Article

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The link between terrorism and drug trafficking in Africa

Abstract

The degree of linkage between transnational organised crime and terrorism is a debated issue among analysts, law enforcement, and the academic community. In the wide range of the degree of relationship they can manifest, the strategic collaboration between organised crime and individuals belonging to terrorist movements has alerted the authorities due to its complexity in detecting, prosecuting, and repressing these acts. It is a hybrid formula between coexistence in the same space and convergence where organised crime and terrorism meet. From Al Qaeda-affiliated groups in West Africa to Boko Haram militants in Nigeria, the cooperation of individuals on both sides of the criminal spectrum is becoming a major threat to African security forces. The challenges are numerous at an adverse political and social time for the continent, and this article sets out to conduct a risk assessment exercise in a context of constant change and transformation.

Keywords: Sahel, drug trafficking, nexus, organized crime, terrorism

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1. Introduction

In late 2009, the US Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) arrested three jihadist individuals in Ghana on suspicion of having acted as facilitators of drug trafficking in West Africa. The conviction upheld these charges against the three arrested, Oumar Issa, Harouna Touré, and Idris Abdelrahman, constituting the first evidentiary conviction of links between Al Qaeda's North African branch, Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), and transnational organised crime involved in drug trafficking (Brown, 2013:22). A year later, a DEA representative argued before the US House of Representatives Subcommittee on Homeland Security and Foreign Affairs that terrorist groups operating in Africa such as AQIM used individuals linked to drug trafficking to engage in money laundering, transportation and other criminal activities (Department of Justice, 2010:4).

Transnational organised crime involved in drug trafficking and terrorist groups have a long history of interconnection in Africa, with the former being a source of funding for terrorist organisations as they need protection for passage and transit through spaces under the control of the armed insurgency. In recent years, this collaboration based on a mutually beneficial strategic alliance has attracted increasing attention from policymakers, investigators, and law enforcement agencies alike, as it is a criminal act that is complex to eradicate due to the opacity of its actions and the multitude of actors that interact in its criminal network.

This article aims to explore the complex relationship between these two phenomena, examining how drug trafficking and terrorism interact and reinforce each other in different contexts. Through the analysis of case studies, this paper aims to provide a nuanced understanding of the ways in which drug trafficking and terrorism intersect in Africa and the implications of this nexus for regional and international security.

2. Assessing the link between terrorism and drug trafficking in Africa

Research into the link between transnational organised crime and terrorism has a long history. Since the consolidation of a robust criminal apparatus from the 1980s onwards, the African continent has undergone both its transformation as a growing transit route for goods to their final destination in Europe and North America and a significant increase in the domestic consumption of drugs and other substances on the black market. Organised crime has been able to take advantage of both the political circumstances - in a continent with a State fragility index far above that of its European neighbours - and its geographical proximity to drug production sites, as in the case of South America and cocaine. Thus, the continent has gone from transporting a residual volume of illicit substances through Africa to becoming a relevant space for the distribution and consumption of narcotics and other drugs, with nerve centres in countries such as Nigeria and others that are seeing an increase in domestic consump-

tion, such as Algeria and Libya.

In addition to the rise and consolidation of these criminal niches, since 2010 Africa has also been facing new political, economic, and social risks derived from the appearance of a strong terrorist presence on the northern and western flank of the continent, especially jihadist terrorism. Taking into account the balance of terrorist attacks and fatalities in the world, in 2021 jihadism has positioned Africa as the epicentre of terrorist activity at the global level (Igualada, 2021:12), shifting the gravitational centre of its strength spotted in certain areas of Syria and Iraq in the past decade to transfer it regionally and decentralised to hot spots in Sub-Saharan Africa. The wave of Arab revolts in North Africa and the Middle East had a strong impact and destabilised the surrounding countries, particularly those such as Mali, which had a strong nationalist sentiment in some factions such as the Tuareg in the northern part of the country known as Azawad. The popular demonstrations in Tunisia, Libya, Syria, and Egypt, and the national movements that took advantage of them to demand self-government for their peoples, were hijacked at the ideological level by a series of terrorist movements that sought to expand their brand and turn the political wind in their favour. Groups such as Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb not only took up the Tuareg cause but sought to finance their cause and pursue their costly expansionist agenda using whatever sources of funding they could find. It is at this point in the equation that we can observe an increasingly recurrent use of the role of the drug trafficking industry in jihadist plans, juggling the profits of the drug trade while justifying the use - and sometimes consumption - of substances that are dogmatically forbidden according to their basic conception of Islam.

