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Organized Crime and Terrorism in the Sahel

Drivers, Actors, Options

Wolfram Lacher

The dimensions of organized criminal activity in the Sahel region have fundamentally changed in recent years. As profits from cocaine smuggling and abductions of foreign nationals increase substantially, criminal networks are expanding their influence, eroding both the rule of law and existing social structures. The growing presence of al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) should equally be seen in the context of the developing criminal networks. Attempts to counter this trend by boosting the capacities of regional states in the security sector have failed to address the real problems. The EU and Germany should encourage greater regional cooperation. Key states are Algeria, which claims regional leadership, and Mali, which has yet to begin tackling organized crime.

The growing number of abductions targeting Western nationals in Mauritania, Mali and Niger in recent years have attracted increasing attention to AQIM's presence in the Sahel region. Western officials perceive AQIM first and foremost as a terrorist network – consequently, the United States as well as European states are seeking to combat the group as such. But contrary to the main AQIM presence in northern Algeria, AQIM offshoots in the Sahel have, to date, mainly focused on criminal activities. Their kidnapping business is primarily motivated by financial gain. The group has killed two hostages: In one case this was due to the UK government's refusal to negotiate ransom pay-

ments; in the other case it was triggered by a botched rescue attempt by French special forces. Admittedly, AQIM offshoots in the Sahel are not just criminal gangs. The group does pursue a political agenda in Mauritania, in particular, as several attacks on the security forces and Western nationals have demonstrated. But the likelihood of AQIM terrorist activity emerging as a major threat to stability in the region is low. The group's growing presence in the Sahel is worrying primarily because it occurs in the context of expanding organized criminal activity and ethnic or social conflicts. The combination of these trends threatens to seriously destabilize the states of the region.

The expansion of criminal networks

Smuggling networks and organized crime are not new phenomena in the Sahel. Contraband of consumer goods has played a major role in the regional economy for decades. During the 1990s, tobacco smuggling thrived – as did the arms trade, fueled by conflicts in the region.

But in recent years, the dimensions of organized crime in the region have changed, and so have its political repercussions. One reason is the shift in smuggling routes for Latin American cocaine to Europe, which for the past five years have been increasingly running via West Africa. Although coastal states like Guinea, Guinea-Bissau and Senegal continue to function as the main hubs, the role of the Sahel – and Mali in particular – is growing. The most compelling example to date is a wrecked Boeing 727 jet that was discovered in northern Mali in November 2009 and had been carrying a large shipment of cocaine – possibly several tons. While the exact scale of cocaine smuggling via the Sahel states is difficult to establish, it is clear that the profits are substantially higher than for other smuggled goods. In addition, there is the trade with Moroccan cannabis resin through the Sahel states to Egypt and the Arabian Peninsula, as well as a thriving arms trade.

Kidnappings of Western nationals by AQIM or associated criminals are also on the increase. Following an exceptional incident in 2003 – when 32 European nationals were kidnapped in southern Algeria – four Western nationals were abducted in 2008; ten in 2009; and eight in 2010, including seven employees of French companies who were kidnapped from the uranium mines in Arlit (Niger) in a spectacular operation. Ransom payments are said to have steadily increased and now amount to several million euros per hostage – though there are, of course, no reliable figures.

Once more, northern Mali is at the center of these developments: In all cases, hostages were held and negotiations

over their release were conducted there.

Destabilizing consequences

The new forms of organized crime are having a significant destabilizing impact. Using their growing financial leverage, criminal networks are expanding their influence in state and society. Only two years ago, the number of AQIM fighters in the Sahel was estimated at around one hundred; now it is placed at double that figure. New recruits are coming mainly from Arab and Tuareg tribes in Mauritania, Mali and Niger. The financial incentives created by ransom payments are likely to play a key role. Similarly, the local population's acceptance of AQIM in parts of northern Mali is also due to the group's purchasing power.

There is increasing evidence that criminal networks have begun to infiltrate the states of the region. This is particularly true of Mali, where there are strong indications of complicity between cocaine smugglers and officials in the administration and security apparatus at the local and regional levels – and widespread speculation that such links also exist at a higher level. The same applies to the kidnappings; intermediaries dispatched by the Malian president to negotiate the release of hostages are believed to have repeatedly taken major cuts in ransom payments.

At the same time, conflicts over the control of these lucrative criminal activities are on the rise. Again, this is most obvious in northern Mali, where such conflicts are fueling power struggles between ethnic and tribal groups, and thereby accelerating the erosion of existing social hierarchies. These conflicts reached a preliminary climax in January 2010: After clashes over a cocaine shipment, Berabiche and Imghad (Arab and Tuareg communities, respectively) temporarily abducted the chief of the Kounta (an Arab tribe). The Malian leadership's ability to balance these groups' interests is being severely tested by such conflicts. In

addition, the integration of Tuareg, who led the 2006 rebellion, remains fragile. The rebels represent parts of the formerly dominant Ifoghas tribes and are demanding the establishment of special forces that would serve under their command. At stake is the control over the Kidal region – and therefore the smuggling routes traversing it – which the Malian leadership has entrusted to the formerly vassal Imghad tribes, as well as some co-opted Ifoghas representatives. In northern Niger, too, the integration of Tuareg rebels remains fragile, and conflicts over the control of criminal activities could lead to renewed destabilization.

