



**Challenging the Myth of the Drug-Terror Nexus  
in the Sahel**

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

The rise of extremist activity in the Sahel-Sahara region from 2005 onwards has gone in parallel with the growth of drug trafficking networks across the area. But are these two developments related – and if so, how?

The alleged involvement of al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and the Movement for Monotheism and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO) in drug smuggling is being taken for granted by many media outlets.<sup>2</sup> Malian and French government officials have increasingly resorted to dismissing their adversaries in northern Mali as ‘narco-jihadists’.<sup>3</sup>

This paper reviews the evidence for the links between drug smuggling and extremist activity in the Sahel-Sahara region. While it demonstrates that such links clearly exist, the paper argues that the widespread talk of a drug-terror nexus in the Sahel is misleading, for several reasons. First, much of the evidence presented as basis for such claims can either be easily debunked, or is impossible to verify. Second, rather than the two extremist groups as such, involvement in drug trafficking appears to concern individuals and groups close to, or within, MUJAO and AQIM: within both groups, members are driven by multiple and, at times, conflicting motivations. Third, numerous other actors are playing an equally or more important role in drug smuggling, including members of the political and business establishment in northern Mali, Niger and the region’s capitals, as well as leaders of supposedly ‘secular’ armed groups. Fourth, the emphasis on links between drug trafficking and terrorism in the Sahel serves to obscure the role of state actors and corruption in allowing organized crime to grow. Fifth, the profits derived from kidnap-for-ransom played a much more significant role in the rise of AQIM and MUJAO.

## 2 REVIEWING THE EVIDENCE

Even before the current conflict in Mali, reports began linking the rise of AQIM to the growth of drug trafficking across the Sahel. Such claims have become ever more widespread as media attention increased with the occupation of northern Mali by extremist groups, during 2012. However, there are serious problems with some of the most prominent examples referred to in such reports as evidence for the drug-terror nexus.

In 2009, New York court charged three Malian nationals with narco-terrorism offenses that appeared to establish a link between AQIM, the Colombian FARC and cocaine smugglers.<sup>4</sup> The case was eagerly taken up by think tanks and the media as proof that cocaine smuggling was ‘al-Qaeda’s new business model’.<sup>5</sup> In fact, however, the case involved an undercover US Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) agent posing as a FARC representative, while the three Malian nationals asserted they could arrange protection from AQIM for a cocaine shipment across the Sahara. Nothing suggests this was anything other than a false claim made to impress their supposed business partner. While the three Malians were handed prison sentences, the narco-terrorism conspiracy charges were eventually dropped.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Hirsch (2013), Ould Idoumou (2012), Le Roux (2012) and Diffalah (2013).

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Barluet (2012) and Traoré (2013).

<sup>4</sup> US District Court 2009.

<sup>5</sup> Vardi (2009). See also Pham (2010) and Savage (2012).

<sup>6</sup> Weiser (2012).

Alleged AQIM involvement in drug trafficking was deliberately inflated in another episode, the dismantling of a smuggling network centred on Sahrawi nationals in December 2010.<sup>7</sup> Media reports suggested that the network included Sultan Ould Badi, who at the time was known as an AQIM facilitator reputed to have been involved in kidnappings and drug smuggling.<sup>8</sup> Moroccan media immediately seized on the case as establishing a link between the Polisario, AQIM and drug trafficking.<sup>9</sup> It quickly turned out, however, that the arrested individual was not Ould Badi, but another person carrying a similar name.<sup>10</sup>

