

First, the official security structures consist of the Libya National Army, which was founded by the NTC in 2011, but which has failed to assert control over the national territory over the next couple of years. The National Army is a decentralised structure based upon the units that joined in after the revolution, and its troops are reintegrated troops, which fall either under the (politically controversial) category of former officers of Gaddafi's army, or under the category of inexperienced soldiers without formal training. There exists no inventory of the weapons the National Army possesses, nor of how many soldiers it employs (Fick 2013).

The second category is armed groups – often called 'militias' by the press – which are formally or informally affiliated with the government structures. As the NTC proclaimed Libya liberated, it had neither the capacity of providing security nor to control the several other armed actors involved in the revolution. Once it accomplished its mission to prepare for elections, which were successfully held in July 2012, the NTC gave way to the General National Congress (GNC), which elected Ali Zeidan as prime minister. During its existence, the NTC relied on revolutionary brigades to provide security and enforce order in the streets of towns and neighbourhoods. The 'Libyan Shield', a coalition of groups that in April 2012 formalised and legitimised their operations with the Ministry of Defence (Cole 2013, 44), and the Tripoli-based 'Supreme Security Committee' (SSC) were commonly described as two of the most powerful armed groups in the country. They were seen as acting on behalf of the Ministries of Defence and Interior when it suits their objectives, and as the main forces currently present in Libya (Hauslohner 2012).

There are different views as to the effect one may expect from weapons in the hands of such armed groups. Some argued that due to the their degree of fragmentation, no group is capable of decisively defeating the others, leading to a generalised deterrence – i.e., providing an incentive to refrain from violence (Kadlec 2012). Others have observed patterns of competition over available weapons, explaining them as a way to strengthen relative power positions. For example, in June 2012, two armed groups fought over access to 22 containers of weaponry at a police compound and checkpoint in Ad Dafn, killing at least 11 people as a container exploded during the fighting, and one Danish explosive ordnance technician who examined the area the following day (Chivers 2012b).

The last category of armed actors in post-war Libya comprises those groups that are not affiliated with the government. These have different backgrounds and objectives, ranging from revolutionary groups outside the scope of the Military Councils, to groups with Islamist affiliations such as Ansar Al Sharia, and groups with purely extra-legal and criminal economic interest. The control over weapons by larger and more established armed groups might limit these groups' arms availability (McQuinn 2012), but on the other hand, Islamist groups or groups involved in the trafficking of arms or other illicit commodities might have external support or regional contact networks that may facilitate access to arms.

Libyan armed groups – regardless of their affiliation with the government or not – have at least three reasons to reject integration with the Libya National Army: first, in their eye the presence of officers from the former Gaddafi army precludes legitimacy; second, their newfound power gives them a stakeholder status they see no reason to sacrifice; and three, Islamist groups reject a Libya that is run according to Western-style democracy (Basar 2012a). In addition, the fact that the state lacks the capacity to provide security to its people and defend the sovereignty of its territory and borders makes its institutions look like empty shells. The fact that most heads of household own weapons for personal protection is a clear symptom of a state presence that is not perceived as a capable and legitimate actor.

At the same time, however, people tend to mistrust the armed groups – the 'militias' – as well. The UN Panel of Experts on Libya reports that most revolutionary brigades remain in control of their own weapons (UNSC 2013, 13). The killing of US ambassador Stephens in Benghazi on September 11, 2012, triggered a shift in the public acceptance of militias as security providers (Basar 2012b), and swaths of protesters calling for an end to the armed groups took to the streets and attacked the bases of Ansar al Sharia, forcing their fighters to flee from Benghazi (AFP 2012). Subsequently, the central government issued a ban on such groups: "We're disbanding all the armed groups that do not fall under the authority of the government. We're also banning the use of violence and carrying of weapons in public places" (Al Jazeera 2012a). The government then established a National Mobile Force to disband the groups based on "non-violent initiatives" (CNN 2012) and embarked upon disarmament campaigns based on voluntary collection (Al Jazeera 2012b).

