



Traffickers and Terrorists: drugs and violent jihad in Mali and the wider Sahel

Key points

- In order to understand the relationship between terrorism and drugs in Mali and the region, we need to appreciate the underlying context that pre-dates both: a complex network of social relations, with Islam at its heart, that builds reciprocity and facilitates trade; and regional states that lack a monopoly of control over territory and with compromised capacity to prevent criminality and violence. Taken together, with an expedient theological worldview, these elements have allowed the drugs trade to grow in northern Mali which, in turn, has been used by terrorist groups for their own ends.
- In the absence of effective state control across national territory, social and trading networks span borders, tying the Sahara together, creating norms and reciprocal relationships that facilitate commerce. **Northern Mali and the wider region is not ungoverned space. It is differently governed space.**
- Much cross-border trade in the Sahel is illegal. But there is a **big qualitative difference between basic supplies needed for survival and the drugs business**, whose vast rewards distort fragile social and political relations.
- The **Sahelian trade in arms, cigarettes and drugs** grew during the 1990s. The drugs trade accelerated dramatically in northern Mali and the region from the early 2000s. The hashish business, originating from Morocco, is well established. A range of evidence shows that Mali has played a role in cocaine trafficking across the Sahara. While thought to be relatively small, it is difficult to establish the quantities involved or the longevity of operations.
- Strictly speaking Islamic theology prohibits the consumption of drugs but does not explicitly warn against selling them to support Islam. As slavers historically accommodated their faith with their trade, those who wish to can adapt Islamic tenets for their own ends. In the Sahel, **proximity to drugs trafficking can be justified as a way of supporting a “good” Islamic lifestyle.**
- **The term “narco-terrorism” does not accurately describe a reality: terrorists are usually not the same as drugs traffickers. But they are useful to each other** for political and social power, access to resources and for personal connections. Mokhtar Belmokhtar from al-Murabitun is a known smuggler. The Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJWA), also now in al-Murabitun, appears to be the terrorist group most integrated with drug networks and has counted known smugglers among its backers. Al-Qaeda in the Lands of the Islamic Maghreb (AQ-IM) has had a more distanced relationship, charging transit fees for drugs convoys, but also with some sympathy among smugglers.
- Most experts agree that French-led military intervention in Mali in January 2013 has disrupted existing drugs trafficking networks, which may have spread into Niger, Mauritania and Libya. But better information and research is needed for a more complete picture.

Policy implications

- **Dismantling organised criminal groups will deprive terrorists** of important facilitative networks.
- **Tackling weak states will be essential** to this task. Weak governance is at the heart of the problem both of organised crime and terrorism.
- Such a policy will also need to consider that:
 - pursuing criminals runs the risk of raising tensions within and between ethnic groups
 - “good” illicit trade (food, fuel, basic supplies) and “bad” illicit trade (drugs, arms, people) should be disaggregated to safeguard the survival of ordinary communities
 - an important part of success will be to provide youths with viable alternatives to the drugs trade
- **More research** is needed for a better picture of the state of drugs trafficking networks in the Sahel following the French-led intervention in Mali from January 2013.

Introduction

1. Northern Mali has become well known as a region where terrorism has been able to flourish. A base for AQ-IM's regional operations for a decade, it was overrun by a rebel-jihadi alliance in April 2012. With the French-led military intervention from January 2013, AQ-IM and its allies lost their urban territory but links in 2013 to terrorist attacks in Algeria (January) and Niger (May) have highlighted their regional reach. Organised criminal networks – particularly involving drugs – are another important element to Malian and regional instability. But it is not always clear where the terrorists stop and the criminals start. Some commentators separate them, while others define “narco-terrorism” as a major problem.
2. This paper aims to shed light on the links between the drugs trade and terrorist groups in Mali and the region. The first section discusses Sahelian trading routes, licit and illicit exchange, the growth of the drugs trade, the importance of social relations and state complicity. The next section looks at the trade's links to terrorist groups, starting with the theological context and then examining what have been northern Mali's three main terrorist groupings: AQ-IM, MUJWA and the Signed in Blood Battalion. The paper finishes with a glance at developments since January's military intervention.

