

Illicit Drug Trafficking and Financing of Terrorism

The Case of Islamic State, Al Qaeda and their Affiliate Groups

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The revenue generated from the drug trafficking business constitutes a fifth of the organised crime revenues, with annual worldwide value of the trade estimated to be around \$650 billion. As the trafficking of drugs provides a lucrative opportunity, transnational terror groups such as Al-Qaeda, the Islamic State and their affiliates are increasingly using illicit drug trade to fund their expenses and operational costs. Further, with the increasing surveillance of the funding routes of terror by the security forces, the traditional sources of revenue have dried up. The investment in drug trafficking is low, and profits are high. Drug trade, therefore, provides terror groups with an adequate and sustained alternative means to generate funds.

INTRODUCTION

Drug trafficking is a multibillion-dollar business, constituting a fifth of the organised crime revenues. A good part of the income from drug trafficking is funnelled into the treasury of terrorist groups. Over the years, major transnational terrorist groups have emerged as big actors in controlling the network of the illicit drug trade. With increasing surveillance on the traditional financial routes, the terror organisations are regularly looking for resources to fund their activities. The Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) is a case in point. Until recently, it was

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termed as the world's richest terror group, earning its revenues mainly from the sale of oil and taxation of the population it controlled. However, since its defeat in Baghuz in Syria—the last stronghold of the ISIS, effectively bringing the geographical caliphate to the end—it has lost access to its primary sources of revenue. To ensure a regular supply of funds, it is now exploring alternative revenue sources and in this regard, drug trafficking provides a lucrative opportunity. As a result, we see an increasing involvement of the ISIS jihadis in the drug trade. Likewise, when Al Qaeda lost its usual stream of funding—Islamic charities and wealthy patrons from the Gulf—its affiliates moved to drug trafficking. It is a lucrative source of money on 'which terrorists rely on financing their organisations and activities'.¹ The investment in drug trafficking is low, and profits are high, which provides terror groups with an adequate alternative means to generate funds.

There are two major categories of drugs used in the business of illicit drug trafficking: opiates and cocaine. While opiates primarily originate from Afghanistan, cocaine comes from the Latin American countries, but mostly from Colombia. In addition to this, synthetic drugs are also increasingly penetrating the traditional categories of trafficked drugs. The primary destinations for both opiates and cocaine are Europe, the United States (US), Australia, Canada and Russia. There is evidence to suggest that Western and Central African countries have also become users of these substances.

Opiates leave Afghanistan through three routes: the Balkan, northern and southern routes. The opiates taking the Balkan route are primarily meant for European consumption; and the northern route is mainly used to transfer drugs to the Russian markets. The southern route is more complicated. From Afghanistan, opiates arrive in Iran and Pakistan and leave towards multiple destinations via the Indian Ocean. The Indian Ocean drug network is pivotal to the opiate trade, which, after leaving the Makran coast (in Pakistan and Iran), bifurcates into two branches. The western branch leads to Kenya, Tanzania, Mozambique, Madagascar and Yemen. The eastern branch moves to India, Sri Lanka, the Maldives and other Southeast Asian countries. The western branch further gets bifurcated into many sub-branches leading to South Africa, West Africa and the US, after crossing the Atlantic. Seychelles has also become a prominent transit point as well as an end-user country. Drugs landing on the African coast further make their way to Central and West African countries, and to the Sahel region to be either sold or transited to

Europe. In the east, Sri Lanka serves as a transit point, largely because of its reputation of promptly handling high port volumes, although a small portion of heroin stays in Sri Lanka for consumption.

The last couple of years have witnessed an exponential rise in the production of opiates in Afghanistan and cocaine in Colombia, much to the delight of terror groups which now enjoy an increased cash flow. At the same time, it has further fuelled instability and insurgency in transit countries as well as countries of origin. In West Africa, the drug trade has fuelled terror groups like Boko Haram and its faction, the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP), Al Qaeda in Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and the Mouvement pour l'unicité et le jihad en Afrique de l'Ouest. The ISIS benefits from the sale of drugs, particularly synthetic opioid, in the territories controlled by it and in countries where it has a strong presence, like Libya, and Al Shabab cuts its share in Somalia, Kenya and Tanzania.

