

## **The Atlantic Connection: Latin America's Drug Links with West African Terrorist Hubs**

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### *Introduction*

The major trends that have characterized the evolution of the illicit drug trade over the last quarter of a century are the increasing globalization of drug consumption and the proliferation of transnational supply chains. These smuggling corridors from production to consumption countries are highly adaptable networks of criminal groups along the key nodes of the routes to these markets. The networks are composed of the criminal groups involved in the production, transportation, and distribution of illegal drugs, compromising state actors in transit countries, and criminalized terrorist groups.<sup>1</sup>

Historically the United States has been the largest market for illicit drugs originating in Latin America, predominantly cocaine and marijuana. Nevertheless, while levels of cocaine consumption in the United States have declined steadily since the early 1990s, cocaine consumption has increased in Europe in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Moreover, cocaine commands prices in Europe that are twice as high as those in the United States.<sup>2</sup> The increased demand and profitability of the European market has resulted in the expansion of smuggling corridors from South America to Europe.<sup>3</sup>

### *The South America to West Africa Pipelines*

Over the past decade, Latin America-based drug cartels began to route cocaine shipments to Europe through West Africa. The Colombian drug trade is controlled at the source by the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), together with a set of “emerging criminal bands” known by their Spanish acronym BACRIM. The BACRIM



are Colombia's third-generation drug trafficking syndicates. They are made up of many different, independent nodes, with few connectors between them.<sup>4</sup> Although Mexican cartels specialize in supplying the U.S. market, two Mexican criminal organizations, Los Zetas and the Sinaloa cartel, have been known to smuggle narcotics to Europe through West Africa.<sup>5</sup> Venezuela is a key point in the trans-Atlantic connection. Notably, elements within the Venezuelan military (known collectively as the Cartel of the Suns) are reported to be deeply involved in the drug trade. Members of the Cartel of the Suns leverage their access to major airports and ports to move Colombian cocaine.<sup>6</sup> Finally, as discussed below, Lebanese Hezbollah plays a significant role in the drug trade collaboration with South American drug trafficking syndicates.

The West African route provides Europe, the world's second-largest market for cocaine (after the United States) with cocaine valued at between US\$3 billion and US\$14 billion in 2012.<sup>7</sup> The shortest route from South America to Africa follows the 10th parallel of latitude. European and U.S. law enforcement refer to this route as "Highway 10." Containers with cocaine concealed inside commercial vessels are brought ashore in West African ports or offloaded on to other smaller boats along the coastline or inlets on West Africa's Atlantic coast.<sup>7</sup>

Air routes appear to be the most commonly used ways to transport illegal drug shipments from a number of regional airports in South America to various landing strips in West Africa. According to the United Nation Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), the potential is almost unlimited for those willing to use less formal landing strips, since many West African countries lack the capacity to detect or pursue unauthorized aircraft entering their airspace. In 2010, there were increasing numbers of modified light aircraft (such as the dual-engine Cessna 441 modified by the inclusion of additional fuel tanks for the transatlantic voyage) departing from Venezuela on transatlantic flights to Mauritania, Sierra Leone or Guinea-Bissau. There is also evidence of modified turboprop aircraft flown from Venezuela to Mauritania, Mali, Sierra Leone, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, and Cape Verde.<sup>8</sup> A Boeing 727 from Venezuela carrying an estimated five to nine tons of cocaine landed at Tarkint, near the city of Gao in northeast Mali, in November 2009. The aircraft unloaded, made a failed take off attempt, and then was burned. The drugs were never recovered.<sup>9</sup>

Brazil, Argentina, and Uruguay are significant export hubs for shipments of illegal drugs across the Atlantic. Peruvian and Bolivian cocaine is routed through one of these three countries. Colombian and Mexican drug cartels working in conjunction with Italian and local crime syndicates based in Rio de Janeiro, Sao Paulo, Salvador, and Recife, as well as Buenos Aires and Montevideo. As in the case of drug consignments from Venezuela, shipments are dispatched either directly to ports in Europe or through West Africa with Guinea Bissau as a key point of entry.<sup>10</sup>