Although the Government has pledged $8 billion for the demobilisation and disarmament of Libyan militias, expecting some 200,000 combatants to sign up for a program drafted by the Warriors Affairs Committee (The Daily Star 2012), as of this writing there has been no follow up. Other international actors, including the UN Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL), are involved in stockpile management, army training, and mines and Unexploded Ordnance (UXO) clearance, but as Michael Smith - the security advisor to UNSMIL - stated in an interview, there is no coherent strategy for Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration (DDR) and Security Sector Reform (SSR) present in Libya (Reeve 2013). One explanation might be that the conditions are not ripe for such restructuring yet, or that there was no formal peace process onto which DDR could be written, but one might also imagine that these conditions are partly *due to* the lack of such security programs. Another explanation is that the international community is not taking centre stage in Libya, a fact that is somewhat paradoxical considering the significant war effort made by NATO allies. While the Libyan government is intent on maintaining ownership over responses to security challenges (e.g. through a fledgling disarmament program under the control of the Ministry of Interior), it appears to be hardly in a position to enforce such programs.[6] The defenestration of key ministers, the dramatic sequence of assassinations of security and judicial officials that has swept the Benghazi region, as well as the confusion surrounding the kidnapping of the prime minister Ali Zeidan on October 10, 2013, are some of the most serious illustrations of the persistent problem of establishing control over the security apparatuses.

Instead of resolutely assisting the implementation of DDR and SSR programs, international actors appear to have been primarily concerned with worst-case scenarios that would be triggered by the loss of control of specific weapons, notably man-portable air-defence systems (MANPADS). Much of the support to Border Management efforts has been directed at MANPADS control, on the basis of the assumption that they would play a role as strategic game changers, should they be diverted to non-state groups that are able to use them. The United States, for example, committed $40 million to secure Libya's arms stockpiles, much of it to prevent the spread of MANPADS, including a 'buy-back' program (Chivers 2011b). Various western intelligence agencies estimated that Gaddafi's arsenals included some 20,000 shoulder-launched missiles capable of bringing down an aircraft. While there are certainly a set of reasons for missiles not being fired against military or civilian targets in Libya or the Sahel, it is a fact that there has been no reported use of MANPADS from Libya in the region,

[6] This situation is potentially indicative of the fact that Libya, contrary to other precedents of external involvement in stabilisation, can in no way be considered a developing country. In fact, high oil revenues and a small population have given Libya one of the highest nominal GDP per capita in Africa, and traditional development oriented schemes might be inapplicable in this context.

including not been used against French jet fighters and US military transport aircrafts flying into Mali and neighbouring Niger. While French helicopters were confronted with anti-aircraft fire, no missiles were reported. In addition, no civilian airliner have so far been attacked with MANPADS, leaving an uneasy feeling that international actors were more concerned with protecting its own interest in the region rather than confronting the ubiquitous small arms and domestic disintegration of Libya.

Arms Diverted to Regional Conflicts

While the power vacuum created by the collapse of Gaddafi's regime had distinctive implications in terms of localised conflicts in border areas, historically speaking it is a fact that no Libyan government was ever in control of its borders, especially in the South (Cole 2013, 36–37, 46–47). Getting access to firearms in the Sahel-Sahara region was never difficult, as long as a given actor had resources and connections to the protagonists of the so-called *troc*, the Saharian world of contraband and illicit transactions (Scheele 2011). Failure to put weapons under legitimate control on Libyan territory has had severe consequences beyond national borders: the meteoric transformation of an authoritarian cornerstone of regional stability[7] such as Gaddafi's Libya into a mosaic of localised conflicts protagonised by ever-changing alliances of clans, political groupings and militias has deeply affected the configuration of the regional geopolitical landscape.

While generally praising the inception of Libya's post-war transition as one driven by democratically elected 'moderates', after the killing of the US ambassador in Benghazi on September 11, 2012, mainstream media representations sharply veered towards depicting the country as the epicentre of regional destabilisation and chaos (Ghanmi 2012), or – to put it more vividly – as a 'Tesco for terrorists' (Daily Mail 2013). With Libya's security sphere increasingly out of control,[8] the conditions were ideal for those Al Qaeda affiliates that claimed responsibility for attacks in neighbouring countries to find support and protection (Reuters 2013). In reality calls for attention to the calamitous effects that Libyan weapons arsenals cause to regional stability were far from new: since the onset of the 'February 17 Revolution', warnings came from many quarters about how assault rifles, ammunitions and sophisticated weapons systems diverted from Libyan depots could rekindle Tuareg violent mobilisation in the Sahel, fuel armed Jihadism in the Maghreb and Nigeria, destabilise the Sinai peninsula and Gaza, and potentially affect the military balance in Syria. While little doubt exists about the size of Gaddafi's stockpiles or about the fact that significant amounts of weaponry have been diverted into the hands of non-state actors beyond Libya's borders, the impact of such proliferation is less linear than often presumed. In line with the argument that we have developed so far, a more fruitful approach may be to consider cohesiveness within armed movements as an intervening factor. Instead of following the dubious footprints of weapons across the sands of the desert and searching for a mechanistic explanation for violent escalation, we try to look into how the increased availability of weapons may have reshaped the organisation of armed groups, and possibly altered their cohesiveness and leadership structure.