To counter drug trafficking, countries are collaborating both internationally and nationally. For instance, the networks in the Indian Ocean, which clearly serve as the lifeline of the drug trade originating from Afghanistan, have continuously been under surveillance by a joint action force of 18 countries led by the US, known as Combined Task Force 150 (CTF-150). The force aims to 'promote maritime security to counter terrorist acts and related illegal activities'. Other measures like 'taking a more robust approach towards unflagged vessels' and 'improved interdiction rates over flagged vessels' have also been introduced.² Likewise, the European Union (EU) and Interpol have stepped up measures to counter drug trafficking by training security forces and assisting operations against drug traffickers, as well as making efforts to reduce drug demand. However, combating drug trade is a complex task and with the increasing presence of terror groups, security agencies are facing mounting challenges. It requires a continued, coordinated effort to break the supply chain.

This article highlights the presence of terror groups in the business of illicit drugs. The scholarship exploring the nexus between the two is scarce and therefore, the article aims to touch upon those areas which have not been discussed much. As the drug trade network is very complex and there are hundreds of terror groups, organised criminals and non-state actors benefiting from it, the focus here is only on illicit drugs financing the ISIS, Al Qaeda and their affiliates, including the Taliban. The scope is restricted to only the trade of opiates (mainly heroin, originating

from Afghanistan) and cocaine originating from Latin America (mostly Colombia), both travelling in the direction of Europe.

The article is divided into different sections. The first section identifies the types of drug used in illicit trade and trafficking networks. The second section discusses the increasing presence of different terror groups in drug trafficking. The conclusion briefly highlights the measures undertaken by security agencies, the United Nations (UN) and various countries to counter drug trafficking.

UNDERSTANDING DRUG TRAFFICKING ROUTES: THE TRADE OF COCAINE AND OPIATES

Before arriving at the final destination, illicit drugs travel thousands of miles from their place of production, pass through multiple countries, and sometimes continents, and change several hands. During this journey, their worth increases manifold: usually, drugs are sold close to 150 times more than their price at the place of origin.³ While illicit drugs pass through multiple criminal groups, individuals, traffickers and major terrorist groups, 'the cross-border nature of organised crime provides potential avenues for these groups to cooperate'.⁴ Traffickers also follow a standard operating travel procedure—drugs are trafficked along a few predefined routes—following well-established trends of other forms of criminal behaviour.⁵ Evidence suggests a correlation between the conflict regions controlled by powerful non-state actors and drug trafficking routes. While drug trafficking predates conflict and is made possible by state weakness, once a 'conflict starts, it is the presence of illicit economies that emboldens the armed groups that are a party to the conflict'.⁶ The Taliban in Afghanistan, Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) in Colombia, Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (also known as Al Qaeda in Mali) in Mali and AQIM are some terrorist groups or non-state actors who have both benefited from and contributed to the conflict in their regions.

The final destination of a majority of drugs is either Europe, the US (and Canada) or Australia, owing to their purchasing power. However, a rising trend in the use of illicit drugs in Africa is also observed. The drugs in Europe, as will be shown later, arrive through multiple channels, namely, the Balkans, the Atlantic and Africa. While the Balkans and the Atlantic primarily bring opiates and cocaine, respectively, Africa brings both cocaine from South America and heroin from Afghanistan, as well as cannabis resin from North Africa.⁷

Classification of Illicit Drugs

Drugs meant for trafficking and illicit trade can be divided into two categories: plant-based drugs and synthetic drugs. Plant-based drugs are further categorised into three categories: cocaine, opiates and cannabis, and all of them require unique climate and conditions to be produced. On the other hand, synthetic drugs are not geographically constrained 'as the process does not involve the extraction of active constituents from plants that have to be cultivated in certain conditions for them to grow'.⁸

Opiate drugs (heroin and morphine are called opiate drugs), consumed by 18 million people around the world, are derived from opium, a chemical produced by poppy plants. Opium is used both as an end product and to manufacture heroin and morphine. Most of the opium produced is converted into heroin, which is then trafficked to different locations. Afghanistan is the primary source for most opiates produced and trafficked around the world. It produces opiates nearly at an industrial scale, making opiates production in other regions negligible. Cocaine, produced from coca bush, has around 17 million users. Among the main coca-producing countries, Colombia is the leading country, followed by Peru and Bolivia, both having a high level of illicit cocaine production.

Among the plant-based drugs, cannabis, with 183 million users, is the most popular illicit drug. Cannabis is produced widely across the world: around 135 countries, covering 92 per cent of the world population, produce this drug. Morocco remains a significant source of cannabis resin, followed by Afghanistan, Lebanon, India and Pakistan.⁹ While terrorist organisations continue to benefit from its sales, cannabis trade does not form a strong transnational trafficking network due to its wide availability and easy access. Several states in the US, Canada and some European countries have legalised the plantation and use of cannabis for medicinal purposes, making it less attractive for transnational criminal groups to invest in its trafficking.