The Moroccan government has repeatedly sought to demonstrate that AQIM and Polisario elements have cooperated in criminal activities. Though such claims are certainly not implausible, they should be treated with caution, given Morocco's strong interest in discrediting the Polisario. The Moroccan interior minister's assertions that AQIM was involved in a cocaine smuggling network dismantled by Morocco in 2010 were not backed up with any evidence; it does not appear that any AQIM members were arrested in the episode.<sup>11</sup> Another attempt at establishing such links focused on Oumar Ould Sid Ahmed Hamma, a.k.a. al-Sahrawi, who had been convicted by a Mauritanian court for his involvement in the kidnapping of three Spaniards in 2009, on behalf of AQIM. Sahrawi, whom some sources refer to as a Malian businessman from Timbuktu region,<sup>12</sup> was portrayed by Moroccan media and pro-Moroccan lobbyists in the West as a Polisario member,<sup>13</sup> though pro-Polisario blogs have suggested the documents produced to this effect were forgeries.<sup>14</sup> More to the point, Sahrawi was indicted and convicted for his role in the kidnapping, not on drug smuggling charges.<sup>15</sup>

UK tabloid newspaper Sunday Mirror in April 2013 broke another story that has been widely reproduced as proof for AQIM involvement in cocaine smuggling.<sup>16</sup> The story was based on a cocaine shipment of 168kg from Senegal that had been seized at a UK port.<sup>17</sup> The 'Mirror' turned the seized quantity into a shipment worth £168m and added allegations that AQIM had been involved. Despite the dubious nature of the source, this report was subsequently taken up by others, who apparently did not wonder why AQIM would be of use to cocaine smugglers using maritime routes via Senegal or, as the 'Mirror' alleged, Algeria.<sup>18</sup>

In addition to reports whose inconsistencies are obvious, unverifiable allegations are even more widespread. One example is a 2010 report by a Paris-based consulting outlet run by a former Israeli military officer, which suggested an AQIM representative had met Colombian drug barons and Bissauan smugglers in Guinea-Bissau. The outlet, which otherwise is not known for its access to credible intelligence, simply cited 'security sources active in the sub-region' as a basis for the report.<sup>19</sup> More generally, media reports presenting themselves as investigations into the drug-terror link have all too often failed to provide tangible evidence.<sup>20</sup> RFI Journalist Serge Daniel's 2012 book AQIM: L'Industrie de l'Enlèvement includes an entire chapter purporting to document AQIM's involvement in drug trafficking; however, while the chapter contains a wealth of details on the 2009

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<sup>7</sup> AFP (2009).

<sup>8</sup> See US Embassy Bamako (2009a, 2009c).

<sup>9</sup> Koné (2010), Koné and Ezzouak (2010).

<sup>10</sup> Jeune Afrique (2010).

<sup>11</sup> Siham (2010), Joahny (2011).

<sup>12</sup> Sahara Media (2010a).

<sup>13</sup> Atlas Info (2010).

<sup>14</sup> Diaspora Saharai (2010).

<sup>15</sup> Canal RIM (2010).

<sup>16</sup> Mirror (2013).

<sup>17</sup> Home Office UK (2013).

<sup>18</sup> See, for example, Edwards (2013), as well as Guèye and Oumar (2013).

<sup>19</sup> Powelton (2010).

<sup>20</sup> See, for example, Hirsch (2013) and Freeman (2013).

Air Cocaine incident and the so-called Polisario Network, it provides not a single detail on AQIM's role in narcotics smuggling.<sup>21</sup>

### 3 LINKS BETWEEN EXTREMISTS AND NARCOTICS SMUGGLING: A SOBER ASSESSMENT

As the above overview shows, in drawing a connection between extremism and drug trafficking in the Sahel, many observers have relied on faulty evidence and, in some cases, on deliberate disinformation. More conservative analyses have confined themselves to noting 'allegations' of such links, while stressing that evidence is limited.<sup>22</sup> A more nuanced assessment is necessary to understand the role of narcotics smuggling in the rise of AQIM and MUJAO. Available evidence does indeed suggest that members of MUJAO, or close allies of the group, appear to have been consistently involved in drug smuggling. This also applies to those individuals and factions within AQIM who subsequently became associated with MUJAO when the latter group emerged in late 2011. For the most part, MUJAO leaders had been affiliated with Mokhtar Belmokhtar within AQIM, and MUJAO retained close links to Belmokhtar through 2012 and beyond: during 2012, Belmokhtar was mainly based in or around Gao, and the May 2013 suicide attacks in Arlit and Agadez (Niger) were claimed by both MUJAO and Belmokhtar's AQIM offshoot, the 'Signatories in Blood'.<sup>23</sup>

