



Transnational Threats: The Criminalization of West Africa and the Sahel

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Introduction

Governance in West Africa and the Sahel is becoming criminalized. Dirty money, particularly from trafficking in drugs, is rapidly undermining the region's political and economic governance.¹ Drug trafficking through the region is, as former UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) Executive Director Antonio Maria Costa put it, "not only buying real estate and flashy cars: it is buying power,"² jeopardizing the "peace dividend" from the end of West Africa's civil wars earlier this decade. Revenues from global illicit markets for drugs, sex, counterfeited pharmaceuticals and music, cyberfraud, stolen oil, and hostages offer political and military leaders a fast, easy, and relatively cost-free source of funds for their electoral and military campaigns and patronage systems. Political leaders also offer traffickers protection or even access to government services from diplomatic passports to the use of the military for trafficking purposes. It is a win-win situation—or so it seems.

Yet, the true costs in terms of political stability, human security, and economic prosperity are poorly appreciated by the region's leaders. Drug traffickers' infiltration of Guinea-Bissau's highest levels of political and military leadership, resulting in the assassination of the country's president, is only the most notorious example. There is also increasing evidence of trafficking revenues infecting legislatures, police forces, militaries, courts, and presidential offices, as well as chambers of commerce, in

countries as diverse as Côte d'Ivoire, The Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Nigeria, and Sierra Leone. Nonstate armed groups stand to gain the most. This policy brief considers the nature and provenance of these problems and some unorthodox ideas to tackle it.

A Silicon Valley for Criminal Innovation

West Africa and the Sahel are fast becoming a Silicon Valley of criminal and militant innovation. Geography is partly to blame. When interdiction of cocaine trafficking was stepped up in Central America and the Caribbean in the 1990s, traffickers from Mexico, Venezuela, Colombia (including the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia [FARC]), Spain, Portugal, Italy, and Lebanon found a work-around: diversification into markets farther to the east. In Europe, cocaine consumption tripled in a decade.³ Similarly, between 2001 and 2007, annual cocaine seizures in West Africa increased from approximately 273 kilos to roughly 47,000 kilos.⁴

Working with West African (especially Nigerian Igbo) partners, foreign traffickers have developed new routes, moving steadily east from Cape Verde to the African littoral. Two main hubs have emerged, around The Gambia, Guinea, and Guinea-Bissau and around Benin, Ghana, and Togo (fig. 1). Other states have developed ancillary service



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“Smuggling is widely tolerated, law enforcement is fitful and inefficient, and politicians are easily bribed or are even involved in the drug trade themselves.”¹⁷ Participation in trafficking can appear to offer political, military, and business leaders windfall profits with which to conduct electoral and military campaigns and feed patronage systems or simply a fast-track to wealth and power. In turn, politicians and security leaders can offer traffickers protection or even assistance. The pattern is clearest in Guinea-Bissau, but after the December 2008 coup in Guinea, there have also been reports of Latin American cocaine traders moving in significant numbers there and to Burkina Faso and Benin, reproducing the pattern of collusion.¹⁸

In one sense, the current state of affairs is the logical, transnationalized extension of dominant forms of governance in West Africa and the Sahel. Postcolonial leaders in West Africa exploited the prevalence of informal economies and cross-border trading and trafficking by debilitating formal bureaucracies and markets and governing instead through patronage systems constructed off the back of their abilities to control informal markets.¹⁹ This created what Will Reno has described as “shadow states,” one manifestation of a larger process of indigenous criminalization of the state in Africa.²⁰ The criminalization of governance by global drug and other trafficking revenues over the last decade is the result of the integration of local governance arrangements with globalized trading, financial, and migration arrangements.

Transnational Trafficking Undermining Sovereignty and Security

With access to global illicit markets comes an entirely new scale of illicit financing, untethered to the local political and social

responsibilities that usually structure the state’s revenue extraction and service delivery arrangements. The scale of this finance can be appreciated from figure 2. Even if a mule earns only a small portion of the final street value, trafficking just a few grams of cocaine to Europe offers a payoff similar to the annual economic production of the region’s average citizen. The incentives to participate in and control such trafficking are clear.

The result seems to be violent competition for control of trafficking revenues. As violence in Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Mali, and Niger in the last three years seems to show, drug-trafficking revenues already offer a highly tempting fast-track to the top for younger, impatient generations of military officers or social groups that feel deprived of their fair share of criminal market revenues.

Figure 2. West African gross domestic product (GDP) per capita, in grams of cocaine, at western European wholesale prices, 2010.

