# Africa Center for Strategic Studies

# Countering Transnational Threats in the Sahel Workshop



## Program Summary

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# PROGRAM BACKGROUND

The *Countering Transnational Threats in the Sahel* workshop provided a unique opportunity for 34 senior security professionals from 12 African countries[1] and the United States to evaluate the security vulnerabilities that exacerbate transnational and irregular threats in the region, and to identify national and regional solutions to the security challenges. Co-hosted by the Africa Center for Strategic Studies (ACSS) and the Government of Senegal, this workshop was organized in collaboration with the United States Africa Command (AFRICOM), the US Defense Threat Reduction Agency (DTRA), and the Near East and South Asia Center for Strategic Studies (NESA). This five-day workshop focused on evaluating threats in the region, analyzing various responses, and developing recommendations for a regional framework to counter transnational threats in the Sahel. The impact of corruption within the security sector, a major vulnerability that can exacerbate transnational threats in the Sahel, as well as relevant anti-corruption strategies, were cross-cutting themes throughout the workshop.

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[1] Algeria, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Chad, Egypt, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal and Tunisia.

# INTRODUCTION

The recent rise to prominence and power of traffickers and terrorists in the Sahel has highlighted deep regional vulnerabilities, including corruption, that weaken defense and security of Sahel nations. This workshop examined ways to fight corruption and build defense and security capacity in order to combat transnational and irregular threats in the Sahel region. This included strengthening border security, building defense institutions, and enhancing security professionalism in order to combat challenges such as drug trafficking and weapons proliferation. Corruption is a critical vulnerability that allows transnational threats to thrive and grow in the Sahel, and if left unaddressed, it will undermine all the best efforts and intentions of Sahel nations and their partners to overcome transnational threats.

In the past twenty years, long-standing historical patterns of illicit cross-border trade in the Sahel region have transformed into new transnational and irregular threats. Illicit trafficking in drugs, weapons, contraband, and persons has greatly increased in volume, scope, and value. Porous borders and ungoverned spaces have permitted the smuggling of arms and created conditions favorable for the proliferation of dangerous weapons, materials, and goods. The value of trafficked South American cocaine alone dwarfs the operating budgets of many nations' security apparatuses. Advances in regional cooperation and border security in the Sahel region have been made, but their effectiveness remains vulnerable to weakness through the corruption of those in charge of countering transnational and irregular threats. Increased regional cooperation and a common approach to transnational and irregular threats are needed to strengthen border security, build defense institutions, and enhance security professionalism in the Sahel.

# KEY PROGRAM THEMES

The security challenges in the Sahel region are complex and multifaceted and require dynamic and cooperative national, regional and international responses. Participants and invited experts at this workshop discussed and evaluated threats including drug and arms trafficking, chemical and biological weapons, and kidnapping for ransom. To address these threats, key workshop themes included: security vulnerabilities, particularly corruption; managing the defense and security sector; anti-corruption initiatives; lessons from other regions; and regional coordination. The following summary highlights the main challenges, lessons learned, best practices, and key recommendations identified by both guest speakers and participants.

## OVERVIEW OF TRANSNATIONAL THREATS

Transnational threats in the Sahel are not new, but recent political instability, increased activity by violent extremist organizations, and growing illicit trafficking suggest the impact of such threats is expanding. The 2012 crisis in Mali presents the starkest example of how transnational threats can create a severe political, economic and security crisis that spreads rapidly across borders. While many illicit transnational activities have pernicious implications for states and their citizens in the Sahel, some unregulated and illegal informal transnational activities are crucial to the livelihoods of the population. Identifying dangerous illicit types of transnational activity within unregulated but necessary economic activities is a major challenge to combatting transnational threats in the Sahel. Additionally, simply clamping down on all illicit transnational activity, without regard for the greater economic and social impact on the whole supply chain, could actually increase the threats by removing the sole source of income from populations that are already suffering from intense poverty.

