



## ***Trans-Saharan Trafficking: A Growing Source of Terrorist Financing***

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The region of West Africa and the Sahel has been attracting increased international attention lately for two reasons. First, terrorist activity in the region appears to be rising, especially as kidnappings of Western tourists and aid workers by Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) or groups linked to it become more frequent. Second, smuggling in the region, both in legal commodities and illicit ones such as drugs, appears to be increasing as well. The rise of the drug trade, in particular, has generated fears that weak states in West Africa could become criminalized “narco-states,” or that profits from the drug trade could be used to fund terrorism. This paper will examine smuggling routes from West Africa to North Africa, by way of the Sahara, and how terrorist groups, particularly AQIM, could be profiting from this trade.

### ***Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM)***

There are a wide range of different criminal, terrorist and militant groups involved in smuggling and other illicit activities in the Sahara and Sahel regions. In terms of international terrorism, AQIM is the major actor in the region, and it will be the focus of this paper. However, it appears to have relationships with a number of other groups, including smaller criminal organizations or militant groups involved in local conflicts such as the one in Northern Mali between the Malian government and the Tuaregs, or a similar situation in Niger. These groups do not have international political goals, but

sometimes assist AQIM in carrying out its activities, such as kidnapping Western tourists and aid workers and selling them to AQIM.

From the perspective of international terrorism, AQIM, formerly the Salafi Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC), is the group of most concern in North Africa and the Sahel. The group, which originated in Algeria, allied itself with the main branch of Al-Qaeda in September 2006 and adopted the name Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb in 2007. Since then, it has expanded southward into ungoverned territories in the Sahel, in Mali, Niger and Mauritania. There it has developed local alliances and worked with local officials.<sup>1</sup> What makes AQIM of such concern to the U.S. is its links to the main Al-Qaeda group, its potential to carry out attacks both within Africa and abroad, and its ability to finance those activities by participating in organized crime in the ungoverned spaces of the Sahara. The rise of drug trafficking through the region has heightened these fears, and recently evidence has begun to emerge linking AQIM to this highly lucrative trade, although the extent of this connection is still disputed. There is also the potential that AQIM could learn operational techniques from the drug traffickers, who often have the latest technology and run highly complex and organized operations.

The degree of the threat posed by AQIM is hotly debated. The organization is estimated to consist of 500 to 1,000 individuals, but the extent of their ideological commitment to jihad is open to question. The group emerged out of the Algerian civil war but, despite some high profile bombings in Algiers since 2007, it does not currently pose a threat to the stability of the Algerian government. Instead, it has shifted the focus of its operations to the Sahel, particularly Northern Mali, where it is able to operate unimpeded. In the Sahel, AQIM has clashed with the militaries of Mauritania, Niger and Mali, and conducted raids on police and military targets in those countries, in addition to kidnapping and assassinating soldiers and tourists. There have also been attacks on embassies and diplomatic targets in 2009, including an attack near the French embassy in

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<sup>1</sup> Amb. Janet Sanderson, Dynamics of North African Terrorism, panel discussion at CSIS, 2/16/10.

Nouakchott, Mauritania and an unsuccessful attempt to kidnap U.S. embassy employees in Niger.<sup>2</sup>

The nature of AQIM's affiliation with Al-Qaeda is not completely clear, but it does not appear to be taking orders directly from core Al-Qaeda leadership in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Thus far, its actions have mainly been limited to the North African/Sahel region, although it has announced as its goals the targeting of American and French interests and has reportedly sent individuals to fight in Iraq. Successful counterterrorism activities in Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia have pushed AQIM into Algeria's six Saharan states and south into the Sahelian countries of Mauritania, Mali and Niger. This region has become a source of recruits, logistics and financing for AQIM, which is now able to finance its activities through kidnapping for ransom as well as involvement in the smuggling of arms, cigarettes, drugs, vehicles and persons.<sup>3</sup> AQIM has taken advantage of the weak government control over parts of the Sahel, which allows it to carry out its activities without interference. It has allegedly set up mobile training camps along the Algeria-Mali border and an increasing number of its attacks and kidnappings have taken place in Mali, Mauritania and Niger.