Obstacles to countermeasures

Criminal networks have been able to expand largely unchecked, not least because there has been no effective response to the new forms of organized crime in the region. This is not simply because Sahel states have limited resources to exert control over vast Saharan spaces. In northern Mali, control over a relatively limited number of strategic locations and corridors would be sufficient to significantly reduce the activities of smuggling networks and AQIM. The fact that this has yet to happen is above all due to the fragile balance of power in the north, as well as collusion between parts of the state and security apparatus on the one hand, and criminal networks on the other hand. Under pressure from France and the EU, Mali is now planning to increase the security presence in the north. But as long as this deployment is not coupled with a fundamental shift in the government's approach, it is unlikely to help in effectively tackling AQIM and organized crime.

The Malian leadership's reluctance to confront organized crime, in turn, is one of the main reasons for the failure of all attempts to improve regional cooperation on security. The joint command center established following an Algerian-led initiative in April 2010 is making, at best, a modest contribution to confidence-

building. There has not yet been any real cooperation among the states of the region. For example, Mauritanian forces in September 2010 conducted air strikes and a ground offensive in northern Mali with French support, but without giving prior knowledge to the Malian government. Since November 2010, Mauritanian troops have continued to operate on Malian territory without receiving meaningful support from the Malian army. Algeria continues to harbor strong reservations about Mali, which the Algerian press accuses of complicity with criminal networks and AQIM. The Malian leadership, in turn, suspects Algeria of supporting the Tuareg rebels.

Algeria's rivalry with Morocco and Libya represents another obstacle. Like Algeria, Libya claims the role of mediator in conflicts in northern Niger and Mali; Libya is also an influential donor and investor in both countries. Morocco is an important actor because of its role in Western Sahara, and maintains good relations with both the Malian and the Mauritanian governments. But neither Libya nor Morocco are present in Tamanrasset. Algeria is opposed to any Moroccan participation in regional cooperation on security, while Libya is seen by all others as too unpredictable. Both states, therefore, have a reason to undermine Algeria's initiative.

Interventions by European states have aggravated regional tensions and posed additional obstacles to cooperation. Algeria sees the ransom payments negotiated by European governments as an incentive for further kidnappings. Moreover, Algeria reacted furiously when Mali twice released AQIM members in exchange for the liberation of hostages, apparently under Spanish and French pressure. France triggered even greater irritation in Algeria when it carried out military strikes in Mali in July and September 2010 together with Mauritania. These interventions provoked resentment toward the former colonial power and ran counter to Algeria's claim to regional leadership.

Options

The greatest threat to the stability of states in the Sahel region is not terrorism, but the growing influence of criminal networks and increasing conflicts over the control of smuggling routes. European states and the United States have primarily sought to bolster Sahel states' capacities in the security sector. But such support will not help in tackling the real problems. The main obstacles to combating organized crime and AQIM more effectively are weak regional cooperation and the Malian leadership's lack of political will to act against organized crime. Whether the Malian government can be persuaded to change its stance in this regard is uncertain. However, donor states should voice their concerns about collusion by officials with organized crime in their bilateral relations. Moreover, they should link the continuation of development assistance to progress on combating corruption and organized crime.

Germany and the EU can help improve regional cooperation by supporting the Algerian-led initiative and encouraging member states to increase their engagement in this initiative. Algeria has by far the most significant capabilities in the security sector and is an indispensable player in Sahel security matters; EU member states, therefore, should acknowledge Algeria's regional leadership role and seek to include Algeria in their approach. At the same time, they need to take into account that Algeria pursues its own interests in northern Mali, and that it accords little importance to human rights issues in counterterrorism. Nevertheless, regional programs aimed at capacity-building in Sahel states to the exclusion of Algeria would be the wrong approach. Nor is it possible to build on regional organizations to improve cooperation: Both the Arab Maghreb Union (AMU) and the Community of Sahel-Saharan States (CEN-SAD) are paralyzed by regional rivalry. Morocco should be discouraged from undermining regional cooperation; the prospects for exerting

influence on Libya in this regard are limited.

Germany and EU member states should avoid measures that would militarize Sahel security issues or obstruct regional cooperation. That applies to military strikes such as those carried out by France, but also to prisoner exchanges made under European pressure. EU states should coordinate their strategies toward the region in general, and their approaches to abductions in particular. While the UK-backed Algerian proposal of banning ransom payments entirely is unrealistic, a common approach is necessary to reduce the incentives to criminal gangs and self-interested mediators.

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