

# Combating the Trans-South Atlantic Drug Trade

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There is a little-noticed war underway, overshadowed by events elsewhere and waged on both sides of the South Atlantic. “West Africa is under attack” is how Antonio Maria Costa, Executive Director of the United Nations (UN) Office on Drugs and Crime, described the effects narcotics smuggling is having on the region.<sup>1</sup> He cited Guinea-Bissau as being in particular jeopardy because corruption caused by the booming illicit drug trade is undermining the government’s sovereignty.<sup>2</sup> Costa’s deputy, Philip de Andres, went further by describing a link between the financing of terrorism and the activities of cocaine dealers in West and Central Africa.<sup>3</sup> In West and Central Africa, well-organized, well-equipped, and well-funded drug trafficking networks are manipulating and corrupting weak governments, which is creating an environment where extremists operate unencumbered and where they exploit otherwise unrelated criminal enterprises to facilitate their operations.<sup>4</sup>



Photo courtesy of USCG

Figure 1: U.S. Coast Guard boarding a “go-fast” drug runner.

## Diagnosis

While drug smuggling out of Latin America through Africa to Europe has created opportunistic organizational and financial links between criminal organizations and extremist networks, these links get scant attention by government officials because they fall between policy, organizational, and geographic “seams.”

Crime and extremism tend to be compartmented into separate missions and organizations. Since 9/11, resources and manpower have been diverted from “traditional” law enforcement priorities, such as counternarcotics, to efforts to counter extremists. There has been little attempt to coordinate the two missions. Sophisticated criminal and extremist organizations are agile, able to identify and exploit the limitations and weaknesses of U.S. national institutions and the preoccupations of the U.S. Government. Moreover, both criminals and extremists are adaptive and innovative in exploiting globalization. They use some of the same methods and facilitators to finance their operations and have some of the same goals, engaging in loose partnerships of convenience that probe and exploit the seams of traditional intelligence, law enforcement, and military domains.

The growing trans-South Atlantic drug trade is particularly troublesome because there is not a clear strategy for countering it. While the movement of drugs through West Africa to Europe does not threaten the United States directly, it undermines weak African governments and U.S. NATO allies alike. This trade is overlaid on existing extremist and criminal networks that smuggle diamonds,

<sup>1</sup>“Cocaine Trafficking in West Africa: The Threat to Stability and Development (With Special Reference to Guinea-Bissau),” United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, December 2007, [www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/west\\_africa\\_cocaine\\_report\\_2007-12\\_en.pdf](http://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/west_africa_cocaine_report_2007-12_en.pdf), accessed 3 Sept 2008.

<sup>2</sup>The recent assassination of Guinea-Bissau’s president Joao Bernardo Vieira highlights the extent to which the government’s sovereignty is undermined by illicit trade. “President of Guinea-Bissau Assassinated,” CNN (2 March 2009), [www.cnn.com/2009/WORLD/africa/03/02/guineabissau.general/](http://www.cnn.com/2009/WORLD/africa/03/02/guineabissau.general/), accessed 9 April 2009.

<sup>3</sup>Ofeibe Quist-Arcton, “A Small Nation Tries to Tackle Big Drug Traffickers,” National Public Radio, 23 October 2007, [www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=15152837](http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=15152837), accessed 3 Sept 2008.

<sup>4</sup>For the purposes of this paper, *extremist* refers to both religious and political entities who “(1) oppose—in principle and practice—the right of people to choose how to live and how to organize societies and (2) support the murder of ordinary people to advance extremist political purposes.” Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, *National Military Strategic Plan for the War on Terrorism* (1 February 2006).

launder money, enslave humans, and traffic in illicit arms. The United States has not yet focused sufficient resources to shut down this activity.

## Petri Dish

The security environment in the trans-South Atlantic region provides a petri dish for examining the effectiveness of current U.S. Government efforts to coordinate interdiction of criminal networks that facilitate extremist ends. Understanding criminal networks provides important visibility into extremist networks, offering greater interdiction opportunities.

