

The Sahel: A Crossroads between Criminality and Terrorism

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10th October 2012

Besides the ongoing political conundrum in Mali, it is the entire West African region, from Guinea Bissau to Mali, which is under threat of destabilization. Indeed, for many years now, terrorists and drugs traffickers have been synergizing their respective illegal activities, transforming the Sahel into a narco-terrorist zone. As a result, the Sahel has become a dangerous crossroads for drugs, crime, terrorism and insurgencyⁱ. Already vulnerable due to the porosity of its frontiers, a catastrophic humanitarian situation, tensions between Tuaregs and their respective central governments and its strategic route for cocaine trafficking, the region has become even more unstable due to the proliferation of arms. These arms have fallen into the hands of insurgent and terrorist groups such as Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), Ansar Dineⁱⁱ (Defenders of the Faith) and the Unity Movement for Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO)ⁱⁱⁱ, especially since the fall of Qaddafi in Libya.

The Saharian Ocean^{iv} is a zone that has undoubtedly and increasingly become part of the pivotal transit route to Europe for international trafficking of narcotics emanating from Latin America. Colombian cartels in particular have directed their merchandise to Europe—the world's predominant consumer market for illicit drugs—transported via West Africa^v. According to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), in 2009, it was estimated that 21 tons of cocaine transited through West Africa to the European market^{vi}. This is equivalent to \$900 million for local economies and comparable to the GNPs of Guinea and Sierra Leone put together^{vii}. Likewise, in 2008, 60 tons of cannabis from Morocco were also intercepted in Algeria^{viii} while Malian forces seized 750 kg of cocaine, the equivalent to 36% of the Malian military budget that year^{ix}. The impact of this criminal trafficking enterprise in the Sahel is further aggravated by the amounts of narcotics coming from Afghanistan and transiting via East Africa. The merchandise is then transported through Chad, Mali, Niger and Morocco whose porous frontiers facilitate passage^x.

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ISBN : 978-2-36567-086-9
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The concentration of drugs traffickers and terrorists in the Sahel can be principally explained by state weakness, lack of surveillance, the porosity of frontiers as well as corruption which gangrenes different institutions such as the army, customs and the police.

In this regard, the 2009 Boeing scandal, labeled “*Air Cocaine*”, underlines the enormous shortcomings, if not complicity, of Malian local government officials. In November 2009, a Boeing 727 coming from South America landed in the northern desert of Mali. Once the cocaine was unloaded, the plane, bogged down in the sand, could not take off. Forensic personnel found large traces of cocaine on the plane^{xi}. Similarly, in January 2010, another plane arriving from Latin America landed in North West Mali near the Mauritanian border^{xii}. All these illegal activities underline the connections and ramifications of international trafficking and also indicate that such traffic cannot occur without the complicity of the locals. It was indeed established in the “*Air Cocaine*” affair that local officials were present during the unloading of the plane^{xiii}. According to some French diplomats, there close ties even exist between AQIM and members of the Malian government^{xiv}.

Through their cooperation, these criminal and terrorist groups benefit from each other’s expertise which, in the medium to long term, could mean a transformation into hybrid groups like the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC). The Colombian organization is a perfect example of a group founded on a radical and militant political ideology, which transformed itself into a criminal-narco-terrorist group. According to the US Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA), 60% of foreign terrorist groups have some kind of link with drug trafficking^{xv}. Likewise, it is estimated that 80% of the Taliban’s leaders in Afghanistan fight for the financial profit to be made from opium and other drugs rather than any close attachment to religious ideology^{xvi}. Regarding the latter, they nonetheless pursue a seemingly parallel religious struggle in order to remain credible vis-à-vis their partisans.

In addition to the trafficking of drugs and arms, the important routing of contraband cigarettes across the Sahel is also very lucrative for traffickers in the region. Counterfeit cigarettes, which come mainly from Nigerian and Asian factories, are then distributed through the Sahel, the Maghreb, Europe and the Middle East. Although terrorist groups are not necessarily directly implicated in this kind of trafficking, they nonetheless enrich themselves by imposing on the traffickers a “transport guard” throughout the journey, for a fee of course^{xvii}.

In order to recycle the money generated from drug trafficking, narco-traffickers carry out money laundering through different forms, not all of which are legal. Criminals frequently invest dirty money in real estate projects or insurance contracts, very often in countries where legislation remains vague and opportunities numerous. In countries such as Morocco and Senegal, for example, where the real estate market is in constant augmentation, the easy acquisition of houses and buildings facilitates money laundering. Moreover, this type of acquisition is hard to detect due to the absence of central data or a registry^{xviii}.

Traffickers also take advantage of the socioeconomic vulnerability and poverty of local populations. Idleness and unemployment among these populations undoubtedly provide an ideal opportunity for the encouragement and incitement of crime, usually in the form of narco-criminality, which is increasingly linked to terrorist groups. Many

Africans—and other migrants—often become connected to drug traffickers and clandestine smugglers who lure them with the prospect of a better future in Europe^{xix}.