According to the UN Panel of Expert's 2013 report on Libya, weapons from Libya have reached 12 countries, including Tunisia, Algeria, Niger, Mali, Chad, Nigeria, Somalia, Egypt,

[7] But see footnote 5.

[8] On November 9, 2013, the Italian foreign minister declared that Libya was "absolutely out of control" (Libya Herald 2013).

the Gaza Strip and Syria (UNSC 2013). One should not forget that a number of reports were indicating increased availability of weapons well before the collapse of Gaddafi's Libya (Pézard and Glatz 2010, 22). To identify a change in scale (and a leap into a new situation) one has probably to look into the rise, in the region, of new drug-related criminal actors and trans-state networks linked to the so-called industry of kidnappings already in the late 2000s. It is through this type of armed business that disproportionate revenues were generated, along with the soldering of new symbiotic modalities of protection by illicit armed actors, and new forms of non-interdiction by state apparatuses. Traditional smugglers and protectors were often sidelined by the arrival of new, better equipped and more resolute convoys, which imposed their *droit de passage*. New, by far more remunerative business brought about the reorganisation of local collusive deals. The advent of new communications and motorised mobility were such that the traditional fuel, food and weapons smugglers (and the border security officers that protected) them over the 1980s and 1990s faced a problem of market obsolescence, and were eventually defeated. An example was the episode in which Western aid workers were kidnapped in Saharawi refugee camps, therefore breaking the protection of the Polisario Front, and the subsequent appearance of the *Mouvement pour l'Unicité et le Jihad en Afrique de l'Ouest*, which later organised its power base in close connection to local criminal businessmen in Gao, North Mali (Lacher 2013, 76). Likewise, behind the rise of the Islamists of Ansar Dine one can plausibly see the material support received by new geopolitical actors, notably the Gulf states (Moniquet 2013).

Having premised that we are entering an uncharted shadow territory in which illicit economic activities and terrorism cross, and where criminal dynamics and their meaning are quite fluid, in the following sub-sections we seek to develop some insights from open sources and secondary literature that addresses the implications of the cross-border smuggling of Libyan weapons for the broader regional landscape.

Al Qaeda & Affiliates

As the Libyan war escalated over the summer of 2011, governments of both Niger and Chad reported evidence of weapons being smuggled across their borders, expressing fear that the final destinations were Al-Qaeda-affiliated groups in the region. For his part, Gilles de Kerchove, the European Union counterterrorism coordinator, concurred on the fact that the Salafist 'Al Qaeda in the Maghreb' (AQIM) was in a position to gain access to small arms, machine guns and surface-to-air missiles (Zimbabwe Star 2011). British intelligence warned about the fact that groups linked to Al Qaeda have profited from the large numbers of weapons smuggled out of Libya (Drury 2013).[9] Likewise, US Defence Department officials underscored that weapons looted from Libyan depots or sold by fleeing Gaddafi's loyalists (small arms, anti-tank mines, rocket-propelled grenade launchers, light machine guns, crates of ammunition and rockets, truck-mounted heavy machine guns, anti-aircraft artillery and Russian-made Strela anti-aircraft missiles) have been providing new firepower to al Qaeda-linked jihadist militias across the entire northern Africa, thereby accelerating local conflict dynamics (Wood 2013).