The Malian Context

Sahel trading and drugs routes

3. Trade has been at the heart of Saharan life for generations. Before West Africa's coastal links to Europe developed after the 16th century, merchants exchanged gold, salt, slaves and other commodities between North and West Africa. Although trans-Saharan trade lost out to coastal commerce and French regulations from the end of the 19th century, routes persisted post-independence. And they were greatly reinvigorated in the 1970s and 1980s, taking advantage of new state borders and price differentials. Traders began

to sell subsidised Algerian and Libyan goods in northern Mali and Niger. When profits were hit in the 1990s as North African subsidies were withdrawn under IMF pressure, traders looked for new products. Alongside cigarettes and arms, the drugs trade developed. It grew considerably in Mali from the early 2000s.

4. Drugs trading in the Sahel involves two major commodities.¹ Marijuana, right up to the present crisis in Mali, was transported from northern Morocco to northern Mauritania, crossing Mali into Niger. From there, it split either north to Libya and the Balkans or east through Chad and Sudan towards the Middle East. There is not a reliable estimate of the quantities involved on this route, although the Mauritanian security services have been reported by an academic to estimate that at least a third of the hashish from Morocco (with Afghanistan the world's foremost source country) followed it in the late 2000s.
5. The other is cocaine. West Africa's role as a transit region rose dramatically from 2005 as South American cartels sought to avoid more effective law enforcement on traditional routes and to open new European markets to supplement the maturing US market. Most of the cocaine arrives at one of the coastal states – predominately Guinea Bissau (plus Guinea, Senegal and Mauritania) and the Gulf of Guinea (particularly Togo, Benin and Ghana) – and is then transported by land, boat or air. The UNODC has estimated that in 2008 14% of Europe's cocaine transited West Africa (making that portion of the trade worth \$1 bn). Despite a probable fall in through-travel from 2009 (seizures dropped) West Africa remains an important drug trafficking transit route.
6. Mali has played a role in cocaine transit between West Africa and Europe. Diplomats in Bamako reported in 2008 that cocaine enters Mali from Guinea and Guinea Bissau; a seizure of 750kg in Tinzawaten the same year showed that it was reaching the far north of the country. In 2010 reports emerged of inter-tribal conflict in northern Mali over cocaine trading. An anthropologist who spent months around the Mali-Algeria border reports on one overland route: drugs from Colombia arrive by boat through Nouadibhou (Mauritania), where they are picked up by drivers from Western Sahara refugee camps. They are handed to traders (mostly Malian Arabs and Tuareg, but also including Mauritians, Nigeriens and Chadians) connected to In Khalil, a northern Malian smuggling hub. From there they travel through Niger into Chad, where new couriers direct them to Sudan, Egypt, Israel and Eastern Europe. As well as overland routes, a number of aircraft carrying cocaine were recorded in 2009 and 2010 landing in northern Mali, the most famous of which was a Boeing known as "Air Cocaine".
7. It is difficult to quantify the amounts of cocaine that have transited Mali. There is little evidence for sustained major flows on any single route. And there is no sign that Air Cocaine, which carried a very large quantity of cocaine, was part of a routine operation. Few incidents in the region since early 2011 means there is minimal evidence available to make an assessment on the evolution of routes and quantities since the Libyan civil war and crisis in Mali.
8. Three more developments over the past decade deserve mention. First, rising drugs consumption in wealthy Gulf states means that some of the trans-Sahel trade ends up there. Second, there is increasing drugs consumption in West Africa itself (regional

¹ Heroin also enters the region but trafficking (from Pakistan) has fallen sharply from a high in 2001

cannabis use is twice the global average; cocaine use is growing and UNODC estimated 1.6m users in West and Central Africa in 2012). So, not all hashish and cocaine that enter West Africa is intended for Europe. Third, from 2009 onwards methamphetamine production within the region (notably Nigeria) has been rising, changing the relationship between internal and external traffickers.