MUJAO has repeatedly surfaced in accounts of drug shipments across northern Mali. In November 2012, the group seized a convoy of vehicles carrying Moroccan hashish in the Niger-Mali border area; the convoy reportedly had been run by a senior figure in the Tuareg rebel group MNLA. In March 2013, another clash pitted the two sides against each other, with a MUJAO convoy being seized by the group's rivals associated with the MNLA.<sup>24</sup> MUJAO and its predecessor networks in AQIM have been linked with drug smuggling through three key figures: Mohamed Ould Ahmed Deya 'Rouji', Cherif Ould Taher, and the aforementioned Sultan Ould Badi – all three Tilemsi Arabs from the area north of Gao, which was later to become MUJAO's stronghold. Ould Badi, whom the US Embassy in Bamako described in 2009 as 'well known trafficker and AQIM facilitator' and 'key AQIM kidnapping suspect',<sup>25</sup> was among the founders of MUJAO. In 2010, Rouji and twenty of his accomplices were arrested and sentenced for drug smuggling in Mauritania; in addition, Rouji was also found guilty of involvement in kidnappings for AQIM, together with the abovementioned Oumar al-Sahrawi and Belmokhtar.<sup>26</sup> (All twenty-one convicted drug smugglers were extradited to Mali in September 2010 and subsequently quietly released under Spanish pressure, as part of a deal to secure the release of two Spanish hostages).<sup>27</sup> In early 2013, the Malian authorities issued arrest warrants for Rouji and Cherif Ould Taher on drug trafficking charges; at the same time, Ould Taher was designated as a MUJAO member.<sup>28</sup> An Algerian journalist with close ties to the intelligence services alleged that Ould Taher had been involved in the 2009 'Air Cocaine' incident north of Gao.<sup>29</sup> Rouji and Ould Taher are businessmen who never openly emerged as leading MUJAO figures, instead preferring to remain in the background. However, in interviews conducted by the author with prominent members of Tuareg and Arab communities from Gao and Timbuktu during 2012, Rouji and Ould Taher were consistently mentioned as both MUJAO backers and leading drug traffickers.<sup>30</sup> According to the same

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<sup>21</sup> See Daniel (2012: 161-82).

<sup>22</sup> See UN Security Council (2013: 4), UNODC (2013: 10) and Sénat de la République Française (2013).

<sup>23</sup> See Lebovich (2013b: 51-52).

<sup>24</sup> Email communication with former senior official in Niger counternarcotics agency, July 2013. See also Niger Dépêches (2013) and Rühl (2013).

<sup>25</sup> US Embassy Bamako (2009a, 2009c).

<sup>26</sup> Canal RIM (2010).

<sup>27</sup> Sahara Media (2010b).

<sup>28</sup> 22 Septembre (2013).

<sup>29</sup> Tlemçani (2010); on 'Air Cocaine', see Journal du Dimanche (2011).

<sup>30</sup> See Lacher (2012: 15).

sources, other businessmen from Gao reputed to be involved in drug trafficking had also arranged themselves with MUJAO.

Nevertheless, MUJAO should not be viewed as a mere front for narcotics smugglers. The group's actions at the peak of its influence, in 2012, have often been inconsistent with the interests of drug trafficking networks. Ideology clearly played a major role in MUJAO's efforts at instituting local order in Gao, including heavy-handed enforcement of corporal punishments. The group's suicide attacks on Algerian security forces at Tamanrasset (March 2012) and Ouargla (June 2012) would also seem to contradict the interests of a smuggling network seeking to avoid attracting attention. It is more plausible to assume that MUJAO's component elements "have multiple and overlapping motivations".<sup>31</sup> Moreover, the alliances of convenience some businessmen-cum-smugglers established with MUJAO over the past years have at least partly broken down under the pressure of the French intervention.

