An assessment of crime related risks in the Sahel

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The Sahel, a vast belt of land covering nine million square kilometres and encompassing ten countries, has always been a transit area for constant flows of people, trade, finance and religious groups. For the past twenty years, organized crime has had ample opportunity to develop here, either by using traditional networks or by taking over areas where there is no state control. It is also a region afflicted by perennial crises and weakened states, notwithstanding its undeniable strategic importance arising from its natural resources: oil, gold, phosphates, diamonds, copper, iron, coal, nickel, zinc, bauxite, uranium, plutonium, manganese, cobalt, silver, chrome and precious timbers.

Despite an abundance of natural assets, the fragility of the majority of Sahel states and regional instability perpetuate conditions that breed insecurity: rapid population growth (except in the Maghreb, which is going through a demographic transition), corruption, endemic poverty, illiteracy, and incessant conflict, resulting in displaced populations (refugees) and illegal migration. The result, frequently, is that these people are forced to submit to criminal or rebel groups in order to benefit from the profits of trafficking or obtain protection. The situation is compounded by chronic food shortages and /or recurrent famines, galloping urbanization, malaria, the HIV/AIDS epidemic, the plundering of resources, the establishment of parallel economies and rackets, and the use of the area as a safe haven by terrorist groups needing a territorial base from which to organize transnational action.

An assessment of the security issues in this region in the light of migratory and other flows shows that the trans-Saharan areas, far from being enclosed and compartmentalized territories, overlap and intersect along

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a periphery that is larger than the Sahel itself, extending from the Atlantic to Sudan, and from the Mediterranean to the Gulf of Guinea. It is a land where the advancing desert pushes back frontiers and where unmonitored areas provide sanctuaries for all manner of illicit practices.

Given the magnitude of these interconnected criminal networks and their tight solidarity, there would be no point in trying to split them up into single components: the phenomenon of organized crime can only be understood if viewed as a whole, since organized criminal activities and opportunistic trafficking are mutually supportive and driven by interdependent dynamics. However, for the purposes of analysis, the different types of criminal activity will be studied separately, in order to give a clearer picture of their specific characteristics.

CURRENT SITUATION

The new drug routes

Saharan and Sub-Saharan Africa have been part of the drug economy since the 80s, the drugs concerned being mainly cannabis (and cannabis resin) and cocaine. Africa has thus become the strategic trading centre for drugs arriving from Colombia, Venezuela and Brazil, which are shipped to the ports of Guinea Bissau and Cap Vert in the north, and to Ghanaian ports in the south, from where they are shipped onwards to Nigeria, Guinea, Senegal and Mauritania, and then to Morocco and Algeria. These countries are now referred to as narco-states.[2] There are two reasons for this evolution:
- Tougher crackdowns by the US and Canada have driven drug traffickers to seek new smuggling routes and to redirect traffic towards the European market.
- The high level of corruption greatly facilitates entry of consignments into Africa. Drug traffic has reached

such proportions that, from a transit and trading zone, Africa has become an area of large scale consumption of cannabis, cocaine and even hard drugs.

Indeed, the African continent offers numerous advantages for traffickers: poor border control; the predominance of diasporas in transnational trade; local police with no training in investigation; the spread of corruption to all levels of state institutions; total lack of national criminal records; inadequate, outdated judicial systems that are susceptible to corruption.

Cannabis and cannabis resin

If Africa is a cannabis production area, this is first and foremost because cannabis cultivation is a highly profitable activity. Its expansion during the 80s made it a far more lucrative cash crop than traditional plantations, enabling farmers to earn an adequate income from smaller plantations and thus compensate for the reduction of arable land.[3] The new anti-drug policy adopted since 2005 by Morocco has encouraged traffickers to turn to cocaine and to reorganize traditional cannabis channels. Nigerians, who are notoriously active in the Golden Crescent (Pakistan, India, Afghanistan), work closely with Latin American cartels. Nigeria is still the biggest regional producer of cannabis[4], with plantations bringing farmers 200 million dollars and generating profits of 12 billion dollars for traffickers. Algeria, on its part, has established itself as the new east-west cannabis route. In the south-western regions, along the border with Morocco (Bechar), consignments are shipped to Tunisia and Libya via the towns of Ouargla and El Oued. The old route through Oranie (Oran province) is no longer used. From a transit country Algeria has gradually become a producer (Adrar) and consumer of drugs, including heroin.

