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Transnational Organized Crime and Political Actors in the Maghreb and Sahel

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The following paper is based on a workshop organized by the Regional Program South Mediterranean and the Regional Program Sahel of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung on December 3rd and 4th 2018 in Tunis. The paper aims at providing an overview on the dimensions of organized crime in the Maghreb-Sahel belt, the economic dependence of border populations on illicit economies, and the extensive connections between smugglers, states, jihadist groups and local communities.

The Maghreb-Sahel belt refers to the border regions of Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, Mauritania, Mali, Niger and Chad. The area is immensely important due to its grave economic and security repercussions on the fragile environment of the wider region. In the following, the historical relevance of the topic is outlined and the framework of the illicit trading system elaborated. Moreover, the political parameters are highlighted and the regional implications underlined in order to establish a comprehensive dialogue and long-lasting recommendations on tackling transnational crime in the Maghreb-Sahel belt.

Understanding Transnational Organised Crime in the Maghreb and Sahel

Jihane Ben Yahia

This brief serves as an overview of the wide and complex array of the Transnational Organized Crime (TOC) activity that occurs in the Maghreb and the Sahel. Although it varies greatly in scope or nature, originates in different continents, takes root in various parts of Africa or only across a single border, all these manifestations of organised crime in the Sahara share common characteristics: they take advantage of century-old trade habits that have survived or adapted to the establishment of contemporary borders and modern law enforcement and territorial control techniques. Understanding TOC is no easy task. While the phenomenon is not new, the past twenty years have seen the expansion of criminal markets and their diversification into a truly globalised criminal economy where criminal, business, and political are deeply intertwined.

The illicit nature TOC impedes an easy understanding of the complex situation on the ground, which goes beyond the mere interconnections between organized crime groups and formal or informal political actors. However, understanding the phenomenon of TOC requires an identification of the various criminal, state, and non-state actors involved in the emergence or persistence of criminal markets, and the factors which underpin their inter-relationships.

Africa does not escape these dynamics. The pursuit of profit remains the main goal of organised criminal groups, regardless of the destabilising impact it has on often fragile political and social ecosystems. While each region of the continent is impacted differently by the various criminal markets, the transnational nature of the phenomenon implies that the regional criminal activities have to be understood beyond national borders. The Maghreb and the Sahel offer a perfect illustration of this inter-relation.

At the centre of many of these dynamics is the Sahara. The desert stretches over more than 5000 kilometres from west to east, over an area of nearly 8.5 million square kilometres and encompasses multiple Maghrebi and Sahelian states, including Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco, Mauritania, Mali, Niger, and Chad. The Sahara's harsh environment is largely populated by nomadic and semi-nomadic tribes that have existed and lived off the trading routes long before current borders were established. Scattered across several countries, these local populations often identify themselves through ancestral tribal structures rather than with modern states. To prevent tribes from distancing themselves from governments, authorities across the region have largely let historical trade practices subsist despite contemporary realities of borders, customs, taxes, etc.

This understanding, aimed at maintaining stability, constituted an opportunity for criminals and corrupt officials to prosper off the facilitation of cross border movement. Today, the Sahara and its bordering regions are characterised by porous borders and limited state penetration and control of peripheral regions. This constitutes a key factor that underpins the role of the Maghreb and the Sahel in the global criminal economy.

Indeed, the Sahara and the wider region are used in a number of global trafficking activities as a transit region to reach destination markets. For example, it is alleged that large amounts of cocaine originating from Bolivia, Colombia, and Peru that reach the African continent in West Africa are transported via land routes through the desert – particularly through Mauritania, Mali, Algeria, and Morocco – to Europe. Similarly, heroin from Afghanistan reaches Africa through the East African coastal states before transiting through the southern edge of the Sahel towards Nigeria, the main hub for the narcotic on the continent.

One of the major developments in criminal activity since 2011 has been the centrality of the Maghreb and the Sahel to human smuggling networks. Until 2018, the city of Agadez in northern Niger was a major migrant smuggling hub for West and Central Africans nationals'

on route to the Maghreb and Europe. From cities like Agadez, migrants used transport services provided by smugglers to move north through the desert, in a succession of short trips aboard buses, semis, or pick-up trucks for which they were charged hundreds of dollars. The Sahara became infamous as an open-air cemetery for many of the migrants who attempt to cross and ended up abandoned by smugglers in the desert, with estimates of at least double the death toll of the Mediterranean Sea routes.