The frequency and severity of attacks attributed to AQIM have increased since the group emerged in 2006. Initially, it carried out a number of attacks against African militaries and government targets but it has now shifted to target civilians, particularly Westerners. In 2007, AQIM began to adopt the tactic of simultaneous suicide bombings, similar to those seen in Iraq, mostly directed against Algerian targets. In 2007, its attacks included the Government Palace and a police station in April and the Constitutional Council and the UN headquarters in Algiers in December. There was also a failed assassination attempt against Algerian President Abdelaziz Bouteflika in September. A

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<sup>2</sup> John Rollins, Coordinator. "Al-Qaeda and Affiliates: Historical Perspective, Global Presence, and Implications for U.S. Policy," CRS Report R41070, February 5, 2010. 16.

<sup>3</sup> Andrew Hansen and Lauren Vriens, "Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) or L'Organisation Al-Qaïda au Maghreb Islamique (Formerly Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat or Groupe Salafiste pour la Prédication et le Combat)," Backgrounder, Council on Foreign Relations. July 21, 2009, available at [http://www.cfr.org/publication/12717/alqaeda\\_in\\_the\\_islamic\\_maghreb\\_aqim\\_or\\_lorganisation\\_alqada\\_au\\_maghreb\\_islamique\\_formerly\\_salafist\\_group\\_for\\_preaching\\_and\\_combat\\_or\\_groupe\\_salafiste\\_pour\\_la\\_prdication\\_et\\_le\\_combat.html](http://www.cfr.org/publication/12717/alqaeda_in_the_islamic_maghreb_aqim_or_lorganisation_alqada_au_maghreb_islamique_formerly_salafist_group_for_preaching_and_combat_or_groupe_salafiste_pour_la_prdication_et_le_combat.html).

suicide attack on a police academy in 2008 killed 40 people. In 2009, AQIM's attacks in Algeria shifted to areas outside of the capital where there was less of a security presence, including an ambush that killed 24 gendarmes and another ambush on a military convoy that killed 14 soldiers.<sup>4</sup> Many believe that AQIM has stepped up its attacks in the Sahel since 2009 because some of its members are returning from fighting in Iraq. However, others believe that the increased number of attacks is due to a rivalry between two Al-Qaeda sub-commanders in Mali, Mokhtar Belmokhtar and Abdelhamid Abu Zeid.<sup>5</sup>

Since 2008, the number of kidnappings of Westerners in the Sahel region has increased exponentially, and most of them have been linked to AQIM in some way. Many of the targets have been from France, Spain or Italy. Usually, tourists or aid workers have been kidnapped by local criminal groups in Mauritania, Tunisia, Mali and Niger. They are then sold to AQIM and transported to northern Mali, where a lack of government control allows the terrorist organization to operate unimpeded.<sup>6</sup>

In addition to providing a source of funding, AQIM's reliance on kidnapping has the added advantages of calling public attention to the group's existence and appearing to further its jihadist goals, in contrast to involvement in the drug trade and other smuggling activities, which are out of the public eye and are seen to be purely criminal in nature. However, the fact that the majority of hostages are ransomed rather than killed illustrates that profit is one of the driving motivations behind the latest string of kidnappings. Some incidents, such as the killing of British hostage Edwin Dyer in 2009, have given credibility to both the jihadist rhetoric of AQIM and its threats to kill hostages, and have given the organization more leverage in ransom negotiations. But the fact that hostages are rarely killed is evidence of the primarily profit-driven nature of the kidnappings.

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<sup>4</sup> Rollins, 15.

<sup>5</sup> Eric Schmitt and Souad Mekhennet, "Qaeda Branch Steps Up Raids in North Africa," *The New York Times*, July 9, 2009, available at [http://www.nytimes.com/2009/07/10/world/africa/10terror.html?\\_r=2&scp=1&sq=al%20qaeda%20north%20africa&st=cse](http://www.nytimes.com/2009/07/10/world/africa/10terror.html?_r=2&scp=1&sq=al%20qaeda%20north%20africa&st=cse).

<sup>6</sup> Dario Cristiani and Riccardo Fabiani, "AQIM Funds Terrorist Operations with Thriving Sahel-Based Kidnapping Industry," Jamestown Foundation, *Terrorism Monitor* Vol. 8 Issue 4. January 28, 2010.