### *The West Africa to Europe Pipelines*

West African crime networks are leading players in transporting and distributing the cocaine in Europe (West Africans are key cocaine distributors in Europe), which may explain the selection of West Africa as a staging ground for cocaine importation from South America. There are also reports that South American nationals have relocated to West Africa and may have moved part of the manufacturing process to locations in the region. The advantages of West Africa as a staging ground for the movement of drugs to Europe derives from the prevalence of under governed areas and the weakness of state institutions, which seriously inhibits the ability of West African states to control their territory. Security personnel are poorly trained, equipped, and disciplined, underpaid and often irregularly paid, which increases their vulnerability to corruption.

Some of the cocaine departs West Africa by sea. Some goes directly by courier or air cargo on flights from West African to European cities. There is evidence of both land and air transport to North Africa before proceeding to Europe by sea or by air. This latter routing may involve Moroccans who have gained smuggling expertise through years of trafficking hashish.<sup>11</sup> Leopold Senghor Airport in Dakar is known to be a major departure point in West Africa for drugs en route to Europe. Since Guinea-Bissau was formerly a Portuguese colony, Guineans do not need visas to enter Portugal, which makes the movement of drugs from that country even easier.<sup>12</sup>

### *Links to Terrorism*

The West African syndicates involved in the movement of illegal drugs to Europe are often allied with al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). It is estimated that AQIM

spends about US\$2 million on weapons, vehicles, and payments to families whose children join its combat branches. In recent years, the group has lost ground in its traditional stronghold in the Kabyles on Algeria's Mediterranean coast because of pressure from the Algerian security services, and it has come to rely heavily on criminal activities in the Sahel, including kidnapping for ransom, and trafficking in drugs, cigarettes, subsidized gasoline, and illegal migrants, to fund its operations. There is evidence that the group charges a fee for safe passage of illegal trade through territory where it is active, particularly northern Mali. Narcotics are transported from West African countries in heavily armed convoys of four-wheel-drive vehicles guided by GPS through Nigeria, Mali and the Western Sahara into Algeria, Libya and Morocco, from where they are smuggled into Europe. There are even reports that the militants use cocaine as a stimulant while fighting. At the same time, it appears that some elements of the AQIM leadership do not approve of involvement in the drug trade, which they regard as haram. In October 2012 AQIM's leader Abdelmalek Droukdel relieved Mokhtar Belmokhtar of his position as commander of AQIM's Katibat al-Moulathimin ("The Veiled Brigade") because of his supposed deviation from AQIM's ideology. Droukdel reportedly disapproved of Belmokhtar's participation in the drug trade. (Belmokhtar is known as the "Marlborough Man" because of his cigarette smuggling franchise.)<sup>13</sup>

Another major actor in the West African drug trade is Lebanese Hezbollah. The group has been involved in the Lebanese drug trade (largely hashish) since the 1970s and expanded into the South American drug trade in the 1980s, drawing on the Lebanese diaspora in South America. Hezbollah has been active in Colombia; in the Tri-Border Region of South America, the border region where Paraguay, Argentina, and Brazil converge—a region notorious for arms trafficking, smuggling, money laundering, currency fraud and the manufacture and movement of pirated goods; and more recently in Venezuela. Lebanon became a transit country for cocaine and heroin, with Lebanese nationals operating in concert with South American drug traffickers.<sup>14</sup> Hezbollah is reported to have established arms trafficking and money-laundering networks in Maicao, a town in Colombia near the Venezuelan border. Like the Tri-Border Region, the area is a hub of smuggling and other criminal activity. There are also reports of Hezbollah and Hamas cells on Margarita Island, a duty-free zone off the northern coast of Venezuela.

