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Narco-TrAfrica: Why West Africa is the World's Newest Alleyway for Illicit Substances and Why the Global Community Should Care

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Abstract

West Africa has seen a spike in the confiscation of illegal substances – most notably cocaine – within the past five years. Due to the instability that this development portends in a region already beset by stability concerns and a lack of government capacity, a thorough understanding of the reasons underpinning West Africa's new narco-prominence is necessary. This article assesses how the new West African drug trade undermines regional stability as well as U.S. and global security interests, investigating both the *external* (geopolitical) and *internal* (domestic African) factors creating the contemporary environment in which the drug trade exists. Specifically, it offers case studies of three countries – Guinea Bissau, Nigeria and Mali – to contextualize this troubling situation.

Introduction

For years, Baobab Island - a forgettable sliver of land off the coast of the oft-forgotten West African nation of The Gambia – played host to an equally unremarkable

guesthouse. Owned by a Dutch national who also ran a local fishing company staffed by Venezuelans, the shabby inn received tourists only infrequently. But when Gambian authorities paid the inn a visit in June of 2010, they found not simply sun and sand, but something else: cocaine - nearly two and a half tons of it. Imported to the continent by the Venezuelan fisherman and hidden in the shell of the Dutchman's dilapidated hotel, the haul was valued at over $1 billion, making it the largest drug seizure ever made in West Africa, and leading it to serve as a symbol of the region's ever-growing prominence in narco-trafficking (Bojang, 2010).

Historically only marginally involved the global drug trade, West Africa has become one of the world's hottest spots for drug trafficking in the last five years. Between 2000 and 2003, cocaine seizures in West Africa amounted to an average of only 427.7 pounds annually (Vullamy 2008), leading the United Nations to describe the problem of African drug trafficking generally as "insignificant" (Neal 1998). Recently, however, the continent's participation in the global narco-trade has risen exponentially, primarily fueled by activity in West Africa. By 2006, cocaine seizures in Africa had increased to more than 33 times their 2000 levels to 16.5 tons (Vullamy 2008). Of the total African seizures of cocaine for that year, West and Central Africa accounted for an astronomical 96.8 percent. Current estimates suggest that some 50 tons of cocaine pass through West Africa each year, with two-thirds of all drugs reaching Europe having been transited through the region (McConnell 2009). At the time of this writing, the West African drug trade was worth an estimated $6.8 billion (Editorial Board, *This Day* 2010).

Cocaine Seizures in Africa, 2000 – 2006, in Pounds*

Year	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006
Cocaine	997.3	1,028.9	1,319.8	2,444	7,911.2	5,641.7	33,111.3

*Figures converted from kilograms in original document to pounds (Cook and Wyler 2010).

As a result of the region's new prominence in the global narco-trafficking circuit – and the effects that this development has on regional and global security – a more thorough consideration of the reasons for this spike in trafficking is required. The following pages make such an attempt.

This article first enumerates various ways that the recent upsurge in West African drug trafficking threatens regional, U.S., and global security interests. The next two sections focus is on the contemporary environment in which the drug trade exists, inclusive of the *external* (geopolitical) factors effectively "pushing" the trade to West Africa and the *internal* (domestic African) factors "pulling" trafficking to the region. Specifically, this latter discussion focuses on the roles played by low state capacity, poverty, unique geography, as well as a specific "x factor" in three specific countries – Guinea Bissau, Nigeria and Mali – in creating an environment conducive to narco-trafficking. The thrust of this essay is that it is the very confluence of both *external* (geopolitical) and *internal* (domestic African) factors that has made the region so attractive to West African narco-traffickers. Only by understanding the nexus of these

can both the macro- and micro-processes underpinning the trade be comprehended and thus mitigated.

The West African Drug Trade and Implications for the International Community

Paralleling the historically marginal role it played in the global drug trade, West Africa has also languished on the periphery of global security interests. But apathy towards the region is a luxury that the international community can no longer afford if it is to tackle the trafficking problem. To be sure, though West African narco-trafficking is not a pre-eminent global security interest, the proliferation of drugs passing through the region does fundamentally undercut many efforts to bolster regional governmental capacity and stability.