There is no better example of the extremist-criminal link than Hezbollah. Drug enforcement and African experts increasingly link Hezbollah to the trafficking pipeline that delivers drugs to European markets from Latin America via West Africa or from Latin America into U.S. markets. Using the Lebanese Diaspora as cover for front companies, human couriers, and real estate transactions, Hezbollah has established a trans-South Atlantic pipeline for drugs.<sup>5</sup> In October 2008, law enforcement officials from the United States and Colombia exposed this pipeline with the arrest of Chekry Harb and 36 associates in Bogota. The case began as a joint investigation between the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) and Colombian police who suspected Harb of laundering money for Colombian drug traffickers. Through informants and wiretaps, the investigators turned the money laundering case into an international drug trafficking case that linked Harb and his associates to the transfer of drugs and money from the Colombian cartels to Hezbollah.<sup>6</sup> Harb's network used Venezuela as a launching point to move Colombian cocaine to the United States or through the trans-South Atlantic pipeline to Europe.<sup>7</sup> Besides facilitating the movement of drugs, Harb laundered money for the cartels, sending 12 percent of his profits, mostly cash, to Hezbollah.<sup>8</sup>

IDA research in this area originated as a study of lessons from interagency efforts to protect and advance U.S. national security

interests. The analysis was intended to answer the question *What can a Regional Combatant Commander do to facilitate greater interagency cooperation, coordination, and collaboration in the implementation of U.S. policy and programs in his area of responsibility?* What emerged was a mixed picture of how interagency players implement strategy and policy. Particularly successful examples are the Joint Interagency Task Force-South (JIATF-South) and DEA Special Operations Division (SOD). JIATF-South's way of doing business is unconventional. Part military command center, intelligence fusion center, law enforcement coordination center, and mini-UN, it has a unique cross-organizational culture that contributes to its effectiveness. SOD targets the command and control of drug trafficking organizations that cross jurisdictional boundaries by integrating intelligence into investigations to create seamless law enforcement operations.

Our work suggests that distributed transnational criminal organizations, some of which have loose ties to extremist networks, dominate the illicit trade of narcotics, nuclear fissile materials, people, arms, and commodities. These criminal organizations have little in common with the extremist networks beyond a financial incentive to cooperate, but do so because the partnership opens previously untapped markets. Such transnational activity has been observed in the Horn of Africa, including traffic crossing the Gulf of Aden from Yemen; in the Sahel and Maghreb regions of Africa; across the South Atlantic between South America and Africa; and along Russia's periphery. Sometimes millennia-old smuggling routes used by criminal networks rooted in ancient tribal, clan, and family relationships are put to new uses. These criminal enterprises destabilize already fragile government institutions, and in some cases challenge state sovereignty. They also facilitate extremist capability by providing ready-made networks for generating wealth and for moving that wealth, as well as people and weapons, around the globe in the shadows of the legitimate global commercial and economic system.

<sup>5</sup> "Confronting Drug Trafficking in West Africa," hearing before the Committee on Foreign Relations, United States Senate (23 June 2009), <http://foreign.senate.gov/hearings/2009/hrg090623a.html>, accessed 27 July 2009, in particular see the testimonies from DEA Chief of Operations Thomas Harrigan and International Assessment and Strategy Center analyst Douglas Farah; Sara A. Carter, "Hezbollah Uses Mexican Drug Routes into U.S.," *The Washington Times* (27 March 2009); Alain Rodier, "Notes D'Actualité N° 168: Les Trafics de Drogue du Hezbollah en Amérique Latine," *Centre Français de Recherche sur le Renseignement* (14 April 2009); "17 Arrested on Curacao for Involvement in Hezbollah-linked Drug Ring," *The Guardian* (29 April 2009).

<sup>6</sup> Chris Kraul and Sebastian Rotella, "Colombian Cocaine Ring Linked to Hezbollah," *Los Angeles Times* (22 October 2008); Personal interviews with senior DEA officials (30 October 2007 and 13 December 2007).