Trust and tensions among Sahelian traders

9. Social and family connections are the backbone of everything in the Sahara. Without an effective state presence, these networks provide security and reciprocity in an otherwise anarchic and unpredictable environment. The region is therefore best understood not as an “ungoverned space.” It *is* governed, just not in the conventional sense. Understandings between different groups govern long-distance trade. The marijuana route is split into segments, with different tribes or clans responsible for each, including Tekna, Berabiche and Kounta Arabs as well as Tuareg. Connections between tribes are sealed through marriage.
10. These connections mean families and economic interests span borders. Malian Kounta Arabs maintain strong links with their kin in northern Mauritania and eastern Niger. Berabiche Arab networks also straddle Mali and Mauritania. In northern Mali, indigenous Arabs and Tuareg have gradually become more important traders relative to their Algerian neighbours and relatives, who dominated business after the colonial period. But strong ties are maintained. The cross-border linkage means north-eastern Mali’s economy (especially in Kidal and Tessalit) is more linked to Algeria than to the rest of Mali. Such connections allow successful traders to spread their assets over a vast area. A businessman may move seamlessly between his warehouses in Algeria (places like Adrar or Tamanrasset), livestock in northern Mali and property in Bamako.
11. Drugs and other illicit trade plays into the complex and at times strained dynamic between northern Mali’s tribal groupings. An Arab sub-group, the *Tilemsi*² have traditionally been subordinate to the Kounta Arabs. But they dominate commerce in the region between Gao and Kidal, especially illicit traffic. Well-connected to Algerian Arabs, the Tilemsi branched into cigarettes and arms, including through links to Malian refugee camps in Algeria (where smuggling was rife) from the 1970s to 1990s. The *Lamhar* clan is particularly powerful and own the most expensive villas in Gao, a district locally known as “Cocaine City”. For the Tilemsi, drugs (as well as cigarettes and arms) offer previously unheard of opportunities for social progression. Their new-found confidence led them to stop paying a traditional tribute to the Kounta in the early 2000s and they began to stand in local elections, with some success.

Smuggling networks and State roles: “Air Cocaine”

12. As well as social ties, state officials play a role in regional illicit trade. One example is the 2009 case of a wrecked Boeing 727 found in Tarkint, northern Mali. According to a Malian state prosecutor, the plane carried between 7 and 11 tons of cocaine that was

² The Tilemsi Valley is formed by a seasonal river that runs on a north-south axis between Bourem (north of Gao) and Aguelhok (near Kidal). The Tilemsi Arabs established themselves in the late 19th century when they migrated from Mauritania to help the Kounta Arabs in their fight against a powerful Tuareg Federation, the Iwelmeden. Locally, Tilemsi Arabs are known as *Tangara Arabs*, after a village between Gao and Kidal.

smuggled overland to Morocco by a network including Spanish, French, Moroccan, Malian, and Senegalese nationals. It was then set alight or crashed on takeoff. Tilemsi Arabs were suspected of involvement in the landing, including a local mayor and governmental adviser. Arrests were made by the Malian security forces, but suspects were quietly released in 2012.

Drugs and Terrorism

Islamic theology and practice

13. Islamic theology forbids the consumption of drugs. Qur'an Surah 2 Verse 90 reveals that, "intoxicants. . . are an abomination – of Satan's handiwork: eschew such (abomination), that ye may prosper." However it does not explicitly warn against handling or selling intoxicants to support Islam. Some jihadists argue they are only bound to prohibit vice (including drugs) when they are in full control of the land and that when they are not, such demands do not apply. Others argue that if the arbiters of the land – such as the Tuareg – permit drugs smuggling then Islamists can do the same. In the end, as with petty criminality for fundraising, Salafi-jihadists take an 'ends justify the means' approach: they are not consuming and the proceeds are put towards what many see as their greatest obligation, of supporting the mujahideen in their violent *jihad*.

Islamic theology and narcotics in a Sahelian context

14. Islam and trade in the Sahel have typically gone hand in hand. Before modern states governed regional trade, Islamic law created a common framework for exchange over long distances and between different clans and ethnic groups. And tribal expansion often involved religious and business elements at the same time. One example is the Arab *Kounta* tribe, a *qadiriyya* sufi federation. As it became established in northern Mali and the surrounding region in the 17th century, its religious students became deeply involved in and eventually dominated regional trade, especially of salt. The *Kounta* grew rich and developed an elite commercial and spiritual status among Arab groups in the Mali region.