Likewise, synthetic drugs are not limited by a particular geography. These are created by chemicals and can be manufactured anywhere in the world. The most common synthetic drugs are amphetamine-type stimulants, methamphetamine, ecstasy (MDMA) and lysergic acid diethylamide (LSD). Yet, these drugs differ from cannabis in that they are trafficked widely through certain trafficking routes. However, their origin and destination countries are mostly developed countries. There

is evidence that terrorist groups benefit from its trafficking and on some occasions, from being end users.

For the reasons discussed earlier, this article focuses only on the trafficking of opiates (heroin) and cocaine for financing terrorism, while briefly touching upon profits made from the sale of cannabis and synthetic drugs. Similarly, the focus of the discussion here will be the profits made by the Taliban, the ISIS, Al Qaeda, and their affiliated organisations, and West African terrorist groups. The article will exclude discussions on terrorist groups like FARC in Colombia (even though it has been one of the biggest beneficiaries of illicit trade of cocaine), Latin American drug cartels and other small armed groups.

Illicit Drug Trade Networks

The Opiate Trading Networks

As mentioned earlier, once opiates are ready to be traded, three major routes are used for trafficking: the Balkan route (via the Islamic Republic of Iran and Turkey to West and Central Europe); the northern route (through Central Asia to the Russian Federation and further to Europe); and the southern route (to South Asia, Gulf countries and other countries in the Near and Middle East, Africa and then to Europe).¹⁰ All three routes find a place in the world's top five drug trafficking routes, sometimes referred to as 'narcotics superhighways'.¹¹

Historically, opiates were trafficked mostly over ground and the Balkan route was the primary choice for traffickers. This route is the shortest and fastest way for opiates to arrive from Afghanistan, via Iran and Turkey, to be sold on European streets. 'According to Europol, Istanbul is a key location used by organised crime groups (OCGs) to arrange heroin transports with Turkish facilitators.'¹² In recent years, a sub-branch of the Balkan route has emerged which passes through Iraq before entering Turkey, either directly or through Syria.¹³ However, current trends suggest that trafficking along this route is decreasing. This is mainly due to the recent increase in refugees and subsequently, the increase of vigilance in Turkey. Traffickers now prefer to circumvent Turkey to send drugs to Armenia or Azerbaijan from Iran.¹⁴ This route has a significant presence of terrorist groups who either act as transit drug traffickers or impose a custom tax on drugs, ensuring sustained cash flow for their activities.

Opiates shipped from Afghanistan along the northern route are 'primarily destined for the huge consumer markets in Central Asia,

Russia, Ukraine and Belarus'.¹⁵ The Russian heroin market is big enough to consume the entire quantity of drugs entering Russia and very little is further shipped to Europe, mainly to Poland or Baltic countries.¹⁶ Historically, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) has made profits on this route from the sale of the drug. The IMU also pledges allegiance to the ISIS.

Opiates shipped along the southern route are destined for multiple countries, in multiple directions, involving multiple actors. From Afghanistan, opiates are moved to Pakistan (small quantities are moved to Iran as well) to be shipped to the Gulf countries or East Africa for shipment to Europe. Drugs are also trafficked along the southern route to India, Sri Lanka and other countries in South Asia for subsequent shipment to Europe or North America (mostly Canada).¹⁷ Pakistan, with well-established ethnic and familial links, is a major transit country for Afghan opiates arriving in the United Kingdom (UK). 'Heroin trafficked via Pakistan to the UK is likely to have either been sent directly by parcel, air courier or maritime container; or been trafficked by sea onto eastern or southern Africa for onward movement.'¹⁸

Drugs entering Eastern Africa land in the ports in Djibouti, Eritrea, Kenya, Tanzania, Mozambique and Somalia. As airports of Addis Ababa and Nairobi have an international reputation and are well connected with the entire continent, drugs are easily transited to either West African countries or directly to European countries.¹⁹ Remaining drugs make their way to the African mainland, like Uganda, Rwanda, Mozambique and Zambia. There is evidence to suggest that Africa is experiencing a sharp increase in heroin use, becoming end users as opposed to their traditional status of drug transit points. Armed groups have reportedly made profits on this route and seem to have a destabilising effect in East Africa.²⁰ In West Africa, Islamic extremist groups are increasingly playing an active role in regional drug smuggling networks.²¹

The Cocaine Trading Networks

The transatlantic route, from Latin America to Europe, is the most popular route for cocaine to travel to Europe. A significant proportion of cocaine arriving in Europe is produced in Colombia and enters Europe via Spain, after crossing the Atlantic in maritime containers. This route is known as Highway 10. Other trafficking routes, like 'shipments passing through South American countries, such as Ecuador, Brazil and