While a decade ago terrorist groups and drug traffickers were perceived as having diametrically opposed motivations, this is not the case anymore. Nowadays, the activities of drug cartels in South America and other African and European drug barons are closely intertwined with terrorist groups such as AQIM and MUJAO. The latter rapidly understood the financial benefit they could gain in cooperating with criminal groups and other traffickers, regardless of common values or goals^{xx}. Indeed, terrorist groups are now more interested in increasing their financial revenues than any promotion of religious ideology. Furthermore, globalization and communication over the Internet have also facilitated a *rapprochement* between drug traffickers and terrorists. This collaboration is further assisted by the weakness of many states in the region, their lack of means of surveillance, the porous nature of their respective borders and the corruption which often permeates and poisons state institutions such as the army, police and customs.

Taking advantage of a power-vacuum due to a lack of judicial and institutional power, as the Malian example indicates, the Sahel has become a platform for many kinds of illegal trafficking. Already vulnerable due to porous frontiers, a catastrophic humanitarian situation and tensions between Tuaregs and their respective central governments in Mali and Niger, the Sahel is becoming increasingly unstable. Additionally, the increase in criminal activities underlines the urgent need for action in order not only to reinforce the sovereignty of the states concerned but also to prevent a rapid spreading across Africa.

ⁱ W. Kemp, “As Crime in West Africa Spreads, Response Requires Regional Cooperation”, 5th March 2012, available at <http://www.theglobalobservatory.org/analysis/231-as-crime-in-west-africa-spreads-response-requires-regional-cooperation.html>.

ⁱⁱ *Jum’a Ansar Al-din al Salafiya*.

ⁱⁱⁱ Some intelligence reports indicate a growing link between AQIM and the Nigerian terrorist group, Boko Haram.

^{iv} The author has borrowed this expression from Mehdi Taje, “La réalité de la menace d’AQMI à l’aune des révolutions démocratiques au Maghreb”, *Géostratégiques*, no. 32, 2011, available at http://www.strategicsinternational.com/32_20.pdf.

^v Since the shortest route for delivering the drugs is not necessarily the safest one, traffickers have opted for Highway 10 (in reference to the tenth parallel) in order to penetrate and transit West Africa.

^{vi} UNODC, “The Transatlantic Cocaine Market”, Research Paper, April 2011, available at http://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/Studies/Transatlantic_cocaine_market.pdf.

This is an estimation only and given that, in the same year, around 10 tons were intercepted in Mali alone, this UNODC figure may well be an underestimate.

^{vii} W. Kemp, *op. cit.*

^{viii} F. Belgacem, “60 tonnes de drogue saisies”, *Liberté Algérie*, 14th June 2012, available at <http://www.liberte-algerie.com/actualite/60-tonnes-de-droque-saisies-la-marchandise-a-ete-interceptee-aux-frontieres-marocaines-180058>.

^{ix} G. Berghezan, *Panorama du trafic de cocaïne en Afrique de l’Ouest*, June 2012, p. 27, available at http://www.grip.org/sites/grip.org/files/RAPPORTS/2012/Rapport_2012-6.pdf.

^x In July 2012, the Nador Customs, in Northern Morocco, intercepted 10 kilogrammes of heroin dissimulated in 30 copies of the Qur’an, see, for example, <http://oumma.com/13496/maroc-10-kgs-dheroine-caches-30-corans>.

^{xi} M. M. Ould Mohamedou, *The Many Faces of Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb*, May 2011, p. 3, available at <http://www.gcsp.ch/Middle-East-North-Africa/Publications/GCSP-Publications/Policy-Papers/The-Many-Faces-of-Al-Qaeda-in-the-Islamic-Maghreb>.

^{xii} G. Berghezan, *op. cit.*, p. 29.

^{xiii} For a concise analysis on the drug trafficking situation in Mali, see A. Abderrahmane, *Drug Trafficking and the Crisis in Mali*, 6 August 2012, available at http://www.issafrica.org/iss_today.php?ID=1529.

^{xiv} G. Berghezan, *op. cit.*

^{xv} C. Schori Liang, *Shadow Networks: The Growing Nexus of Terrorism and Organised Crime*, September 2011, p. 3, available at <http://www.gcsp.ch/Resources-Publications/Publications/GCSP-Publications/Policy-Papers/Shadow-Networks-The-Growing-Nexus-of-Terrorism-and-Organised-Crime>.

^{xvi} *Ibid.*

^{xvii} L'Assemblée nationale française, Rapport d'informations sur "La situation sécuritaire dans les pays de la zone sahélienne", 6th March 2012, available at http://www.assemblee-nationale.fr/13/rap-info/i4431.asp#P323_48989.

^{xviii} N. Lalam, *Argent de la drogue : blanchiment et mondialisation financière*, October 2011, p. 3, available at <http://www.ofdt.fr/BDD/publications/docs/efdxn1r5.pdf>.

^{xix} Migrants are often not aware that they transport drugs only to be caught upon arrival in European airports. See, for example, A. Angel-Ajani, *Strange Trade, dealeuse de drogue*, Champs-sur-Marne, Original Books, 2011.

^{xx} Currently, AQMI's sources of finance remain largely based on ransoms paid by states to free their respective hostages. However, this trend could change in the future if this source of financing dries up, which could in turn reinforce the links between this particular terrorist group and drug traffickers.