The link between illicit trafficking and violent extremism, or so-called narco-jihadism, may be a worrying trend, as criminal activity gives violent extremist groups a steady and independent source of funding. Reducing illicit trafficking to eliminate violent extremist groups' funding streams may be an important step in limiting these groups' ability to conduct violent acts. However, the link between illicit trafficking and violent extremism is complex. The overlap between purely criminal traffickers and violent extremist groups that engage in illicit trafficking varies widely and follows different patterns depending on historical trafficking routes, collusion with authorities, and type of goods trafficked. In some cases, violent extremist organizations are directly involved in trafficking, while other extremist groups control trafficking routes and demand levies from the traffickers. Governments and security forces need a better understanding of how illicit trafficking and violent extremism are linked financially and operationally in individual contexts in order to prevent both transnational threats in the most effective way. In some cases, traffickers who have worked closely with violent extremist organizations are now offering information to governments and security services. While it may be tempting for foreign and local governments conducting counterterrorism operations to use traffickers as a source of information, collusion with these illicit networks may end up fueling violence and instability.

Although many types of threats were discussed during the workshop, participants and speakers focused on drug trafficking and consumption, illicit arms trafficking, biological and chemical weapons, and kidnapping for ransom as major destabilizing factors in the Sahel. Each type of threat can be linked to instability.

### Drug Trafficking, Production, and Consumption

For more than a decade, the Sahel and West Africa have been important transit regions for drugs, particularly cocaine trafficked from Latin America to Europe. Although cocaine still provides a major source of income for traffickers, the United Nations Office of Drugs and Crime (UNODC) estimates that cocaine trafficking through West Africa has diminished to 18 tons per year in 2013 from its high of 47 tons per year in 2007.[2] With a retail value of $1.25 billion in Europe, 18 tons of cocaine would still provide substantial income for traffickers in the Sahel, but such a drop in volume may have also pushed traffickers to look for alternate goods. Methamphetamine production and trafficking has increased in West Africa and the Sahel, originating primarily in Nigeria. Production of methamphetamine and other amphetamine-type stimulants (ATS) was originally conducted by South American chemists to be sent primarily to East Asia, but there are now African manufacturers. Domestic control of production, without the need to rely on foreigners, can make African drug lords even more powerful and dangerous. Nigeria has been the hub of ATS production in Africa, and there are indications that neighboring countries are developing production capabilities as well. Additionally, ATS consumption within West Africa and the Sahel has followed the growth of its domestic production and trafficking. Drug trafficking in the Sahel is made possible in part by corruption and collusion from government authorities at all levels of the supply chain.

### Illicit Arms Trafficking

Illicit arms trafficking is a serious problem that fuels violence and conflict throughout the Sahel region. The flow of small arms and light weapons (SALW) from Libya after the collapse of the Gadhafi regime, while certainly not the only source of weapons in the Sahel, is the most prominent example of the serious lack of control over arms in the region. Annual reports from the United Nations Panel of Experts on Libya provide details on how non-state armed groups within and outside of Libya have gained control over state weapons, as well as how weapons from Libya are trafficked throughout the region. The lack of control over the security forces allowed for rapid and unchecked weapons proliferation to civilians and non-state armed groups. Most countries in the Sahel have limited capacity to monitor or trace illicit weapons, and official corruption exacerbates trafficking. Many analysts have argued that the crisis in Mali was in part a byproduct of the Libyan conflict due to weapons flowing into Mali from Libya. However it is important to remember that the two countries do not share a border and are separated by vast desert terrain. Weapons trafficked from Libya to Mali could not likely have gone unnoticed by multiple governments in the region, so state complicity with arms trafficking may have been an important factor in the buildup to the crisis in Mali.