Venezuela, as well as the Caribbean and West Africa while *en route* to Europe are also frequently used.²²

Almost for a decade now, West Africa, like East Africa for heroin, has become a significant transit point for cocaine arriving from Latin America and subsequently, transhipped to Europe. Thanks to their weak judicial system, corrupt security forces and lack of surveillance capacity, the ports of Guinea-Bissau, Sierra Leone, Guinea, Ghana and Senegal have become easy targets for drug traffickers. Indeed, 'West African criminal networks are leading players in transporting and distributing cocaine in Europe', with help from AQIM and other Sahel-based extremist groups.²³

Large quantities of cocaine are also trafficked to the US and further to Canada, Central America, the Caribbean, Oceania (mainly Australia), and to Southeast Asia via South Africa and East Africa. The trafficking of cocaine via both the eastern Pacific and the Caribbean has significantly increased in the last decade.²⁴ Discussion on these drug networks, however, is outside the scope of this article.

TERRORIST GROUPS IN THE DRUG TRADE

Before 9/11, drug trafficking was not seriously considered a sustainable source of income for terrorist organisations. Scholarship on the financing of terrorism excluded or only vaguely included the link between the profits from drug trafficking and terror financing;²⁵ and this assertion did not change immediately after 9/11. There is a reasonable amount of justification for this exclusion as evidence to suggest connections between drug trafficking and Al Qaeda's financing was absent. Al Qaeda's primary funding source prior to 9/11, which reached an annual income of up to \$30 million at one point, came largely from Islamic charities 'and the use of well-placed financial facilitators who gathered money from both willing and unwilling donors, primarily in the Gulf region'.²⁶ In addition to fundraising and money from charitable organisations, Al Qaeda had offshore entities and companies. Hawala was the most popular source of money transfer, followed by cash transactions and bulk couriers.²⁷ Bank accounts were also frequently used to transfer money: for instance, operatives of 9/11 received money mainly through bank transfers.

Within a few years after 9/11, a reasonable shift in the narrative of terror financing was observed. Drug trafficking gradually became a profitable, sustainable and lucrative means of terror financing.²⁸ A major

factor for this shift after 9/11 was the crackdown by security agencies on the sources of terrorism financing, particularly charitable organisations and bank transfers of money, by increasing the monitoring of the global bank transaction system. Following the guidelines issued by a majority of countries, banks and other financial institutes adopted comprehensive regulatory measures to curtail money laundering. Security agencies across the world also targeted the sources of income in a coordinated way. Amid these measures, Al Qaeda and allied organisations' funding stream dried up, forcing them to explore alternative sources of income. The illicit drug trade provided them with the right means to ensure a secure line of credit. A classic example of this is the Taliban. In 2011, Taliban's income peaked to \$400 million per annum,²⁹ and this only includes profits made at sales points in Afghanistan and not in European streets, which is way more than Taliban's selling price at the borders of Afghanistan. Likewise, in 2013, the FARC earned an astronomical income of \$1 billion only from the drug trade.³⁰ The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) also reported that the total potential value of Afghanistan's opium harvest could be up to \$3.1 billion per annum, while cocaine in Latin America was estimated at \$2.5 billion per annum.³¹ The 2017 Global Financial Integrity report, *Transnational Crime and the Developing World*, estimated the global business of drug trafficking at around \$650 billion.³² No doubt, such an enormous amount attracts considerable attention from terror groups.

Most of the funds received by terrorist groups are invested in increasing their organisational capacity, which includes the purchase of arms and ammunition, recruitment of workforce, creation of information technology (IT) infrastructure, payment of couriers and maintenance of hideouts. Contrary to the general belief, a much smaller amount goes into financing terror attacks. For instance, at the time Al Qaeda's income peaked to \$30 million per annum, the operational cost of 9/11—the world's biggest-ever terrorist operation on a sovereign nation—was only \$500,000.³³ Though this was the most expensive terrorist operation in the history of terrorism, it represented only 1.6 per cent of Al Qaeda's total income. Other high-profile attacks, like the 2005 London bombings at £8,000 and the 2002 Bali attacks at \$50,000, required much less investment. Similarly, the Moroccan-origin attackers responsible for the Madrid attacks funded their operation mainly through the sale of hashish and ecstasy.³⁴