Most overtly, the connections between terrorist groups and the international drug trade have become clear. Reports from the U.S. State Department indicate complicity in West African drug trafficking by pro-Hezbollah members of the Lebanese Diaspora living in the region, as well as members of the FARC rebel faction of Colombia (Cook and Wyler 2010). A 2008 report by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security revealed the existence of a clandestine air route (employed by craft as large as Boeing 727s) between South America and West Africa. Authorities revealed it to be used by the FARC to send cocaine, arms and other provisions to smugglers in the Sahel. The awaiting recipients: affiliates of Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) (Gaynor and Diallo 2010). Apart from its connections with the FARC, AQIM maintains friendly relations with

drug traffickers of West African origin. In 2009, U.S. federal prosecutors accused three Malian nationals of running a trafficking ring through the Sahara. The Malian defendants revealed that members of Al Qaeda served as the security arm of their operation, and in exchange for their help, the traffickers frequently offered AQIM food and fuel (Traub 2010).

Moreover, the entrenchment of the drug trade puts in even greater peril a region characterized by its chronically unstable states. Through the efforts of bilateral partners from the United States and the European Union, as well as international organizations like the United Nations, the international community has long been engaged in attempts to develop African state capacity, including efforts at democracy building, anti-corruption campaigns, rule of law initiatives and gender and human rights projects (Cook and Wyler 2010). Without a doubt, the transformation of the region into a trafficking hub hinders the pursuit of these objectives. Not only does narco-trafficking create black market economies operating independently from state taxation mechanisms, it further highlights to local citizens the gaping holes in their states' policing and national security capabilities. In a region where state consolidation has been a priority since independence, the recent influx of drugs only hampers such a pursuit.

Aside from its impact on stability and state capacity building efforts, the drug trade has decidedly deleterious impacts on human security in the region. The new presence of the drug trade obliges African states with already limited budgets to spend more on security measures to combat traffickers, thus rendering them less able to offer

the social protections of healthcare, education, and infrastructure so desperately needed by their populations. Further, as proven in South American and the Caribbean, a typical accompaniment of drug trafficking is violence. So-called "turf wars" between rival traffickers are common (see: Juarez, Mexico and Kingston, Jamaica), and frequently, innocent civilians are caught in their crossfire. Further, human rights are jeopardized as more people have taken to serving as so-called "drug mules," hiding drugs on their bodies while crossing international borders (New York County Lawyer's Association 1996). Epidemiologically, security is particularly threatened by increased intravenous drug use that follows an influx of cocaine and heroin into a region. Given that the African continent has the highest proportion of HIV/AIDS infected persons in the world, the potential for disease transmission is exacerbated with the greater availability of drugs (Drug Policy Alliance 2011).

Cognizant of the instability that this development could breed, the United States and European countries are all engaged in mitigating the spread of narco-trafficking in West Africa. For its part, the United States' military's Djibouti-based Combined Joint Task Force – Horn of Africa (CJTF-HOA) has taken stock of the threat the West African drug trade engenders and has recently given assistance in communications training to the Mauritius Port Authority to help combat drug trafficking, among other threats, in the Indian Ocean (U.S. Department of State 2008). In West Africa, the United States has partnered with the archipelago nation of Cape Verde to stem the flow of ocean bound drug shipments by supporting a maritime security coordination center near its capital of Praia (Crawley 2010). Further, in 2007, the United States Navy along with several global

allies – including France, Italy, Germany and Brazil – established the African Partnership Station, a West African based initiative intended to assist African navies to more effectively patrol their waters against piracy, terrorism, and drug and human trafficking (Jontz 2010).

As Europe is the most typical final destination for Africa's drugs, NATO too has become increasingly concerned with West Africa's newfound prominence in the global drug trade. European states like France and Britain have provided bilateral assistance in various forms, the most successful of which have been military (Ellis 2009). The two most notable European funded anti-narcotics centers are the France-based Mediterranean Anti-Drug Coordination Center and the Portugal-based Maritime Analysis and Operations Center – Narcotics (Cook and Wyler 2010). More recently, in a May 2009 ceremony in Abuja, the European Union collectively pledged €120 million to combat the flow of drugs (Amalu 2009).

Despite these truths, the reality is that in no way is the mitigation of the West African drug trade the most pressing foreign policy concern of the U.S. or its allies. Instead, thanks to narco-trafficking, the region represents a mid-level threat: not a full-blown crisis, but neither a development to be overlooked as innocuous. Thus, in a world of exigencies, the U.S. and the rest of the world should be concerned about the state of the region not simply for what it currently *is*, but what the future repercussions of a drug-filled West Africa *could be* for our allies both on the continent and around the globe.

