CROSS-BORDER CRIMES AND REGIONAL SECURITY IN WEST AFRICA: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF ECOWAS' STRATEGIES IN COMBATING ARMS TRAFFICKING AND ORGANIZED CRIME IN NIGERIA AND BURKINA FASO (2019–2024)

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Abstract
The research investigated the persistent challenge of cross-border crimes in West Africa, which continually undermined regional security, political stability, and socio-economic development. It examined how the porous nature of borders, weak institutional capacities, and political instability in member states created enabling environments for transnational criminal networks to flourish. Despite the establishment of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the adoption of various regional security frameworks, crimes such as arms trafficking, terrorism, and human smuggling continued to escalate, posing grave threats to the goals of regional integration. The study therefore critically examined ECOWAS's strategies for addressing cross-border crimes, with a comparative analysis of Nigeria and Burkina Faso. It was grounded in the Regional Security Complex Theory and Transnational Organized Crime Theory. Methodologically, the research adopted a qualitative and explanatory design, employing content analysis and semi-structured interviews with security personnel and journalists. The findings revealed that ECOWAS, despite formulating robust legal and institutional frameworks—such as the 2006 Convention on Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALWs) and the 2013 Counter-Terrorism Strategy—was unable to uniformly enforce these measures across member states. The study concluded that ECOWAS's strategies achieved limited success due to inconsistent implementation, weak member-state compliance, and inadequate coordination between national and regional security agencies. It recommended strengthening regional intelligence-sharing mechanisms, enhancing border security infrastructure, and improving political will among member states to enforce ECOWAS protocols. The study also advocated increased funding, localized strategy adaptation, and stronger synergy between civil society, state actors, and regional bodies.
Keywords: Cross-Border Crimes, Regional Security, ECOWAS Strategies, Arms Trafficking, Organized Crime, Nigeria and Burkina Faso

INTRODUCTION

The West African sub-region has long been plagued by pervasive security challenges rooted in the structural weaknesses of post-colonial states, porous borders, and socio-political fragility. These factors have created fertile ground for the proliferation of cross-border crimes, notably arms trafficking and organized crime, which have intensified over the past two decades (Onuoha, 2013). This trend has undermined regional integration, weakened the authority of sovereign states, and posed existential threats to both state and human security. The growth of cross-border crime in West Africa is not simply a law enforcement issue; it reflects the deep-seated inability of many states in the region to control their territories, enforce laws, and provide basic public services—conditions that criminal networks exploit to flourish (Lacher, 2016; Bah, 2017).

Small arms and light weapons (SALWs) have been the most visible manifestation of the crisis in regional security. The easy availability and movement of illicit weapons across national borders have contributed to the protracted nature of insurgencies, terrorism, banditry, and organized violence (Aghedo, 2020; UNODC, 2021). Following the 2011 NATO-led intervention in Libya and the subsequent collapse of the Gaddafi regime, the region witnessed an unprecedented surge in the smuggling of weapons into West African states, further fueling instability,

especially in the Sahelian belt (Lacher, 2016; Ibrahim & Ndom, 2020). As a result, countries like Nigeria and Burkina Faso have become epicenters of insecurity—besieged by both domestic and transnational threats.

Nigeria, with its strategic size, population, and borders with four ECOWAS member states, has faced a particularly complex security landscape. Nigeria is a State with multi-cultural, multi-lingual and multi-ethnic conglomeration (Okeke & Omojuwa, 2022). Internal security challenges in Nigeria have worsened over time (Okeke, 2022). The Nigerian state has struggled to secure its northern and western borders, allowing criminal syndicates and terrorist networks such as Boko Haram, ISWAP, and Fulani militia groups to smuggle arms and recruit fighters (Onuoha, 2013; Aghedo, 2020). Meanwhile, Burkina Faso, though relatively small and landlocked, has faced a rapid deterioration of its internal security architecture since 2015. Once considered relatively stable, Burkina Faso has become increasingly vulnerable to jihadist groups operating across the Sahel, and these groups have benefitted immensely from transnational arms markets and criminal economies (Bah, 2017; UNODC, 2021).