Hezbollah relies on criminal specialists in West Africa with close ties to the drug trade for money laundering, document forgery and other criminal activities. The group played a significant role in the blood diamonds trade and collects substantial amounts in contributions from the Lebanese diaspora in West Africa. The magnitude of these contributions was revealed when a charter flight bound for Beirut from Cotonou, Benin, crashed on takeoff on December 25, 2003. On board was a Hezbollah “foreign relations” official carrying \$2 million in contributions raised in the region.<sup>15</sup>

According to numerous sources, cocaine traded through West Africa accounts for a large part of Hezbollah’s income. A witness at a U.S. House of Representatives hearing stated that there is documentary evidence that an average of US\$180 million in cash per quarter was being transported from Togo to Ghana, where it was placed on commercial aircraft and flown directly to Beirut.<sup>16</sup>

INTERPOL and UNODC reports say Hezbollah uses the Lebanese expatriate population in South America and West Africa to guarantee an efficient connection between the two continents. Hezbollah facilitates, for a fee, trafficking for other drug-smuggling networks, such as the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC). A U.S. Treasury investigation of the Beirut-based Lebanese Canadian Bank uncovered nearly 200 accounts linked to Hezbollah. The accounts were held mainly by businessmen in West African countries, many of them known Hezbollah supporters, and involved transactions in the hundreds of millions of dollars a year. The businessmen’s companies appeared to be serving as fronts for Hezbollah to move all sorts of suspicious funds. The system allowed Hezbollah to hide not only the sources of its wealth, but also its involvement in a range of business enterprises.<sup>17</sup>

Guinea-Bissau, widely regarded as Africa’s first narco-state, is a strategic hub for the Hezbollah-facilitated drug trafficking from South America to West Africa. The Lebanese network based in Bissau does business directly with the FARC. The associated AQIM cells, based in the Sahel, receive a cut for letting smugglers cross their territories. INTERPOL has confirmed that cocaine trafficking in West Africa has supported several Hezbollah operations in Lebanon since at least 2006. Profits from cocaine trafficking have allowed the Lebanese network to diversify its portfolio of illegal activities in West

Africa. In Nigeria, for example, 80,000 barrels of oil a day are siphoned from illegally tapped pipelines—an estimated value of \$4 billion each year.

Before he was assassinated in March 2009, Guinea-Bissau's President João Bernardo "Nino" Vieira was reported to have had a hand in distributing drugs, but mostly he allowed the Lebanese to do their business.<sup>18</sup> (Vieira was killed in March 2009 in retaliation for the assassination in a bombing of his army chief, General Na Wai. It was later reported that the device used to kill Na Wai was more sophisticated than anything previously seen in Guinea-Bissau, leading to suggestions that Latin American drug cartels had sponsored a connection between Na Wai's rivals and high-end weapons traffickers.)<sup>19</sup>

In conclusion, the transatlantic route emerged as the result of the globalization of the cocaine trade and the growth of the European market. It generates significant revenues for terrorist organizations that enable them to fund and expand their operations, it extends the reach of organizations like Hezbollah through strategic alliances with crime syndicates in the Western hemisphere and Europe, and it destabilizes weak governments in West Africa and the Sahel.

تتشر هذه المادة من قبل مؤسسة الشرق الأدنى والخليج للتحليل العسكري (ابنغما) في اطار المؤتمر الرابع لدولة الامارات العربية المتحدة حول مكافحة القرصنة البحرية، "الحفاظ على تعافي الدولة: من خلال استدامة الجهود الفعالة في البحر ومجابهة عدم الاستقرار على اليابسة." الذي تنظمه وزارة الخارجية الاماراتية بالشراكة مع موانئ دبي العالمية في دبي بتاريخ 29-30 أكتوبر، 2014. ان الآراء الواردة في هذه الورقة هي خاصة بالمؤلف فقط، ولا تعكس آراء أو مواقف منظمي المؤتمر. قد يكون تم تعديل المضمون لأغراض تشكيلية.