For these reasons, the drug trade in West Africa necessitates attention if regional security is to be preserved. So as to aid this pursuit, the next two sections bring into focus just *why* West Africa has seen such a spike in narco-trafficking in the past decade. The following section focuses on factors *external* to the region (related to the geopolitics of narco-trafficking), while the last focuses on specific *internal* state-level criteria from Guinea Bissau, Nigeria, and Mali that make these areas so very attractive to those involved in global drug trafficking.

External Factors: The Geopolitics of West African Narco-Trafficking

As is the case with any type of trafficking, the drug trade in West Africa cannot be looked at in isolation, but must instead be situated within the context of the larger global narcotics community. Indeed, to understand West Africa's new prominence in this arena, one must understand the geopolitical conditions *outside* of the continent that led to this new rise.

To trace the flow of narcotics into West Africa, one must first begin with their point of origin: South America. The nations of Venezuela and Colombia are the producers of the majority of the cocaine passing through West Africa. Though long engaged in the drug trade, within recent years, traffickers from these states have been forced to re-tool their routes in accordance with new global realities. Historically, shipments were funneled from South America to countries like Jamaica, Panama, and Mexico before making their way to Europe and the United States. However, tighter

international policing of Central American and Caribbean routes has rendered these avenues increasingly difficult to navigate, and ever-powerful Mexican drug cartels have shut off access through their country (Vullamy 2008). Moreover, the concurrent drop in cocaine demand from the U.S., coupled with the spike in demand from Europe, has meant that market dynamics have shifted east, necessitating new routes (Traub 2010). Enter West Africa.

From South America, most drugs arrive to West Africa by airplane. The planes, which range from Cessna turboprops to Gulfstream II jets (Traub 2010) (Logan 2010), are normally privately owned and are typically outfitted with fuel reinforcements (Traub 2010). The craft often land on either on abandoned or little-used airstrips in West Africa, or simply use ad hoc runways, such as the Boeing 727 that touched down on a packed-sand runway created by camel caravans in Mali (Gaynor and Diallo 2010). Pilots carrying drugs are also known to request last minute changes in landing location, hoping that airports accepting them at the spur of the moment will lack personnel to conduct thorough cargo screenings. Some pilots opt to put fake tail numbers on their craft. Others disguise themselves as humanitarian envoys, such as the narco-plane emblazoned with a fake Red Cross insignia that touched down in Sierra Leone's Lungi International Airport in 2008 (Gaynor and Diallo 2010).

Once inside West Africa, drugs are commonly brought to large African cities, at which point human drug mules transport them to Europe on commercial flights. In this scenario, willing local participants either ingest or conceal pre-wrapped quantities of

cocaine or other drugs on their person while flying from West African hubs such as Lagos, Nigeria, Dakar, Senegal, or Accra, Ghana to Europe. One Nigerian commentator noted that amongst his female compatriots some "women…go as far as inserting the wraps in their private parts in the [sic] bid to escape detection (Editorial Board, *This Day* 2010." European nationals also take part in commercial smuggling, such as the two Britons arrested in Accra's international airport attempting to smuggle some six kilos of cocaine in their laptop cases (The Times Online). One major boon to traffickers employing the commercial airways was the 2009 inauguration of Turkish Airways' flight from São Paolo, Brazil to Dakar, Senegal, the first non-stop flight connecting South America to West Africa. Seizures of cocaine on that flight have already been made (Ellis 2009).

But airplanes are not the only means of transport – so too do boats make the trip across the Atlantic. Smugglers often use commercial fishing boats loaded with cocaine, or smaller ships traveling only at night. During the day, the small ships, which can make the trip in four to five days, are covered with blue tarpaulins to avoid being spotted by surveillance craft above (Vullamy 2008). Near land, the ships then drop parcels of wrapped cocaine into the ocean miles off African shores, where local traffickers then retrieve them to bring ashore (Walt 2007). Once within the borders of African countries, a vast and complex network of transportation awaits.

Most frequently received on the littoral of West Africa – in states like Guinea Bissau, The Gambia, Senegal, and Nigeria – the drug shipments must then find their way to the intended markets of Europe over land. Shipments are transported through the

Sahel and Sahara deserts via truck or four-wheel drive vehicles until they reach North Africa. Smugglers frequently travel through Sahelian countries of Mali and Niger, employing routes once used by ancient nomadic traders to transport salt (Middle East Online, 2010), which are today used for the movement of not only heroin and cocaine, but also cigarettes, weapons, and even humans (UN News Centre 2008).