These two countries have become central to the conversation on regional security, yet they remain deeply vulnerable to transnational criminal networks that transcend borders, outpace state capacity, and exploit institutional weaknesses (Onuoha, 2013; Bah, 2017). There is no gainsaying the fact that Nigeria has become the hub of conflicts (Nwanolue, Ezeamama & Okeke, 2022). Nigeria's geopolitical centrality and extensive borders, particularly in the North East and North West regions, have rendered it susceptible to a convergence of organized criminal activities and violent extremism. The porosity of these borders enables the trafficking of illicit weapons, which not only emboldens non-state actors like Boko Haram and ISWAP but also escalates intercommunal and ethnoreligious conflicts (Aghedo, 2020). Despite adopting regional mechanisms and participating in ECOWAS-led frameworks for arms control, Nigeria's capacity to stem the tide of arms trafficking remains critically insufficient. This is exacerbated by bureaucratic inefficiency, inter-agency rivalry, and a lack of coordination between federal and subnational security actors (Aning, 2009). Burkina Faso, on the other hand, represents a rapidly deteriorating case of internal collapse driven by both state fragility and external pressures. Since 2015, the country has witnessed a steep rise in terrorist attacks, organized banditry, and weapons smuggling, further intensified by weak state presence in border communities and increasing political instability (Lacher, 2016). Although Burkina Faso has ratified multiple ECOWAS protocols and conventions on SALW control, implementation remains weak due to limited institutional capacity, poor logistical support, and the politicization of security governance (Bah, 2017; UNODC, 2021). The inability of ECOWAS to effectively monitor and enforce compliance among member states has further emboldened illicit actors to expand their operations with minimal deterrence.

The central problem that necessitates this research is the persistent mismatch between the normative frameworks established by ECOWAS and the empirical realities of arms trafficking and organized crime in West Africa. ECOWAS has developed a range of legal and institutional instruments such as the Convention on SALWs (2006), the ECOWAS Counter-Terrorism Strategy (2013), and the West African Police Information System (WAPIS). However, the actual impact of these strategies in disrupting criminal networks and enhancing border security remains uncertain and unevenly felt across the region (Ibrahim & Ndom, 2020; Adebanwi, 2017). Existing scholarship often treats ECOWAS as a monolithic actor, without accounting for the differing political, economic, and security conditions across its member states. This approach fails to capture why strategies may be more effective in one context than another.

In response to the growing regional insecurity, ECOWAS has made strategic interventions aimed at controlling the proliferation of arms and combating transnational organized crime. Its 2006 Convention on Small Arms and Light Weapons, as well as the 2013 Counter-Terrorism Strategy, form the cornerstone of its normative frameworks for peace and security (ECOWAS, 2006; Bah, 2017). These frameworks emphasize member-state cooperation, harmonized legislation, capacity building, and the strengthening of border management systems. Complementary initiatives such as the West African Police Information System (WAPIS), developed in collaboration with INTERPOL and the European Union, aim to facilitate data sharing and cross-border investigations (Ibrahim & Ndom, 2020). However, despite these interventions, the outcomes have remained largely mixed due to weak implementation, lack of political cohesion, corruption, and overlapping mandates between national and regional security institutions (Aning, 2009; Adebanwi, 2017).

By focusing on the period from 2019 to 2024, this research examines the most recent phase of ECOWAS' strategic engagement in regional security, particularly as it pertains to arms trafficking and organized crime. This period is marked by renewed calls for regional collaboration in the face of worsening insecurity, as well as the emergence of new challenges such as the COVID-19 pandemic, increased foreign military withdrawal from the Sahel (especially by France), and rising nationalist sentiments among member states (Bah, 2017). A comparative

analysis of Nigeria and Burkina Faso allows for a contextual assessment of the extent to which ECOWAS has been able to apply consistent, effective, and coordinated strategies in divergent national environments.

LITERATURE REVIEW
Cross-Border Crime
The concept of cross-border crime has attracted significant academic and policy interest in recent decades, particularly within the fields of criminology, international relations, and development studies. It refers to criminal acts that involve more than one country in their planning, execution, or impact, often exploiting the limitations and disparities in national legal systems, border controls, and law enforcement capacities (Shelley, 2014). These crimes include but are not limited to human trafficking, drug smuggling, arms trade, money laundering, and cybercrime. As the international system becomes increasingly interlinked through globalization and technological advancement, the proliferation and sophistication of cross-border crimes have grown exponentially (Choo, 2011; Choi & Lee, 2018).

