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Links Between Terrorism, Organized Crime and Crime: The Case of the Sahel Region

Erik Alda* and Joseph L. Sala†

Many observers hold that terrorist groups and transnational criminal networks share many of the same characteristics, methods and tactics. There are many examples cited to demonstrate these observations are not coincidental, but indicative of a trend: a trend that is a growing threat to the security interests of many nations. We propose that the intersection of criminal networks and terrorist organizations can be broadly grouped into three categories – coexistence (they coincidentally occupy and operate in the same geographic space at the same time), cooperation (they decide that their mutual interests are both served, or at not least severely threatened, by temporarily working together) and convergence (each begins to engage in behavior(s) that is/are more commonly associated with the other). The activities of these types of organizations in the Sahel region of Africa provide examples of all three categories of interactions. This perceived threat has prompted action and policy choices by a number of actors in the sub-region. But this assessment might not be accurate and may, in fact, be an attempt to force an extra-regional, inappropriate paradigm upon a specific situation and set of circumstances where they do not apply.

Introduction

The burned skeleton of a Boeing 727 aircraft outbound from Venezuela in November 2009, but registered in Guinea-Bissau, lays on a makeshift landing strip near Sinkrebaka, some nine miles from Gao, in remote north-eastern Mali. According to Alexandre Schmidt of the United Nations Office of Drugs and Crime (UNODC), the plane ‘unloaded cocaine and other illegal substances’ and ‘wanted to take off but crashed’ (The Telegraph 2009; Serge 2009). Investigators later determined, however, that the aircraft had been destroyed

after its illicit cargo, estimated at between seven and 11 tons of cocaine had been offloaded. In June 2011, in an action directly related to the above-mentioned aircraft, three individuals were arrested and charged with international trafficking in cocaine. On January 19, 2012, the Malian businessman was reportedly freed by Malian authorities ‘following a demand from a group of young Arabs’ whom the Malian government has called upon to assist the Malian armed forces in their fight against *Tuareg* rebels then demanding the independence of northern Mali (L’Agence France-Presse 2012).

The incident was, and continues to be, cited by many as yet more ‘evidence’ of a growing nexus between radical Islamist elements active across the Sahel (*as-Sahil* – the

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'shore' of the Saharan sea) region of northern Africa, and particularly in northern Mali, and drug traffickers and other national and trans-national criminal syndicates. This intersection of criminal networks and terrorist organizations can be broadly grouped into three categories – coexistence (they coincidentally occupy and operate in the same geographic space at the same time), cooperation (they decide that their mutual interests are both served, or at not least severely threatened, by temporarily working together) and convergence (each begins to engage in behavior(s) that is/are more commonly associated with the other).

Data to confirm these connections are virtually nonexistent. But, more and more anecdotal evidence pointing to their existence continues to emerge, particularly after the disintegration of state authority in Libya and *Tuareg* uprising and the subsequent French/West African intervention in Mali. Our research is based upon a close examination of the existing open literature and regional media, which often serves to give a voice to both the criminals and the terrorists. We have quite consciously tried to shy away from the ongoing events in Libya and Mali except where they might shed light on our hypothesis.

The Sahel is a densely layered and intricately fragmented sub-region, and the criminals and terrorists who have chosen to operate there do so as participants in existing social, political and economic environments; they are not necessarily considered as exogenous actors nor are they necessarily seen as threats. What we have tried to do is not examine in detail the criminal networks or the terrorist groups, but suggest their relationships are more complex than most observers posit. Far too often and far too easily every event in the sub-region is trumpeted as a terror threat, despite the fact that most of the 'events' were kidnappings for ransom, not only in the sub-region, but also Africa, the Middle East, Europe and the United States. Resorting to anti-terror tactics has led to an exaggerated response by

U.S. drone and support personnel in Niger and French forces intervening in Mali which has dragged West Africa militaries in for the foreseeable future. Our hypothesis would allow one to argue that the assault on In Aménas gas plant in Algeria was a hostage-taking attempt that went bad, the May 23, 2013 attacks on Agadez and Arlit in Niger were for demonstration effect and the recent killing of RFI journalists, Ghislaine Dupont and Claude Verlon on November 2013, an act of terror.