Cocaine
Although cocaine is not produced in Africa, accord-

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[2] Ahmedou Ould-Abdallah, UN Special Representative for West Africa, quoted in Xavier Raufer, "Cocaïne: l'Europe inondée. Une offensive mondiale des narcos", *Cahiers de la sécurité*, no. 5, July-September 2008.
[3] A hectare of cannabis brings 100 times more than a hectare of manioc and 10 times more than a hectare of groundnuts.
[4] Nearly 15 tonnes seized since the beginning of 2009 and a network dismantled in which military were involved. See *Jeune Afrique*, " 4,5 tonnes de drogue saisies au nord-est du pays ", 3 February 2009; see also *Le Figaro*, " Maroc: 413 kg de haschich découverts ", 25 February 2009.

ing to Interpol every year about 50 tonnes of the drug, worth 1.8 billion dollars, are illegally trafficked through West Africa. Since the late 90s, cocaine produced by Latin American cartels has been shipped through the Gulf of Guinea to Senegal and Mauritania, then from Morocco or Algeria to its final destination in Europe. The land route is through Mauritania and then Morocco, and the air route is through Bamako, Casablanca or Dakar. Guinea Bissau has become the most important transhipment centre for traffic from South America. The principal reason for this is its coast, dotted with the numerous islands of the Bijagos archipelago that are difficult to monitor. The second reason, which is political, is the weakness of the state. Local links in the drug traffic chain reach the highest spheres of government, as demonstrated, for example, by the involvement of the former chief of the general staff and that of the former president.[5] These favourable conditions have encouraged numerous Columbian, Venezuelan and Nigerian nationals to settle in Guinea Bissau. Drugs shipped by sea or air are received by the military, for whom this activity is a means to acquire wealth, political power and access to national resources.[6]

In Morocco, the policy of eradicating cannabis plantations has led to a constant rise in cocaine traffic. The country has thus become a transit area increasingly used by "mules", couriers paid to carry the drugs in their stomachs.

Algeria is an east-west transit zone for hard drugs arriving from the south: the vast region stretching from Tamanrasset to Ain Guezzam is an area of choice for traffickers, and the Naama region is the entry point for the drug, before it is shipped to Tunisia and Libya via the town of Tiaret.

Drugs are frequently trafficked along the same channels as arms and diamonds, both of which help finance local wars or enrich warlords and unemployed veterans.

Light weapons traffic and plundering of resources

According to the United Nations, arms are shipped to West Africa from Central and Eastern Europe and from Russia and China, as well as from other African countries. Many of these weapons are smuggled first into Africa and then sold illegally, thus fuelling corruption. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) states that there are 100 million light weapons in circulation throughout Africa.[7] For West Africa, the figure is estimated as 8 million, including 100,000 Kalashnikovs in the Sahel alone.

Regional conflicts and internal rebellions play a decisive role in the transfer of light weapons, which have fuelled conflicts in Ivory Coast, Guinea Bissau, Liberia and Sierra Leone, the Tuareg uprisings in Mali and Niger, and the Casamanca rebellion. The political decline and break-up of the Polisario Front [8] and Western Sahara's proximity to Mauritania have created an ungoverned area that has been exploited by members of this organization to make money from arms smuggling. The Polisario Front's Sahrawi refugee camps in south-west Algeria, southern Libya and northern Mali are also transit zones. Thanks to its strategic location, the town of Tindouf provides the ideal bridge between the eastern Sahel and the western Sahel.