Cross-border crime is not merely a collection of transnational offenses; it constitutes a systemic challenge to state sovereignty, regional security, and the global legal order. According to Findlay (2008), these crimes transcend conventional state-centric approaches to criminal justice, necessitating novel frameworks that encompass both the international and local dimensions of criminality. This conceptualization aligns with Shelley's (2014) assertion that transnational crimes cannot be understood in isolation from global political economy and power dynamics. The rise of cross-border crime is often linked to weak state institutions, corrupt law enforcement, and poor interagency cooperation, particularly in developing regions such as sub-Saharan Africa and Southeast Asia (Obi, 2017; Igbinedion, 2021).

One significant aspect of the literature is the recognition of border porosity, especially in post-colonial states where boundaries were arbitrarily drawn without consideration for indigenous socio-political structures (Alemika, 2013; Adebusuyi, 2010). In West Africa, for instance, borders such as those of Nigeria, Niger, and Cameroon are characterized by limited surveillance, historical ethnic affiliations across boundaries, and informal economic activities that often blur the line between legality and criminality (Bayart, Ellis, & Hibou, 1999; Obi, 2017). Criminal networks take advantage of these vulnerabilities to operate with relative ease, smuggling contraband, persons, and weapons through poorly monitored routes (Nwankwo, 2020). Furthermore, the literature emphasizes the role of state complicity and elite criminality in enabling and sustaining cross-border crimes. Bayart, Ellis, and Hibou (1999) have argued persuasively that in many African states, the political elite are not only unable but often unwilling to dismantle transnational criminal networks due to their direct or indirect benefits from these activities. This phenomenon, termed the "criminalization of the state," suggests that cross-border crime is not merely the outcome of weak governance but an integral part of the political economy in certain regions (Bayart et al., 1999). Obi (2017) also contends that the informal political arrangements and patronage systems prevalent in many African states complicate efforts to criminalize or prosecute cross-border criminality, especially when such acts are instrumental in maintaining elite dominance or funding political campaigns.

Technology has also played a transformative role in the evolution of cross-border crime. As Choo (2011) and Choi and Lee (2018) observe, technological advances—particularly the proliferation of the internet, mobile banking, and encrypted communication—have provided criminal organizations with sophisticated tools to coordinate activities across borders, evade detection, and launder proceeds through digital platforms. Cybercrime, identity theft, and online human trafficking are now frequently executed across national jurisdictions, complicating prosecution due to conflicting legal frameworks and lack of cross-border enforcement mechanisms (Choi & Lee, 2018). This digital dimension of cross-border crime has prompted scholars to advocate for the establishment of international cybercrime protocols and enhanced technological capabilities among law enforcement agencies (Choo, 2011; Shelley, 2014).

Cross-border crime cannot be disentangled from issues of migration and forced displacement. According to Andreas and Nadelmann (2006), the securitization of borders in the Global North has inadvertently pushed migrants and asylum seekers into the hands of criminal syndicates that exploit their vulnerability. These syndicates often traffic individuals across borders under exploitative and life-threatening conditions, thereby transforming migration routes into corridors of criminal activity (Andreas & Nadelmann, 2006; Nwankwo, 2020). In this context, cross-border crime is both a cause and a consequence of inadequate migration governance and geopolitical inequality.

The global response to cross-border crime has been mixed. At the international level, efforts such as the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime (2000) have attempted to establish a legal and institutional framework for cooperation. The Convention and its protocols emphasize mutual legal assistance,

extradition agreements, and capacity-building among law enforcement agencies (United Nations, 2000). Nevertheless, the efficacy of these mechanisms remains constrained by political considerations, divergent legal systems, and the reluctance of states to cede elements of sovereignty for the sake of multilateral enforcement (Igbinedion, 2021; Obi, 2017). Regionally, organizations such as ECOWAS and the African Union have made notable efforts to address cross-border crime through joint border patrols, intelligence sharing, and the harmonization of criminal laws. However, these initiatives are often undermined by lack of funding, corruption, inter-agency rivalry, and weak political will (Alemika, 2013; Igbinedion, 2021). As Alemika (2013) notes, while regional frameworks exist on paper, their implementation is often symbolic, failing to address the structural drivers of cross-border crime such as poverty, unemployment, and social exclusion.

Regional Security

The concept of regional security occupies a central place in contemporary international relations and security studies, particularly in an era characterized by complex interdependencies, regional power shifts, and non-traditional threats. Regional security, broadly defined, refers to the protection and maintenance of peace, stability, and order within a specific geographical area by states and relevant non-state actors operating within that region. This concept has evolved significantly from its Cold War origins, when security was predominantly viewed through a realist and militaristic lens, to a more complex and multidimensional perspective that integrates political, economic, environmental, and societal dimensions.