Coexistence, Cooperation and Convergence of Terrorism, Organized Crime, and Crime

The incident of the burned plane that had transported cocaine from South America to northern Mali might support the argument of potential cooperation between groups that coexist in this region. However, it is important that to determine if this perceived increasing incidence of 'cooperation' is indeed reflective of a global trend or is simply an ad-hoc convergence of factors operating across the region. Such a differentiation would also serve to determine if the willing acceptance of the 'cooperation' argument is an attempt to substitute the facile global perspective of the 'war' against *al-Qa'ida* (AQ) for a superficial understanding of the sub-regional security dynamics at play. This position is espoused most vigorously, some argue to the point of conspiratorial paranoia (Keenan 2009).

Drawing this distinction is essential because since its founding in 2007, AQIM has sought to internationalize the effort of its predecessor group, the *Groupe Salfiste pour le Prédiction et le Combat* (Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat - GSPC), beyond the borders of Algeria. The group made little progress on its own before announcing its allegiance to *al-Qa'ida* and that announcement in turn brought international attention despite the fact that its operations were initially limited to Algeria. The perceived success of AQIM has led to a continuing proliferation of AQ-branded groups that now

operate across the region. This phenomenon closely parallels the franchising of AQ around the globe. The international community has witnessed a proliferation of regional and sub-regional groups that declare they have pledged loyalty to AQ.

Drawing the necessary distinctions and differentiations allows the international community to put in place the necessary policies and prescriptions to deal with the matter, not only in the Sahel, but across the globe:

By knowing your enemies, you can find out what it is they want. Once you know what they want, you can decide whether to deny it to them and thereby demonstrate the futility of their tactics, give it to them or negotiate and give them a part of it in order to cause them to end their campaign. By knowing your enemies, you can make an assessment not just of their motives but also their capabilities and of the caliber of their leaders and their organizations (Richardson 2006: 215).

According to James R. Clapper, the United States Director of National Intelligence (DNI), these increasing transnational organized crime entities and their links to international terrorism needed to be considered among the most pressing national security concerns of the United States. The DNI detailed specific areas of interaction that included: kidnapping for ransom, human smuggling and illicit finance (Clapper 2012: 26–27).

In addition, in a review (the first in 15 years) of transnational organized crime, the international and intelligence community underscored the argument that a 'threatening crime-terror nexus' was a key threat to U.S. national security:

Terrorists and insurgents increasingly will turn to crime to generate funding and will acquire logistical support from criminals, in part because of successes by U.S. agencies and partner

nations in attacking other sources of their funding. In some instances, terrorists and insurgents prefer to conduct criminal activities themselves; when they cannot do so, they turn to outside individuals and facilitators... U.S. intelligence, law enforcement and military services have reported that more than 40 foreign terrorist organizations have links to the drug trade (National Intelligence Council 2011).

But is there a trend? All the argumentation, either thematic or specific (as in the Sahel), appears to be based on anecdotal evidence and not the clear observation of clinical symptoms. This 'evidence' in turn, is all too often based on rumors and/or accusations. We must recognize, therefore, that the plural of 'anecdote' is not 'data.' It is difficult for a casual observer to definitively determine if such cases merely provide an isolated example or are reflective of an emerging trend or demonstrate a widespread problem. Any supposed nexus must in such a case be seen as blurred, conceptually and in reality. Empirical evidence for the crime-terror link is scarce and varies over time. This makes it difficult to determine what aspects of the relationships are most significant. Such ambiguity demands much more granular information before any declaration of a nexus can be made.

It is possible to argue that it is becoming increasingly difficult at times to distinguish between international terrorists and transnational criminals. They both share operational and organizational commonalities and their actions appear to be increasingly more blurred. Research conducted by the UNODC reveals that during the past decade there has been significant increase in criminal and terrorist activity in the region (UNODC 2013). It is argued that the current security crisis in the Sahel is explained by the links between crime, organized crime and terrorism (UNODC 2013).

This paper argues that these commonalities can be grouped into several broad categories

of interaction – coexistence, cooperation and convergence. Each category includes opportunities when a terrorist/criminal partnership might serve to grow and sustain each organization, bolstering each group's capabilities, strengthening their individual infrastructures and contributing to their financial well-being. The U.S. Intelligence Community confirms that it:

...is monitoring the expanding scope and diversity of 'facilitation networks,' which include semi-legitimate travel experts, attorneys, and other types of professionals, as well as corrupt officials, who provide support services to *criminal and terrorist groups* (emphasis added) (Clapper 2013: 5).

Such links, however, might be deemed merely transactional.