The consolidation of terrorism in Africa and its coexistence with the old market of drug production, distribution, and smuggling has inevitably given way to the possibility of a closer relationship between the two over time. Although terrorism focuses the bulk of its funding on other activities, such as the collection of fees and taxes, kidnappings, diversion of funds from non-profit organisations, or the payment of rents, the illegal drug trade has managed to position itself as an additional source of funding for jihadist organisations, so that the two phenomena have interacted and reinforced each other in a number of ways. This cooperative sentiment, which in no case necessarily implies convergence, but goes beyond coexistence, has been evident through different forms and manifestations.

The main way in which drug trafficking and terrorism intersect in Africa is through the use of drug profits to fund terrorist activities. Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) is a group known to engage in drug trafficking to finance its operations and expand its influence, with its peak during the time of Mojtar Belmojtar (Aguilera, 2022:81).

The most frequent activity of collaboration between drug cartels and this terrorist group has been based on AQIM's use of its networks and resources to protect drug trafficking operations in exchange for a share of the profits. The group has been accused of providing security for drug smugglers

in the Sahel region, which stretches across the southern edge of Africa's Sahara desert. Collecting tolls and protecting routes for the passage of all kinds of illicit goods, including drugs, through the areas under its control became standard practice among its individuals in the mid-2010s, benefiting from the chaos and lack of state control left in the wake of the wave of protests in the Arab world.

Mojtar Belmojtar's leadership was instrumental to this cooperative alliance. A former fighter in the Afghan theatre against Soviet troops, Belmojtar made a career in jihadist movements and groups in both the Maghreb and the Sahel. Among other functions, the Algerian leader coordinated cross-border drug operations from the western part of the continent to North Africa, where the merchandise reached its next distribution point in Europe (Aguilera, 2022:81). Cocaine came to the forefront as the demand and supply of this substance from South America increased, and led the leader to involve much of his organisation through the establishment of an 'import' tax on both cocaine and any other cargo crossing the AQIM-dominated area, especially from northern Mali to Algeria (Rabasa et al., 2017:143).

In March 2015, a military operation led by the Nigerien army and the French Barkhane force in northern Niger led to the arrest of nine AQIM militants aboard five 4x4 vehicles from southern Libya. They were wanted by the authorities for drug and arms trafficking, and the investigation revealed that they had been involved in selling these drugs in southern Libya and raising funds from their members and other terrorist groups operating in the country (FATF-GIABA-GABAC, 2016:19).

Overall, AQIM's involvement in drug trafficking has been an important source of funding for the organisation and has allowed it to expand its operations and influence in North Africa. This has had serious consequences for stability and security in the region and has hampered the fight against both terrorism and illicit drug trafficking.

Since 2017, AQIM has been integrated under the umbrella of the Support Group for Islam and Muslims, better known as the JNIM coalition. The coalition, operating mainly in Mali and Burkina Faso, includes other known extremist groups such as Ansar Dine, Katiba Macina, and al-Mourabitoun. Notably, in late 2018, the DEA, in cooperation with Croatian judicial authorities, dismantled a criminal organisation based in Latin America that was attempting to conduct a deal with the first. The deal involved the delivery of surface-to-air missiles to Ansar Dine's militants in exchange for cocaine and a safe passage route under the group's protection through the Sahara desert that would allow them to transport their cocaine business across Africa (Petrušic and Deškovic, 2018). As a result of this investigation, links were also found between the Colombian drug trafficker who had been the ringleader of the operation and al-Mourabitoun. This group, inspired by the radicalised vision of the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC, a precursor to AQIM), was active in the battle of Aguelhok in northeaster Mali, and its current operational capacity resides as a force belonging to the JNIM coalition. The results of the 2018 investigation would thus point to a network of connections

between drug trafficking in the Americas and one of the most important terrorist actors operating in Africa today.