While drugs carried by mules via commercial plane have destinations of Paris or London, the shipments that cross the Sahara by truck or foot will instead enter Europe through the Mediterranean. Boats departing from Tunis, Tunisia, or Tangier, Morocco, will move the product into coastal states such as Italy and Croatia, where the UN has recorded traffickers working in partnership with Italy's Calabrian mafia as well as what it terms "Balkan mobsters (McConnell 2009)." So too do smugglers use the Spanish Canary Islands as a shipment point for drugs. Located some 154 miles from the coast of Western Sahara, Spanish officials on the archipelago recently intercepted a Venezuelan-crewed boat named the *Dona Maria* some 780 nautical miles from the island of Las Palmas. From that ship, law enforcement officials confiscated approximately five tons of cocaine (McConnell 2009).

While the vast majority of the drugs that flow through West Africa are ultimately destined for Europe, emerging market countries – in particular, China – are displaying increasing avarice for Africa's drugs. As the country's middle-class of adults grows accustomed to the accoutrements enjoyed by their counterparts in the West, so too are China's youth gaining an appetite for recreational drugs, already popular amongst urban teenagers in Hong Kong. As Stephen Ellis astutely notes, given growing interactions

between Chinese and African merchants as well as the country's massive consumer base, China has the potential to contribute more than any other country to the world's increased drug trade (Ellis 2009). Similarly, increasingly affluent middle-classes in other developing countries such as India, Turkey, and Brazil could also have the potential to drive up global drug demand.

Internal Factors: The Domestic Recipes of Guinea Bissau, Nigeria and Mali

Unquestionable, then, is West Africa's newfound starring role on the stage of international narco-trafficking. In the previous section, the discussion focused on factors *external* to the African continent that have led to the region's heightened participation. In this section, attention turns to *internal* country-level aspects of three West African countries that play an equally important role in explaining the region's rising participation. Low state capacity, poverty, and geography are not only common characteristics amongst Guinea Bissau, Nigeria and Mali, but are the very reasons that they have been so profoundly implicated in the global drug trade.

Guinea Bissau

If popular nicknames are any indication of infamy, Guinea Bissau's sobriquet as Africa's first "narco-state" should be telling (Hinshaw 2010). Nestled on the Western coast of Africa between southern Senegal and northern Guinea, the former Portuguese colony of Guinea Bissau is undoubtedly West Africa's *problema do dia* in the fight against the transnational drug trade. As an example: in 2007, the value of cocaine

passing through the country's borders was more than the country's total national income (AFROL News 2010).

Perhaps the most readily-visible reason for Guinea Bissau's narco-prominence is the troubling reality that it is, for all intents and purposes, a failed state. The country has been beset by chronic instability since its 1974 independence. An army-led coup in 1998 embroiled the country in civil war (Tran 2010). In 2009, the Bissauan army assassinated the president of the country, João Bernardo Viera (BBC 2009), and in April 2010, the country's prime minister, Carlos Gomes Júnior was captured by military forces and placed under house arrest (Tran 2010). Aside from political instability, the country is devoid of any semblance of a criminal justice system. Guinea Bissau is infamous for having but one prison that, in all irony, lacks a lockable door (Skelton 2010 [B]). The prison has no water, no electricity, let alone a working phone, radio, or computer; all four of the country's police cars are in desperate need of repair (Walt 2007). Because of the government's poverty – it had an external debt of just over $1 billion in May 2010 (Tran 2010) – civil servants go months without getting paid (Walt 2007), and the state's ability to provide basic goods and services to citizens is almost non-existent. The rule of law carries little gravitas (Skelton 2010 [A]). As one citizen mused, it is not surprising that the country is a hub for narco-traffickers: "Guinea Bissau is a failed state anyway, so [for traffickers] it's like moving into an empty house (Vullamy 2008)."