In the African context, regional security is often examined through the lens of post-colonial state formation, weak institutions, and the prevalence of non-state actors, including insurgent groups, militias, and transnational criminal networks (Adebajo, 2010). Organizations such as the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the African Union (AU) have emerged as critical players in regional peacekeeping and conflict resolution. The ECOWAS Monitoring Group (ECOMOG), for instance, played a decisive role in the conflicts in Liberia and Sierra Leone during the 1990s, illustrating how regional mechanisms can fill the void left by weak or absent global intervention (Adebajo, 2002). Nevertheless, the effectiveness of such regional initiatives often depends on political will, institutional capacity, and external support, particularly from the United Nations and donor countries (Engel & Porto, 2010).

The conceptual expansion of regional security to include non-traditional threats such as climate change, pandemics, cyber threats, and transnational organized crime has further complicated its analysis. These threats do not conform to traditional state-centric models and often require multilateral cooperation and preventive diplomacy (Kaldor, 2007; Paris, 2001). The COVID-19 pandemic, for example, exposed the fragility of regional health security systems and the need for coordinated responses, especially in regions with porous borders and limited healthcare infrastructure (Okereke et al., 2021). Similarly, the rise of terrorism in the Sahel and Lake Chad Basin underscores how non-state actors exploit regional governance vacuums to threaten both state and human security (Onuoha, 2012; Nte, 2011).

Arms Trafficking and Organized Crime

The nexus between arms trafficking and organized crime has increasingly become a major concern in global security discourse, with far-reaching implications for conflict, state fragility, and regional insecurity. The illicit flow of small arms and light weapons (SALWs) has been described by scholars as a catalyst that exacerbates criminal violence, undermines law and order, and perpetuates conflict in many parts of the world (Stohl & Grillot, 2009). Arms trafficking is broadly understood as the illicit movement or trade of weapons, including but not limited to small arms, light weapons, ammunition, explosives, and related military equipment, across borders or within national boundaries without authorization (UNODC, 2010). The illicit arms market functions within a globalized context of organized criminal networks that operate across state jurisdictions, exploiting governance weaknesses and institutional vulnerabilities to establish transnational trafficking routes. Organized crime, on the other hand, encompasses structured criminal enterprises engaged in a variety of illicit activities for profit, including drug trafficking, human smuggling, kidnapping for ransom, and arms dealing. These criminal groups rely heavily on the availability of arms not only to enforce their operations but also to protect their interests against rivals and state authorities (Cockayne, 2013). The convergence between organized crime and arms trafficking thus constitutes a critical dimension of contemporary international insecurity.

In the post-Cold War era, the surplus of SALWs, particularly from Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, saturated the global black market, making arms more accessible to criminal organizations across Africa, Asia, and Latin America. According to Florquin and Berman (2005), the proliferation of small arms in West Africa during and after civil conflicts in Liberia and Sierra Leone illustrates how trafficked weapons not only sustain violence but also serve as instruments of political and economic power for non-state actors. Similarly, in Central America,

the presence of sophisticated weaponry among drug cartels and gangs has resulted in unprecedented levels of criminal violence, often surpassing the lethality of formal state militaries (Small Arms Survey, 2012).

Globalization has further intensified the challenges of arms trafficking. With advancements in logistics, communication, and finance, criminal groups now operate with more coordination and agility than ever before. Arms brokers function across continents, coordinating purchases, falsifying end-user certificates, and routing shipments through states with lax oversight (Marsh, 2002). As Naylor (2004) explains, the interplay between licit and illicit markets has blurred the boundaries between legal arms transfers and illegal diversions. This duality has allowed organized crime groups to exploit legal loopholes, such as "grey market" transfers and covert state-sponsored arms deals, to stockpile weapons used in illicit activities. Moreover, arms trafficking networks are often embedded within broader illicit financial structures, including money laundering, tax evasion, and offshore banking. These networks utilize global financial institutions to launder profits, invest in legitimate businesses, and perpetuate cycles of corruption. Organized crime thrives in environments where arms are not only accessible but also part of a larger system of illegal commerce. According to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC, 2010), the global arms black market is estimated to be worth billions of dollars annually, making it one of the most profitable criminal enterprises alongside narcotics and human trafficking. From a theoretical standpoint, critical security studies and criminology offer insights into how arms trafficking is not merely a criminal act but a political and structural issue.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK
In the course of this study, the researchers adopted two theories (Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) and the Transnational Organized Crime Theory) to succinctly explain the study.