The Taliban: Primary Beneficiary of the Opiate Trade

The Taliban is possibly the only terrorist organisation which does not have multinational footprints in this transnational illicit trade. However, it does control the production and supply of opiates, becoming one of the most prolific organisations in the drug business. While it was uprooted in 2001 by the alliance of North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the Northern Alliance, successive weak governments allowed it to regroup and a resurgence of the Taliban became imminent. By the time NATO pulled out of Afghanistan, the Taliban was controlling a significant size of the country's territory. Control over territories allowed the Taliban to become a major player of the drug business in Afghanistan. In 2016, around 92 per cent of opium poppies were grown in either Taliban-controlled areas or 'high-confidence Taliban support zone'.³⁵ Most Afghan opium is grown in the southern provinces of Helmand, Kandahar, Farah, Nimroz and Uruzgan.³⁶ There is also evidence of the presence of the ISIS in poppy cultivation and sales business in Afghanistan, although it is estimated that the ISIS only controls around 1 per cent of the total opium poppy cultivation.³⁷ The enthusiasm of organisations to reap profits from the drug business is so high that the ISIS fought with the Taliban to control the drug trafficking profits in Nangarhar, which it eventually lost to the Taliban.³⁸

The Taliban's increasing control over Afghani territories has some justification as it has created an ecosystem of sustainable supply chain model. It does not cultivate poppies on its own, but facilitates production by supporting local farmers. These farmers are neither terrorists nor insurgents. They do not have any business with the Taliban's or any terrorist organisation's ideology. In the absence of any alternative means of livelihood, the poppy business provides them with a source of income. The Taliban further supports these farmers by guaranteeing the purchase of their products. It also provides local farmers with advance loan 'to obtain their backing while simultaneously ensuring a future source of revenue'.³⁹ In areas it has full control, the Taliban exercises the functions of a proper government. It taxes the same farmers it supports (or promotes) to grow poppies. The income generated through tax levies and sale of poppies helps to sustain the insurgencies.⁴⁰ The Taliban also taxes other actors involved in the opium chain in territories it does not control but requires transit access.⁴¹

Tony Blair, the former British Prime Minister, once said that the arms 'the Taliban are buying today are paid for by the lives of young British

people buying drugs'.⁴² This is quite right as the Taliban uses its profits from the opium trade to buy weapons, food and other necessary items to support its insurgency in Afghanistan. It also appears that another aim of the Taliban to be involved in the drug trade, as confessed by a Taliban associate and terror convict, is to wage war against the West by making them drug addicts.⁴³

The Role of the ISIS and its Affiliates in Drug Trafficking

While the Taliban has been in this business for a while, the ISIS—once the world's richest terrorist organisation—is relatively a new player. The ISIS's \$2 billion revenue⁴⁴ was primarily made up of the sale of crude oil, taxation on the subjects in its controlled territories and kidnapping for ransom.⁴⁵ Recent evidence suggests an increasing involvement of the ISIS in drug trafficking. In fact, it has emerged not only as the trafficker of drugs but also as an end user. The ISIS jihadis have been found using captagon, known as jihad pills in the ISIS circles, on a wide scale.⁴⁶ These pills appear to suppress the pain and induce enough energy in jihadis to remain awake for lengthy battles.

From 2017 onwards, the ISIS rapidly started losing the territories it once proudly controlled, which culminated with the loss of Baghuz in Syria in March 2019.⁴⁷ The loss of territories deprived the ISIS of its two primary sources of revenues—oil and taxes—forcing them to look for unconventional sources of revenue, which illicit drug trade adequately provides. While the ISIS has lost its territory, its jihadis are very much active and prepared for a long asymmetric war—something that Al Qaeda did after it was pushed out of Afghanistan's urban centres in 2001.

The ISIS comes with an advantage that makes it a key player in this business. Its jihadis, or affiliates, are actively present in territories where drug networks, both cocaine and opiates, pass and enter Europe. Further, increased surveillance over the coastline of Spain to control the cocaine arriving directly from the coasts of Latin America has forced the Latin American drug cartels to look for alternative ways and forge alliances with terrorist groups for smooth passage of drugs through highly unstable regions. For instance, an ISIS affiliate, Jund al-Khilafa, provides armed protection to cocaine traffickers. In fact, drug traffickers prefer to use unstable region controlled by non-state actors as the latter can protect drugs at a cost, a privilege that cannot be extended by sovereign governments. Recently, the Italian Navy discovered a new route from Libya to Sicily, controlled by the ISIS, that was being used

to transfer cocaine. Another route from 'Libya now goes to Egypt and the Middle East before entering Europe through Balkans'.⁴⁸ The ISIS has now seized control of much of the Middle Eastern and Asian drug profits from both cocaine and opiates, and can also move drugs from Iraq through Syria and Turkey into Europe with relative ease. Recently, more than 11 million of the amphetamine pills that the ISIS fighters were given were seized at the Syrian borders⁴⁹ and Greek authorities, in 2017, caught 26 million tablets of synthetic opiate, tramadol, destined for Libya.⁵⁰