Country	Per capita GDP, 2010 (US\$)	Equivalence in grams of cocaine, at western European wholesale prices
Benin	709.82	8.7
Burkina Faso	589.11	7.2
Cape Verde	3,100.26	37.8
Côte d’Ivoire	1,051.99	12.8
The Gambia	587.30	7.2
Ghana	1,124.66	13.7
Guinea	451.47	5.5
Guinea-Bissau	518.49	6.2
Liberia	212.69	2.6
Mali	690.82	8.4
Niger	371.57	4.5
Nigeria	1,111.75	13.6
Senegal	997.61	12.2
Sierra Leone	325.66	4.0
Togo	466.34	5.7

Source: IMF World Economic Outlook, September 2011; 2011 UNODC World Drug Report.

There is already strong evidence of the involvement of separatist elements in the

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Casamance in cannabis trafficking,²¹ and more recent reports suggest criminal and militant groups in the Niger Delta are now integrated into cocaine trafficking, oil bunkering, and piracy networks in the Gulf of Guinea.²² According to the 2004 report of the International Narcotics Control Board, in Côte d'Ivoire and Liberia the proceeds from drug trafficking facilitated the acquisition of "arms and ammunitions used by rebel groups and criminal organizations."²³ In the Sahel, Al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and its Touareg and other militant allies (including elements of the Polisario Front) are already deeply involved in protecting drug, contraband, and cigarette smuggling convoys, using the proceeds to buy arms and build power over isolated communities. Trafficking revenues may have allowed some violent extremist groups in the region to purchase weapons taken from Libyan arsenals in recent months.

In some West African states, the future security landscape may resemble the cartel wars of Mexico, perhaps with an overlay of ethnic and religious sectarianism, while in others, the collaboration between foreign trafficking organizations and local oligarchic powers that we see in Guatemala and Honduras may be a better guide.²⁴ Either way, transnational trafficking seems likely to fuel increased human insecurity.

Economic governance is also being negatively affected. Clandestine economic transactions in the parallel or informal economy have long served to keep West African incomes and assets out of reach of predatory states. Yet, they lead to regulatory distortions, financial market volatility, increased costs of borrowing, and reduced state revenue and therefore public service delivery. In the short term, criminal market revenues may provide economic stimulus, for example, lifting construction in Dakar and Abidjan.²⁵ Their

longer-term effects, however, will be highly corrosive: the creation of asset bubbles and an effect akin to Dutch Disease, distorting the local export economy and driving down production and activity in legitimate economic sectors, as labor and capital drift away to transnational criminal enterprises. Trafficking organizations also wield increasing influence in legislatures and presidential palaces, working to block reforms that could threaten illicit market activities and opportunities for money laundering.

The criminalization of political, military, and business leadership undermines other governance institutions. The military, police, members of the judiciary, key ministers and parliamentarians, and local and traditional institutions are all being targeted for corruption by trafficking organizations in countries as diverse as Ghana and Guinea. As one example, a member of the Ghanaian parliament, Eric Amoateng, was convicted in a U.S. court in 2007 for possession of 136 pounds of heroin. Drug traffickers increasingly use their wealth to purchase traditional titles in countries from Nigeria to Sierra Leone. Anticorruption and human rights institutions will come under attack. Space for an independent civil society and a free press shrinks; as recent attacks on journalists and bloggers in Mexico have shown, an independent media threatens the shadow power of organized crime. Furthermore, elections offer little protection. Far from acting as safeguards, democratic elections, absent effective electoral finance transparency and international oversight, are providing opportunities for organized crime to gain influence over leaders by financing their campaigns.

The result is massively increased human insecurity. By paying for the services of local fixers and partners with drugs, traffickers are creating a secondary market in the region and

local consumption.²⁶ Experiences in other parts of the world from Rio de Janeiro's favelas to the Chicago ghettos and from Karachi to Nairobi make the resulting trajectory clear: the rise of local gangs to control distribution and serve as low-level enforcers for higher-level organizers and their political protectors and the fragmentation of governance and service delivery, especially in underprivileged urban areas. Given the rapidly accelerating rate of urbanization in West Africa and the fact that, according to the United Nations, more than 90 percent of city inhabitants in the region already live in slums,²⁷ this seems likely to have major impacts on public order; public health, especially issues involving HIV and other needle-borne diseases; and human security in the region in the coming decade.