In the case of coexistence, the groups might both be sharing and/or operating in the same geographic space, but there appears to be little cooperation between them. But this does not necessarily mean that the activities of each don't benefit the other. Criminal organizations and terrorist groups are both dependent upon the presence of weak governmental and law enforcement institutions. In other words, these groups thrive in the presence of a weak government, which seems to be the case in the countries of this region. Governments may simply turn a blind eye to criminal activity, or governmental institutions may simply be too weak to be able to successfully confront the criminal networks or terrorist organizations. Often those institutions are themselves coopted by criminal networks, thereby benefitting both the criminal organizations as well as the terrorist groups. The situation in Guinea-Bissau lends credence to these words of warning. As the National Intelligence Council asserted, from 2008:

...concurrent with the shift of power among nation states [, t]he relative power of various state actors – including even criminal networks – will

increase. Several countries could even be taken over and run by criminal networks (National Intelligence Council 2008: 81).

Criminalized governance benefits both criminal networks and terrorist groups and fosters an environment that is conducive to both.

Cooperation between terrorists and criminal networks takes place when each group determines that their inherent fear of contact outweigh the risks. While collaboration might deliver some mutual benefits and/or satisfy some organizational necessity, there are common disincentives to affecting such partnerships including increased and unwanted attention and surveillance, fear of compromising internal security through infiltration and the heightened prospect of capture. Such contact routinely takes the form of 'pay-as-you-go' operations, one-off instances of customer-service provider relationships. Criminal networks are likely to risk disrupting their illicit relationships with governmental institutions only for short-periods of time and only for lucrative financial returns. Terrorist organizations, on the other hand, are likely to see such contact as merely the means to an end, their self-declared ideological ends.

It is, however, an open question as to whether these short-term partnerships can mature into long-term relationships. Most observers argue that far more likely to see the convergence of terrorist and criminal groups into an organization where the two groups' separate and distinct operations are merged and conflated. The international community has already touted FARC as an example of such an organization and, most recently, the Mexican drug cartels. In fact, the term 'narco-terrorism,' it could be argued, was coined to define just such organizations. Such a phenomenon can be seen as a transition along a crime-terrorism continuum.

All of these currents have emerged in an area of little strategic importance to the outside world. However, the Sahel has long been

a sanctuary for outlaws smuggling persons, automobiles, gasoline and cigarettes. The Sahel has also seen this residual banditry merge and become intertwined with international drug smugglers using the same routes. This should, however, not be unexpected. While much of the region is uninhabited desert, all human activity – legitimate and illicit – relies on these same routes, converging on water and fuel stops.

Into this context of discontent stepped AQIM in January 2007. AQIM is the latest in a line of AQ-branded, franchise groups in the region. What distinguishes it from other AQ affiliates is the degree to which the group had been able to retain a regionally indigenous leadership who remain focused on conducting operations in the region. According to DNI's Clapper, AQIM's 'intentions and capabilities remain focused on local US and Western interests in northern and western Africa' (Clapper 2013: 5). This might, however, change in response to the intervention in Mali by France, Chad and the West African states that comprise the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS).

AQIM is deeply rooted in recent, post-independence, Algerian history. A full-fledged civil war erupted in Algeria in 1992 after Algerian government authorities cancelled a second round of parliamentary elections in response to an overwhelming and unexpected victory by 'Islamist' parties. The fighting was led by the *Groupe Islamique Armé* (Armed Islamic Group - GIA); a group composed of Algerian veterans of the war against the Soviet Union in Afghanistan. In September 1998, a GIA commander Hassan Hattab broke from the GIA and formed the GSPC. Critically, the GSPC successfully incorporated the GIA's Saharan branch (Filiu 2009: 2–4). The GIA, deeply rooted in Algeria, had kept its distance from AQ and struggled to maintain its independence, rejecting foreign participation in its *jihād*, which ended in 2003 after the leader of the GSCP was forced out by Abdelmalik Drukhal. Drukhal later sought closer ties to AQ by pledging allegiance to Osama Bin Laden (Morgan 2013; Filiu 2009).

By March 2003, the GSPC allegedly abducted 32 tourists in groups numbering from one to eight on six different occasions from the Illizi region of the Algerian Sahara. In what was arguably an instance of the industrial kidnapping for ransom industry that has come to mark the region, secret negotiations followed shortly thereafter and the hostages were released in two groups, the first in May 2003 and the second in August 2003. Interestingly, the first group that was kidnapped was freed by the Algerian army after an action that resulted in the death of nine GSPC members. But some of the kidnappers escaped. They reemerged months later in northern Mali where the remaining 14 hostages were freed after Germany, Austria and Switzerland reportedly paid a ransom of €5 million (Daniel 2012: 87–95). This incident is often considered to mark the emergence of criminal action by a terrorist group to finance its operations (Scheele 2012: 89–92; Daniel 2012: 98).