The ISIS has also adopted a microfinancing model which allows the European recruits to rely 'on drug trafficking as a means of generating revenue at a low level'.⁵¹ This model enables European jihadis to make proceeds from peddling drugs at a minimal level, providing them with the 'financial flexibility to travel back and forth to Syria as well as to save the money to help procure the resources necessary for planning a terrorist attack'⁵²—a model adopted by the Madrid attackers. This *modus operandi* fits well into the ISIS' 'extra-territorial contributions on a tactical level';⁵³ and as profits and benefits suggest, the ISIS will likely continue getting involved in the illicit trade.

The Involvement of Al Qaeda and its Affiliates in the Drug Trade: The West African Networks and the Sahel

Guinea-Bissau, a small West African state, is often known as Africa's narco-state due to the enormous inflow of cocaine from Latin America.⁵⁴ Guinea-Bissau's political instability and weak governments have facilitated the growth of the drug trade. It is an excellent geographical choice for a transshipment point as 'it is flat, with an archipelago of eighty islands, all covered by thick jungle and with easy access by the sea'. It is equipped with 27 airstrips constructed by the Portuguese, ideal for small planes to land. During the Portuguese times, Guinea-Bissau was a major fishing hub. As a result, its 'port has huge empty warehouses where cartels could store the cocaine'.⁵⁵ Once drugs arrive in Guinea-Bissau, corrupt officials ensure a prompt and safe transfer of shipments to mainland Africa and ultimately, to Europe.

In addition to Guinea-Bissau's geographical advantage, the Sahel region offers plentiful opportunities for the Latin American drug cartels to use this route for drugs to be moved to Europe. The region hosts the ancient trans-Sahara smuggling routes—used for smuggling contraband items for generations—the area is unstable, there is a significant presence

of smugglers who can act as traffickers and major terrorist groups, like AQIM and its affiliates, are now operating in the Sahel under the umbrella of the Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims (GSIM). The region is impoverished with no economic opportunities for youth and most importantly, ethnic and tribal loyalties are well respected.⁵⁶ The last one is particularly important as organisations or groups which receive the patronage of local tribe leaders are guaranteed safe passage of contraband items.

After the trans-Sahara route in the Sahel region was revived for drug trade from 2003 onwards, in no time it became the only economic activity of the entire region. Hundreds of local smugglers, including jihadis, from Algeria, Libya, Mauritania, Mali and Morocco were employed by terrorist organisations to smuggle drugs or did so on their own. Soon Gao in Mali became the trading headquarters, acting as the main transit point in the cocaine trade with Europe. From Gao, the drugs are sent 'north across the Sahara Desert, primarily to the Mediterranean shores of Libya'.⁵⁷ The regions of southern Tunisia, southern Algeria and northern Niger serve as bases and transit points for terror groups and local smugglers with 'links to the wider Sahel region'.⁵⁸

Cocaine also lands directly at the airports of Nigeria, Ghana and Benin, usually hidden in shipments of plantains or coffee.⁵⁹ This is then transported inside trucks and sport utility vehicles (SUVs) along the old trans-Sahara smuggling routes.⁶⁰ Once it enters the African mainland, different groups control the movement of cocaine as well as opiates arriving from East Africa. Depending on the influence in the region and profits, while some terrorist groups become traffickers themselves, others provide protection to traffickers and ensure their safe transit—charging a nominal fee in lieu of their service.

There is clear evidence that GSIM and the Movement for Monotheism and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO) have coordinated with Colombian cocaine traffickers to ensure the safe passage of their business. In a systematic method, they have recruited locals to transfer drugs 'across the desert region between Mauritania, Mali, and Algeria to Europe', and also transfer 'synthetic drugs between Spain and Algeria'.⁶¹ The AQIM also imposes a tax on drug convoys in areas where its jihadis are not directly involved in trafficking.⁶²

Likewise, Boko Haram is a key player in the transit of drugs from Nigeria and neighbouring countries, like Cameroon, Chad and Niger, using the traditional long-distance trading routes northwards to the

Mediterranean.⁶³ It also provides a variety of services to drug cartels: trafficking of drugs and ensuring a safe passage; providing protection to drug traffickers; or purchasing drugs for consumption. 'It is widely suspected that much of Boko Haram's funding for recruits to rape and kidnap civilians come from drug trafficking.'⁶⁴ However, unlike Guinea-Bissau, Nigeria is the central hub for opiates (heroin), mainly arriving from East Africa via air or inland. Nigeria's annual heroin seizure is around 180 kilogram (kg), whereas other countries rarely reach 10 kg per annum.⁶⁵