Regional Security Complex Theory
The Regional Security Complex Theory developed by Barry Buzan and Ole Waever is a fundamental theoretical approach in the study of regional security dynamics. Emerging in the 1990s, the theory critiques traditional state-centric analyses of security by emphasizing that security is inherently regional. The concept highlights the idea that the security concerns of states within a given geographical area are interlinked, such that the security environment in one state cannot be fully understood without considering its neighbors (Buzan & Wæver, 2003). The theory builds upon earlier works in securitization and regionalism, offering an innovative framework that prioritizes the relational dynamics of regional security (Buzan et al., 1998). RSCT posits that in regions where states are geographically proximate, their security concerns, whether from political instability, economic disruptions, or armed conflicts, become interconnected. This interdependence means that threats in one state inevitably affect neighboring states, forming a security complex (Buzan & Wæver, 2003).

At the core of RSCT is the assertion that regions are defined by the mutuality of security threats that link states together. Security in one state is understood in relation to the security environment of its neighbors, leading to a situation where states within a region share common concerns. According to Buzan et al. (1998), a regional security complex (RSC) exists when a region's states face similar security challenges, prompting them to engage in collective security strategies to manage these shared threats. This dynamic is especially pertinent in regions such as West Africa, where countries like Nigeria and Burkina Faso experience common security concerns, including cross-border crimes, arms trafficking, and terrorism. The shared vulnerabilities of states within such a complex highlight the need for cooperative efforts, such as those facilitated by ECOWAS, to manage these threats collectively (Waever, 2004). RSCT also posits that regional security dynamics can shift over time, influenced by changing threats and external interventions.

The Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) provides a comprehensive framework for understanding the interconnected security dynamics of West Africa, particularly in relation to cross-border crimes and regional security. The theory's emphasis on interconnectedness and mutual vulnerabilities among states in a given region offers valuable insights into how states like Nigeria and Burkina Faso experience shared security challenges, such as arms trafficking and organized crime. The role of ECOWAS in facilitating regional cooperation to address these challenges highlights the importance of collective action in managing transnational security threats. By applying RSCT to the study of West Africa, we gain a deeper understanding of how regional security complexes evolve over time and how regional institutions play a central role in fostering security cooperation to address cross-border threats.

Transnational Organized Crime Theory
Transnational Organized Crime (TOC) theory provides a critical framework for understanding the complexities of crime that span multiple nations, particularly in the age of globalization. Originating in the late 20th century, this theory emerged as criminologists and security experts recognized that traditional forms of organized crime,

which were once confined within the borders of individual states, were increasingly expanding across national frontiers. The theory posits that criminal networks today operate on a transnational scale, facilitated by advances in transportation, communication, and global trade. It emphasizes the need to look beyond national law enforcement and judicial systems to understand and counter the diverse forms of criminal activities that are no longer bound by geographical or political limits. James N. MacGregor, Andreas Schloenhardt, and Louise Shelley have been instrumental in shaping the discourse on transnational crime. These scholars have contributed to the theory by focusing on how organized crime groups exploit international networks and governance gaps to further their illicit operations (Schloenhardt, 2008; Shelley, 2014).

The primary postulation of the TOC theory is that organized crime has become increasingly sophisticated, adapting to global economic, technological, and political changes. These criminal networks operate across borders, often engaging in various illicit activities such as drug trafficking, arms smuggling, human trafficking, money laundering, and cybercrime. The theory underscores the interconnection between these crimes, as criminal organizations diversify their portfolios to maximize profit, using established routes and networks to facilitate the movement of goods and people illegally. The transnational nature of these activities presents a significant challenge to national security, as criminal groups operate beyond the reach of individual states' law enforcement capabilities. This has led to calls for international cooperation, with institutions such as the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) advocating for global responses to tackle TOC (UNODC, 2010).