15. This mixing of religion and trade has led to ethical debates about what to sell and who to sell it to. In the past, this concerned questions around slavery. In modern-day northern Mali, Islam and drug trafficking have a complicated relationship. The local term for smuggling describes a respectable activity that encompasses a wide range of exchange and continues in the tradition of Saharan trading. It includes in particular the diverse range of goods which cross the Mali-Algeria border, a largely illegal activity. Such trade is categorised differently from "illicit smuggling", which is generally seen as immoral by "respectable" Arabs in northern Mali.

16. But lines are blurred. Drugs traffickers' money pays for an otherwise "moral" Islamic life. It often funds the religious education of relatives. Mosques in In Khalil have been built by traffickers. Some are also active in missionary groups, including *Tablighi Jama'at*, the controversial Pakistan-based movement that had an impact on the elite Ifoghas clan of the Tuareg – including Ansar Dine leader Iyad Ag Ghali – in the late 1990s and pushed some towards extremism. For those so inclined, Islamic piety and drugs trading can be accommodated.

Terrorist involvement with drugs trafficking

17. Terrorist networks and activities overlap existing social frameworks and state actors – and their implication in drug trafficking – in complicated ways. But a common thread is the utility of smugglers and jihadis to each other.
18. Mokhtar Belmokhtar, head of the **Signed in Blood Battalion**, and now a senior commander in the new **al-Murabitun** ('The Sentinels') group is known for being a violent jihadist. But he also has a reputation as a smuggler. Since the 1990s this Algerian has been a cigarette trafficker (earning the nickname "Mr Marlboro") and regional arms trader. Developing his network of influence, such activity gained him associates among Mali's Tilemsi Arab smugglers who later became so important to MUJWA. Belmokhtar also married into the Berabiche Arabs near Timbuktu and into the Malian Tuareg. The extent of his links to the drugs trade is unclear. In an interview in 2012 he said that drugs trafficking was "outlawed. . . by Allah." But his "rock star" reputation among Sahelian youths stems from ownership of considerable resources. His cigarette smuggling would certainly give him the links and opportunities needed to enter or facilitate the drugs trade.
19. A range of reporting links **AQ-IM** with drugs. Some members reportedly visited Guinea Bissau in 2010 to arrange deals with Latin American networks. But rather than buying and selling, this and other reporting appears to point to route facilitation. A French expert has found that in the late 2000s, AQ-IM provided protection to cocaine convoys and charged transit fees (10% of the convoy value) for areas under its control. His research is supported by separate cases in 2009 and 2010, when drugs smugglers arrested in Ghana and Mali admitted to securing AQ-IM's protection across northern Mali. Another case in Mauritania in 2011 revealed that \$50,000 was the price to guarantee a hashish convoy through AQ-IM territory. Was such activity directed by AQ-IM's leadership? It is likely that there would have been tacit acceptance from its overall head, Abdelmalik Drukdal, but that the details would have been left to the very autonomous battalion commanders in northern Mali.
20. Drugs smugglers have otherwise been useful to AQ-IM. A former Malian MP and a mediator in AQ-IM kidnaps has reported that the group used to give traffickers a portion of multi-million dollar hostage payments in return for access to vehicles, arms, medical supplies and electronics. Such trading links, together with AQ-IM's social connections help to explain how the group managed to gain control of northern Mali in 2012. As Timbuktu's defences crumbled in April that year, key Berabiche businessmen and reputed drugs traffickers with influence among the town's militias, arranged for control to be passed to AQ-IM rather than rivals in the National Movement for the Liberation of the Azawad.
21. **The Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa's** (MUJWA) (now re-merged with Belmokhtar's group under the guise of al-Murabitun) suicide bombing attacks in Algeria in 2012 and against Malian and Tuareg forces in 2013 revealed a jihadist core to this AQ-IM spin-off. But it has also had strong ties to the drugs trade. A range of Arab drug smugglers supported or accommodated MUJWA's occupation of Gao in 2012. MUJWA has been a coalition of jihadist and criminal elements, whose different interests have at times created tensions. Bilal Hicham, one of MUJWA's few black commanders quit in November 2012, complaining to AFP that "[t]hese lunatics from [MUJWA] are not

children of God, they are drug traffickers. They do everything which goes against Islam.” Hicham explained that his bosses had prevented him from stopping a drugs convoy in Gao.