The most severe impacts will fall on the most vulnerable: women and children. Women are left as sole care providers, subjected to the predatory authoritarianism of drug gangs, and bear the brunt of disease and poor service delivery. As civil wars are replaced by drug wars, so child soldiers will be replaced by child gangs. Inexpensive and easily manipulated as laborers, the value of West African children's lives, already among the most endangered on the planet, will become cheaper by the day. An expanding percentage of West Africa's population is 15–24 years of age, the age at which young men are most likely to be involved in criminal activity and to pose a threat to stability.²⁸ Additionally, they are growing up in some of the poorest, least-employed communities on Earth.²⁹ There is a real danger of the next generation of young West African men and women being “lost” to the ideals of democratic governance and turning instead to a life of crime as their best and only hope of “advancement.”

What Can We Do?

West African states will not be able to entirely eradicate trafficking and organized crime

anytime soon. Their physical and institutional capacity is far too weak, and the causes of the criminalization of governance lie too deep in the structures of globalization. Nevertheless, states in the region and beyond are making efforts to tackle the problem. States have received important bilateral and multilateral assistance, most notably in improving maritime interdiction in Cape Verde. This assistance is limited, however, compared to the billions of dollars that flow from the drug trade. The new joint UN-Interpol West Africa Coast Initiative, designed to develop specialist transnational crime units in five countries (Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, and Sierra Leone) is budgeted at roughly \$50 million over four years and not yet fully funded. European states, the United Nations, and Interpol are all chipping in, here and there, and the Group of Eight (G8) recently called for stepped-up efforts,³⁰ but current approaches are proposing technical solutions to a political problem. Short-term solutions that rely on external assistance to upgrade existing local capacity will be necessary steps toward an effective regional response. Yet, they will not be sufficient because they rely on external sponsorship, which will likely diminish over time, and will not overcome the deeper problem of connections between crime and politics.

The immediate objective must be narrower: to unwind the criminalization of the region's leadership by severing the increasingly close connection between criminal financing and political, military, and business power. Trafficking may remain, but it must be marginalized, literally and figuratively. There is a need to alter elites' perceptions of trafficking and incentives to acquiesce or even engage in it. This requires increasing the costs of participation in such a criminalized governance system and decreasing the costs of opting out. This will not be possible through the actions of individual political leaders, acting alone. As Stephen Ellis notes, “Many

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officials throughout the region are deeply concerned by the effects of the drug trade, but are often confronted by people and networks more powerful than they, with other priorities.”³¹ Leaders need support from their publics, from within the region, and from abroad.

Some Unorthodox Ideas

At the domestic level, there is an urgent need to mobilize the political and social will to fight trafficking and to change leaders’ incentive structures. There is rhetorical support in the region for antitrafficking measures, notably the adoption of a regional response action plan by the members of the Economic Community of West African States in Abuja in December 2008 and the AU Plan of Action on Drug Control and Crime Prevention (2007–2012). Yet, those rhetorical commitments have not translated into major efforts on the ground. There is huge, unexplored room for innovation to build local social and political support in several ways.

- *Sensitization of the region’s political, military, and business leaders through interactions with experienced foreign peers.* A visit by Mexican technical officials to Accra in 2009, for example, seems to have produced a marked uptick in transatlantic law enforcement cooperation, as Ghanaian officials became more aware of the personal, institutional, and national risks they were confronting from drug trafficking.
- *Mobilizing civil society, including church and mosque-based groups, women’s groups, and traditional authorities (especially chiefs), to fight the most pernicious forms of trafficking, such as human and drug trafficking.* More could be done, for example, to mobilize the Edo traditional leadership against the key role that group is playing in sex trafficking to Europe or

the Igbo leadership against its role in regional drug trafficking. Other civil society–based opportunities include fostering an independent press; partnerships with mass media (e.g., Nollywood) to raise awareness; consumer boycotts, such as the antimafia boycotts in southern Italy; and harnessing the early-warning capacity of social media, as in Mexico.

- *Strengthening municipal-level governance and service-delivery, particularly in West Africa’s growing informal conurbations, as a bulwark against the emergence of local drug gangs.* There are numerous models for fostering such growth, especially in South America, for example, in the city of Medellin or the current efforts in the favelas of Rio de Janeiro.

A regional approach will be crucial, given the ease with which traffickers have proven able to displace operations from one part of West Africa to another in response to changes in the regulatory environment. Regional mandates can also give national leaders more room to maneuver on policy issues. Following are several regional approaches on this issue.