Terrorism, too, is an aggravating factor and a catalyst in arms trafficking: the Algerian civil war caused an escalation of the phenomenon and made it easier for local and foreign terrorist groups to obtain supplies in the towns of Ouargla, Tamanrasset, El Oued, and also Batna, where arms shipments arrive from over the Mali and Nigerian borders. On the eastern and western borders of Algeria, antipersonnel mines and explosive devices are passed from smuggling networks into terrorist hands. Smugglers, protected by terrorist groups, are able transport their merchandise in complete safe-

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[5] Joao Bernardo Vieira, assassinated on 2 March 2009. See Crisis Group Report, "Guinée Bissau: construire un véritable pacte de stabilité", *Briefing Afrique,* no. 57, 29 January 2009.
[6] Jean-Claude Marut, "Guinée-Bissau, Casamance et Gambie: une zone à risques", *ISS opinion,* December 2008.
[7] Ministerial conference on trade in light weapons, Geneva, 12 September 2008.
[8] See Laurence Ammour, "The Western Sahara dispute: who benefits?", *Research Paper* no. 30, November 2006, NATO Defense College, Rome.

ty, while terrorist groups can obtain references from arms dealers operating in the Sahel.[9]

Light weapons are also passed on from one conflict to another: they can either be recycled for use by other combatants and local crime organizations, or they can be sold to neighbouring countries where there are ongoing conflicts. Arms used in the Lebanese civil war have even been found among the GSPC maquis.

Arms trafficking is also combined with the plundering of natural resources, thus merging the interests of certain multinationals, arms dealers and heads of state. The governments concerned are known as " kleptocracies". This applies particularly to diamond production in Sierra Leone or Liberia, which has created genuine war economies.

Terrorism: from a regional to an international phenomenon

Terrorist networks are involved in international crime and use the considerable profits from trafficking to procure weapons. For this reason, any attempt to combat terrorism must be part of a global campaign against all forms of crime, whose interconnections and interdependence are well established. Since the two activities feed on each other, there is a clear link between organized crime and terrorism, fuelled by their converging interests: criminal organizations profit from the violence perpetrated by terrorist organizations and guerrillas or by rebellions, which in turn benefit from the funding provided by criminal activities.

The Algerian Charter for Peace and Reconciliation (September 2005) led to the release of a large number of GSPC militants who are now present not only in the Sahara, but also in Darfur and Iraq.[10] The operational connection between the different Maghrebi

groups has been made possible by the alliance of several North African Islamist groups: the Algerian GSPC, the Moroccan GICM, the Libyan GICL and the Tunisian GICT, as well as other splinter groups in the various Sahel countries, particularly Mauritania, Mali and Niger[11] The invasion of Iraq by American troops has encouraged the development and spread of recruiting networks in Maghrebi and Sahelian countries, and nearly 25% of the suicide bombings in Iraq have been the work of Maghrebis, mainly Algerians.[12]

In this regard, a crucial question about security still needs to be answered: after the imminent withdrawal of US troops from Iraq, what will happen to the Libyan, Moroccan, Algerian and Tunisian combatants who have held sway in the area? Their return to their home countries entails the serious risk of their becoming radicalized and posing a real threat to the stability of the Sahel states. Once back in the Maghreb, they could use their newly acquired expertise in urban combat to instigate forms of insurrection hitherto unknown in North Africa.

Migrant traffic

The African wars are a major cause of insecurity for human beings, leading to migrations and displaced populations (refugees). Migrations are not in themselves a direct threat to security, but the desperate plight of migrant groups could force them to become involved in trafficking of varying degrees of seriousness. However, while the illegal situation of migrants makes them fragile and dependent on traffickers, smugglers and drug couriers, it does not necessarily make them criminals.
West African migrations have for some time been lawful seasonal migrations towards the sub-region, following agreements on the free circulation of people in

[9] Salima Tlemçani, " Trafic d'armes aux frontières de l'Algérie", *El Watan* (Algiers), 15 May 2008.
[10] Jean-Luc Marret, "Evolutions récentes du GSPC - 'Al Qa'ida au Maghreb Islamique': un redéploiement historique", *Note de la FRS*, Washington, 12 March 2007.
[11] Mathieu Guidère, "La Tentation internationale d'Al-Qaïda au Maghreb", *Focus Stratégique*, no. 12, IFRI, December 2008, pp. 13-14.
[12] Emily Hunt, "Islamist Terrorism in Northwest Africa. A 'Thorn in the Neck' of the United States?", *Policy Focus*, no. 65, February 2007, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy.

force in the countries of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS).[13] It is only since the Eighties that forms of intercontinental migration have appeared. The littoral countries, particularly those of the Maghreb, have become stopping off points and/or transit zones in the migration strategies of sub-Saharans heading for Europe.