### Biological and Chemical Weapons

Weapons of mass destruction, including biological and chemical weapons, may not seem like an imminent threat in the Sahel. However, given the facility of transporting and using such weapons, combined with their potential danger, it is important that preventative measures are put in place. The same biotechnology research that is used to cure diseases can be used to turn viruses (such as Ebola and smallpox) into deadly weapons that, if disseminated, could have a global impact. It is therefore very important for research and biological samples to be adequately protected. Currently, many countries in the Sahel do not appropriately safeguard potentially harmful biological materials, and they lack appropriate legislation on the trade and transportation

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[2] United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime. *Transnational Organized Crime in West Africa: A Threat Assessment*, 2013.

of such materials. To improve their protection mechanisms, countries could promote national biosafety and security frameworks, cooperate on regional interdiction of the trafficking and transfer of biological materials, participate in the Biological Weapons Convention, and implement the International Health Regulations (IHR) framework.

### *Kidnapping for Ransom*

Violent extremist groups in the Sahel have been kidnapping individuals and holding them for ransom to fund their activities. Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and other groups have carried out a number of high-profile kidnappings in Niger, Mali, and Algeria, but kidnappings are also becoming more popular among other groups like Boko Haram in Nigeria and Cameroon. Foreigners are frequently the victims of kidnappings, as they are thought to provide more lucrative ransoms than local captures. Europeans, in particular, are deemed most valuable, since European countries have a reputation for permitting the payment of high ransoms for their citizens, despite official policies against pay. Participants noted that unless countries stop paying ransoms, kidnappings will continue, funding violent extremist groups throughout the region. International cooperation is required to publically denounce both kidnappings and ransom payments. Although foreign individuals may be frequently targeted for kidnappings, the abduction of nearly 300 girls in Chibok, Nigeria, by Boko Haram is an indication that high-profile domestic kidnapping for increased bargaining power may also become a threat.

## VULNERABILITIES TO TRANSNATIONAL THREATS

Governments in the Sahel have developed mechanisms for responding to transnational threats. However, corruption and other security and governance vulnerabilities within these structures hamper their ability to prevent the growth of transnational threats. Institutional corruption in the security sector is dually detrimental, because it inhibits security forces' ability to respond effectively to existing threats and allows criminals to use and abuse state resources. Transnational organized crime and corruption are intrinsically linked. Members of the military, police, and other security forces may be particularly targeted for infiltration by organized criminal networks because defense and security forces have access to arms, privileged information, and state power. Members of the defense and security sector become particularly vulnerable to graft if they are underpaid or believe they are being mistreated by senior officials. Countries with weak institutions, in the Sahel and globally, are also vulnerable to the negative impacts of corruption, in the Sahel and globally.

Corruption in the security sector occurs at multiple levels, ranging from the highest political calculations for embezzling state funds to common bribery at a border post. Petty corruption at the operational and tactical levels, which allow criminal networks to operate with impunity, may be a symptom of the grand corruption pervasive in many governments in the Sahel. Sahel countries with high levels of corruption in the defense and security sector also suffer from pervasive corruption throughout all government institutions, such that corruption is the operational norm rather than the exception. Some risks for defense and security sector corruption include: lack of civilian oversight over the military; high levels of secrecy in defense and security activities, including budgeting; restrictions on civil society organizations and their interaction with the security sector; limited procurement systems; hiring and human resource procedures based on group affiliation rather than merit; and deep involvement with organized

criminal networks. Corruption consists not just in money changing hands, but as a method of acquiring and using power.

Participants noted that grand corruption at the state level can exacerbate individual corruption by members of the defense and security forces in several ways. Diversion of state funds can compromise defense and security resources, equipment, and salaries. In addition to preventing the defense and security forces from adequately protecting the nation, not paying them enough leaves individuals vulnerable to temptation by criminal networks that can offer greater and more reliable sources of income. Lack of oversight of defense and security forces allows infractions to go unpunished. Moreover, if elites in power are involved with criminal networks, they may force their subordinates to carry out orders to support the goals of the criminal organization rather than the state. In many cases, individuals have little recourse to report their superiors, and even when such channels exist, whistleblowers risk retaliation for reporting infractions.