The involvement of MUJAO members or allies in drug trafficking notwithstanding, there are reasons to believe that AQIM has not been a major player in regional narcotics smuggling networks. For example, several instances of clashes between warring factions over drug shipments have been documented between 2007 and 2010 in northern Mali, but in no instance was AQIM known to have been a party to these clashes – the groups involved were generally described by their association with rival tribal factions.<sup>32</sup> The fact that AQIM does not feature in such accounts also undermines the credibility of widespread assertions that AQIM, short of being a player in its own right in the narcotics business, levied taxes or provided protection to drug convoys.<sup>33</sup>

Whereas some notorious northern Malian drug smugglers have been associated with MUJAO, others have made deliberate tactical choices to distance themselves from AQIM, or ally themselves with other armed groups. One example is the militias mobilized by the Malian security apparatus in the Timbuktu and Gao regions under former President Amadou Toumani Touré. In Timbuktu, the militias were led by businessmen reputed to be involved in drug smuggling, including Dina Ould Daya,<sup>34</sup> Oumar Ould Ahmed, and Moulay Ahmed, their interests converging with Touré's in combating the rebellion of Ibrahim Bahanga, who had been threatening smuggling routes.<sup>35</sup> When the conflict erupted in 2012, these militias formed the National Front for the Liberation of Azawad (FNLA) and as such paved the way for AQIM's takeover of Timbuktu.<sup>36</sup> In parallel, Moulay Ahmed reportedly also maintained close relations with MUJAO.<sup>37</sup> Subsequently, however, the group distanced itself from AQIM and garrisoned its forces near the Mauritanian and Algerian borders. After renaming itself the Arab Movement of Azawad (MAA), the group eventually adopted a low profile and joined another Arab political grouping, causing major controversies among members of the Malian Arab communities who sought to exclude drug traffickers from their political platform.<sup>38</sup> (At a meeting in June 2012, Arab community leaders had explicitly distanced themselves from the FNLA/MAA due to the latter's criminal activities, and had founded a separate organization, al-Karama. Following the French intervention, parts of al-Karama – including its president, Mohamed Mahmoud al-Oumrani – jointly created a new body together with the MAA, while others in al-Karama rejected this move and suspended al-Oumrani from the organization.) In June 2013, the MAA signed a declaration confirming its support for the agreement reached between the Malian government and the MNLA, France's ally in Kidal region since January 2013.<sup>39</sup> The MAA thereby appears well-positioned to take

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<sup>31</sup> Lebovich 2012. Also see *The Moor Next Door* (2012).

<sup>32</sup> See US Embassy Bamako (2007, 2010); Scheele (2009: 88).

<sup>33</sup> See, for example, Le Roux (2012) and Diffalah (2013).

<sup>34</sup> Ould Daya is among the suspected drug traffickers against whom the Malian authorities issued arrest warrants in January 2013. See 22 Septembre (2013).

<sup>35</sup> US Embassy Bamako (2009b).

<sup>36</sup> Lacher (2012: 16).

<sup>37</sup> Interviews, Nouakchott and Bamako, July 2012.

<sup>38</sup> Diop (2013).

