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THE LINKS BETWEEN JIHADI ORGANIZATIONS AND ILLEGAL TRAFFICKING IN THE SAHEL

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the links between jihadi organizations and illegal criminal activities in the Sahel region. Based on extensive interviews conducted in the region, the paper argues that, while radical organizations are linked with activities such as human trafficking and drug trafficking, this is not their main sources of revenue, which in fact generally comes from kidnapping. Furthermore, the paper shows that those groups have developed links with illegal networks that deal in the basic goods the organizations need, such as gas, weapons and food. While jihadi groups do maintain relations with various illegal economic sectors in the Sahel, those relations are not as strong as many have argued.

INTRODUCTION

This paper focuses on the existing links between various illegal activities in the Sahel and radical armed organizations. The Sahel is characterized by weak and failed states that are unable to provide security and economic redistribution for their citizens, which in turn has led to the fostering of all kinds of illegal economic activities. Many argue that in this context, radical jihadi organizations in the Sahel have been able to maintain themselves by establishing links with different kinds of mafias and by becoming involved in a variety of illegal activities. In turn, the argument goes, this has generated a considerable amount of money for these organizations, which they use to finance themselves. Among these illegal criminal activities, many cite the trafficking of drugs, weapons and humans.

The paper addresses the following questions: (1) What is the nature of the existing trafficking in the Sahel? (2) What is the reality of the links between jihadi organizations and illegal criminal activity? (3) How can the organizations, which are based on religion, justify their involvement in criminal activity? (4) Is trafficking really the main source of revenue for the organizations?

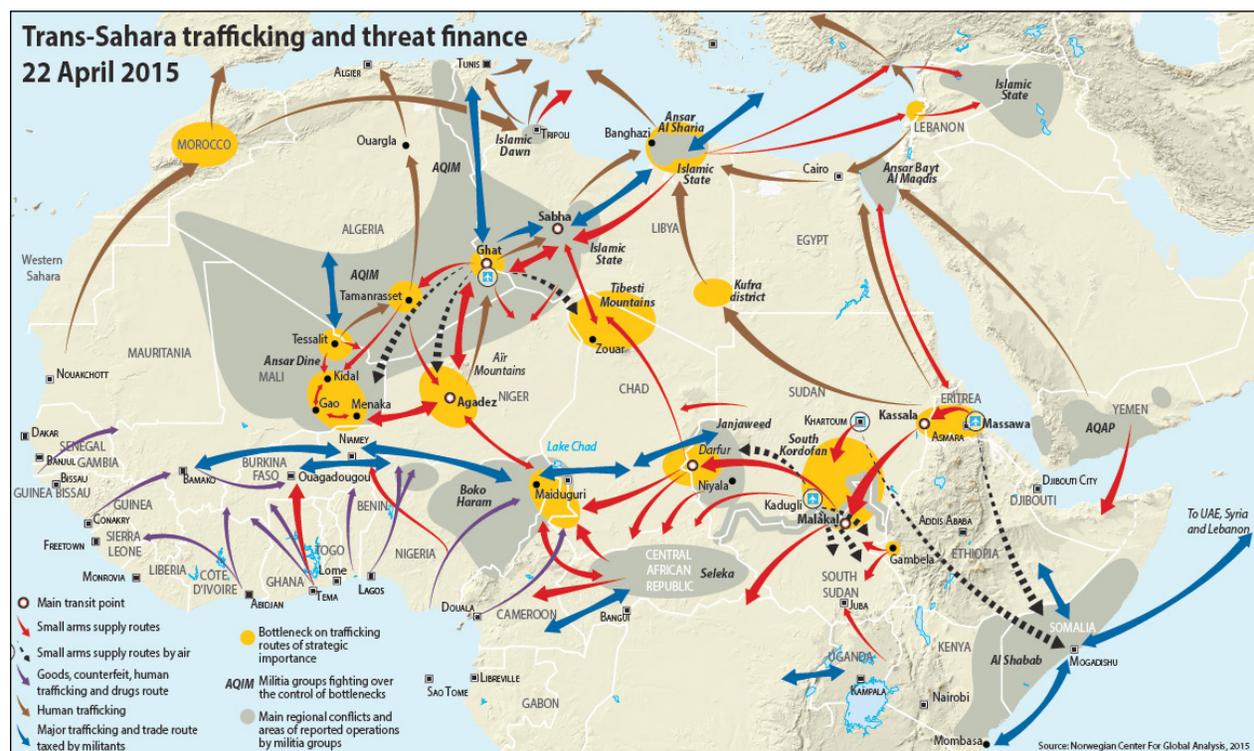
The analysis argues that while there is a relationship between terrorist organizations and human trafficking, this relationship is very tenuous. Similarly, the paper argues that the links between the armed organizations and drug networks are not that obvious, and they have generated a great deal of controversy within the jihadi organizations themselves. Instead, jihadi organizations have established more regular interactions with illegal networks that provide “required goods for pursuit of their fight”, such as gas traffickers, food traffickers and arms traffickers.