Estimates indicate that approximately 40 per cent of illicit drugs arrive in Europe through Africa. The African route is now becoming more popular for cocaine, thanks to the increased monitoring over the Spanish coastline. The *World Drug Report 2017* indicates that around 70 per cent of cocaine that arrives in Europe uses Africa as the transit point. We have seen earlier how Highway 10 is slowly losing its popularity over Libya–Sicily route. The extent of the drug trade in Sahara can be assessed by a sighting of a burned Boeing 727 in the middle of the desert in Mali in 2009, which was flown across the Atlantic from Venezuela loaded with cocaine, but crash-landed. The owners of cocaine were quick to burn the substance to destroy the evidence.⁶⁶

While drug cartels have been moving cocaine through Guinea-Bissau by strengthening ties with the West African terror groups, the heroin business has been thriving on the other side of the continent. Drugs arrive from Afghanistan to the eastern seaboard, into Somalia, Kenya, Tanzania and Mozambique, through 'flotillas of small boats, ferrying smaller quantities of the drug to nearby beaches, islands or coves; or sometimes even directly to commercial ports'.⁶⁷ Once it has landed on the East African coast, traffickers either work in an individual capacity or under a group, transshipping drugs via air to Europe or by land to Central Africa, and then to North Africa via the Sahel. In the latter case, opiates meet the same drug handlers, individuals or terrorist groups who traffic cocaine from the West African ports. In the East African coast, there is also evidence of politicians being directly involved in drug trafficking. In Kenya, 'several high-profile politicians, including Mombasa governor Hassan Joho and Nairobi governor Mike Sonko, have been implicated in the drugs trade in a report made to Kenya's parliament.'⁶⁸ Similarly, there is a clear link between some local politicians in Mozambique and drug trafficking.⁶⁹ However, the drugs from Mozambique are likely to move to South Africa for consumption.⁷⁰

Further, Al Shabab's involvement in khat trade is well known. Khat is a stimulation drug which is grown in East Africa and the Arabian Peninsula. Khat cultivation, like poppies in Afghanistan, supports the livelihood of local farmers. On one occasion, to display its adherence to sharia, Al Shabab decided to burn 'transport and storage associated with the *khat* trade', which proved a 'highly unpopular measure given the importance of *khat* to farmers and traders'.⁷¹ Al Shabab is also dependent on khat production as 'it benefits from taxing the domestic *khat* trade as well as taxing its export'.⁷² Similarly, Al Shabab, to an extent, benefits from the opiate trade as it has an active presence in the Somalian waters, as well as in Kenya and Tanzania. The United Nations Security Council Monitoring Group on Somalia and Eritrea (UNSCMGSE) has indicated that the Ansaar Muslim Youth Centre (AMYC), a group associated with Al Shabab, has been 'reportedly involved in heroin trafficking on the Swahili Coast'.⁷³ Further, 'entry points in Somalia include the busy cargo point of Kismayoo, which for several years was under Al Shabaab control'.⁷⁴

CONCLUDING REMARKS

With the growing surveillance of security agencies on the flow of money, terror groups are finding it increasingly difficult to access a sustainable source of income. As a result, they have resorted to drug trafficking, which provides them with a lucrative alternative to secure a permanent line of credit. They are aware that countering drug trafficking is a much more complex task than blocking the traditional sources of income for terror groups. As explained by the Interpol Executive Director Tim Morris: 'The supply of illicit drugs everywhere around the globe is more abundant, more sophisticated and more diverse than it has ever been before.'⁷⁵

The complex web of drug network across the world poses an enormous challenge for security agencies. While it requires a long-term strategy and 'interlocking national, regional and international strategies rooted in global cooperation',⁷⁶ controlling drug trafficking remains problematic. For instance, opiates leaving Afghanistan via the southern route use the Indian Ocean to transit to either East Africa or move towards Southeast Asia. In this route, 'more than 420 million shipping containers move around the globe each year, accounting for 90 per cent of international trade. Only 2 per cent of these containers are inspected.'⁷⁷ This makes

it nearly impossible for maritime security agencies to intercept drug containers. Other factors which help drug traffickers include:

the location along the southern route, porous borders where drugs can cross undetected, weak law enforcement and maritime surveillance capacity, socio-economic circumstances encouraging participation in trafficking as a means of income, corrupt officials, ineffective criminal justice systems to prosecute perpetrators and a lack of regional and cross-border co-operation.⁷⁸