It is extremely difficult and indeed almost impossible, to calculate the number of illegal migrants in this region: "It is thought that 65,000 (to) 120,000 sub-Saharans come into the Maghreb every year. 75 % of them are believed to emigrate to Libya and 25 % to Algeria and then to Morocco. According to different estimates, at least 100,000 sub-Saharan migrants are currently living in Mauritania and in Algeria, 1 to 1.5 million are living in Libya, and 2.2 to 4 million, mainly Sudanese, are living in Egypt." [14]

The link between conflicts and migration is also a proven fact. It has altered the old migratory patterns and has drastically changed traditional north-south and south-south migration. Immigration countries, like Senegal or the Maghrebi countries, have become emigration countries. Consequently, for the last twenty years or so, the geographical area used as a migratory route has been more extensive then the Sahel itself.

CURRENT AND POTENTIAL REPERCUSSIONS

North-West Africa is experiencing two parallel and paradoxical phenomena:
- On the one hand, there is a constant increase in the merging and/or overlapping of state territory and grey areas, as the result of a combination of political,

economic, ethnic and social networks and alliances, driven by endemic corruption that blurs the links between the public and private spheres. In the confusion that this creates, criminal activities find ways of adapting to the situation and become firmly established.
- On the other hand, conflicts cause fragmentation of national territory in areas with no state control. Interconnected criminal networks graft themselves onto these areas, and thus national territory becomes absorbed into the international criminal system.

Corruption fuels organized crime. Traffic does not always use the most direct routes, but adapts to the most favourable conditions it finds on the way, which in this case are regions where states are weak. In Africa, government officials are often involved with illegal networks (for example, garrisons sell some of the goods sent to them). More often than not border police, customs officers and military guards are part of the same social and family networks. As a result, corruption is not automatically perceived as a crime but as a large-scale redistribution of wealth. Trafficking, therefore, is not regarded as a risk but as a source of income wherever there are links with government actors.[15]

Crime: a geopolitical factor

There is a risk that the crime problems facing North West Africa could spread to Europe and jeopardize the foundations of its security. Since the end of the bipolar era, criminal networks have displayed three characteristics:
- On the African continent they have become a powerful factor in integration in a globalized world.

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[13] The ECOWAS comprises Benin, Burkina Faso, Cap Vert, Ivory Coast, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea Bissau, Liberia, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone and Togo. Mauritania has just become a member. According to estimates based on population censuses, the countries of the region are home to about 7.5 million migrants from other West African countries, accounting for almost 3% of the regional population. This rate, which has been on the increase since 1990, greatly exceeds the European Union rate of 0.5%. The WALTPS (West Africa Long Term Perspective Study) estimates that, on average, one million West Africans per year change their country of residence in the CEDEAO zone.

[14] Hein de Haas, *The Myth of Invasion*. *Irregular Migrations from West Africa to the Maghreb and the European Union,* Research Report, Migration Information Policy Institute, University of Oxford, October 2007. See also, by the same author, "The Inconvenient Realities of African Migrations to Europe", *Third World Quarterly,* 2008, 29(7), pp. 1305-1322.

[15] According to Alain Antil, the main traffickers are often the states themselves. Taking the case of Mauritania, he puts forward the view that the former president redistributed the income from trafficking among the members of his own clan, since control of the criminal economy was shared by certain prominent families who profited from traffic in cigarettes and arms shipped in containers to Nouakchott. See the lecture given during the seminar on "Questions sécuritaires aux marges de l'espace méditerranéen: la zone sahélo-saharienne" IFRI, 5 December 2008, Paris. See also "En Mauritanie, un trafic de drogue éclabousse des notables", *Libération*, 25 May 2007, and "En Guinée, le fils aîné du président Conté arrêté pour trafic de drogue," *Jeune Afrique*, 24 February 2009.