But this empty house is more akin to a hovel than a mansion; the country's very real poverty is the second domestic factor encouraging Guinea Bissau's participation in the global narco-trade (U.S. Department of State 2010 [B]). In a country where the

average family lives on USD $720 per year and the average lifespan is a meager 47.9 years, economic opportunities are limited (Walt 2007). Though average citizens do engage in the trade as one of Guinea Bissau's few viable income-generating activities, members of the country's police and military – who are paid infrequently by the fledgling state – appear to be the country's most active traffickers (Associated Press 2010). As exemplary of the collusion of the country's security apparatus with traffickers, in 2010, the United States named Jose Americo Bubo Na Tchuto, the former Chief of Staff of the Navy, as one of the region's prime personalities hampering anti-trafficking efforts (Skelton 2010 [A). Tellingly, a local journalist quipped, "Everybody is saying that [the arrival of drug trafficking] is a blessing from God because the government does not have the money to pay people. (Walt 2007)"

Aside from weak state capacity and pervasive poverty, Guinea Bissau's coastal geography is the third factor that making it a drug baron's playground. Off its west coast lie eighty-eight remote islands collectively known as the Bijagos archipelago (Gaynor and Diallo 2010), of which only twenty-one are officially inhabited, typically by fishermen and small-scale farmers (Skelton 2010 [A]). Surveillance of them is low: only one "rusty old ship" patrols the entire 220 miles of the country's coastline (Vullamy 2008). One observer noted that because of a lack of a Bissauan Coast Guard "small planes with cocaine coming from Venezuela and Colombia regularly land on [the uninhabited islands] before moving the drugs [to the mainland] by canoe (Skelton 2010 [A])." Further, Guinea Bissau's forested interior, which is also largely outside of state

control, presents problems. Though not currently a site for trafficking, observers worry that deep within the jungle, new manufacturing labs may exist (Skelton 2010 [B]).

Indeed it is precisely because of these three factors that Guinea Bissau's "x factor" – its so-called "narco-bourgeoisie" – has been able to thrive. Beginning in 2004, handfuls of Colombian and Venezuelans (ostensibly working as exporters of fish and cashews (Walt 2007)) began moving to the country's capital city of Bissau and its outskirts, constructing what one observer called "exclusive Spanish-style haciendas with wide verandas, turquoise swimming pools and gates patrolled by armed guards (Tran 2010)." Though businessmen, their object of trade is not nuts or fish, but cocaine. This wealthy and growing cadre of narco-traffickers has arguably filled the void left by the inefficient Bissauan state, and, in collusion with the military, is profoundly undermining the already limited legitimacy of the national government. Their permanent presence and unrivaled material resources bode poorly for the future of the world's first narco-state.

Nigeria

"This house is not for sale," read spray-painted stencilings on otherwise new-looking homes in Lagos. After a spate of schemes in which fake Nigerian real estate agents "sell" houses to buyers while the homes' real owners are away, many in the country were forced to make public declarations – in the form of such spray-paintings – to ward off would-be scammers. The fake house sale is but one of many so-called Nigerian "419" schemes, ploys infamous in the country intended to make quick, easy

cash. Such scams are typical in Nigeria and exemplify the highly entrepreneurial, creative, and questionable lengths that some in the country will go to generate income, including their very real participation in the narco-trade.

Despite a history of strong-armed attempts by the state to combat trafficking – including a 1984 decree handing down death by firing squad for those implicated in drug trafficking (Nigerian National Drug Law Enforcement Agency, 2009) – the notoriously unstable government of Nigeria has limited capacity to fully monitor or mitigate drug flows, which have been on the rise in the past decade. Tasked with providing services to some 150 million people (in Africa's largest country, the world's ninth largest), the Nigerian state has historically been regarded suspiciously by its citizens, who view it to be corrupt, lecherous, and maintained only by greedy elites. This perception does not help ingratiate the state – or its anti-narcotics arm, the National Drug Law Enforcement Agency – to citizens. Frequently, law enforcement officers at local, state, and national levels are accused of protecting or working in collusion with traffickers (Vullamy 2008). Lawmakers are themselves involved in the process, such as Nigerian politician Eme Zuru Ayortor who was caught in 2009 with some five pounds of swallowed cocaine in his stomach. When questioned as to his motives, Ayator, replied, "I needed to do it to finance my campaign (CNN 2010)."