22. Drugs traffickers have been useful to MUJWA. Apart from their wealth, their strong presence in Gao allowed the group to secure and control the town between April 2012 and January 2013. And they have provided important regional connections. These have extended west, as far as Western Sahara. And to the East, Arab smugglers from the Niger Republic are also linked to Gao- and Timbuktu-based Arab criminals.
23. MUJWA have also been useful to Malian traffickers. For Tilemsi Arabs, it has provided reinforcement against regional smuggling rivals. These include Kounta Arabs and their allies among the Tuareg (especially the Ifoghas clan), with whom past competition over drugs trafficking has led to violent clashes. This complex and intelligent interaction with local groups means MUJWA, and now their successor, al-Murabitun, may have been better implanted into northern Mali than AQ-IM.
24. How does trafficking compare with other revenue streams for terrorist groups? The above three groups gain most money from kidnap for ransom (KfR). Estimates vary, but AQ-IM alone have probably gained over \$40 million in ransoms since 2003. Both trafficking and KfR favour its Sahelian (Malian) battalions over its Algerian ones, although some income is shared northwards. Al-Murabitun are more intimately involved in trafficking than AQ-IM, but (as MUJWA) gained probably \$15m from kidnaps in their short existence (and still have four hostages). So, it is unlikely drugs provide most of their income, either. But KfR money is 'lumpy': it arrives in fits and starts and requires luck and patience. By comparison, day-to-day trafficking provides a relatively stable income source. Trafficking also helps the groups integrate into social and economic life in the north. And it permits them to avoid the glare of the compromised state which has no interest in shutting down these routes, even if terrorists are benefitting directly or indirectly.

Post-Intervention

25. Drug trafficking routes have probably been disrupted by the French military intervention in Mali in January 2013. A Mauritanian seizure of drugs, including cocaine, coming from Mali in April 2013 showed that some trade is continuing. But press reporting indicates that smugglers now have a reduced profile in Mali and are using alternative routes, including northern Niger, especially around Agadez and Arlit. Some reporting suggests that southern Libya is fast becoming a new hub for regional terrorist and trafficking activity, including the Salvador Pass on the frontier between Libya, Algeria and Niger. El Khabar, an Algerian newspaper, reported in May that AQ-IM was exchanging weapons with Libyan rebels for drugs which, if true, confirms the growing importance of fragility in Libya but also suggests more of an active role for AQ-IM in buying and selling drugs. In short, then, trafficking routes appear fungible: they can be replicated and reproduced according to the path of least resistance. Networks are flexible and can prove dynamic, too.
26. But if routes have altered, links between traffickers and Malian officials have remained. Following the French liberation, the Mayor of Gao was seen walking around town in

February 2013 with a notorious trafficker and MUJWA facilitator. An angry mob gathered and he was handed to the gendarmerie but fled after a bribe was reportedly paid. He was eventually arrested.

Conclusion

In order to understand the relationship between terrorism and drugs in Mali and the region, we first need to appreciate the underlying context that pre-dates both: a complex network of social relations, with Islam at its heart, that builds reciprocity and facilitates trade; and regional states that lack a monopoly of control over territory and with compromised capacity to prevent criminality and violence. Taken together, with an expedient theological worldview, these elements have allowed the drugs trade to grow in northern Mali which, in turn, has been used by terrorist groups for their own ends. Terrorism and drugs trafficking are not one and the same. Terms like “narco-terrorism” conflate related but separate elements that nevertheless stem from the same political problem: weak or complicit governments. But if political power is at the heart of the problem, it must be central to the solution. Winning the war against both trafficking and terrorism will mean building and maintaining the legitimacy of the state in the region.

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