In general, the involvement of JNIM and its groups in drug trafficking has been an important source of funding for the organisation and has allowed it to expand its operations and influence in West Africa. In addition to directly funding terrorism, drug trafficking has also provided terrorists with the means to operate in areas where they would not otherwise have such a strong presence. In the West African region, evidence points to the use of drug trafficking networks by terrorists to transport arms and other illicit goods, as well as to smuggle people across borders. This allows them to establish themselves in new areas and access local networks and resources.

Boko Haram also illustrates this method of terrorist financing and amplification of their influence in Nigeria. According to Europol, the income generated through the drug trade can account for a significant part of their total funding (Europol, 2019:33). The UN Counter-Terrorism Committee issued a short briefing note at the end of 2018 establishing a link between this terrorist group and drug trafficking in Nigeria (UN Counter-Terrorism Committee, 2018:3). Investigations claim that the group, led by Abubakar Shekau until his death in 2021, helps to smuggle heroin and cocaine through this West African space, drugs that are also used by its militants (Chair, 2018:5).

As the above arrests and investigations suggest, there is ample evidence of an ongoing strategic cooperative alliance between the drug trafficking industry and terrorism in Africa. This collaboration has far-reaching consequences for both regional and global security, especially in the destabilisation of borders, the fight against terrorism and organised crime, the impact of this phenomenon on political calculations, institutional transparency and socio-economic development plans.

3. Consequences of collaboration between the two criminal phenomena and lines of action

A major consequence of collaboration between drug trafficking and terrorism in Africa is regional destabilisation. Terrorist organisations involved in the illicit drug trade often use the profits to finance their operations and expand their influence. This often results in increased violence and insecurity in the areas where they operate, disrupting local communities and undermining the efforts of governments and international missions that seek to ensure the security and well-being of the local population.

One of the destabilising impacts of drug trafficking is linked to a greater dependence on the informal economy to the detriment of a strengthened economy, with the consequent hindering of development and a future economic outlook that even leads to a loss of trust in institutions, an increase in inequality and a reduction in resources destined to combat other types of criminal activity such as corruption. This last point is particularly relevant, insofar as the enormous capacity of drug traffickers

to obtain institutional collaborators on the ground has been confirmed. These collaborators tend to vary depending on the country and the degree of relationship between the two, ranging from collaboration through bribes to customs authorities or local patrols to genuine symbiosis between organised crime and the state institution itself, as has occurred in countries such as Guinea-Bissau (Blanco and De la Corte, 2013:19).

The investigation following the 2009 'Air Cocaine' incident of a burnt Boeing 727 in northern Gao (Mali), believed to be carrying up to ten tonnes of cocaine, came to uncover the link between Malian authorities and drug trafficking (Algeria Watch, 2010; Briscoe, 2018:8). A few years later, the perception of a large drug-related corruption niche of former Malian president Touré was one of the reasons that led much of society to support a coup against him in 2012 (Lebovich 2013).

Society is both a victim and a witness to the influence of the drug trafficking industry on the powers of the state. On the outskirts of Gao (the most important city in northern Mali and a key hub for drug trafficking), there is a neighbourhood known as "cocaine-bougou", the "cocaine village" in the Bambara language (ENACT, 2020:9). This suburb is known as the great representative of the frustration shared between Malian society and the political class, with the volume of buying, selling and transit of this drug so manifest that it undermines any chance of hope for the eradication of this phenomenon (Meché, 2021:695). In Niger, an operation by the authorities managed to seize a cocaine shipment worth more than eight million dollars transported in an official vehicle belonging to the mayor of Agadez, a city considered to be the country's hub for trafficking and smuggling of drugs and other goods (REUTERS, 2022).