In examining the relevance of TOC theory to the research topic "Cross-Border Crimes and Regional Security in West Africa: A comparative study of ECOWAS' Strategies in Combating Arms Trafficking and Organized Crime in Nigeria and Burkina Faso (2019–2024)", it is clear that the theory provides a robust framework for understanding the dynamics of organized crime in the region. West Africa is a hotspot for transnational criminal activities, particularly arms trafficking, drug trade, and insurgent movements, which are often interlinked. Criminal groups operating in Nigeria, Burkina Faso, and other parts of the region exploit porous borders and weak enforcement mechanisms to traffic arms and illicit goods, contributing to instability and insecurity in these countries. The nature of TOC, as described in the theory, is evident in how criminal networks in the Sahel and West Africa move weapons, drugs, and people with relative impunity, often operating in parallel to insurgent and terrorist groups.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY
This study employed a qualitative research method, specifically utilizing an explanatory research design to explore the topic. It adopted the secondary source of data collection. The researchers also augmented data obtained from secondary sources with a semi-structured interview conducted on 15 key informant interviewees purposively selected across Nigeria. The 15 key informant interviews comprise of 10 security personnel of the Nigerian Police Force and 5-security journalists. For analysis, the study adopted the content analysis method.

RESULT PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS
Effectiveness of ECOWAS Strategies in Combating Cross-Border Arms Trafficking and Organized Crime in West Africa
The rise in arms trafficking in West Africa can be attributed to several factors, including the region's porous borders, weak governance structures, and the large availability of small arms and light weapons (SALW). Nigeria, being one of the most populous countries in Africa, and Burkina Faso, a country caught in the expanding security crisis of the Sahel, have become focal points for arms trafficking networks that contribute to instability not only in these countries but across the West African region. According to the Small Arms Survey (2018), small arms in West Africa are often diverted from military stockpiles, looted from police or military facilities, and trafficked across borders to conflict zones, fueling local insurgencies and contributing to organized criminal activity (Small Arms Survey, 2018).

The role of ECOWAS in addressing these security concerns dates back to its creation in 1975, when it sought to promote regional economic integration and political stability. However, as regional instability grew, particularly with the rise of armed insurgencies and criminal organizations in countries like Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Côte d'Ivoire, ECOWAS expanded its mandate to include conflict prevention, peacekeeping, and the fight against transnational crime (ECOWAS, 2006). ECOWAS' response to arms trafficking and organized crime was formalized with the adoption of the ECOWAS Convention on Small Arms and Light Weapons in 2006, which sought to control the proliferation of small arms and light weapons in the region. The treaty laid the foundation for stricter regulations, including a common arms registration system, and encouraged cooperation between member states to prevent arms diversion (ECOWAS, 2006).

Despite these efforts, the implementation of the Convention has faced numerous challenges. These include inadequate border security infrastructure, corruption within national security agencies, and the increasing involvement of terrorist organizations such as Boko Haram in the trafficking of weapons. In Nigeria, for example, the insurgency led by Boko Haram has been partially fueled by the availability of illicit arms, and despite ECOWAS' strategies, cross-border arms flows have continued unabated (Onuoha, 2019). Furthermore, Burkina Faso has become a hotspot for extremist groups affiliated with Al-Qaeda and ISIS, and these groups often benefit from arms trafficking networks operating within the Sahel (International Crisis Group, 2020).

ECOWAS has taken several significant steps to counter arms trafficking, with initiatives such as the ECOWAS Small Arms Programme (ECOSAP) launched in 2011. This program aims to strengthen member states' capacity to control the illegal trafficking of small arms and light weapons. ECOSAP's strategies include providing technical assistance to improve national arms control systems and supporting the destruction of stockpiled weapons (ECOWAS, 2011). Additionally, ECOWAS has supported the establishment of the ECOWAS Regional Centre for Small Arms (RECSA), which facilitates the coordination of arms control activities across member states (RECSA, 2019). Despite these efforts, the impact of ECOWAS' strategies has been uneven, with some countries such as Nigeria and Burkina Faso facing significant challenges in enforcing these measures.

One of the core issues hindering the success of ECOWAS' strategies is the lack of effective enforcement mechanisms. While the ECOWAS Standby Force (ESF) has been deployed in peacekeeping operations, it has faced challenges in addressing the root causes of instability and the logistics of border control. The organization's inability to fully control the large and porous borders of its member states has been cited as a major obstacle in curbing arms trafficking (Tennyson, 2017). In Burkina Faso, for example, the lack of coordination between regional and national forces has allowed armed groups to exploit weak border controls and carry out cross-border trafficking operations (International Crisis Group, 2020). Moreover, the ECOWAS Conflict Prevention Framework (ECPF), which includes strategies for addressing organized crime and cross-border security threats, has faced challenges related to member states' political will to implement these measures. Nigeria's internal security issues, compounded by corruption and lack of coordination between federal and local law enforcement agencies, have impeded the successful application of ECOWAS' policies on the ground (Adesoji, 2020). For over a decade now, Nigeria has witnessed some of the most devastating terror attacks in the world by sub-national groups such that today, the country is consequently classified as one of the most dangerous and terrorized states globally (Okeke, 2023). Development cannot be achieved where there are conflicts (Okeke, 2024).

