



Executive Summary



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THE CHALLENGE OF DRUG TRAFFICKING TO DEMOCRATIC GOVERNANCE AND HUMAN SECURITY IN WEST AFRICA

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West Africa is under attack from international criminal networks that are using the subregion as a key global hub for the distribution, wholesale, and increasing production of illicit drugs. Most drug trade in West Africa involves cocaine sold in Europe, although heroin is also trafficked to the United States; the subregion is becoming an export base for amphetamines and their precursors, mainly for East Asian markets and, increasingly, the United States. The most important of these criminal networks are drug trafficking organizations (DTOs) from Latin America—primarily from Colombia, Venezuela, and Mexico—partnering with West African criminals. These criminals are often Nigerians and Ghanaians, who have been involved in the global drug trade for several decades, first with cannabis and later with heroin. The problem has worsened to the point that these networks represent an existential threat to the viability of already fragile states in West Africa as independent, rule of law based entities. As part of this new Latin America-West Africa criminal nexus, Guinea-Bissau is generally recognized as a narco-state where state-capture by traffickers has already occurred.

There is also increasingly strong evidence linking terrorist organizations or state sponsors of terrorism to the West Africa drug trade, including Colombia's Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), Hezbollah (allied with elements in the Lebanese diaspora), Venezuela,

and Iran. These criminal and terrorist groups are also a threat to U.S. national security because the illicit profits earned by Latin American drug cartels operating in West Africa strengthen the same criminal elements that traffic drugs to North America, and the same North African and Middle East terrorist groups and nations that target the United States. The link to AQIM takes on particular significance in light of this terrorist organization's recent takeover of a vast sector of ungoverned space in northern Mali, along with Touareg allies.

West Africa's geographical location between Latin America and Europe made it an ideal transit zone for exploitation by powerful drug cartels and terrorist organizations—much as the Caribbean and Central America had long suffered for being placed between South America's cocaine producers and North America's cocaine users. West Africa's primary operational allure to traffickers is not actually geography, however, but rather its low standards of governance, low levels of law enforcement capacity, and high rates of corruption. Latin American traffickers recently relocated a share of their wholesale distribution from the Western Hemisphere to West Africa, with the subregion moving from being merely a short-term transit point to becoming a storage and staging area for wholesale repackaging, re-routing and sometimes (re-)sale of drugs.

While West African states have made remarkable progress in democratic and economic

development over the past decade, the insidious effects of narcotics trafficking have the potential to reverse many of these gains. The proceeds of drug trafficking, by far the most lucrative transnational criminal activity in illicit economies, are fueling a dramatic increase in narco-corruption in the region, allowing drug traffickers to stage coups d'état, hijack elections, and co-opt or buy political power. West African countries could develop along similar lines to Mexico, where drug gangs have a symbiotic relationship with the state and political parties, and drug-related violence increases significantly. Besides a spike in drug-related crime, narcotics trafficking is also fraying West Africa's traditional social fabric and creating a public health crisis, with hundreds of thousands of new drug addicts. While the inflow of drug money may seem economically beneficial to West Africa in the short-term, investors will be less inclined to do business in the long-term if the subregion is unstable. On net, drug trafficking and other illicit trade represent the most serious challenge to human security in the region since resource conflicts rocked several West African countries in the early-1990s.

International aid to West Africa's "war on drugs" is only in an initial stage. Until recently, the United States, preoccupied by September 11, 2001 (9/11) and wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, dedicated too few resources to monitoring, much less combating transnational organized crime (TOC) in West Africa. Large-scale cocaine seizures in West Africa started in 2004, but the laying of the Latin America-West Africa illicit drug pipeline started well before this. After the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) adopted a regional action plan on drugs and

organized crime in 2008, the United Nations (UN) responded with a 2010-14 plan, and the United States with its own modest initiative in 2011. West Africa's progress in combating drugs will have to be measured in decades or even generations, not years, and also unfold in parallel with creating alternative sustainable livelihoods and addressing the longer-term challenges of human insecurity, poverty, and underdevelopment.

This paper concludes with specific counter-narcotics policy recommendations for U.S. Government agencies, the U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM) and its components, ECOWAS and its member-states, and the international community, including the UN.

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