Weapons from Libya are reported to have contributed to instability in the Maghreb well beyond spectacular terrorist actions, such as the attack of the 'Signatories in Blood' on the Algerian oil plant of In Amenas (Than Ha 2013). Confronted with growing levels of domestic attacks, Tunisian officials have repeatedly asserted that they have been expecting troubles since the climaxing of the Libyan war, even if often they were not able to clarify whether arms

[9] Among them, some 3000 surface-to-air missiles out of the 20,000 mentioned above had gone missing.

caches they seized belonged to Islamists or to an arms-smuggling group (CNTV 2013). In February 2012 clashes were reported, for example, between the Tunisian army and "armed elements near the city of Sfax: a weapons smuggling network crossing Tunisia from south to north was foiled when officers seized Kalashnikovs and ammunitions apparently coming from Libya after "a professional exchange of fire" (Ghanmi 2012).

In neighbouring Algeria, as early as April 2011 the security apparatus was already warning that AQIM had acquired surface-to-air missiles from Libya (Black 2013). Algeria's foreign affairs minister was on the record for declaring that AQIM was procuring its arms on the black market that blossomed with the Libyan civil war (Ghanmi 2012). Following bilateral agreements on border security signed with Chad and Sudan, in March 2012 Libya signed an agreement with Tunisia and Algeria (Cole 2013, 47). In December 2012 Libyan PM Ali Zaidan met Algerian President Abdulaziz Bouteflika and announced that initiatives "in the security cooperation domain" would aim to reinforce border control so as to detect arms smuggling (KUNA 2012).

Virtually countless episodes of fire exchange between Algerian anti-terrorist units and presumed AQIM cells are on the record, especially as Algeria dispatched thousands of troops to its border with Tunisia, during the spring of 2013. On April 13, for example, security forces intercepted an arms shipment travelling from Libya to northern Mali, reportedly belonging to the al Qaeda splinter group MUJAO. Two SUVs carrying five gunmen were destroyed: reportedly the armed group was providing protection across the Algerian desert to a large shipment of weapons from the Libyan city of Sabha to the Malian city of In Khalil (Ramzi 2013).

This brief reconstruction lends plausibility to the hypothesis that new firepower has emboldened splinter groups in launching attacks. The rapid soar in the availability of weaponry from Libya undergirds the splintering process that has occurred even in highly cohesive Salafist formations such as AQIM. Back in 2010 an increasingly isolated AQIM command demanded a growing contribution from the Saharan *khatibas*, which were increasingly enmeshed in criminal networks (Filiu 2010). Mokhtar Belmokhtar, in particular, was tasked by the Salafist insurgents with supplying weapons from Libya and Niger already from the late 1990s (Aziz 2013, 7). Since then the Saharan combat units have been increasingly active across the border with Mali, and various attempts at imparting discipline by the leadership of AQIM eventually resulted in the dismissal of Belmokthar, and in the creation of the 'Signatories in Blood' unit. This fact, the increasing gravitation of the new brigade towards the newly emerging (and virulently anti-Algerian) faction of MUJAO finds no strong ideological explanation per se, and can be understood only in a context in which solid alternatives have become available, beginning with multiple lines of weapons and gasoline procurement in Libya.

Mali

The collapse of the Libyan regime has often been portrayed as a direct cause for the unleashing of armed violence in Northern Mali. The often heard argument is that as the Libyan civil war began to turn against Col. Gaddafi, the Tuareg auxiliary desert units that traditionally integrated in the Libyan armed forces defected, thereby giving a fatal blow to the regime in Tripoli, while hauling a massive arsenal of weapons and ammunition to Mali. Here they embarked upon a new secessionist rebellion against Bamako. To say the least, this argument oversimplifies causal dynamics: Mali was facing arms proliferation and armed groups challenges well before the Libyan war (Florquin and Berman 2005). In a 2008 report to the UN the Malian government noted that the national arsenal's arms and ammunition stocks were a source of small arms proliferation due to misappropriation by State officials (Republic of Mali, Office of the President of the Republic 2008, 2).

The report that the UN Panel of Experts on Libya published in 2012 does refer to weapons and ammunition from Libyan stockpiles smuggled to Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso (Dembele and Bax 2012). However, the argument portraying Mali as collateral damage of the war in Libya is oblivious of one basic fact: Libya does not border on Mali. Approximately 1800 km of burning desert tracks are to be crossed, either via Niger or through Algerian territory. Tuareg secessionist leaders could certainly rely on the men, the equipment, and the knowledge that are necessary to transport weapons, yet it was a time-consuming operation that took several trips: in no way a passage that could go unnoticed (Raineri and Strazzari 2012, 84–85; Van Dyke 2012). The most plausible route for arms smuggling transits through Agadez, in central Niger, a town that until 2009 had been *territoire interdit* due to an ongoing Tuareg rebellion. Long smuggling chains between southern Libya and Mali cross here, and from here passed armed Tuareg convoys heading for Mali.