للمزيد من المعلومات، يرجى زيارة موقع المؤتمر على الرابط التالي: [www.counterpiracy.ae](http://www.counterpiracy.ae)

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Douglas Farah, "Narcoterrorism and the long reach of U.S. law enforcement," *Testimony before the House Committee on Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Terrorism, Nonproliferation and Trade, U.S. House of Representatives, Washington, D.C., October 12, 2011*

<sup>2</sup> Bruce Bagley, "Drug Trafficking and Organized Crime in the Americas: Major Trends in the Twenty-First Century," Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, Washington, D.C., August 2012.

<sup>3</sup> United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), "The Transatlantic Cocaine Market," Research Paper, April 2011.

<sup>4</sup> Jeremy McDermott, "20 Years After Pablo: The Evolution of Colombia's Drug Trade," InSightCrime, December 13, 2013. The BACRIM are for the most part composed of former members of the now demobilized United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC), right-wing paramilitary formations that were heavily involved in drug trafficking.

<sup>5</sup> Julieta Pelcastre, "Cártel de Los Zetas trafica drogas a Europa via África Occidental," *Diálogo*, October 14, 2013.

<sup>6</sup> Javier Ignacio Mayorca, "Mitos y realidades sobre el cartel de los soles," Observatorio Iberoamericano de la Democracia, October 7, 2012.

<sup>7</sup> Joanne Csete and Constanza Sanchez, "Telling the story of drugs in West Africa: The newest front in a losing war?" Global Drug Policy Observatory, Swansea University, Policy Brief 1, November 2013, p. 7.

<sup>7</sup> Anne Frintz, "Drugs: the new alternative economy of West Africa," *Le Monde diplomatique*, February 2013.

<sup>8</sup> United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), "The Transatlantic Cocaine Market," Research Paper, April 2011

<sup>9</sup> Anne Frintz, "Drugs: the new alternative economy of West Africa," *Le Monde diplomatique*, February 2013.

<sup>10</sup> Peter Chalk, *The Latin American Drug Trade: Scope, Dimensions, Impact, and Response*, MG-1076, RAND Corporation, 2011, pp. 11-13.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 21.

<sup>12</sup> Africa Economic Development Institute, "West Africa and Drug Trafficking," 2014.

<sup>13</sup> "AQIM's Funding Sources — Kidnapping, Ransom, and Drug Running by Gangster Jihadis," 361Security, November 18, 2012; J. Peter Pham, "Emerging West African Terror-Drug Nexus Poses Major Security Threat," *Strategic Interests*, January 28, 2010; "Revealed: how Saharan caravans of cocaine help to fund al-Qaeda in terrorists' North African domain," *The Telegraph*, September 6, 2014; Andrew Lebovich, "Primer on Jihadi Players in Algeria & Mali," *al-Wasat*, January 23, 2013.

<sup>14</sup> Matthew Levitt, "Hizbullah narco-terrorism: A growing cross-border threat," IHS Defense, Risk, and Security Consulting, September 2012.

<sup>15</sup> David E. Brown, "The Challenge of Drug Trafficking to Democratic Governance and Human Security in West Africa," *The Letort Papers*, U.S. Army War College, Carlisle Barracks, PA, p. 24.

<sup>16</sup> Statement of Michael A. Braun, Joint Hearing before the Subcommittee on Middle East and North Africa and the Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere, U.S. House of Representatives, August 1, 2013.

<sup>17</sup> Matthew Levitt, "Hizbullah narco-terrorism: A growing cross-border threat," Jo Becker, "Beirut Bank Seen as a Hub of Hezbollah Financing," *The New York Times*, December 13, 2011.

<sup>18</sup> Marco Vernaschi, "The Cocaine Coast," *The Pulitzer Center on Crisis Reporting*, January 15, 2010.

<sup>19</sup> David O'Regan and Peter Thompson, "Advancing Stability and Reconciliation in Guinea-Bissau: Lessons from Africa's First Narco-State," *The Africa Center for Strategic Studies*, June 2013, p. 8.