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1. JIHADI ORGANIZATIONS AND HUMAN TRAFFICKING

According to a report by the Global Initiative against Transnational Organized Crime published in 2015, human trafficking from the North African coasts to Europe generated an estimated 255–323 million US dollars per year of illegal money in Libya alone. The real figures are impossible to know for certain. According to the report, migrants would gather in Gao in Mali, and above all in Agadez, in northern Niger, in addition to several other towns and areas in the Sahel, where they would wait for a smuggler to transport them to North Africa, especially Libya, and from there to Europe. The cost of the passage from Niger to Libya ranged between 800 and 1,000 US dollars, whereas the passage to Europe cost between 1,500 and 1,900 US dollars (RHIPTO and Global Initiative 2015: 2, 4). A joint Europol-INTERPOL report estimated that illegal migration to Europe from African and Middle East countries in 2015 generated at least 5–6 billion US dollars in illegal revenue, mostly from the Middle East (Europol and INTERPOL 2016: 8). This constitutes a huge amount of money, attracting all sorts of actors from across the Sahel region, which is marked by extreme poverty, weak states, the absence of infrastructures of development, and the presence of powerful non-state actors including mafias and armed terrorist organizations.

Figure 1 | Map of trans-Saharan trafficking and threats



Source: RHIPTO and Global Initiative (2015: 2).

This traffic generates in those areas a parallel economy based on the production by local mafias of fake passports and identity cards as well as transport and housing for the illegal migrants. As Serge Daniel (2014: 47) explains, “the smugglers, transport and housing” were and still are the key elements of this illegal economy. Daniel further explains that transport between the African

countries and towards the North African/Sahelian borders is less problematic and involves less mafia activity, given that ECOWAS countries do not necessarily require visas for citizens of other member countries.² Problems arise, however, when migrants attempt to enter Morocco, Algeria or Tunisia, while in Libya the security conditions have created a dramatic situation for those illegal migrants trying to reach Europe. According to Daniel (2014), in the case of Libya, mafias and non-state actors have come to play a major role in smuggling migrants into North Africa and then to Europe. These networks for illegal human trafficking then come into contact with jihadi organizations in the Sahel, most of them deployed in northern Mali, southern Libya and on the borders between Niger, Mali and Burkina Faso, the areas where migrants gather to transit to North Africa and then to Europe.

Human trafficking generates vast amounts of money every year and involves various illegal networks. Given their past involvement in other forms of illegal trafficking, many have argued that there may be a link between jihadi organizations and human trafficking.

But there seems to be little if any involvement by jihadi organizations in such trafficking. Daniel explained in an interview that the leaders of al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) have never been attracted to this type of activity because it does not generate sufficient revenue. As he bluntly stated, “when it comes to money and human trafficking, it represents peanuts for those organizations” (Interview B). Another possible reason for their lack of interest is that, religiously and ethically speaking, from their point of view human tracking represents a sort of exploitation of men by men, the exploitation of men’s misery, which is what they are fighting against. In this context, exploiting the suffering of others would be a contradiction of the belief system that has motivated their engagement in such organizations. Thus, human trafficking represents at most a marginal source of income for such organizations.

However, while they may not earn money from human trafficking, they nevertheless tolerate it and benefit from it in other ways. According to Mohamed Abu Al-Maali, the director of the Nouakchott News Agency (ANI), who has interviewed the leader of AQIM, “jihadi movements in the Sahel take advantage of such trafficking, by using through those illegal networks including those of illegal immigration, their men, money or anything else that AQIM and other jihadi organizations which are active in North Africa when their own networks cannot do it” (editor’s note: networks of North African jihadi organizations cannot provide such tasks) (Interview A). Daniel also argues that illegal migrants who are stuck in the Sahel waiting to be smuggled to North Africa are sometimes used by jihadi organizations for small jobs, and in a few cases have ended up joining jihadi organizations. However, he notes that this is a relatively rare occurrence, with only a few cases reported of illegal migrants formally joining those organizations (Interview B). According to Mohamed Mokeddem, an Algerian specialist on jihadism, in the early days of terrorism in the Sahel, the links between jihadi organizations and smugglers or traffickers were based on a mutual understanding: “jihadi organizations were to provide protection in exchange of food and shelter from traffickers”. While those relations have evolved, their fundamental nature remains the same (Mokeddem 2010: 113).