The Sahara has also been the theatre of light weapons and arms trafficking for the region. Libya is reported to have hosted one of the largest stockpiles of weapons in Africa under the rule of Muammar Gadhafi, and after the revolution, served as a source of trafficked weapons to multiple countries in the region, in particular Mali, northern Niger, and Chad. Weapons traffickers leveraged the historical and tribal commercial networks for their cross-border movement. As such, the smuggled weapons not only had a detrimental impact on the sub-Saharan conflict situation, but also empowered terror networks across Northern Africa.

Beyond the trafficking of weapons, drugs, and the smuggling of migrants, the ancestral trading routes of the Sahara witness a reemergence of an immense flow of illegal contrabands, such as stolen vehicles, medicines, food or fuel. Cigarette trafficking in Algeria, Egypt, Libya, Morocco, and Tunisia alone is estimated to be a USD 1 billion business per year. These commodities are often not perceived by national authorities as immediate threats to the countries' security – unlike the more illicit phenomena described in the previous paragraphs – and hence are likely to flourish continuously.

Therefore, the following recommendations can be drawn: State actors should seek to empower local populations through supporting legitimate trade activity that respects the old traditions of the Sahara, rather than attempting to stop informal trade altogether. The focus should not only be placed on weapons, drugs, and migrant smuggling, but take into account the illicit trade in medicines and other contraband goods for which the absence of control is damaging to the stability of the North African and Sahelian region.

Transnational Organised Crime and Distributional Politics

Max Gallien

Transnational organised crime (TOC) in North Africa is commonly discussed as a risk to the region's security, public health, and governance. Its origins are often traced to weak security infrastructure, corruption, and booming consumer demand for contraband goods within the region, and across the Mediterranean in Europe. What has often been overlooked, however, is the way in which TOC in the Maghreb is embedded into regional distributional politics.

Throughout the last 60 years, governments across North Africa have tolerated smuggling and other organized criminal activity, and the financial flows they generate, instrumentally, in order to pacify economically underdeveloped regions, informally bind them into national political settlements, and enrich politically connected elites. Instrumental tolerance of organized crime and its role in distributional politics are too often ignored by narratives that focus on how crime exploits corruption or weak state capacity. A clear comprehension of how North African states view, and instrumentally utilize, cross-border smuggling it is crucial to understanding both why it persists and what can be done to address it. Two examples illustrate this point: cannabis growth in Morocco and commodity smuggling in Tunisia.

Morocco is the largest cannabis producer in the world and the principal foreign supplier of the European market. The lucrative drug trafficking trade provides significant income to Moroccan and European trafficking networks. Most notably, however, it provides a livelihood for economically marginalised rural communities in Morocco's northern Rif mountains. Between 750,000 and one million people are economically dependent on the trade – and have been since the colonial period.

Since the 1990s, Morocco has formally sought to eliminate the cannabis trade, often at the diplomatic prodding of its European neighbours. Soldiers have been deployed into the growing areas and eradication programs undertaken, even as high-profile crackdowns are intermittently staged against traffickers and corrupt officials.

However, less visibly Morocco has long tolerated the growth of cannabis. An understanding exists within government that a zero-tolerance stance towards cannabis production or forceful and sustained attempts at supply-side reduction threatens not only countless economic livelihoods, but also a larger informal agreement between the state and the local population. As a result, they have historically triggered large-scale protests in the region and led to a situation in which the production is tolerated but confined to selected regions, while a debate about its formal legalisation is ongoing.

Smuggling in southern Tunisia follows a similar pattern. While commonly characterised as subversive and 'under the radar of the state', smuggling across the Tunisian-Libyan border has for decades been tolerated and in many cases closely regulated by the Tunisian state. It produces an income for thousands of families in the borderlands. The trade in consumer goods in particular is structured in a way that makes it particularly labour intensive, with average traders able to take only a limited amount of goods across on each trip – a pattern that is visible across the region. Smuggling routes often occur in regions that have received little formal state investment and are characterized by a lack of economic diversity. As seen in Morocco and borderlands across the region, any attempt at restricting smuggling has both caused an economic crisis in the borderlands, and been met with large-scale public protests, and typically led to the protection of the smuggling practices.

In the current context it is worth noting that alongside income streams from smuggling or cannabis production, irregular migration and human smuggling have been a common part of the informal income stream to economically marginalised populations in the region. They often act as direct substitutes – unrest in Morocco's Rif mountains commonly correlates with higher rates of irregular migration to Europe, while mounting pressure on smuggling in Tunisia contributed to a spike in irregular migration out of the country's southern regions in 2017.