The emphasis on extra-Algerian operations was driven almost exclusively under the direction and at the instigation of a single individual who continues to dominate all aspects of any discussion of the links between organized criminal networks and terrorists across the Sahel, Mokhtar Belmokhtar ('Khalid Abu Al-Abbas'). In 2000, Belmokhtar broke with the GIA and switched his allegiance to the GSPC, managing to hold to his operational autonomy and leading the operations in Mauritania mentioned above. He slowly integrated himself into the social fabric of the region by marrying the daughter of one of the Bérabiche Arab tribal families that control the regional smuggling routes. He had already established contact with the *Tuareg* in the region during the negotiations for the release of the hostages taken in 2003. Belmokhtar was keenly aware of the fact that no activity in the region was conducted without at least the approval and consent of the local population. In direct contrast with the practices of the GSPC in Algeria, Belmokhtar did not levy 'taxes' on the local population to

support his operations (Scheele 2012: 100–105; Fisk 2013; Morgan 2013).

Belmokhtar increasingly turned to smuggling cigarettes, earning for himself the nickname ‘Mr. Marlboro’ – Marlboro being the most popular brand transported but also including Gauloises, Legend and Gold Seal. From Algeria, the cigarettes are moved to their final destination Italy. (Scheele 2012: 45–63; Morgan 2013). In the process, Belmokhtar raised his profile to the point that air strikes against his camps were recommended (The Guardian 2010). Viewed in the region as a combination of Robin Hood and the Scarlet Pimpernel, Belmokhtar is said to be ready to rob, smuggle or kidnap anyone or anything for anyone for the right price.

Belmokhtar is, however, perhaps best known for using kidnapping for ransom to finance his operations. He was behind the December 2008 kidnapping in Niger of the Special Envoy of the Secretary General of the United Nations to Niger, Canadian Robert Fowler, and his compatriot, Former Canadian Ambassador to Gabon, Louis Guay (Fowler 2011). Fowler’s kidnapping was the most noted of the kidnappings Belmokhtar was believed to have conducted, prior to the attack on In Aménas. But his and AQIM’s direct involvement in the actual abductions is an open question. Many argue that local criminals actually carry out the kidnapping and then sell the hostages to AQIM affiliates for a profit (Cristiani and Fabiani 2010). The AQIM affiliates conduct the negotiations extorting ransoms from the national governments of the hostages. This has led to the creation of ‘gangster-jihadists,’ a term most often used by French parliamentarians, 90 per cent of whose financing is derived from ransoms. The 2003 kidnapping of the 32 Europeans set a precedent. The major targets were French, because of France’s colonial past in the region, and Spanish, due to the historical myth of *al-Andalus*.¹ Americans were to be avoided because it was believed the U.S. Government would not pay ransom, but other governments would.

In early 2008, a series of kidnappings across the region unfolded. By early 2012, 42 individuals had been targeted. Five were killed or died in captivity and 24 released (Lacher 2012). While the national governments of the hostages deny paying ransoms, estimates of the total ransoms paid range from a low of US\$45 million to an Algerian estimate cited in a French parliamentary report of US\$150 million. Most observers believe that US\$90 million is the most likely figure. As Lewis and Diarra reported, a Swiss government report in 2010 confirmed the country had spent 5.5 million Swiss Francs (US\$5.9 million) in 2009 to free two Swiss nationals being held in Mali. Another report showed that 2 million Francs were allocated to pay Swiss workers who participated in the operation (Lewis and Diarra 2012: 2). Author Serge Daniel, provides ‘data’ on ransoms provided by other governments that include Spain, (between €8 and €9 million), Canada (‘some millions’), Austria (between €2.5 and €3.5 million), and Germany (€5 million) (Daniel 2012). According to David S. Cohen, U.S. Department of the Treasury Undersecretary for Terrorism and Financial Intelligence, ‘In 2010, the average ransom payment per hostage to AQIM was US\$4.5 million: in 2011, that figure was US\$5.4 million’ (Nossiter 2012). These reports were reinforced with the October 2013 release of four French hostages taken in 2010 when there were immediate reports of a ransom of €20–25 million (Berthemet 2013; Carayol and Roger 2013).

Despite his having been credited with discovering this money-making machine for AQIM, Belmokhtar chafed under the AQIM leadership in Algeria and in the end of 2012 broke with AQIM and announced the founding of his own AQ-affiliate ‘*al-Mouwakoune Bi-Dima*’ (‘Those Who Sign with Blood’). It was this battalion that was allegedly tied somehow to the attack on the gas plant facilities near In Aménas in southeastern Algeria in January 2013.