2 The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), created in 1975, includes the following countries: Benin, Burkina Faso, Cape Verde, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Ivory Coast, Liberia, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Togo.

By all accounts, the main sources of revenue for jihadi organizations have been kidnappings and the ransoms they have generated, combined with links to weapons smugglers and, to a lesser extent, drug trafficking.

2. JIHADI ORGANIZATIONS AND WEAPONS TRAFFICKING

In the Sahel, a region characterized by weak and failed states and where conflicts are endemic in a context of widespread corruption, the smuggling and trafficking of weapons has become a key element of criminal activities. Traffickers provide weapons to all the non-state actors present in the region, whether militias or mafias, as well as terrorist organizations.

While weapons trafficking has long occurred in the region, the collapse of Libya in 2011 and the looting of the Libyan army's extensive heavy and light weapons stocks radically altered the nature of this activity. As an Algerian official explained, "right now and with the collapse of Libya, and the looting of the Libyan army stocks, there is a black market where you can find any kind of weapon you want provided that you have the money. In that regard, southern Libya has become an open market" (Interviewee 1). To illustrate the importance of this trafficking, the Algerian newspaper *El Watan* conducted an investigation on the Algerian–Tunisian border and found that it was possible to buy shotguns, Kalashnikovs and any other kind of weapon. One of the traffickers explained that he preferred "to buy weapons in Tunisia since they come from Libya, they are less expensive" (Ichalalène 2016).

The Global Initiative against Transnational Organized Crime report noted that the price of a Kalashnikov in the Sahel varied between 150 and 1,000 US dollars, depending on the quality of the weapon. Moreover, the report signalled the circulation of other types of weapons, such as rocket launchers and missiles (RHIPTO and Global Initiative 2015: 3). And as another report from the UNODC underlines, most of the weapons in circulation in the Sahel were introduced to Africa in the 1970s and 1980s, in the midst of the Cold War, by the major powers in order to support their allies – or proxies – on the continent (UNODC 2013: 34). However, at the end of the Cold War several factors, including the collapse of many of those states, the outbreak of civil wars and widespread corruption, contributed to the rise of illegal weapons trafficking. The report explains that the weapons seized by the security services of the North African/Sahel regions come from: (1) stocks inherited from previous wars in the region, (2) recent conflicts in neighbouring areas, (3) the illegal selling or leasing of weapons from members of the security services of the region (corruption), (4) delivery of weapons by "sympathetic governments", and (5) the import of weapons from outside Africa (although here the figures are very low) (UNODC 2013: 35).

Terrorist organizations in the region, including those linked with al-Qaeda, such as AQIM, established contacts with traffickers in order to obtain the weapons and ammunition needed for their activities. This was even more so the case that they had the money to do so, money obtained essentially from the ransoms of the western hostage takings that AQIM practices in the 2000's. Daniel explains that "jihadi organizations consume only few quantities of food and other things, to that extent most of their money goes to their activities, especially acquiring weapons" (Interview B). Another Western observer notes that most of the weapons used by AQIM came from the stocks of the Malian army, acquired through corruption networks during the 2000s as well as in the

aftermath of the takeover of northern Mali by the jihadists in 2012. The collapse of Libya, in his estimation, undoubtedly increased the quantity of weapons, especially heavy weaponry, available to the jihadists (Interviewee 2).

Daniel explains that traffickers rely heavily on the existing connections between Islamist Libyan armed groups, local mafias and other jihadist organizations, especially AQIM. In addition, the tribal links established through a series of marriages by the leaders of AQIM during the 2000s facilitated their acquisition of weapons, since many of the tribes were heavily involved in those activities. A study by Conflict Armament Research on the weapons in circulation in the Sahel reveals that numerous weapons caches have been discovered and destroyed in Mali, especially in the regions of Tessalit, Kidal and Gao. These weapons were registered in Libya and were originally sold to the Qaddafi regime by Poland in the 1970s. Several SA-7b launch tubes originally from Libya were also discovered among other caches (Conflict Armament Research 2016: 12, 15).

Clearly the jihadist organizations have established vital links with weapons traffickers. Without those connections, they would find it very difficult to continue their fight.

Finally, the links between jihadi organizations and drug traffickers have been the subject of much debate and criticism.