Criminal activity has thus tended to replace the strategic configurations that African states had during the cold war.

- They are able to act in different areas at once and to switch from one type of organization to another – local, regional or international – as required.
- They continually draw new maps of different areas, whose boundaries are not superimposed on national borders because they are the result of groups and networks that are constantly being redefined.

Organized crime can destabilize states by infecting them with the gangrene of corruption, by taking over whole regions (war zones and areas of devastation, drug production and distribution), by undermining the country's economy (through the rerouting of financial flows that have not been reinjected into the national system and/or by money laundering), by generating violence (terrorism) and chronic insecurity, and by threatening the population (refugees, migrants).

Illicit trafficking is the criminal component of conflicts, of which it is both a driver and a product. In this sense crime is a geopolitical factor in its own right that undermines territorial borders because, like terrorism, it is able to survive and prosper without a territorial base.

The link between crime and conflicts is due to the fact that criminal organizations always need to develop sectorial activities. The sectorization of crime enables the networks to perpetuate themselves, to reinforce the networking of territories where there is no rule of law, and to adapt to each new obstacle as it arises. At the same time it increases the various types of threats, making them more dangerous to states and institutions, as well as more complex and more difficult for crime fighting authorities and organizations to deal with.

These non-military threats were already identified in 1999 in the Atlantic Alliance's Strategic Concept, which insisted on the need to view security in a global context. It stated clearly that "… Alliance security must also take account of the global context. Alliance security interests can be affected by other risks of a wider nature, including acts of terrorism, sabotage and organised crime (...). The uncontrolled movement of large numbers of people, particularly as a consequence of armed conflicts, can also pose problems for security and stability affecting the Alliance".[16]

The latest declaration concerning security issued by the Alliance states that "instability emanating from fragile and failed states may also have a negative impact on Allied and international security", and that the security of the Alliance "is increasingly tied to that of other regions".[17] In the face of common threats, priority must be given to the collective security requirements and interests of the southern and northern states.

Migration: a political issue first and foremost

Crime in Africa is a danger that all too often is underestimated by Western countries, which only look at the tip of the iceberg: migration. It hardly needs to be said that migration represents a financial opportunity for organized criminal networks. But, as we have seen, not all African migration is illegal, since migration for employment reasons within the West African subregion is in fact permitted by law.

All illegal migration is fraught with peril and entails very real and serious risks, both immediate and remote, that concern not only the countries directly involved (West African and Maghrebi), but also European countries. That is why they are the subject of numerous programmes and action plans.[18] The proximity of the

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[16] *The Alliance Strategic Concept*, approved by the Heads of State and Government taking part in the meeting of the North Atlantic Council in Washington on 23 and 24 April 1999, paragraph 24.

[17] Press communiqué: (2009) 043, Declaration on Alliance Security published by the Heads of State and Government taking part in the meeting of the North Atlantic Council in Strasburg/ Kehl on 4 April 2009.

[18] The Rabat Action Plan (May 2008), financed by the EU, focuses on the criminal aspects and the drivers of human trafficking and illicit migration; the Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons and the Protocol against the Smuggling of Migrants by Land, Sea and Air complete the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime; the African Union strategy framework for a migration policy in Africa envisages regional cooperation and harmonization of labour migration policies; the Euro-African Dialogue on Migration and Development, whose latest ministerial conference (Paris, 25 November 2008) adopted a three-year regional cooperation programme for the period 2009-2011, aims to organize legal migration, fight illegal migration and achieve synergies between migration and development.

Euro-Mediterranean area, including its African dimension, and shared interests on both shores of the Mediterranean, call for a common definition of the threats related to criminal exploitation of migration, and for cooperation that is not confined to security.