None of this means to imply that all or most of the income from transnational illicit economies in North Africa is directed to poor and marginalised populations. Much of the profit is accumulated by small groups of financiers and traffickers. But the fact that some of it sustains local livelihoods gives TOC groups embeddedness in regional distributive politics that has crucial consequences for how policy approaches towards the issue need to be structured. Three points in particular stand out.

First, the embeddedness of illicit economies in distributional politics implies that the roles of both corruption and weak state capacity as root-causes of the phenomenon have been overstated. An increase in state enforcement capacity alone would not decrease volumes of smuggling or cannabis cultivation if the respective regimes have an interest in sustaining these rates in order to avoid uprisings in the affected regions. Histories of uneven development and regional inequalities must be recognised as a crucial underlying factor in the rise of illicit economies and TOC in North Africa.

Second, more attention needs to be paid to the livelihoods of local populations who are dependent on illicit economies. Not only are they suffering the consequences of being reliant on illicit economies and facing difficult interactions with both TOC groups and law enforcement personnel. They are also likely to suffer the consequences of policies aimed at eliminating illicit economies and TOC in the region. When Algeria increased the fortifications on its border with Morocco, for example, a significant economic activity at that border – gasoline smuggling – collapsed. As a result, local communities have faced unemployment and a public health crisis alongside a significant increase in theft and violent crime. Even if illicit economies are successfully reduced, without specific policy interventions their absence can be equally damaging to the public health, governance, and stability of the state itself.

This leads directly to the third and most important point. There is a dire need for more developmental perspectives on TOC and illicit economies in North Africa. While projects aimed at creating targeted development programs for communities reliant on illicit economies exist, they have commonly been underfunded, piecemeal, or inappropriate to the local context. Without development strategies that are built on an understanding of local communities, and are designed, tested and improved in cooperation with local communities, the effectiveness of classical security strategies will be limited.

States and Smugglers: The Ties that Bind and How they Fray

Matt Herbert

Complex linkages and practical, tolerant engagement between states and smugglers are not limited to the Maghreb. They can be found throughout the Sahel, as well as further afield in Europe, Latin America, and Asia. However, they have proved to be particularly robust and dynamic in the Maghreb and Sahel, and have been important, if infrequently discussed, components of state approaches to border security in the regions.

At the centre of the nexus between Maghrebi and Sahelian states and the smugglers who operate across their borders lie two basic security calculations. The first calculation is on the part of states in the region, who in the majority of cases have perceived smugglers as assets able to buttress regime security rather than as threats to it. Historically, states in Maghreb and the Sahel have overwhelmingly been ruled by non-democratic or quasi-democratic regimes. Security forces fielded by these regimes construed their mission as promoting the security of the regime rather than citizen-focused security or the rule of law.

Political and social dissidents were, and often still are, viewed as the preoccupying threats, while smuggling and cross-border criminality were not as long as they did not intersect with political actors (such as dissidents, insurgents, or terrorists). For states, tolerance of smuggling offered a useful tool to buttress regime security. In exchange for informal tolerance, smugglers were expected to avoid certain types of goods (such as narcotics or arms), provide information on security threats along the border, and make routine payments to security force officials. In effect, instrumental tolerance of smuggling persisted as an important, if rarely acknowledged component of the national security infrastructure of the states.

The actual implementation of such engagement varies, from decentralized models in which deals are struck between individual security commanders on the border and smugglers, to models in which agreements are forged with top-level state officials or those in their families. Critically, both decentralized and centralized protection pacts are predicated upon state primacy and power over smugglers.

The second security calculation is made by smugglers, who often view cooperation with states as the best means to ensure their protection. This reflects the historic norm of power imbalances that are starkly in favour of the state. While smuggling in the Maghreb and Sahel is vast and profitable in aggregate, it is largely atomized, with most smuggling networks relatively small, and focus on the trade in types of contraband goods—such as petrol, food, and clothing—that offer only a limited profitability. Such networks may be able to evade state agents some of the time, depending on terrain and security force capabilities. But the near surety of ultimately being caught and the limited unofficial sanctions for smuggling offer a powerful inducement to cooperative engagement with the state. In exchange for offering information and payments, smuggling networks are able to operate with a degree of surety that they face only a limited risk of state interference.

The informal tolerance and connections between Maghrebi and Sahelian states as well as smugglers have ebbed and flowed in intensity and degree of centralization, though they are surprisingly durable facets of the region's security landscape. Simply, they offer a low-cost means for states to exert control and gather information in often fractious and resistive borderland areas, and a low-risk way for smugglers to earn their livelihoods.

Over the last decade however, the concord between states and smugglers has begun to fray in some areas of the Maghreb and Sahel. Violent confrontations between smugglers and state officials have become more common, while in a smaller number of instances smugglers began to engage with non-state actors—such as militias and insurgent groups—for security provision against state interference.