The land routes are equally complex and challenging. Once opiates leave Afghanistan either through the Balkans or the northern route, they go through multiple hands and multiple sub-routes before reaching the final destination. Drug traffickers are also quick to adapt to change, making monitoring of drug routes difficult. Once a route becomes risky and dangerous, drug traffickers rapidly find another sub-route. As was the case in Turkey, once it became difficult to operate due to increased surveillance of refugees, drug traffickers swiftly found another sub-route. Likewise, the supply chain of cocaine to Europe forms a complex web of network starting from Latin America to Guinea-Bissau, and then to North Africa. It is almost impossible to monitor this route as it passes through several unstable states, with terror groups operating as drug traffickers.

To counter these challenges, efforts have been made by governments and international agencies both at global and regional levels. At the regional level, the UNODC is running a number of programmes to assist security forces in different regions. For instance, in Central Asia, UNODC's Central Asia Regional Office runs a programme called 'Countering Transnational Organised Crime, Illicit Drug Trafficking and Preventing Terrorism'. This programme 'provides technical assistance in the field of law enforcement, which includes the establishment of new structures, enhancing capacity and developing cooperation'.⁷⁹

Similarly, Interpol assists national, regional and international law enforcement by assisting in the 'operations against drug trafficking, criminal analysis of intelligence on drug trafficking routes, modus operandi and the criminal networks involved, and comprehensive training for police worldwide to better tackle drug trafficking'.⁸⁰ The EU, which is a major victim of the illicit drug trade, has adopted a seven-year strategy to counter drugs trafficking. This includes working to reduce drug demand and supply; enhancing coordination at both the EU and

international levels by ensuring an active exchange of information and improving research, monitoring and evaluation system within the EU.⁸¹

On the southern route, the Combined Maritime Forces (CMF), a joint force of 18 countries, is quite active and its maritime security wing, CTF-150,⁸² has managed to intercept drug containers with some degree of success. According to the UNODC 2015 estimates, around 23 tonnes of heroin passes every year through the Indian Ocean, destined for East African ports. The CTF-150 detected around 2.5 tonnes of heroin on this route, amounting to roughly around 10 per cent seizure level. Outside CTF-150, the Indian Navy has commissioned INLCU L51 to be 'part of the fleet deployed to check poaching, illegal fishing, drug trafficking and other unlawful activities in the Indian Ocean region'.⁸³ It also closely works with Indian Coast Guard to combat the drug trade.⁸⁴

However, the Indian Navy needs to adopt a more coordinated approach, which should also include navies from Kenya, Pakistan and Iran as their 'strategic leadership will be required and their respective interests need to be balanced'. It is also vital to involve Small Island Developing States, like Seychelles, Mauritius and the Maldives, as 'small states have a great potential to act as honest brokers and intellectual leaders that set the agenda for innovative maritime security thinking'.⁸⁵ India and Seychelles are working together for greater security in the Indian Ocean Region.

Despite a massive coordinated effort to counter drug trafficking, the seizure rate of illicit drugs is, at best, 15 per cent annually. This means that most of the drugs arrive safely to their desired destinations. Thus, the impact on the finances of terror groups and other drug traffickers is meagre. This is radically different from other means of finances where security agencies can sufficiently cut off the supply lines of money, as they did after 9/11.

Also, drug trafficking results in instability of the region, which consequently supports the terror group. In the Sahel, an increase in drug activity, particularly after 2003, further triggered instability in the region, which helped organisations like AQIM to strengthen their base in the Sahel and operate freely. It is a much bigger and complicated task for security agencies to operate in unstable regions. In the Sahel, Illicit drug trade also created a nexus between local traffickers and terror groups. On occasions, existing drug traffickers have worked for the terror group, providing them with a natural human resource base. For example, in the Sahel region, AQIM used the traditional drug routes which had an

existing presence of smugglers, who started working for AQIM and other terror groups in lieu of small sums. This enhanced the organisation's operational capacity.

Therefore, there is much to be done in this context. The security agencies will have to step up their efforts to counter the financing of terrorism through drug trafficking. Countries should collaborate to train police forces to efficiently seize illicit drugs, particularly on how to detect drugs when hidden in small vehicles. In the Indian Ocean, regional powers should come together to form a group like CTF-150. Unlike the members of CTF-150, regional powers like India, South Africa, Kenya, Iran and Pakistan will better understand the challenges in the region. Only long-term multilateral cooperation between states will be useful in the war against drug trafficking.

NOTES

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