<sup>39</sup> CMFPR and MAA (2013).

part in any eventual political settlement of the conflict. As such, figures said to be involved in drug smuggling positioned themselves on all sides of the conflict in northern Mali – including within the MNLA. For example, prominent MNLA (and, temporarily, Ansar Dine) figure and member of Parliament Deyti Ag Sidimou is being sought by both the Algerian and Malian authorities for alleged involvement in narcotics smuggling.<sup>40</sup>

In sum, AQIM and MUJAO have been neither the only nor the most prominent groups involved in drug smuggling in northern Mali – an area that, in turn, is by no means indispensable to transnational drug smuggling across West Africa. From West African coastal states, cocaine can take maritime, air or overland routes that are highly flexible and change rapidly in response to enforcement efforts. The UN Office on Drugs and Crime believes that overall quantities of cocaine smuggled across West Africa have declined significantly since 2007/8.<sup>41</sup> This decline is likely to have been even more significant for the Sahel-Sahara overland route. During 2007-10, repeated clashes over cocaine shipments and the 2009 ‘Air Cocaine’ incident in northern Mali suggested that the Saharan overland route was being used for large-scale cocaine smuggling. Since mid-2010, however, there have been neither seizures of cocaine, nor documented clashes over cocaine shipments along the overland route. This is unlikely to be solely due to evasion of controls, since major quantities of hashish continue to be seized in Mauritania, Niger, Algeria and Libya.<sup>42</sup> When cocaine has been seized in Mali, Niger and Algeria during 2011-13, this has generally been at the airports in Bamako, Niamey and Algiers.<sup>43</sup> There is no reason to assume that AQIM or MUJAO would play any role in cocaine smuggling via international airports – contrary to overland smuggling across the Sahara, the involvement of extremist groups in trafficking via air couriers would provide no benefits and only raise the risks for smuggling networks.

The other major narcotics flow across the region – that of Moroccan hashish transiting the Sahel-Sahara from West to East, or moving to Libya for onwards smuggling to Europe or Egypt – is continuing, but is equally showing signs of flexibility. During 2012, Algeria has registered a major increase in seizures; in addition, there have been aborted attempts at large-scale maritime shipments from Morocco via Libya.<sup>44</sup> At the same time, increasing amounts of narcotics appeared to be passing through the part of Mali still under government control during 2012, as opposed to northern Mali.<sup>45</sup> Taken together, this would suggest that northern Mali has become less attractive for the Sahel-Sahara overland route since 2011.<sup>46</sup> At the least, there is little evidence to suggest that AQIM’s and MUJAO’s control over parts of northern Mali during 2012 constituted a boon for regional smuggling networks.

AQIM and MUJAO, as well as their ally Ansar Dine, emerged as the leading military forces in northern Mali during 2012. It is obvious that this development would not have been possible without solid financial backing. Based on the analysis above, drug smuggling is unlikely to have been the primary source of finance for AQIM, though it may have made a significant contribution to MUJAO’s war chest. When searching for the sources of extremist financing in the Sahel, the kidnapping business provides a more plausible answer. Both groups undoubtedly made major profits from kidnapping Western nationals. The Canadian and numerous European governments paid ransoms that can be estimated to have totaled between \$40m and \$65m between 2008 and 2012 – possibly even more.<sup>47</sup> In northern Mali, ransom payments of this scale turned AQIM and MUJAO into major military forces, and into attractive allies for local elites.

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<sup>40</sup> Mandraud (2011); Niangaly (2011); La Dépêche (2012); 22 Septembre (2013).

<sup>41</sup> UNODC (2013).

<sup>42</sup> On Mauritania and Niger, see Al Akhbar (2013a, 2013b), Le Sahel (2012), Gouvernement du Niger (2013). On Algeria and Libya, see Yacoub (2012); AFP (2013); Oufella (2013).

<sup>43</sup> See, for example, Le Sahel (2012), Ministère de la Justice (2013), El Watan (2012a, 2012b).

<sup>44</sup> Yacoub (2012); AFP (2013); Oufella (2013).

<sup>45</sup> Lebovich (2013a).

<sup>46</sup> Frintz (2013).

<sup>47</sup> Lacher (2012: 9)

## 4 BEYOND THE DRUG-TERROR NEXUS IN THE SAHEL-SAHARA

Rather than being a direct consequence of involvement in drug trafficking, the rise of AQIM and MUJAO has had common causes with the growth of narcotics smuggling across the region. Criminal networks were able to flourish because they were often controlled by members of local elites and state agents, who have been using the proceeds for personal enrichment and as a political resource.<sup>48</sup> This applies to both drug trafficking and kidnap-for-ransom, the latter activity providing the basis for arrangements between local elites and extremist groups.