One reason for this change can be found in the weakening of state capacity, especially on the peripheries. In some instances, this weakening has been on dramatic display—such as with the 2011 revolutions in Tunisia and Libya, and the 2012 rebellion in Mali. However, security forces throughout the Maghreb and Sahel are increasingly struggling to fully assert control over the peripheral areas and marginalized populations in the borderlands. Because of the interdependent nature of border security—frequently predicated on cross-border cooperation and information sharing—a decline in one state's ability to control its frontiers can have a sharp impact on the abilities of its neighbours.

A key part of weakening state capacity is not just in the quality and quantity of security forces allocated to the frontiers, but also growing gap in intra-governmental coordination. The ability of governments to ensure centralized coordination between different security force bodies has declined in many cases since 2008. This results in protection pacts which cannot fully be enforced by a government, as different government forces demand duplicative payments from smugglers. More ominously, this has led security forces in some cases to compete with each other over access to smuggler rents.

For smugglers, the weakening of state capacity creates doubt as to whether the state can uphold its end of the bargain and provide the service—the non-enforcement of laws—that smugglers are paying for. This in turn can lead to a search for alternate security providers—including militias and insurgent groups—or drive smuggling networks to build autonomous paramilitary capacity.

A second driver of the fraying bond between states and smugglers revolves around what is smuggled. Beginning in the early 2000s, the types of goods smuggled through the Sahel, and later the Maghreb, began to shift. While food, clothing, and petrol continued to be mainstays of borderland contraband ecosystems, drugs such as kif (cannabis resin) and cocaine began to flow across the region. Smuggling of these goods came to be concentrated into a relatively limited number of highly organised smuggling networks. Unlike other types of contraband along the border, possession of narcotics was strictly criminalized, and contravened the stipulation common in state-smuggler protection pacts that drugs were prohibited.

Drug smugglers at first attempted to operate within a state-protective approach as traffickers buy protection, at varying levels, from government officials. However, the illegality of these goods ensured that government tolerance of the trade, even if decentralized, risked a higher degree of political pressure and diplomatic sanction than other sorts of commodities. This pressure raised, and continues to raise, the likelihood that, ultimately, drug transit states will crack down on the trade.

Whereas small scale smugglers of petrol or clothing or food often have little choice but to accept the whim of state officials, the profitability of kif and cocaine traffickers sets them apart and allows them to respond differently to the threat of state crackdowns. In Mali, Libya, and Tunisia it has led them to engage with non-state security providers—such as militias or insurgent groups—for protection. This will be analysed further in the following section. In other instances, such as in south-western Algeria, drug traffickers have increasingly armed themselves and clashed with state forces; albeit with often poor results for the smugglers involved.

The growing divergence between states and smugglers in North Africa and the Sahel is unlikely to change. Despite significant international security sector assistance in recent years, the capacity of most security forces has not improved. Rather, instability and violence have spread in the region. So too has drug trafficking, with cocaine traffickers in particular focusing on trafficking routes across the Maghreb, as well as in the Sahel.

There are some positive aspects to this fraying bond, from anti-corruption to rule of law. However, there are also significant, though often underappreciated, drawbacks. The connections between states and smugglers have been an important component of the

national security approaches of nations in North Africa and the Sahel since independence. They have offered a relatively inexpensive means of controlling and monitoring what crossed a nation's borders. As the previous section explained, governmental tolerance of smuggling also limited social unrest in otherwise under-developed regions. It will be difficult politically, economically, and technically for regional governments to replace the benefits arising from engagement with smugglers. In their absence, it is likely that the borderland regions of North Africa and the Sahel will become more resistive to central authority and less governable in the coming years.

The Multiple Types of Interaction between Jihadists, Criminals and Local Communities

Riccardo Fabiani

The complex ties that link jihadist groups, criminals, smugglers and local communities in the Sahel area have been for years the subject of scrutiny and concern, particularly by Western policy-makers. The idea of an “unholy alliance” between these actors is the stuff of nightmares for Europeans and Americans, who fear that the Sahel's governance and security vacuum could become (or has already become) a magnet for all types of threats.

Much of the debate, however, has been based on anecdotal evidence and second-hand information, usually conveyed by Western journalists and analysts based in the capital cities of the Sahel and the Maghreb. Only recently have scholars started to apply a more rigorous methodology to assess the nature of these relations, paving the way for a more empirically-grounded and comprehensive understanding of this phenomenon.