In June 2011, the Nigerien authorities intercepted weapons and 645 kg of explosive from Libya, apparently destined for AQIM. In November 2011 Nigerien authorities declare that four violent incidents had taken place since the beginning of the Libyan revolution. "Arms were stolen in Libya and are being disseminated all over the region" – President Issoufou told reporters days after Niger's military clashed with arms smugglers, asking international to secure the border (Maylie and Hinshaw 2011). Quite tellingly, less than a year later the Tuareg leaders who had been accused of smuggling weapons and explosives were released, in a move that could only be interpreted as a part of a strategy to keep stability in Niger (Lacher 2013, 71).

It is possible that the Libyan arsenal seized during the second half of 2011 constituted a first nucleolus of firearms that the Tuareg rebels used to launch their offensives in North Mali/Azawad in the spring of 2012: the vast majority were light weapons such as Kalashnikovs, rocket-propelled grenades, and some vehicles that allowed good desert mobility. One can assume that some *sol-air* missiles were part of the arsenal, but most probably were in conditions in which they could not be used. Professional smugglers, including those based in southern Libya, joined later on (Diffalah 2013).

While in 2013 French army sources indicated that the majority of weapons left behind by the rebels in North Mali originated from Malian stocks (Lebovich 2013), months earlier Malian army officers described being overrun by heavily armed rebel forces equipped "just like Libya's army," with heavy machine guns on four-wheel drive vehicles, as well as anti-tank and anti-aircraft rockets and light weapons. The inspection of cashes left behind by the insurgents shows evidence of some Belgian-manufactured landmines originally supplied to Gaddafi's army (Black 2013). Reuters first, and the New York Times later, published pictures of anti-tank munitions NR-160s left behind by the Islamist militias as they fled the French airstrikes: these projectiles were manufactured by a no longer existing Belgian company that used to supply Gaddafi's army. This provides evidence that weapons cast loose in Libya have been contributing to instability in Mali (Benitez 2013).

The politically most salient accident concerning arms smuggling regards the August 2011 death of Ibrahim Ag Bahanga, an uncompromising Tuareg leader whose appeal was to be heard across the entire spectrum of the otherwise segmented Tamasheq-speaking population, in North Mali and beyond. Officials in Mali reported his death in unclear circumstances, whose versions oscillate between a car accident and a killing as he smuggled weapons. A Malian officer quoted by Reuters declared that "he had got his hands on lots of weapons in Libya … and he hid them on the border with Algeria and Niger" (Ghanmi 2012). Once the attempt to hold together the Tuareg people through charismatic leadership foundered, various affiliations characterizing the segmented nature of Tuareg community surfaced, while the Islamist element, whose military apparatus was oiled by greater resources in a situation where weapons were available everywhere was able to drive a wedge and eventually sideline secular Tuareg nationalism.

Egypt, Palestine and Syria

By the end of 2011 Israeli intelligence warned that arms looted in storehouses in Eastern Libya were thought to have ended up in Egypt's Sinai Peninsula. For that reason Israel has been beefing up its missile defense system for its commercial airliners (Maylie and Hinshaw 2011). While the Israeli intelligence did not expect the victory of the anti-Gaddafi front to stop this flow, this weaponry would have made its way into the Gaza Strip via the smuggling tunnels on the Gaza-Egypt border (Pfeffer 2011). As we have noted elsewhere, weapons availability was partially influential in causing and deepening the split that crossed the body politic of the Palestinian national movement between the first and second Intifada (Strazzari and Tholens 2010): evidence concerning the new weapons supply line illuminates the appearance and the empowerment of a number of heavily armed new Salafist/Jihadist formations in the Sinai peninsula (Moniquet 2013).