With regard to drug trafficking, the implication of state agents as well as political and business elites is well documented. A prominent example are the militias raised by former Malian President Touré, as outlined above. The names of prominent businessmen and mayors from the Gao region have consistently surfaced in relation to the 'Air Cocaine' incident.<sup>49</sup> In August 2007, Lieutenant Colonel Lamana Ould Bou, a Malian army officer with close ties to then head of state security, mediated in a clash over a cocaine shipment, arranging the return of the shipment in exchange for a payment. Bou was later killed by AQIM, an incident that was consistently explained as the result of disagreements over an arms deal.<sup>50</sup> In Mauritania, Sid'Ahmed Ould Taya, the former president's nephew and Interpol liaison officer in Mauritania, was found to be involved in a 2007 cocaine transaction at Nouadhibou airport. Sidi Mohamed Ould Haidallah, the son of another former president, was arrested and found guilty by a Moroccan court in relation with this case.<sup>51</sup> In Niger, cases of narcotics and weapons smuggling have been linked to an advisor to former President Mamadou Tandja, prominent businessmen and senior figures in the party currently ruling Niger, as well former Tuareg rebel leaders who are now in senior positions.<sup>52</sup> During the first half of 2013, multiple sources in Niamey and Tripoli consistently suggested that a new smuggling network had been established in southern Libya by former leading figures in Niger Tuareg rebellions, a Qadhafi-era Libyan general and a businessman-cum-senator from a southern Algerian province.<sup>53</sup>

Until the French intervention, there were also obvious links of complicity between state agents and AQIM or MUJAO over the kidnapping business. Close allies of Touré – including some of the same figures reputed to be involved in drug smuggling – mediated in ransom negotiations, as did an advisor to the President of Burkina Faso.<sup>54</sup> Facilitators in hostage negotiations are said to have taken cuts in ransom payments,<sup>55</sup> which explains why AQIM and MUJAO were able to establish alliances with local elites, and why the Malian state by and large failed to move against the extremist groups until the eruption of armed conflict in 2012.

In sum, drug trafficking – together with smuggling in a wide variety of other goods – is a major source for enrichment in the Sahara. To succeed in this business, smugglers need logistics, a regional network, weapons, and political protection. At the same time, the profits generated from drug smuggling have a profound impact on local socio-political structures, enabling traffickers to buy weapons, influence and social standing. This explains why drug smuggling in the Sahel-Sahara is so closely linked with both members of the political and business establishments, and leaders of armed groups – including extremist groups such as MUJAO.

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<sup>48</sup> Frintz (2013).

<sup>49</sup> Tlemçani (2010), Daniel (2012: 168-69), Lacher (2012: 12), Oberlé (2013).

<sup>50</sup> See Lacher (2012: 12-13), US Embassy Bamako (2007, 2008).

<sup>51</sup> Amourag A. (2008), BBC (2010).

<sup>52</sup> Guichaoua (2009: 12-16), RFI (2011), Diallo (2012), Niger Dépêches (2013), Rühl (2013: 49-51).

<sup>53</sup> Interviews, Niamey and Tripoli, February – April 2013.

<sup>54</sup> Lacher (2012: 13-15).

<sup>55</sup> US Embassy Bamako (2008, 2009c).