3. JIHADI ORGANIZATIONS AND DRUG TRAFFICKING

3.1 THE DEBATE AMONG JIHADISTS WITH REGARD TO DRUG TRAFFICKING

The use of drug money in the context of jihad has been the subject of much debate within jihadi organizations around the world, which officially have always denied any involvement in such activities based on religious principles. As a former Sahelian jihadi explained, “drug trafficking is strictly forbidden, the Koran is a catalogue where there are dogmas that cannot be changed, and among these, drug trafficking which is strictly prohibited” (Interviewee 3). However, the debate about the use of drug money has been ongoing among the al-Qaeda leadership since as early as the mid-1990s.

Among the documents found during the raid of Osama bin Laden’s hideout in Abbottabad in May 2011 was a letter, released by the Pentagon in early 2012. The letter was an exchange between Jaysh al-Islam, a Palestinian organization based in Gaza, and Atiyah Abd al-Rahman, one of al-Qaeda’s most important religious authorities. In this document he explained that among the two categories of money earned from selling those items are “intrinsically forbidden, such as wine, pork, the meat of improperly slaughtered animals, and the like, [...as well as the money] [f]orbidden by virtue of the means by which it was gained” (CTC 2012: 2). Atiyah explained, however, that there was a debate among scholars and specialists on these questions. Atiyah also expressed his fear that this money would bring corruption upon the jihadist; however, he explained that

if you are capable of taking their monies, in some cases, without there following any greater corruption, as we mentioned, then this is to you, and you may spend the monies for jihad in God’s name. [...] Such as: You stumble upon their monies, or one of their (drug

merchants') convoys fall into your hands, and you then take their monies (not the drugs themselves), and spend them for jihad in God's name. (CTC 2012: 7)

Atiyah goes further, reiterating that while several scholars argue that this money is forbidden, "some scholars choose (TN: the position that) it is permissible, saying: their sins are upon them, and nothing is upon he who takes of it. However, the former is most likely, God is all-knowing" (CTC 2012: 7). Finally, taking an even more ambiguous position, Atiyah authorizes the use of such money in another case: "if these traffickers, however, who traffic in forbidden (TN: items), such as drugs, give their monies as alms for jihad in God's name, then it appears to me, and God is all-knowing, that it is permissible to spend these monies for jihad in God's name" (CTC 2012: 7).

This argument was further advanced by Abdul Rashid, formerly responsible for the Taliban police in Afghanistan, who considered that it was permissible to sell opium "because it is consumed by unbelievers, *kafirs*, in the West and not by Muslims or Afghans" (Schmidt 2010: 67).

Thus jihadi organizations, and above all AQIM, had serious reservations about becoming involved with drug traffickers when they started establishing connections with all the mafias present in the Sahel in 2013. Nevertheless, as a Mauritanian specialist explains, "with hostage taking, drug money represented the second source of revenue for those organizations" (Interviewee 4).

3.2 JIHADI ORGANIZATIONS IN THE SAHEL AND DRUG TRAFFICKING

As Daniel explains,

AQIM either takes a commission on drugs transiting on the territories it controls or, in exchange of payment, it would form a convoy with its fighters to escort and provide security during the passage of the drug traffickers and the drug itself. Having said so, the organization does not get involved in the drug distribution at all. (Daniel 2012: 182)

Following Atiyah's recommendation, then, AQIM was not directly involved in trafficking but only charged a "tax" in exchange for protection, given that the lack of security on the roads in the Sahel endangered the drug shipments. For example, in 2012, the Mauritanian army announced that it had captured a convoy of traffickers composed of drug smugglers as well as several AQIM fighters who were in charge of providing security (Mokeddem 2010: 119). Antonio Maria Costa, the former executive director of the UNODC, explained that "terrorists and anti-government forces in the Sahel extract resources from the drug trade to fund their operations, purchase equipment and pay foot-soldiers" (Costa 2009: 6). A Mauritanian official went further, explaining that "AQIM provides the traffickers with food and even sometimes with money, in exchange those traffickers provide them with logistic supports and weaponry" (Interviewee 5). He further confirmed that AQIM's main role was to provide security in exchange for a "tax".

Of course, the decision to become involved in drug trafficking was not welcomed by all the leaders of the AQIM brigades in the Sahel, nor by the men themselves. While the brigade led by Mokhtar Belmokhtar did engage in trafficking, including of drugs, the brigade led by Abdelhamid Abu Zeid systematically refused to do so and condemned any such involvement, resulting in major tensions

between the two men. A former member of the Belmokhtar brigade explained that meetings between members of the two groups were tense due to the involvement of Belmokhtar in illicit drug trafficking. This man also claimed that Abu Zeid's men systematically attempted to convince them to abandon Belmokhtar and join with them instead (Fall Ould Oumere 2011). Another former member of the Belmokhtar brigade reported that in several cases, after the brigade had seized drug shipments, rather than destroying them Belmokhtar would order them released along with the drug smugglers following negotiations with drug lords from the region (Fall Ould Oumere 2011). Belmokhtar was known to be pragmatic in that respect, adapting to circumstances as they evolved. He considered that it was better to accommodate local traffickers in exchange for their support in obtaining weapons or strategic information on the security services in the region, rather than fight them.