Another highly disputed direction through which Libyan weapons have been channelled is the armed conflict in Syria, presumably affecting complex stability dynamics. In January 2013, four new weapon models appeared in large quantities in Syria's Daraa province, none of them used at any time by the Syrian military: the M60 recoilless gun, the M79 Osa rocket launcher, the RPG-22 rocket launcher and the Milkor MGL/RBG-6 grenade launcher. At the same time, anti-Assad rebels, who until that point tended to hoard the bullets of their Kalashnikovs, seemed no longer concerned about preserving ammunitions. One plausible hypothesis is that these anti-tank and anti-infantry weapons came from Libya, which was one of the initial arms-runners to the Syrian opposition.[10] The fact that it was not the jihadists component of the Syrian opposition that benefited from the shipment, jointly with the observation that new stockpiles of Libyan weapons have been appearing and disappearing from Mali, made some analysts suggest that the entire operation was in fact orchestrated by Western powers (Weiss 2013). The implications that weapons from Libya may have (had) for the Syrian war (and post-war) is a matter of heated debate. A number of media report have illustrated the logistics of weapons smuggling from Benghazi to Syrian Sunni fighters (Donati et al. 2013). The fact that in 2013 the US has been vetting Syrian rebels in an attempt to make sure that weapons do not end up the "in wrong hands" (NTI 2013) is in itself a clear indication of the deep concern for how weapons shape and structure armed groups and political scenarios.

Conclusions

By shedding light on the correspondence between increased weapons accessibility for fighters in the field and the fractionalisation of armed groups, the analysis presented in this article offers some preliminary observations regarding the relationship between weapons availability, on the one hand, and the character/trajectory of war on the other. We have done so by exploring the way in which weapons were available to actors at various stages of the Libyan war, and by observing a proliferation of armed groups in parallel to the proliferation of arms, particularly small arms. Although the empirical aspect of the Libyan case study presented here is necessarily a composite sketch of available data, and while more evidence from more cities would certainly help to give us a clearer picture, our findings corroborate the hypothesis that a

[10] As a matter of fact the former Yugoslavia, which manufactured the M60 and M79, formerly enjoyed close relations with Muammar Gaddafi, as did Croatia prior to the Libyan revolt and subsequent NATO intervention. It is possible that the M60s, M79s, RPG-22 s and RBG-6 s were all sold to Libya a long time ago, and were only just emptied from warehouses by the National Transition Council for urgent use in another country (Weiss 2013).

modified conceptualisation of arms availability – reformulated in terms of accessibility and control over the acquisition and distribution of weapons – is needed for a better understanding of the dynamics of armed struggles. Where one observes medium levels of arms availability, armed movements tend to be relatively more coordinated in engaging in a concerted effort towards a common goal. In the presence of high levels of arms availability – i.e. where weapons are accessible to virtually every fighter in the field - the insurgency is likely to be more fractioned, and numerous armed groups and militias with diverse methods and objectives tend to take centre stage. With respect to Marsh' framework, it is however disputable whether low arms availability leads to a coherent and top-down organisation of armed movements. In this article we rather found that – possibly due to the spontaneous character of the uprising – low arms availability led to situations of bottom-up, family or neighbourhood-based organisation of the armed struggle.

Furthermore, we have considered the way in which weapons affect the aftermath of the war in Libya. We observed how arms availability has conditioned the political landscape. In particular, how the omnipresence of weapons, rather than generating mechanisms of widespread deterrence, has had severe implications for the state's capacity to assert its monopoly over the use of force, and has been accompanied by armed tensions and violence. The analysis has demonstrated that while plenty of firearms and ammunitions are to be found throughout Libya, there remains competition over their control, and existing balance of power mechanisms are extremely fragile.

Finally, this article has looked into how Libyan weapons were diverted into the hands of different actors in the wider North African region and beyond, often contributing to the splintering of armed formations in existing or latent localised conflicts. The regional security complex is a kaleidoscopic landscape of armed challenges to state power. While the situation is far from one of simple explanatory schemes, our analysis shows that the influx of weapons coming from Libya from 2011 onwards is key to explaining the abundance of tactical options available, and that splintering processes are likely to have been affected by the increased arms availability in the region. Yet, as we have pointed out, the situation described as a 'Tesco for terrorists' is probably inaccurate: leadership and balance of power dynamics still matter in the borderless Sahara-Sahel region, albeit possibly to a lesser extent than before the collapse of Gaddafi's Libya.

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