<sup>7</sup> While the United States and Europe represent the largest markets for Colombian cocaine, some of the cocaine moved by Harb's network also ended up in the Middle East.

<sup>8</sup> Kraul and Rotella, "Colombian Cocaine."

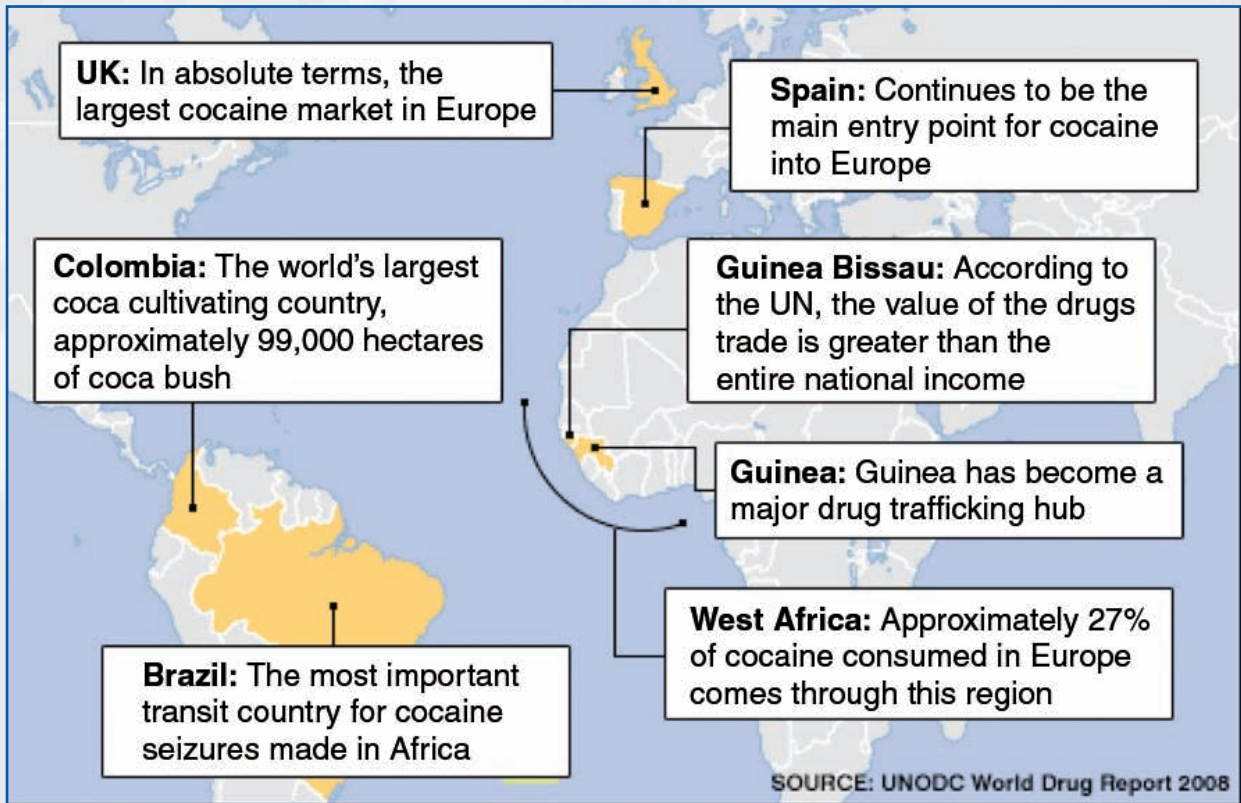


Figure 2: Key countries in the Transatlantic Drug Trade.

### Prescription

Our research suggests that increased U.S. attention to this problem could result in 1) the prosecution of extremists for criminal behavior; 2) greater visibility into transnational terror networks and their state sponsors; and, 3) compromising criminal networks, raising their operational costs and increasing the risk of doing illicit business.

Focusing efforts on criminal investigation and more fully integrating them into defense and intelligence community activities could increase threat network visibility, inhibit extremist ability to leverage criminal networks, and increase the financial and logistics burden on extremists, their organizations, and their supporters.