As a result, however, several members of his brigade decided to desert and surrender to the security services. This also affected other jihadi organizations, including the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJWA), known for being heavily involved in drug trafficking. Daniel cites Bilal Hisham, a MUJWA brigade leader who deserted the organization, explaining that "I understood from that moment onward that these people (jihadists) did not come to do the jihad but rather to make business, to do drug trafficking. I heavily regretted my decision to join them" (Daniel 2014: 89).

Ultimately, as an international observer summarizes it,

whereas it was clear that MUJWA had connections with this traffic, it was less the case for AQIM. Indeed, there were individuals within AQIM, at intermediary levels that are involved one way or another in such activities, since it can help to finance the organization. However, this implication remains at the individual level [rather] than [the] organizational one. (Interviewee 6)

Lemine Ould Salem, a journalist who spent a month with the Belmokhtar brigade in 2012 and is known as an authority on Belmokhtar, is categorical on this topic: "I found no one to tell me that he [Belmokhtar] was involved in such activities except officials. The other actors in the region, including the smugglers were always clear about the fact they were afraid of bumping into him for he would severely punish them" (Interview C).

It seems clear that while at some levels jihadi organizations were involved in drug trafficking, it was only to a limited extent, in order to obtain weapons and logistical support in exchange for protection. The figures provided by officials, about which we must be careful, refer to a few million dollars generated for jihadi groups in exchange for this protection. By all accounts, the amount was much lower than that earned through kidnapping in the Sahel, which is estimated to have generated more than 160 million euro for jihadi organizations between 2003 and 2013.

CONCLUSION

Establishing close relations with illegal networks has been of paramount importance for jihadi organizations since they began deploying in the Sahel. This was part of their strategy of adaptation

to the environments in which they were evolving in order to strengthen their presence and entrench themselves among the local populations and actors. This in turn generated additional sources of revenue to finance their fight and turned them into key local economic actors. However, their main source of financial revenue, contrary to an established idea, was the kidnappings that shook the Sahel during the 2000s. Today, there are still Western hostages in the hands of the al-Qaeda-affiliated Group in Support of Islam and Muslims (GSIM), but the Western powers have refused to pay the ransoms in an effort to avoid the mistakes made in the 2000s. By all accounts, nowadays the main sources of revenue for radical organizations are the leftovers of the money from of the hostage takings of the 2000s, taxes taken from local populations and donations from supporters of their cause.

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ANNEX: LIST OF INTERVIEWS

Interviewee 1: Algerian official, Algiers, January 2015

Interviewee 2: international expert on jihadi organizations, Bamako, March 2017

Interviewee 3: former jihadist, Nouakchott, November 2011

Interviewee 4: Mauritanian specialist in jihadi organizations, Nouakchott, November 2011

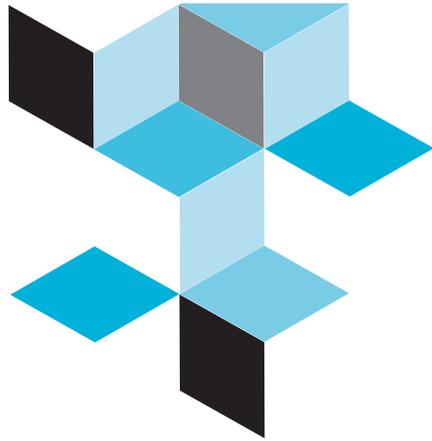
Interviewee 5: Mauritanian official, Nouakchott, November 2011

Interviewee 6: Western observer, Bamako, March 2017

Interview A: Mohamed Mahmoud Ould Abu Al-Maali, director of Nouakchott News Agency (ANI),
Nouakchott, August 2013

Interview B: Serge Daniel, journalist at Radio France Internationale and specialist on jihadi
organizations, Bamako, March 2017

Interview C: Lemine Ould Mohamed Salem, journalist and author of a biography on Belmokhtar,
April 2017



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MENARA maps the driving variables and forces behind these dynamics and poses a single all-encompassing research question: Will the geopolitical future of the region be marked by either centrifugal or centripetal dynamics or a combination of both? In answering this question, the project is articulated around three levels of analysis (domestic, regional and global) and outlines future scenarios for 2025 and 2050. Its final objective is to provide EU Member States policy makers with valuable insights.

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