To be sure, the low income levels of the average Nigerian have played an important role in the country's new narco-prominence. In 2008, per capita income in the country was $1,160, and 70 percent of Nigerians are classified as poor (International Fund for Agricultural Development 2011 [B]). This widespread poverty coupled with

insufficient opportunities for work has led some Nigerians to turn to the drug trade to meet familial obligations. Afolayan Adeniyo was arrested in November 2009 for attempting to smuggle cocaine on a flight to Paris. When questioned, the mother said that she became involved in trafficking to pay her children's school fees:

> I lost my husband ten years ago and I have seven children. A lady that used to give me money and food is the one that led me into the drug business. She wanted to take my daughters but I refused. I want them to be educated because I could not go to school. She took me to Benin where I swallowed 60 bitter kola [nuts]. She then gave me N10,000 [approximately $67] (CoinMill.com 2011). After that she gave me the drugs to swallow and took me in her car to Lagos airport. She promised to pay me €3,000 [$3,811] (CoinMill.com 2011), out of which she gave me €1,000 [$1,270]" (CoinMill.com 2011) (Uma 2009).

Arrested cocaine smuggler Udide Okwudili, an auto parts dealer from Lagos, told authorities "I did it because my father's burial is [in] January and I am the first son [so I must pay for the ceremony]" (Uma 2009). Put succinctly by apprehended trafficker Mustapha Latifu, "It is poverty that made me to [sic] smuggle drugs (Ogunseye 2010)."

Nigeria's geography plays some role in its trafficking participation, but less than Guinea Bissau's. A longer journey than Guinea Bissau for South American traffickers, Nigeria's main geographical asset is that its bustling business metropolis of Lagos is found on an easily accessed port. Trafficker Obi Okonkwo told reporters that he and his associates most frequently used Lagos as a point of departure, employing speedboats going out into the Bight of Benin to pick up drugs from waiting boats, doing so only at night so as to avoid security officers (Ibagere 2000). Recently, five Nigerians working as inspection agents at a Lagos port (along with a Taiwanese and Chinese national) were caught attempting to smuggle a half ton of cocaine worth $26.6 million originating from

Chile (Yahoo.com 2010. Once inside Nigeria, the limited surveillance of the country's northern regions – which provide easy access into the Sahel and Sahara – are also a boon to traffickers. If geography plays a minor role, Nigeria's undisputed "x factor" in the drug trade is its massive global Diaspora. Nigeria's massive population (which accounts for one out of every four Sub-Saharan Africans) can be found residing in every corner of the world, from Europe to South America, the Indian sub-continent to China. This global swath of citizens means that contact points for drug export markets exist everywhere. Some members of the sizeable Nigerian Diaspora living in the United Kingdom frequently facilitate trafficking deals there; in 2005, 85 of the 151 Nigerian women held in custody by U.K. authorities were accused of drug-related charges (Jeavens 2005). The Nigerian Diaspora's reach extends beyond just Europe into lesser-considered drug markets in Asia. A newspaper out of New Delhi recently reported how "Nigerian gangs" were using young Indian women from the northeastern region as drug mules, paying them to carry picture frames to Europe in which were hidden bags of cocaine purchased from Afghanistan (Makaar 2008). So too do Nigerians play a substantial role in the trade in other parts of West Africa. In 2007, five Nigerian women were arrested for smuggling 49 kilograms of cocaine on the border of Burkina Faso and Mali, while a stash of opium found in Guinea in 2009 was sourced from "Nigerian groups based in Pakistan (The Telegraph 2009)."

Mali

As home of the famed intellectual mecca of Timbuktu, Mali's nearly singular tourist draw is emblematic of why the country has recently been implicated in the global

drug trade. Located in the deepest Sahara, the city flourished between the 12th and 16th centuries as a meeting place and center of Islam for traders in an otherwise desolate area (Timbuktu Education Foundation 2011). Today, that very desert remoteness of Mali is drawing clandestine drug traffickers who are all too willing to use the unsurveyed space to traverse the Sahara on their way to European drug markets.

Although Mali ranks nowhere near Guinea Bissau or Nigeria in its participation in the trade, it is notable for its unique role as a geographic middleman. Without a coastline, Mali does not often serve as an entry point for drugs on the continent. Rather, situated squarely in the center of West Africa, overland traffickers are obliged to pass through the deserts of Mali, Niger, or Mauritania on their way to Europe. Being geographically central of the three, Mali tends to be the most frequently employed. Despite its differing role in the process of trafficking, the same phenomena present in the previous two states underlie its attraction for smugglers.

Poverty, pervasive in the country, once again serves as a benefit to traffickers. With an average gross national income of $590 per year, Mali is the poorest of the three countries examined, ranking at 168 out of 172 countries in the United Nations' 2009 Human Development Report. This poverty is particularly pronounced in the northeastern Sahelian and Saharan regions of the country, where 77 percent of rural inhabitants live below the poverty line (International Fund for Agricultural Development 2011 [A]). In a region where camel caravanning (which generates $100 – 200 per month) is one of the most lucrative professions, many rural Malians are all too willing to engage

in trafficking. For participation in just one cocaine run across the desert, officials in Timbuktu estimate that citizens can make $9,000 to $11,000 (Gaynor and Diallo 2010).