AQIM still faces several challenges. Although it has gained a foothold in the Sahel, where government control is weak, it has failed to extend its presence into the Maghreb countries of Morocco, Libya and Tunisia, the region for which it is named. It maintains a presence in Algeria but it faces constant pressure from the Algerian security forces. The fact that AQIM has established an effective safe haven in the Sahel may discourage the group from increasing its attacks there, for fear of alienating local populations and authorities and prompting a backlash that could threaten its position in the region.

AQIM has the potential to become a much greater threat, however, if it can expand its capabilities and goals beyond its traditional areas of operation by establishing links with other groups. AQIM is increasing its focus on West Africa, including Senegal and Nigeria. It has tried to piggyback on recent ethnic violence in the Nigerian city of Jos by offering to train and arm Nigerian Muslims to protect themselves from Christian aggression,<sup>7</sup> and some fear that it could gain support among militants in Senegal as well. Another concern is that it could develop ties with other Al-Qaeda affiliated groups such as Al-Shabab in Somalia. Although AQIM has no presence in or near Somalia, an increasing number of foreign fighters are being trained in Somalia, some of which are then moving back to West Africa, where AQIM could come in contact with them. Some also fear that it could establish ties with the African diaspora in Europe, giving it the ability to carry out attacks there. Diaspora communities have been used by drug traffickers to establish distribution networks within Europe, and AQIM could try this tactic as well. Finally, the expanding role of the drug trade through West Africa and the Sahara could provide the organization with both a source of funding and an opportunity to share lessons learned with the drug traffickers.

### ***Tuareg Conflicts***

Local conflicts in the Sahel have facilitated AQIM's expansion into the region. In both Mali and Niger, Tuareg nomads have been fighting for greater autonomy and

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<sup>7</sup> <http://www.rttnews.com/Content/GeneralNews.aspx?Node=B1&Id=1198801>

economic development for some time. Tuareg rebel movements in both countries fought against their respective governments throughout the 1990s. Although a series of ceasefires and peace agreements have been signed, conflict shows signs of breaking out again. Mining and exploration for oil in disputed areas have complicated the situation in both countries. In Niger, one of the Tuareg grievances is a demand for a greater share of the revenue from the country's uranium exports,<sup>8</sup> while in Northern Mali, Chinese and Australian companies are exploring for oil, giving the government an incentive to try to end the conflict quickly.<sup>9</sup>

The conflicts in Mali and Niger, though separate, have followed parallel paths over the past few years. Fighting broke out again in both countries in 2007 as ceasefires collapsed. In Niger, the Niger Movement for Justice (MNJ) began attacks against the military in February 2007, claiming to be fighting for greater economic development and a share of the revenue from uranium mining in the region. Fighting also broke out in Mali in September 2007, when a 2006 ceasefire was broken by some of the groups involved. A new ceasefire was declared in December 2007 after a strong response from the Malian military. Since 2007, each country has gone through a series of failed ceasefires and peace agreements, with rebel factions splintering and some of them returning to conflict after each failed ceasefire. Rebels returned to the peace process in Mali in February 2009 and a ceasefire was agreed between the government and rebels in Niger in April 2009 after Libyan mediation.

The Tuareg militant groups in Mali and Niger are not natural allies of Al-Qaeda. The Tuareg people are non-Arab Berbers and have traditionally been rivals of the Arabs in the region. They are also Sufi Muslims rather than Salafists, giving them little in common with the primarily Arab, Salafist Al-Qaeda movement.<sup>10</sup> However, regional conflicts such as the one between the Malian government and the Tuaregs have played a role in AQIM's expansion into the Sahel. Hama Ag Sid Ahmed, a spokesman for the

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<sup>8</sup> <http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2008/900/in6.htm>

<sup>9</sup> [http://www.transcend.org/tms/article\\_detail.php?article\\_id=2258](http://www.transcend.org/tms/article_detail.php?article_id=2258)

<sup>10</sup> "Briefs: Rebel Movement Suggests Malian Government Deliberately Driving Tuareg to Al-Qaeda," *Terrorism Monitor*, Vol. 8 Issue 3, Jamestown Foundation, January 21, 2010.