- *Creation of a network of political and business leaders within the region dedicated to fighting trafficking and to holding each other accountable for fighting trafficking.* National leaders may find it easier to sign on to and stick to robust antitrafficking campaigns if it is part of a regional push by political and business leaders, especially if the group included other leaders affected by the same trading routes, from Latin America and Europe.
- *Economic integration throughout West Africa to develop increased growth and investment in the licit sector, for example, through creation of joint economic development plans and regulatory and price harmonization.*

- *Strengthened regional financial oversight, in particular by expecting greater transparency in public accounting and a rapid scale-up of national and regional anti-money laundering capacities.*
- Finally, there will be a need for targeted international support in a range of areas and develop shared practices, materials, and strategies.
- *External assistance with investigations and prosecutions.* The model here is the International Commission Against Impunity in Guatemala, a UN-assisted international investigative mechanism in Guatemala that assists Guatemalan prosecutors to dismantle the illegal armed groups that control its governance. Central American leaders recently suggested the creation of a similar mechanism for much of Central America. The model could be adapted to provide support to willing leaders in West Africa.
 - *Specialist support for governance reforms and capacity building, for example, in the area of electoral campaign finance reform, judicial reform, and security sector reform, from bodies such as the United Nations and International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance.*
 - *Creation of an international forum focusing on these issues, modeled, for example, on the international Contact Group on Piracy Off the Coast of Somalia.* This UN-backed mechanism has four working groups to coordinate and mobilize support to Horn of Africa states on military operations, judicial response, engagement with the private sector, and public information. A similar model could be adopted for drug trafficking through West Africa to assist with law enforcement and border controls, financial governance, electoral governance, public health, and public awareness campaigns and civil society mobilization.

The views expressed in this policy brief are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of the Center on Global Counterterrorism Cooperation, its staff, or advisory council.

Notes

¹For an overview, see James Cockayne and Phil Williams, “The Invisible Tide: Towards an International Strategy to Deal With Drug Trafficking Through West Africa,” International Peace Institute, October 2009, http://www.ipacademy.org/media/pdf/publications/west_africa_drug_trafficking_epub.pdf.

²Antonio Maria Costa, “Drug Trafficking Is a Security Threat” (remarks at the opening of the Economic Community of West African States high-level conference on drug trafficking as a security threat, Praia, Cape Verde, 28 October 2008), <http://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/about-unodc/speeches/2008-28-10.html>.

³Vivienne Walt, “Cocaine Country,” *Time*, 27 June 2007, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1637719,00.html>.

⁴UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), *Cocaine Trafficking in West Africa: The Threat to Stability and Development (With Special Reference to Guinea-Bissau)*, December 2007, pp. 3–7, http://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/West%20Africa%20cocaine%20report_10%2012%2007.pdf; UNODC, *Drug Trafficking as a Security Threat in West Africa*, October 2008, p. 3, <http://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/Studies/Drug-Trafficking-WestAfrica-English.pdf>; UNODC, *World Drug Report 2009*, June 2009, http://www.unodc.org/documents/wdr/...2009/WDR2009_eng_web.pdf.

⁵Michael A. Braun, “The Need for European Assistance to Colombia for the Fight Against Illicit Drugs” (statement before the House Judiciary crime, terrorism, and homeland security subcommittee and House International Relations Western Hemisphere subcommittee, September 21, 2006), <http://www.justice.gov/dea/pubs/cngrtest/ct092106.html>. For a good discussion of who controls the cocaine after it leaves West Africa, see UNODC, *Cocaine Trafficking in West Africa*, p. 20. See also Stephen Ellis, “West Africa’s International Drug Trade,” *African Affairs* 108, no. 431 (2009): 188–189, <http://users.polisci.wisc.edu/schatzberg/ps362/Ellis2009.pdf>; various officials, interviews with author, 2010–2011.

⁶See generally UNODC, *Transnational Trafficking and the Rule of Law in West Africa: A Threat Assessment*, July 2009, http://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/Studies/West_Africa_Report_2009.pdf.

⁷Intelligence officials of multiple countries, interviews with author, 2008–2010.

⁸UNODC, *World Drug Report 2011*, June 2011, <http://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and->

analysis/WDR2011/World_Drug_Report_2011_ebook.pdf.

⁹See UNODC, *Drug Trafficking as a Security Threat in West Africa*, pp. 31–33. See also International Narcotics Control Board (INCB), *Report of the International Narcotics Control Board for 2008*, E/INCB/2008/1, 19 February 2009, p. 47, http://www.incb.org/pdf/annual-report/2008/en/AR_08_English.pdf.