In systems dominated by corruption, members of the government may seek to protect themselves and their own resources instead of using state resources to protect and provide for citizens. Although specific acts of fraud are complex and hidden beneath layers of bureaucracy, citizens are acutely aware of pervasive government corruption from seeing elites getting rich while very little money is actually flowing to communities and citizens. Many countries in the Sahel face extreme poverty, particularly in remote or peripheral regions. Factions of the population that have very few economic opportunities are vulnerable to disenfranchisement and recruitment into violent extremist or criminal groups. Corruption can exacerbate existing security threats, such as violent extremism, by further marginalizing sectors of the population who already feel they are not receiving their rightful public services. Fighting corruption is therefore an important aspect of countering transnational threats.

International partners providing assistance have struggled to find the best way to help countries in the Sahel and around the world combat transnational threats without exacerbating endemic corruption. Foreign assistance is often centered on technical interventions related to specific threats, such as terrorist activities or drug trafficking, and this assistance does not deal directly with improving governance or reducing corruption. Real political reform that addresses corruption can be made more difficult when international actors protect and reinforce existing regimes in an attempt to counter specific threats. In some cases, pumping large amounts of foreign aid into a country with poor governance and weak institutions can worsen corruption. In addition to technical assistance and training, foreign support to counter transnational threats in the Sahel should focus explicitly on anti-corruption. These efforts need to address norms and work with societies as a whole, not only the government or just its defense and security services

## RESPONSES TO TRANSNATIONAL THREATS

Countering transnational threats requires multi-faceted solutions at the local, national, sub-regional, regional, and international levels. Individual countries cannot be successful without the support and cooperation of their neighbors, and (sub)regional and international approaches will fall short if countries do not have the capabilities or political will to uphold agreements. In addition to existing frameworks within the Sahel, other regions around the world have dealt with similar transnational threats. Latin America and South Asia offer valuable lessons for improving defense and security responses to transnational threats.

***Managing the Defense and Security Sector to Counter Transnational Threats***
In order to effectively defend their countries and their citizens, governments need to re-evaluate the existing threats and then structure their security services to combat them. Many countries in the Sahel maintain defense and security forces to fight traditional inter-state wars, which are infrequent in the current context in the Sahel. Adapting a defense and security sector to fight new and evolving threats is a difficult but necessary process. Still, defense and security forces do not have the luxury of restructuring in a vacuum: they must evolve while fighting current and emerging threats. Defense and security forces have the unique power and role of using force, but many soldiers and police in the Sahel do not have adequate training on when or how to appropriately use force. More effective tactical training, as well as training on ethics, morals, and the legal use of force, would help these forces, particularly for circumstances where the enemy cannot be easily identified. In the current context, where perpetrators of transnational threats may not be clearly defined as criminals, terrorists, or civilians involved in illicit activities, it is particularly important for defense and security forces to use restraint when applying force. Defense and security forces need to work closely with civil society actors in order to improve their relations with civilians and better understand the security issues that different factions of the population face.

***Reducing Defense and Security Sector Corruption***
Many governments in the Sahel have established anti-corruption commissions to combat fraud and graft throughout the nation. Anti-corruption commissions can be important actors that raise awareness on the negative impacts of corruption, investigate infractions, serve as a resource for whistleblowers, and provide recommendations on how to fight corruption. Anti-corruption agencies can only be successful, however, if they have support from other government agencies, including the judiciary, law enforcement, and the military. In the Sahel, there is evidence that investigators from anti-corruption commissions from different countries are working together to track criminals who operate across borders, yet cooperation remains ad hoc and informal, based on interpersonal relationships. These institutions might be more effective if they were independent and benefited from political will to prioritize anti-corruption efforts. On the other hand, they flounder or, worse, may be manipulated to cover up government corruption or used to attack political opposition. Anti-corruption commissions, even when effective, are not the sole answer to fighting corruption in the defense and security sector. Civil society organizations can also serve as important independent actors. Although civil society does not have the ability to enforce investigations, it can bring attention to corruption and push for reforms. The defense and security leaders and forces themselves are also responsible for curbing corruption within their ranks.