Talk of an “unholy alliance” between non-state actors goes back to the early 2000s, when three trends began to converge and to lay the foundations for the encounter between jihadists, criminals and local communities in the Sahel. The first trend was the gradual shift of North African terrorist groups away from the Maghreb and towards the Sahel – which was itself the consequence of the increasing security force pressure in the densely populated coastal areas where these organisations operated in the 1990s and early 2000s, as well as the growing political and security vacuum in the Sahel region. Terrorist groups such as Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) responded to this new incentive structure by increasingly targeting Algeria's southern regions and Sahelian countries.

The second trend was the gradual weakening of central authorities across North Africa, due to economic liberalisation and structural adjustment from the 1980s onwards. The culture of smuggling, termed “*trabendo*” in Algeria, started to flourish, with central governments quietly adjusting their social contracts with peripheral communities by turning a blind eye to their smuggling activities in return for social stability as cuts to public spending and investment were undertaken.

The increasing use of West Africa and the Sahel as a corridor for drug trafficking was the third trend. In addition to cannabis production in Morocco, from the early 2000s Latin American drug trafficking organization and other organized crime groups tried to diversify their supply lines to Europe. This phenomenon was highlighted by the case of Air Cocaine in 2009, when a Boeing 727 believed to have transported several tonnes of cocaine was found near Gao in Northern Mali.

The overlapping of AQIM's growing Sahel focus, intensifying smuggling activities and international drug trafficking created the perception of a jihadist/criminal nexus that dominated a lawless region. Several events contributed to strengthening this perception – from AQIM's kidnappings of Westerners to the issues of arms smuggling and human trafficking (particularly in the aftermath of the 2011 Arab Spring and the onset of the Libyan conflict) and the Northern Mali conflict since 2012.

Against this backdrop, media coverage of the tactical alliances between jihadist groups and various criminal enterprises in the region has only intensified. This coverage has principally zeroed in on a few elements:

- The “kidnapping industry”, which has had devastating effects on local tourism;
- Smuggling of subsidised goods – such as fuel, cigarettes etc.;
- Drug trafficking;
- Human trafficking, particularly since 2011;
- Arms smuggling.

However, this coverage has often exaggerated and simplified those links between terrorist groups and criminal activities, which have been emphasised for various reasons – including propping up the domestic and international legitimacy of regional governments, securing external aid and credit and cracking down on domestic opposition – a good case in point is Mauritania since Mohamed Ould Abdelaziz’ rise to power. Most importantly, this exaggeration has been used both by Western security professionals and local governments to attract international attention and raise funds for security initiatives in the area.

For these reasons, the representations of this phenomenon offered by the media should be nuanced and contextualised. While instances of tactical collaborations between terrorists and criminals cannot be denied and do occur (and in some circumstances, as in Mali, this problem has grown to pose a dramatic challenge to state authority), there is no systematic or strategic alliance between these groups nor is there a blurring of roles, as some analysts have argued. From close collaboration can come emulation and there are examples of hybrid identities of individuals who straddle the two worlds. Nevertheless, we cannot argue that terrorist groups in the Sahel have become fully-fledged criminal organisations – or vice versa.

Indeed, the types of exchanges between jihadist groups and criminal organisations in the Sahel space are multiple and can include:

- Tactical collaboration;
- Taxing/protection money charged by terrorists on smuggling and trafficking activities;
- “Supply chain” arrangements, as has been the case for kidnappings, which can be executed by criminal organisations that would later transfer the hostages to jihadist groups;
- Mutual tolerance: the Sahara Desert is a vast and sparsely populated area in which opportunities for clashes over territory are limited;
- Individual conversions/radicalisations;
- Provision of weapons.

Based on this tentative typology, we can argue that in the “Saharan sea” several kinds of entrepreneurs co-exist – from smugglers to criminals, from terrorists to drug traffickers. These entrepreneurs often share this space with local communities of all kinds. And in such a wide space, our ability to systematically observe local processes remains severely limited.

In this context, it is important to avoid a trap here – that is, considering smugglers, criminals, jihadists, local communities and perhaps even migrants as a large coalition of “bad people”. In a region so significantly undergoverned, where borders are often more symbolic than anything, it is easy and yet extremely superficial to lump all these non-state actors together and adopt a purely security-based solution to the many problems stemming from these different developments.

We need to keep a flexible mind when looking at all this to avoid a purely “security-minded” approach. There are several historical processes at work that require complex solutions, from the effects of economic liberalisation in North Africa to the growing security vacuum in the Sahel and the international drug trade. Avoiding a simplistic, one-dimensional explanation for these interconnected problems is essential.

Biographies

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