Tuareg rebel group Alliance Démocratique du 23 mai pour le Changement (ADC), reported to an Algerian newspaper that the Malian government's failure to fully implement the 2006 peace agreement was a direct cause of the expansion of the presence of AQIM in the Kidal region of northern Mali. According to Hama Ag Sid Ahmed, AQIM forces in the region have grown from 250 to 800 members in the last year as a result of the fact that the Tuareg have been prevented by the army from chasing the terrorists out of the area, but the army lacks the capacity to do so itself. Under the 2006 peace agreement, the government was supposed to create special Tuareg security units to police the area, but it has not done so, contributing to the lack of security in the region.<sup>11</sup> Meanwhile, the Tuareg are becoming increasingly frustrated by the lack of development in their region, exacerbated by a drought. It is possible that their disaffection could push them closer to Al-Qaeda, despite the many differences between the two groups.

### ***AQIM and Smuggling in the Region***

Trans-Saharan trade routes have existed for centuries and wide expanses of harsh, sparsely populated terrain make the area ideal for smuggling. In addition to more traditionally smuggled commodities such as cigarettes and arms, in recent years these routes have provided a means to transport South American cocaine to Europe, by means of West Africa. This trend is worrisome for a number of reasons. First, the value of the drugs now passing through the region is huge compared to other commodities that have traditionally been smuggled there. This allows groups in the region to accumulate profits much quicker than they could previously, giving them the means to carry out local armed insurgencies or international terrorist activities. Second, the international nature of the drug trade, in contrast, for example, to the trade in smuggled cigarettes, allows connections to form between powerful criminal and terrorist organizations in different parts of the globe. AQIM is only one of the actors in the region and, unlike many local criminal organizations, it appears to be only indirectly involved in illicit trade (with the exception of its trade in hostages), such as by providing protection to the smugglers in

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<sup>11</sup> "Briefs: Rebel Movement Suggests Malian Government Deliberately Driving Tuareg to Al-Qaeda," *Terrorism Monitor*, Vol. 8 Issue 3, Jamestown Foundation, January 21, 2010.

exchange for a fee. However, AQIM's expansion of its activities southward into the countries of the Sahel from its base in Algeria has put it in a good position to profit from the illicit trade. It is this combination of an international terrorist organization and trade networks for high-value illicit commodities that presents a new development that is cause for concern.

The cocaine trade from South America to Europe through West Africa increased dramatically from 2005 to 2007, as measured by large maritime seizures of cocaine off the coast of Africa as well as the percentage of couriers arrested in European airports from flights originating in West Africa. These seizures dropped off in 2008 and 2009, perhaps as a result of increased interdiction efforts in the region by both local and international law enforcement. However, recent anecdotal evidence from late 2009 and early 2010 may indicate that the amount of cocaine shipped through West Africa has begun to pick up again as the traffickers find new routes that offer less resistance. One of these routes may be by air to West African countries such as Mali and then overland through the Sahara and on to Europe.<sup>12</sup>

The arrest of three alleged Al-Qaeda associates in Ghana in December 2009 for cocaine trafficking would support this hypothesis, as would the recent discovery of a crashed Boeing 727 in Mali. Even before evidence began to accumulate in support of the theory that the cocaine trade through West Africa has been rerouted through the Sahelian countries rather than the coastal states, U.S. officials were taking note of an increase in rogue jet aircraft crossing the Atlantic bound for West Africa. An official at the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) reported in early 2008 that a growing fleet of jet aircraft was crossing back and forth between the cocaine-producing regions of South America and West Africa. He called it "the most significant development in the criminal exploitation of aircraft since 9/11."<sup>13</sup> This fleet is now believed to include twin-engine turboprops, executive jets and Boeing 727s. Since Boeing 727s can carry up to 10 tons of cargo, they give the traffickers the ability to transport multi-ton shipments of cocaine or

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<sup>12</sup> UNODC, "Crime and Instability: Case Studies of Transnational Threats," February 2010. 16.