***Lessons from Latin America***
Latin American countries have faced transnational challenges similar to those the Sahel is currently experiencing. Efforts to fight illicit networks across countries like Colombia, Peru, and Mexico can provide lessons learned. As in the Sahel, drug trafficking has been an important illicit market in Latin America and a financial resource for violent insurgent groups. In many countries, there are high levels of government corruption and criminal infiltration of law enforcement and defense and security services. Colombia, which was long the world's top producer of cocaine, has been plagued by violence stemming from the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) for over 50 years. The FARC has combined a political ideology, violent insurgency, and control over cocaine production and trafficking to become an important

political and economic actor. The Colombian government has been fighting a counterinsurgency campaign against the FARC that combines military and economic methods. The Colombian democratic security plan invoked all aspects of society, not just the government and the security sector, and it sought to find economic alternatives to coca production. Although Colombia still faces many security and drug trafficking challenges, it is no longer the world's largest cocaine producer, and the government is engaging in peace negotiations to demobilize the FARC. In Mexico, wars with the drug cartels have become increasingly lethal, causing over 60,000 deaths between 2006 and 2012. The United States is directly affected by the violence and the inflow of drugs from Mexico, as well as by the general instability of its neighbor. The U.S. is supporting Mexico through the Merida Initiative, a bilateral partnership between the two countries that seeks to "improve citizen safety in affected areas to fight drug trafficking, organized crime, corruption, illicit arms trafficking, money-laundering, and demand for drugs on both sides of the border."[3] The Merida Initiative is working to improve the justice sector and rule of law, and to support border security through improved equipment and increased information sharing. The experiences combatting transnational threats in Latin America have shown that certain important factors to consider when designing and implementing strategies to combat transnational threats include political will, institutions, mechanisms, resources, and performance measures.

### *Lessons from South Asia*
Afghanistan, like other countries in the region, has faced many challenges over the past decade, and its challenges can provide important lessons for defense and security professionals in the Sahel. Like nations of the Sahel, Afghanistan has had long-term violent insurgencies and extremist groups, drug trafficking, extreme poverty, and pervasive and institutionalized corruption. The international presence in Afghanistan is markedly different from the Sahel, however, and it is important to recognize this difference when evaluating how to apply lessons from Afghanistan to Sahel countries. Yet, even if foreign assistance in the Sahel is not as robust as in Afghanistan, international partners can learn from the Afghanistan case that their interventions can have negative impacts on defense and security, simply by exacerbating government corruption or imposing cultural norms that do not match local customs. Defense and security approaches that do not deal with reforming governance structures and providing economic opportunities have proven futile in Afghanistan and in other parts of the world, and they are unlikely to work in the Sahel.

### *Regional Cooperation to Counter Transnational Threats in the Sahel*
Bilateral and regional agreements exist in the Sahel to counter transnational threats, yet divergent national capabilities can hinder regional cooperation. Neighboring countries may have differences in the means available to their defense and security forces in terms of equipment, training, human resources, salaries, and compensation. Additionally, agencies from different countries may have different organizational structures that make it difficult to harmonize cross-border cooperation. Interagency competition for resources within each country can also hinder a nation's ability to perform its duties and to coordinate with other countries. Cross-border operational coordination is particularly necessary in the Sahel where borders were often set arbitrarily and based on colonial territory and relations rather than the populations, with the result that many communities span borders. Illicit traffickers and violent extremist groups do not respect borders.  As a result, it is crucial that countries find methods of cross-border cooperation, so that progress against threats is continued from one country to another. Despite the challenges,

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[3]United States Department of State. *Merida Initiative*. http://www.state.gov/j/inl/merida/, accessed 6/20/2014.

some examples of regional operational coordination exist. Nigeria, Cameroon, Niger, Chad, and Benin have renewed their pledge to work together to fight Boko Haram, which has spread from Nigeria to its neighbors. Some countries have existing regional patrols and share information and intelligence.