In addition to the impacts on the economy and the integrity of the political class, the collaboration between drug trafficking and terrorism in Africa undermines efforts to combat both phenomena in the fight against armed conflict and organised crime. Illegal drug trafficking provides an important source of funding for terrorists, making it difficult to disrupt their operations and dismantle their networks. At the same time, the involvement of terrorists in drug trafficking makes it more difficult for law enforcement agencies to pursue drug trafficking organisations and disrupt their activities. The lack of a legislative system to prosecute collaboration between the two crimes is an additional obstacle to preventing and combating this hybrid phenomenon of criminal activity.

Collaboration between drug trafficking and terrorism in Africa also has negative consequences for the international community. Illegal drug trafficking is a global problem, and drugs produced and distributed through Africa are often shipped to markets in other regions of the world, with an inevitable impact on the global health and health systems of the countries receiving the shipment.

It also poses a challenge in the domestic environment, with drug use in Africa rising precipitously, especially among young people. According to the Cannabis Use Perception Index, the use of cannabis-type drugs has increased in more than half of African countries in the period 2010-2019

(UNODC, 2021:21). The increasing dependence of the population points to an unprecedented addiction challenge that subjugates its users, with dependence problems so intense that they threaten to create irreversible socio-economic repercussions.

The involvement of terrorists in drug trafficking further complicates efforts to address the problem and may lead to the spread of terrorism beyond Africa's borders, further destabilising direct borders with the Maghreb. The profound contextual transformations of the link between organised crime and terrorism have a direct impact on the security of the borders of the closest countries, whose regional instability could translate into increased congestion in the wave of forcibly displaced persons and migrants in search of greater opportunities and fleeing the severe social crisis. This constitutes a clear security risk, and thus a risk to European strategic interests in general and to the countries closest to the shores of the Mediterranean in particular.

Despite the clear connections between drug trafficking and terrorism in Africa, tackling this problem is complex and requires a comprehensive approach. There is an evident need of strengthening the capacity of security forces in the countries hit hardest by this phenomenon to detect and disrupt these connecting networks. Training, equipping, and investing resources in both national and regional agencies, as well as strengthening intelligence-sharing channels between national and inter-regional law enforcement agencies are essential tools in detecting and pursuing individuals suspected of involvement in these activities.

In addition to strengthening law enforcement efforts, the consequences of the link between the two areas of crime make it necessary to address the root causes of both phenomena. Poverty, unemployment, and political transparency indicators are factors that measure State weakness, especially in Africa, and often serve as breeding grounds for the proliferation of both organised crime and terrorism. Addressing the underlying social and economic conditions that can fuel these illicit activities adds to the list of issues to consider in mitigating the degree of threat that the crime-terror nexus poses to neighbouring countries.

4. Conclusions

The relationship between drug trafficking and terrorism in Africa is a complex and multifaceted issue that requires a holistic approach to understanding and addressing the phenomenon. Although terrorist groups focus the bulk of their funding on other activities, the illegal drug trade has managed to position itself as an additional source of funding for these organisations, so that the two phenomena have interacted and reinforced each other in various ways.

When analysing the risk of the terrorist phenomenon and its degree of collaboration with organised crime, the evidence shows that cooperation between individuals on both sides of the criminal spectrum is amply demonstrated. Arrests and convictions of militants from groups operating in North Africa such as Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, or more recently JNIM, support this collaborative theory, which exacerbates the conditions that Africa currently suffers as the epicentre of global jihadist activity.

Collaboration between drug trafficking and terrorism in Africa has serious consequences for regional and global security. It destabilises the region, undermines efforts to combat both phenomena, and has negative implications for the international community. A comprehensive approach combining law enforcement, counter-terrorism measures, and development assistance is essential to effectively address this problem. The efforts of national and international actors, as well as cross-border cooperation and coordination, are essential. Law enforcement and judicial actions, such as the pursuit and prosecution of terrorists suspected of acting as facilitators of drug trafficking, are an important part of the response. However, these efforts must be accompanied by broader counter-terrorism measures, as well as development assistance that addresses the underlying causes of both phenomena.

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