This attack brought the issue of the links between terrorists and criminal networks

before the general public in the most dramatic manner. It came only five days after the French/ECOWAS intervention in Mali which was in response to the purported threat in Mali by AQIM through its supposed affiliate *Ansar Dine*.

The hostage crisis ended with major loss of life, including at least 37 expatriate workers and 29 militants. The In Aménas incident serves as an adequate metaphor for the question of a terrorist-criminal nexus in the Sahel. The attack was immediately cast by the media and most of the international community as a terrorist act committed by AQ. It was attributed to either AQIM or '*al-Mouwakoune Bi-Dima*' and labeled as an AQ-affiliate attack. Belmokhtar lent credence to this claim when he released a video claiming responsibility for the attack. Missed, however, in most of this discussion was the fact that Belmokhtar labeled his group an AQ-affiliate but did not claim any affiliation with AQIM.

We would argue this is important as it lends credence to the argument that the attack had little to do with the French intervention in Mali (it had to have been planned well in advance of the intervention) and was more a reflection of Belmokhtar's in-fighting with AQIM leader Drukal. This dispute is personal. It did not revolve around some obscure theological distinction drawn between Sunni and Sufi interpretations of Islamic text. Belmokhtar, with the In Aménas attack, threw down a challenge to Drukal on his own territory – Algeria. In addition, the attack's timing, following so closely on the international intervention in Mali, possibly allowed Belmokhtar to assert his was the first reaction to the infidels, no matter that the attack seems, upon close examination, to have been yet another example of a kidnapping for ransom event. As has been noted in another context, the attackers were acting 'more like *Mafiosi* than *mujahideen*' (Peters 2010: 11).

The direct involvement of '*al-Mouwakoune Bi-Dima*' can also be questioned. The leader of the assault, Bouchened, asserted that

his group, 'Movement for the Sons of the Sahara for Islamic Justice' conducted the attack. The group, formed in 2007, is most often described as 'smugglers operating in Algeria.' Determining if the attack was in fact an example of the 'pay-as-you-go' operations criminal organizations have undertaken across the region before will be difficult to determine as Bouchened was killed on the second day of the siege. His death, however, might serve to explain why the kidnapping effort quickly turned into an effort to destroy the gas facility; the militants were not prepared for anything more than trying to earn money quickly. It should be noted that it was claimed that Belmokhtar was killed in a battle in the Ametahi Valley in northern Mali on March 2, 2013. His claim of conducting the attacks at Agadez and Arlit in May 2013 was clearly meant to 'refute' this claim.

Conclusion

This paper has attempted to demonstrate the link between terrorism and organized crime and crime using the Sahel region in North Africa as an example. The terrorist-criminal connection in the Sahel demonstrates, we believe, that there is a symbiotic relationship between these groups. They occupy the same geographic space at the same time and it is not coincidental. Both groups operate best in environments characterized by weak governance, and more often than not, no governance. Both maintain their ranks by drawing on the same demographic – young and dissatisfied men.

Both groups evidence cooperation when it serves their individual organizational needs and purposes. But this is done only if a determination is made that such cooperation does not result in increased scrutiny by the authorities. Criminals will provide terrorist with whatever they require provided the price is right, and the proliferation of kidnappings for ransom across the Sahel shows that that includes hostages. Terrorists, in turn, are prepared to engage in, or at least tolerate, criminal activities if they serve their

needs. This explains why criminals kidnap hostages and terrorists negotiate their ransom. Terrorists in the Sahel, in contrast to the FARC, do not traffic in drugs; they simply force established traffickers to pay a 'tax' for transporting the drugs across territory they control. The terrorists, ever sensitive to the local social and political dynamics, do not seek to interfere with established practices.

The groups operating in the Sahel do not, however, demonstrate a great deal of convergence. Separate institutions continue to mark their operations in the region. Terrorist groups have not yet demonstrated a willingness to cultivate in-house criminal expertise. They simply prefer to draw upon a broad and deep pool of expertise that can be found across the region. As long as the price paid for such support remains within reason, they are unlikely to turn away from it. Ideological or theocratic purity may also preclude such a possibility. But the increased proliferation of AQ-labeled groups, across the region may preview the development of such capabilities.

Notes

- ¹ Parts of the Iberian Peninsula under Muslim rule from the 8th to the 15th centuries and its loss through the Spanish 'Reconquista.'

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