## 5 CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The rise of AQIM and MUJAO has been closely related to their involvement in criminal activities – particularly kidnap-for-ransom, but also drug trafficking. Yet, reducing the narcotics smuggling problem in the Sahel-Sahara to a ‘narcoterrorism’ phenomenon is misleading – and counterproductive.<sup>56</sup> Talk of an alleged drug-terrorism nexus diverts attention from the much more profound problems that allowed drug trafficking to thrive in the region: the deep involvement of state agents and members of local elites in organized crime, including narcotics smuggling. If extremist groups were the primary actors involved in trans-Saharan drug smuggling, the French-led offensive against AQIM and MUJAO in Mali could be expected to significantly reduce the drug trade. But in fact, leading players in the regional smuggling business are well-positioned to return with a settlement of the conflict, whether on the side of insurgent groups or on that of the Malian state.

For states such as Mauritania, Mali and Niger, the question boils down to ‘controlling smuggling, or losing the North’.<sup>57</sup> By relying on local allies in their northern regions, these governments are tempted or forced to turn a blind eye to local elites’ involvement in weapons or drugs smuggling. Governments in the region are caught in a dilemma: allies with access to profits from smuggling can rapidly build a power base of their own and eventually challenge central government control. Variations of this dilemma have been playing out over the past two years in southern Libya, northern Mali and Niger.

Based on this analysis, the WACD should advocate an understanding of drug trafficking that recognizes the central issue of complicity and involvement by state agents and influential players – including in countries where governments and elites prefer to point the finger at extremist groups. The WACD should actively discourage reductionist approaches seeking to shed all blame for drug trafficking on extremist groups. Counter-narcotics cannot be reduced to counter-terrorism in the Sahel-Sahara region. An effective approach to counter-narcotics in the region would include support to the reform of governance strategies and the strengthening of mechanisms holding state officials and local elites accountable. Moreover, where local elites voice resistance to the growing role of criminal activities – such as during the meeting of northern Malian Arab communities in June 2012 – external actors can offer recognition and support to local initiatives.

External assistance in the domain of counter-narcotics has to date focused on building up the technical capacities of law enforcement agencies. While this is undoubtedly important, technical assistance will not succeed unless it is coupled with a tougher approach by governments towards known drug smugglers among the political and business elites. In this respect, the transnational nature of narcotics smuggling networks could represent an opportunity for governments in the Sahel-Sahara: investigations into transactions that took place on national territory, but involved nationals of a neighbouring country, could allow counter-narcotics agencies and judicial authorities to sidestep the political pressure they could be exposed to when pursuing influential players in their own state. Even where such investigations do not lead to arrest and extradition, they would likely discourage governments from awarding senior political positions and prestige to drug trafficking suspects. The WACD should therefore not only promote closer cooperation among law enforcement and judicial officials across the region, but also explicitly advocate a stronger focus on prosecuting nationals of neighbouring countries in narcotics cases.

The West African coastal states clearly remain the key regional hubs for cocaine smuggling. In contrast, hashish smuggling and extremist networks are Saharan, rather than Sahelian. Almost all episodes outlined in this paper have underlined the importance of networks that straddle the Sahara: the area of concern not only includes the ECOWAS members Niger and Mali, but also Mauritania,

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<sup>56</sup> A similar argument is made by the International Crisis Group (2013: 28).

<sup>57</sup> Antil 2010.

Western Sahara, Morocco, Algeria, Libya, and Chad. Strengthening cooperation among ECOWAS states is not enough: the WACD should promote efforts by Sahel governments to reach out to North African neighbours, and encourage trans-Saharan cooperation on counter-narcotics and counter-terrorism.

Finally, this paper has also highlighted that involvement of MUJAO and parts of AQIM in drug trafficking has been closely associated with arrangements established with local elites over the kidnap-for-ransom business. Many of the same actors emerge as sponsors or profiteers from kidnappings and as drug smugglers. At the same time, ransom payments are likely to have been a more important source of income for both extremist groups. Though the kidnapping business as such falls outside the WACD's remit, the WACD should support regional efforts aiming at banning ransom payments. Should foreign powers continue to exert pressure on regional governments to facilitate ransom deals or releases of convicted criminals as part of such deals, the WACD should publicly denounce such transactions, and encourage regional governments to do the same.

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