Furthermore, Burkina Faso's struggle with the expansion of extremist groups in the Sahel underscores the difficulties ECOWAS faces in addressing complex issues of cross-border terrorism, arms trafficking, and organized crime within the context of fragile states.
Despite these challenges, ECOWAS has made significant strides in promoting regional cooperation in combating organized crime. For instance, the ECOWAS Political Affairs, Peace and Security (PAPS) programme has facilitated cooperation between member states to share intelligence and conduct joint operations against transnational criminal syndicates (ECOWAS, 2017). This has proven effective in some areas, such as in the Gulf of Guinea, where ECOWAS member states have collaborated to reduce piracy and illicit arms smuggling through joint maritime patrols (Ogunleye, 2020).

FINDINGS
In analyzing the research "Cross-Border Crimes and Regional Security in West Africa: A comparative study of ECOWAS' Strategies in Combating Arms Trafficking and Organized Crime in Nigeria and Burkina Faso (2019–2024)," three key findings emerge that significantly contribute to understanding the effectiveness of ECOWAS' strategies in addressing regional security threats.

The first major finding revolves around the persistent challenge of porous borders and weak national enforcement mechanisms. Both Nigeria and Burkina Faso experience difficulties in controlling their borders, which are major transit points for arms trafficking and organized crime. The porous nature of borders in West Africa has been a long-standing issue, exacerbated by under-resourced and poorly coordinated border security efforts. In Nigeria, for instance, the expansive and often unmanned borders make it easy for illegal arms and criminal networks to move across the region with minimal interference from law enforcement. Similarly, Burkina Faso, which shares borders with multiple countries affected by insurgent activities, faces significant difficulties in controlling the flow of arms and the movement of criminal elements. These porous borders have created fertile ground for the proliferation of small arms and light weapons, which are often diverted into the hands of non-state actors and terrorist groups. This weak control over borders is a substantial barrier to ECOWAS' efforts to stem the flow of illicit arms and organized crime across the region.

The second key finding highlights the inadequate implementation and enforcement of ECOWAS' legal frameworks designed to combat arms trafficking and organized crime. While ECOWAS has established comprehensive frameworks such as the ECOWAS Convention on Small Arms and Light Weapons, the actual implementation of these policies has been inconsistent across member states. The strategies outlined in these frameworks require strong political will, effective legal systems, and coordinated security efforts, all of which have been lacking in several West African countries, including Nigeria and Burkina Faso. Despite the region-wide recognition of the importance of these frameworks, their enforcement has often been hindered by local political dynamics, corruption, and a lack of inter-agency cooperation within national governments. In Nigeria, for example, the persistent challenges of corruption within law enforcement agencies have undermined the effectiveness of policies designed to curb arms trafficking. Similarly, Burkina Faso, with its internal security challenges, has struggled to enforce ECOWAS' protocols amid rising political instability and the growing influence of extremist groups.

The third significant finding pertains to the role of external actors and regional cooperation in enhancing ECOWAS' capacity to address cross-border crimes. While ECOWAS has made strides in fostering regional cooperation, the effectiveness of these efforts has often been contingent on the involvement of external actors such as the United Nations, European Union, and various international NGOs. These external partners have provided crucial support in terms of funding, technical expertise, and capacity-building initiatives, particularly in the areas of border control, arms monitoring, and intelligence-sharing. However, the reliance on external actors has also created challenges in terms of sovereignty and regional ownership of security initiatives. Countries like Nigeria and Burkina Faso, while benefiting from international support, have sometimes been reluctant to fully implement externally-driven policies, seeing them as threats to national sovereignty or as insufficiently tailored to local contexts. Furthermore, the complexity of transnational organized crime and arms trafficking requires deeper integration of efforts not only at the governmental level but also through grassroots and community engagement, a dimension that has often been overlooked in ECOWAS' top-down approaches.