<sup>13</sup> Tim Gaynor and Tiemoko Diallo, "Al Qaeda linked to rogue aviation network," Reuters, January 13, 2010, available at <http://www.reuters.com/assets/print?aid=USTRE60C3E820100113>.

other commodities, including weapons, and to do so much quicker than could be done by ship. The DHS official concluded that the trans-Atlantic aviation network, which could be used to transport other things besides drugs, could give terrorist organizations such as the FARC and Al-Qaeda “the power to move people and material and contraband anywhere around the world with a couple of fuel stops.”<sup>14</sup>

The Malian authorities lack the capacity to patrol the northern parts of the country, and northern Mali has even become a “no-go zone” for the authorities.<sup>15</sup> Government authorities simply lack the resources to compete with the better armed and equipped traffickers. The crashed 727 found in Mali is further evidence that aircraft is being used for smuggling purposes in the area. Although no cargo was found in the wreckage, it is widely suspected that the plane could have been carrying cocaine.

More facts are now emerging regarding the relationship between AQIM and the trans-Saharan drug trade. In December 2009, the DEA announced the arrests of three men associated with Al-Qaeda for allegedly agreeing to transport cocaine through West and North Africa in order to support AQIM, Al-Qaeda and the FARC. This incident, if verified, supports the frequently made claim that AQIM is financing its activities through the drug trade. It also illustrates the emerging links between North African and South American terrorist organizations. According to information released by the DEA, on several occasions one of the men (Touré), met with a confidential source working for the DEA, who claimed to be a representative of the FARC. During these meetings, he described his relationship with Al-Qaeda groups in North Africa and his experience transporting drugs through the region with Al-Qaeda’s protection. Touré promised that Al-Qaeda could protect the FARC’s shipment from Mali to Spain by way of Algeria and Libya or Algeria and Morocco.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Gaynor and Diallo.

<sup>15</sup> Alfred de Montesquiou, “Al Qaeda offshoot grows in the desert,” AP, June 6, 2010., available at [http://news.yahoo.com/s/ap/20100606/ap\\_on\\_re\\_af/af\\_sahara\\_al\\_qaida\\_franchise](http://news.yahoo.com/s/ap/20100606/ap_on_re_af/af_sahara_al_qaida_franchise)

<sup>16</sup> U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration, “Three Al Qaeda Associates Arrested on Drug and Terrorism Charges,” Press Release, December 18, 2009, available at <http://www.justice.gov/dea/pubs/pressrel/pr121809.html>.

There is still no convincing evidence that AQIM has taken on a direct role in illicit trafficking, but there is substantial evidence that it has worked with traffickers of cocaine and other contraband, and offered them protection.<sup>17</sup> The cocaine trade through western Africa is very internationalized, with Latin American drug cartels wielding increasing influence. Any involvement in the cocaine trade in the region would bring the terrorists into contact with international trafficking networks that stretch from Latin America to Europe. These linkages between terrorist groups and drug traffickers are not unique to Africa—as many as half of the organizations on the U.S. list of terrorist organizations are involved in the drug trade in some way.<sup>18</sup>

AQIM is well positioned to benefit financially from the lucrative illicit trade networks that cross the Sahara. AQIM members are very familiar with the areas in which they operate and are able to offer protection to the traffickers and tax the trade, especially in areas where government authority is very weak. Although AQIM's involvement in the cocaine trade is still believed to be limited, it has been involved in other forms of smuggling, such as cigarette smuggling, for some time and it also charges smugglers a “tax” for passing through areas under its control or charges them to protect their operations. These streams of funding serve to bridge the gap between kidnapping ransoms, which are now believed to be the group's main source of funding. AQIM also reportedly receives some funding from cells in Europe.<sup>19</sup>

The North African governments appear to have taken the strongest stand against AQIM and smuggling. The governments of the Sahel countries have also taken a stand against the terrorist group, but their capacity to halt its activities is far weaker. There does not appear to be high-level government complicity in smuggling or support for terrorism, but corruption among lower-level officials, such as the police or border guards, could be helping to facilitate illicit trade in the region.

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<sup>17</sup> “Algeria says Al-Qaeda guards Sahara drug smugglers,” *Washington Post*, February 22, 2010, available at <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/02/22/AR2010022202128.html>

<sup>18</sup> Michael Braun, Dynamics of North African Terrorism, panel discussion at CSIS, 2/16/10.

<sup>19</sup> Rollins, 15.