As in Guinea Bissau and Nigeria, issues of low state capacity plague Mali. As is typical in other West African counties, officials both within the Malian capital of Bamako and outside it are sometimes willing to accept bribes to ensure traffickers' safety (Logan 2010).[1] The state's prime weakness, however, is its inability to monitor the vast majority of the land within its borders. Though endowed with legal sovereignty, the Malian capital of Bamako, like many others in Africa, lacks *de facto* control. The extreme difficulties faced by the Malian state in this regard were highlighted in 2009, when authorities found the burned-out fuselage of a Boeing 727 abandoned in the desert in the eastern part of the country. Subsequent investigations revealed that the craft had likely been flown in from Latin American completely undetected by Malian authorities, landed unnoticed in the desert, and unloaded an estimated ten tons of cocaine. At the time of this writing in January 2011, there was no evidence that national authorities had made any definitive arrests in this case.

In no way are Bamako's troubles lessened by the country's massive size, which is arguably the most influential variable in its role in trafficking. Covering a landmass the size of California and Texas combined, the country's 474,764 square miles of Saharan desert are perfect hideaways for traffickers, unquestionably outside of the state's limited purview (U.S. State Department 2010 [A]). One such geographically onerous spot is the eastern city of Gao, some 500 miles from Bamako, which, due to its remoteness,

has become a hub for human traffickers who use the city as a transit point before going to Europe (UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs 2007). So too is the northern Timbuktu region of the country, an area approximately the size of Switzerland so vast and dangerous that it is now inaccessible even by government troops (Gaynor and Diallo 2010). Local officials have noted that traffickers have free reign of the desolate desert, and often pass through with four-wheel drive vehicles and global positioning systems, and protect themselves with caches of automatic weapons (Gaynor and Diallo 2010). Said a Malian citizen to a reporter: "There is now a red line across northern Mali, nobody can go there. If you go there with feeble means...you don't come back (Gaynor and Diallo 2010)."

Rendering Mali particularly unique is its "x factor" – the profound connection between the transport of drugs and U.S.-designated terrorist groups. Unlike Guinea Bissau and Nigeria, where narco-trafficking has typically been limited simply to criminal rings, Mali is bringing to light connections between traffickers and terrorists. Specifically, the Algerian-originated group known as the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat appears to be the most active in the country's drug trade. A vocal ally of al-Qaeda, the Maghreb-based group has been linked to a series of bombings in Mali (Logan 2010), and has been allegedly involved in the 2003 kidnappings of some 31 European tourists (Gaynor and Diallo 2010). This branch of AQIM frequently works to traffic drugs with the region's Saharan-dwelling peoples known as the Tauregs, whose distrust of the state, unique knowledge of unsurveyed parts of the country, lack of income-generating activities, and commitment to fundamentalist forms of Islam potentially make them

ideal allies for traffickers. Attempts to mitigate trafficking in West Africa will need to take into serious consideration the large swaths of the country controlled by these groups, which constitute a difficult variable within this increasingly drug-filled region.

Conclusion

At the present moment, West African narco-trafficking represents a mid-level threat to West African stability, as well as the interests of the United States and the global community at large. In addition to the developing evidence of links between West African narco-traffickers and AQIM, FARC, and Hezbollah, the presence of the trade puts in undue peril the peoples and governments of the region while simultaneously creating new security risks for NATO allies in the drugs' intended European markets. Though not a preeminent global security concern in a world of Afghanistans and Iraqs, Irans and North Koreas, Somalias and Pakistans, the sown seeds of the trade in the region nevertheless have the potential to grow into something much more poisonous, thus necessitating serious attention.

In light of the new security issues that the trade engenders, this essay has sought to underline both the geopolitical factors that have "pushed" the drug trade into West Africa and those country specific realities – including weak state capacity, poverty and geography – that have "pulled" it into the states of Guinea Bissau, Nigeria and Mali. Of these three countries, Guinea Bissau is the only one that has gained the colloquial distinction of "narco-state." But without increased vigilance of the process of narco-

trafficking, it could well go from being the neighborhood exception to the neighborhood rule.

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