### *Existing International and (Sub)Regional Frameworks*
Due to its geographic and political fluidity, the Sahel transcends the boundaries of many existing sub-regional bodies, making high-level political and legal coordination between multiple countries in the region a particular challenge. The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS), Arab Maghreb Union (AMU), and the Community of Sahel-Saharan States (CEN-SAD) all exist as regional platforms, but none has been able to truly become a regional coordination body to counter all transnational threats in the Sahel. Still, the United Nations and the African Union offer frameworks to solve these issues if countries adopt and apply international treaties and protocols. The UN Convention against Transnational Organized Crime and its Protocols and the UN Convention Against Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances offer comprehensive frameworks for domestic and international processes, but many countries in the Sahel have yet to harmonize their domestic systems with these conventions. The Nouakchott Process, organized by the African Union, aims to build intelligence sharing and defense and security capacity among 11 countries in the Sahel. This effort, which began in 2013, may provide a bridge between strategic and operational cooperation, if countries are willing to work together and follow set guidelines.

# CONCLUSION

## *Recommendations for the way forward*

The following conclusions and recommendations emerged from the workshop:

- **Prioritize human security and information sharing to help reduce transnational threats.** Participants affirmed that poverty, underdevelopment, and lack of information have aggravated transnational threats in the Sahel. Participants and speakers emphasized the importance of a whole-of-society approach that involves local and national government, civil society, and defense and security forces.

- **Harmonize domestic laws with international treaties and apply the law.** Although multiple international and (sub)regional agreements exist to counter transnational threats, participants agreed that most countries in the Sahel have yet to appropriate, incorporate, and institutionalize these norms into their domestic legal systems. Without an appropriate legal structure, judicial and defense and security officials have a hard time enforcing laws related to transnational threats. Discrepancies between domestic laws throughout the region inhibit (sub)regional and bilateral cooperation.

- **Increase (sub)regional cooperation.** Domestic actions by Sahel countries are essential to combatting threats that cross borders, but (sub)regional and international cooperation is imperative for a viable solution. Participants agreed that both bilateral and (sub)regional relations and platforms for cooperation need improvement. Additionally, responses to transnational threats are not limited to countries in the Sahel region, as many issues, such as drug trafficking and kidnapping ransom payments, extend outside of Africa. Improved cooperation is needed at both the strategic and operational levels. Countries in the Sahel should promote operational cooperation, including exchanging liaison officers between countries, creating joint crisis cells, establishing mixed patrol units, learning regional languages, and conducting regional study tours. Cooperation with international partners in efforts to counter transnational threats in the Sahel is essential, particularly with regards to controlling illicit drug supply and consumption, and publically affirming that governments will not pay ransom for kidnapped citizens.

- **Better prepare defense and security forces to meet transnational challenges.** Countries in the Sahel region need to re-evaluate the threats they are facing and to create defense and security forces in response to those threats. Additionally, leaders must recognize that defense and security forces are often operating in difficult conditions and dangerous situations, all of which should be taken into account when determining length of deployment, training, equipment, and compensation. Governments need to overhaul human resource management to ensure that individuals are hired and promoted based on merit and not on political, ethnic, or familial connections. Additionally, defense and security forces need adequate training and support for specific missions as well as appropriate and timely compensation, including wages and fringe benefits, which are particularly important for reducing the incentive toward corruption or collusion with illicit actors.

- **Mobilize and include civil society actors.** Participants agreed that civil society plays an important role in countering transnational threats in the Sahel, both as service providers to vulnerable communities and as oversight organizations to monitor defense and security forces. Governments and security forces must do more to work with, and to mobilize, civil society against transnational threats, but it was noted that in many countries, civil society is highly politicized and may need reform before the sector generates valuable partners for governments.

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