¹⁰Alexander Nicoll, ed., “West Africa’s Cocaine Coast,” *IISS Strategic Comments* 17, no. 21 (May 2011), <http://www.iiss.org/publications/strategic-comments/past-issues/volume-17-2011/may/west-africas-cocaine-coast/>.

¹¹Rima Salah, “Child Trafficking in West and Central Africa: An Overview” (paper presented at the first pan-African conference on human trafficking, Abuja, 19–23 February 2001), <http://www.unicef.org/media/newsnotes/africchildtraffick.pdf>.

¹²UNODC, *The Role of Organized Crime in the Smuggling of Migrants From West Africa to the European Union*, January 2011, http://www.unodc.org/documents/human-trafficking/Migrant-Smuggling/Report_SOM_West_Africa_EU.pdf.

¹³UNODC, “Sex Imported From Africa,” 21 July 2009, <http://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/frontpage/2009/July/sex-imported-from-africa.html>.

¹⁴See Obi N.I. Ebbe, “The Political-Criminal Nexus: The Nigerian Case,” *Trends in Organized Crime* 4, no. 3 (Spring 1999): 29–59. See generally Jean-Francois Bayart, Stephen Ellis, and Beatrice Hibou, *The Criminalization of the State in Africa* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1999).

¹⁵UNODC, *Cocaine Trafficking in West Africa*, p. 21.

¹⁶UNODC, *Drug Trafficking as a Security Threat in West Africa*, pp. 36–38.

¹⁷Ellis, “West Africa’s International Drug Trade,” p. 173.

¹⁸Law enforcement officials, interviews with author, 2010.

¹⁹William Reno, *Corruption and State Politics in Sierra Leone* (Cambridge, Mass.: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 2–3.

²⁰Bayart, Ellis, and Hibou, *Criminalization of the State in Africa*.

²¹Martin Evans, “Ni paix ni guerre: The Political Economy of Low-Level Conflict in the Casamance,” *HPG Background Paper*, February 2003, p. 11–13, <http://www.odi.org.uk/resources/download/321.pdf>.

²²Ellis, “West Africa’s International Drug Trade,” pp. 193–194.

²³INCB, “Annual Report of the International Narcotics Control Board Focuses on Relationship Between Drug Abuse, Crime and Violence at Community Level,” UNIS/NAR/832, 27 February 2004, http://www.incb.org/incb/press_release_2004_02_27_1.html.

²⁴Antonio L. Mazzitelli, “The New Transatlantic Bonanza: Cocaine on Highway 10,” Western Hemisphere Security Analysis Center, March 2011, pp. 33–34, <http://www.seguridadcondemocracia.org/oco-im/documentos-de-analisis/the-new-transatlantic-bonanza-cocaine-on-highway-10.html>.

²⁵See UNODC, *Drug Trafficking as a Security Threat in West Africa*, pp. 42–45; UNODC, *Transnational Trafficking and the Rule of Law in West Africa*, pp. 77–78; Mark Weston, “FDI Shoots Up in West Africa,” *Global Dashboard*, 3 November 2008, <http://www.globaldashboard.org/africa/fdi-shoots-up-in-west-africa/>.

²⁶Cocaine use is rising in Guinea and Senegal and reportedly stable in Burkina Faso and Nigeria. Use of crack cocaine has been reported in the last three years in Côte d’Ivoire, The Gambia, Ghana, and Nigeria.

²⁷UN Office for West Africa, “Urbanization and Insecurity in West Africa: Population Movements, Mega Cities and Regional Stability,” *UNOWA Issue Papers*, October 2007, http://www.humansecuritygateway.com/documents/UNOWA_UrbanizationInsecurityWestAfrica.pdf.

²⁸Ellen Brennan-Galvin, “Crime and Violence in an Urbanizing World,” *Journal of International Affairs* 56, no. 1 (Fall 2002): 131.

²⁹For example, estimated or actual unemployment rates for certain West African countries include Liberia at 85 percent (2003 estimate), Burkina Faso at 77 percent (2004), Senegal at 48 percent (2007 estimate), Mali at 30 percent (2004 estimate), and Cape Verde at 21 percent (2000 estimate). U.S. Central Intelligence Agency, “World Factbook,” <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/>.

³⁰G8, “Action Plan Aimed at Strengthening Transatlantic Cooperation in the Fight Against Drug Trafficking,” Paris, 10 May 2011, <http://www.g20-g8.com/g8-g20/g8/english/the-2011-summit/declarations-and-reports/appendices/action-plan-aimed-at-strengthening-transatlantic.1245.html>.

³¹Ellis, “West Africa’s International Drug Trade,” p. 173.