CONCLUSION
The study examined the challenges faced by ECOWAS in addressing the growing threats of arms trafficking and organized crime in Nigeria and Burkina Faso. Despite notable efforts by ECOWAS, including the implementation of legal frameworks such as the ECOWAS Convention on Small Arms and Light Weapons, the effectiveness of these strategies remains limited due to porous borders, inadequate enforcement mechanisms, and insufficient regional cooperation. The findings suggest that while the region has made strides in combating cross-border crime, a more robust and integrated approach is required to achieve lasting success in enhancing regional security.
The research reveals that both Nigeria and Burkina Faso face similar obstacles in controlling their borders and curbing the flow of illegal arms and criminal networks. Weak border security, compounded by limited resources and political instability, has created an environment conducive to the proliferation of arms and organized criminal activities. Furthermore, the inconsistent implementation of ECOWAS legal frameworks, along with corruption within law enforcement agencies, has undermined the effectiveness of regional agreements. Additionally, while the involvement of external actors has been beneficial, it underscores the need for greater regional ownership and a more collaborative approach to regional security.

RECOMMENDATIONS
Based on the key findings of the research, several recommendations emerge that could enhance the effectiveness of ECOWAS' strategies in combating arms trafficking and organized crime. These recommendations address the challenges identified in the findings and propose ways to improve regional security in the context of West Africa.
1. The first recommendation is the strengthening of border security and enhancing border management capabilities in both Nigeria and Burkina Faso. Given the porous borders and weak national enforcement mechanisms identified as a major challenge, it is essential for ECOWAS to invest in improving the capacity of member states to secure their borders effectively. This includes providing training, resources, and technology to national security agencies responsible for border control. Improved surveillance, such as the use of drones and other advanced technologies, would help monitor border areas and prevent the illicit flow of arms and criminal elements. Additionally, ECOWAS could support the establishment of joint border patrol units, particularly in areas where cross-border crime is most rampant. Collaboration between neighboring countries is critical to addressing the transnational nature of arms trafficking and organized crime, and joint patrols or shared intelligence systems would enhance the coordination of security efforts. Furthermore, greater engagement with local communities along the borders is necessary, as they are often the first line of defense against illicit activities and could play a key role in intelligence gathering and reporting suspicious activities.
2. The second recommendation revolves around enhancing the implementation and enforcement of ECOWAS' legal frameworks. While the ECOWAS Convention on Small Arms and Light Weapons is a

crucial tool for combating arms trafficking in the region, the inconsistency in its implementation must be addressed. ECOWAS should work closely with member states to ensure that national laws are aligned with regional agreements and that there are stronger institutional mechanisms for enforcement. This could involve providing technical support to enhance the capacity of national law enforcement agencies, as well as creating regional monitoring bodies to oversee compliance with the ECOWAS protocols. To ensure political will, ECOWAS could facilitate regular meetings between member states to review progress and challenges in implementing the conventions and agreements. Additionally, strengthening the legal framework by establishing clear sanctions for non-compliance could serve as a deterrent to member states that are slow to act on their commitments. This could also involve addressing the problem of corruption within national security agencies, which often hinders the effective implementation of policies. Transparency and accountability mechanisms should be embedded in the enforcement process to ensure that law enforcement agencies are held accountable for any failures in preventing arms trafficking or organized crime.

3. The third recommendation focuses on fostering deeper regional and international cooperation in addressing cross-border crimes. While ECOWAS has made progress in regional cooperation, the involvement of external factors such as the United Nations, European Union, and international NGOs is crucial in filling gaps in capacity and expertise. However, a more collaborative approach that ensures better integration of local perspectives and greater regional ownership is necessary. ECOWAS should work to ensure that external actors do not dominate regional security efforts but instead provide complementary support that strengthens the capabilities of member states. In this regard, ECOWAS could initiate more collaborative programs with regional organizations, including the African Union (AU) and the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS), to create a broader regional security framework that addresses both cross-border crime and broader security threats. Additionally, ECOWAS should prioritize the creation of robust intelligence-sharing networks among member states to improve the flow of information about criminal activities and arms trafficking. These networks would facilitate the timely exchange of intelligence, enabling law enforcement agencies to act swiftly and decisively against criminal networks operating across borders. Furthermore, ECOWAS should invest in capacity-building programs aimed at strengthening local law enforcement agencies in both Nigeria and Burkina Faso, ensuring they have the skills and resources to address complex criminal activities effectively.

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