The growing number of irregular migrants and the complexity of migratory patterns in West Africa demand a more coherent cooperative approach. To ensure smoother and more amicable management of the Schengen area, the ECOWAS should become a priority interlocutor for the EU in the debate on sub-Saharan migration to Europe. The issue is an important one because at present the strategies adopted to fight clandestine migration could, by trying to restrict or stop free movement of workers in the West African area, have the opposite effects to those expected and increase illegal immigration to Europe.

Too many North-South and South-South plans

Despite the considerable number of regional as well as international plans, programmes and mechanisms (in the economic, legislative, military and police spheres), the actions taken to fight organized crime and terrorism in the Sahara-Sahel area remain unfocused and divided into numerous sectorial objectives. Moreover, the multiplicity of regional and sub-regional organizations and the various bilateral and multilateral agreements have generated a certain amount of confusion, clouding the real security issues and leading to dispersal of efforts. This confusion has been an obstacle to the fight against criminal networks, which are not confined to national territory. Because of their fluidity, mobility and ability to adapt rapidly, they use only deterritorialized areas.

Regional integration, of course, could reduce crime-related risks. But to be more effective, the fight against organized crime, including terrorism, can no longer be based on criteria such as the inviolability of borders, sovereignty, or rivalry for regional leadership; it should be seen outside the purely national context and based on 'across the board' criteria and on integrated regional areas that share the same problems and are exposed to the same threats.

What does the future hold?

As a region rich in natural resources, Africa is acquiring ever-increasing strategic importance. Despite still high poverty indicators, and a dense concentration of the main global risks, the economic growth of the continent was 5.4% in 2008.[19] Its oil reserves, estimated as 8% of world reserves, are expected to play a decisive role, with an estimated increase of 40 to 50% in the next ten years. It is such a dynamic sector that current production, which is continually on the increase, is equal to the total output of Iran, Venezuela and Mexico. American oil companies have been investing in Africa since 2000. The Gulf of Guinea has also become more attractive since the installation in late 2003 of the Chad-Cameroon oil pipeline that carries 250,000 barrels of oil a day to the Atlantic and, when completed, will provide access to the Sudanese oilfields. For France has understood that it is in its strategic interest to relaunch or strengthen its old ties with Africa. ELF is drilling nearly 60% of its oil production in this area. Total is poised, alongside Gazprom, to finance the project for the trans-Saharan gas pipe (4,000 km) which will link Nigeria to Algeria by 2015. World demand for natural gas is also expected to double over the next twenty years and Africa can play a crucial supplier role in this. The entry of Ivory Coast, Ghana, Chad and Mauritania into the group of oil producing countries is confirmation of these trends,[20] as is the growing interest in Africa shown by China, India,

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[19] This figure should drop to 3%, according to the WMF, because of the current world crisis. See the meeting of finance ministers with the WMF at Dar-es-Salam (Tanzania) on 10 and 11 March 2009 aimed at an enhanced partnership with Africa.

[20] The offshore Ghanaian field will start production in 2010 and is considered very promising, with 120,000 barrels/day against 6,000 today. The Ivory Coast field is estimated by the World Bank and the WMF as 80,000 barrels per day. Chad has been an oil producer since 2003, Mauritania since 2005. This is without of course counting on Algeria and its gas, and Mali, the continent's third oil producer, or Niger, with its uranium fields, placing it second in the world.

Brazil, Russia and the United States.

In this promising context, and bearing in mind its economic potential, development and stability in Africa could receive a further boost, provided there really is the political will and courage to deal first and foremost with corruption, but above all if the approach to security issues is based on a definition of shared economic interests that have been evaluated beforehand, in the light of common threats, by African and non-African partners.

At the political level, greater synergy between Maghrebi and sub-Saharan countries would be necessary. Partnerships in the form of regional platforms would have the advantage of positively involving the countries concerned in African security questions and of bringing governments together in a common effort.

Cooperation between the European Union and NATO should also be strengthened in terms of information exchange, sanctions and crisis resolution, in which the African Union should be fully engaged. As a natural consequence, military and police issues would then be tackled: reform of the security sector, assistance with the tactical and strategic training of Armed Forces, interoperability first of all between African armies and then, on a broader scale, with EU member states and NATO.