## ***Conclusion and Recommendations***

The emergence of West Africa and the Sahara as a major drug-smuggling route does seem to be presenting AQIM with new opportunities. The group appears to have some involvement in the drug trade, although at this stage its involvement seems to be more indirect, in the form of “taxing” the smugglers for transiting territory under AQIM control or charging a fee for protection or logistical assistance. However, the rising influence of international drug cartels is bringing with it access to huge financial resources, extensive logistical capacities, and access to the latest technology. The real danger is not that AQIM is currently involved in smuggling nuclear material through western and northern Africa, but that it is gaining an important source of funding that has proven to be very resistant to international efforts to eliminate it. In addition, by operating in the same environments as the drug traffickers, and by collaborating on some aspects of illicit trade in the region, AQIM could be gaining valuable lessons learned on how to ship illicit commodities around the globe undetected. This could mean that the Sahara and Sahel regions could be vulnerable to nuclear smuggling in the future or that the expertise learned from the drug cartels could later be used for nuclear smuggling elsewhere in the world.

Although terrorist activity in the region has increased in the past several years, many of the organizations working with Al-Qaeda in the region are not Salafists with international objectives; they are local groups with grievances against their own governments over underdevelopment and other issues. Improving security in the region through training and support for local security forces is an important objective that is already being pursued by the U.S. and others. However, it will be important to pursue a holistic approach to the problem rather than one solely involving assistance to security forces. Focusing on the security aspect in isolation, without considering local grievances and economic conditions, will further alienate local groups and push them further into cooperation with AQIM. Therefore, a more balanced approach is needed that combines effective law enforcement with initiatives to develop rural areas and reduce alienation among certain populations, such as the Tuareg. A successful policy to combat AQIM will

have to reduce the links between AQIM and the broader Al-Qaeda movement; prevent it from establishing links with other organizations in Africa, such as drug trafficking organizations or terrorist and militant groups in West or East Africa; reduce the size and utility of its safe havens; reduce its opportunities for kidnappings; prevent it from taking full advantage of the drug trade to finance its operations; and impede its movement across borders.

Capacity Building: Strengthening the capacity of local institutions to combat illicit trade and uphold the rule of law will be a crucial component of any initiative to prevent terrorism financing through crime and cross-border trafficking. Thus far, capacity building programs have mainly focused on the security forces, and particularly the militaries of relevant countries. This is an important first step but it needs to be supplemented by strengthening local law enforcement capacity to combat drug trafficking and other forms of illicit trade through training and provision of equipment; building the capacity of national governments in the Sahel and West Africa to patrol their airspace and maritime boundaries; and increasing the capacity of the judiciary to prosecute criminals and terrorists, including updating laws where necessary and improving prison systems.

Resolving Local Conflicts: In some of the Sahel states, such as Mali and Niger, ongoing conflicts have helped to create an enabling environment for crime and terrorism. The conflicts have led to the formation of rebel groups, which may cooperate with terrorists; created no-go zones for government security forces; caused a proliferation of weapons; and fostered grievances among local populations, who may turn against the government and support terrorist organizations. In order to eliminate terrorist strongholds in the region, political solutions will have to be found to resolve these conflicts. This will involve revisiting and fully implement peace agreements with the Tuareg in northern Mali, including provisions for developing the region and the creation of Tuareg special security units to help the military police the area; and restarting the peace process in Niger, which has faltered, particularly after the February 2010 coup. Underdevelopment is a contributing factor to both these conflicts and to AQIM's ability to establish a base of operations in the region. Development projects in remote areas of Mali and Niger could

help the government among local populations and prevent them from turning to AQIM for support.

Regional Cooperation: Finally, due to the trans-national nature of both illicit trade and terrorism, a regional approach will be needed to make progress against these threats. Institutions for regional cooperation already exist in West Africa, but these can be strengthened to improve their ability to present illicit trade and terrorism. Regional organizations such as ECOWAS should be supported in creating trans-national initiatives to improve the rule of law and to combat crime and terrorist financing. In addition, the regional bureaus of INTERPOL, particularly the West African Police Chiefs Committee (WAPCCO), headquartered in Abidjan, could be used to strengthen cooperation on cross-border law enforcement and facilitate information sharing between member states.

In conclusion, the rise of drug trafficking in West Africa and the Sahel could present a major source of funding and logistics for terrorist groups operating in the area, and there is evidence that they are already taking advantage of these opportunities. Taking steps now to curb illicit trafficking and reduce the appeal of the terrorist groups among local populations could prevent them from emerging as a much greater threat in the future.