



MEETING BRIEF

The Nineteenth Annual IPI New York Seminar

Organized Crime and Conflict in the Sahel-Maghreb: Understanding the Linkages, Responding to the Threat

With increasing economic and political power, transnational organized crime networks have emerged as a global risk factor for international peace, security, and development. Criminal networks have evolved to flourish in regions of the world afflicted by conflict and weak institutions, and as part of global market forces they undermine stability and human security at large. Addressing this threat is thus a responsibility shared by the international community that can no longer be ignored in peacemaking efforts and multilateral support to governments in fragile environments. This was the key takeaway from the International Peace Institute's nineteenth annual New York Seminar on April 8, 2014.

In the Sahel-Maghreb region, kidnapping for ransom, human trafficking, and illicit flows of contraband goods, arms, and drugs have created an explosive mix that influences the dynamics of governance, armed insurgency, and violent extremism. In fact, participants of the New York seminar noted that organized crime was instrumental in the outbreak of Mali's security and governance crises in 2012. While international support to Mali contained the crisis and the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) seeks to facilitate the political stabilization process in the country, socioeconomic and institutional vulnerability to organized crime as an impediment to sustainable peace remains a concern.

During lively discussions among experts and key stakeholders in working groups and panels, several key recommendations for the international community and MINUSMA in particular emerged:

- **Acquire a comprehensive and dynamic understanding.** The first and most important step in responding to the threat is to develop a comprehensive and constantly updated understanding of the political economy of organized crime, including the dynamics of existing illicit markets; the identity, linkages, and operations of criminal actors; and these actors' agendas, means, and economic and political leverage. To generate such an understanding, emphasis should be put on, inter alia, the mapping of origins and dynamics of such markets through field-based research and grassroots activities in local communities. Knowledge of the local context has been highlighted as a prerequisite to understanding the operational conditions of criminal networks. A number of intelligence-gathering mechanisms, including MINUSMA's All Sources Information Fusion Unit (ASIFU), could contribute to this understanding.
- **Develop a coherent and coordinated response.** While national ownership is key, effective strategic responses to transnational organized crime cannot be limited to national policies. Initiatives must also be subregional and regional, taking into account the markets of supply, transit, and demand, as well as a shared international responsibility. Some options to this end include improving, harmonizing, and implementing existing multilateral and national frameworks; considering the potential use of targeted sanctions; and developing functional partnerships with nonstate organizations and actors that enhance the oftentimes limited capacity of national governments and multilateral operations.
- **Consider engaging with offenders where appropriate.** In addition to being a strategic threat to international peace and security, transnational organized crime is a social force that must be taken into account when devising stabilization and transition processes within countries. Crime can benefit the livelihoods of otherwise excluded communities and actors that can spoil

peacemaking efforts. Policymakers should therefore carefully consider the ways in which criminal markets and associated actors are perceived and labeled before developing appropriate responses. Mediation with criminal groups with a view to shifting incentive structures—and emphasizing mitigation and containment rather than eradication—is a tool that should be further explored.

- **Transform the political economy.** Beyond the short-term postconflict stabilization in Mali and support to the ongoing political process, structural causes of instability that allowed for the thriving of criminal networks in the first place need to be addressed as part of a longer-term strategy. To this end, policies should support institutional capacity building and civilian oversight as well as accountability. They should also find ways to generate genuine political will and incentives for a transformation of the underlying political economy. While the international community must scrutinize the political legitimacy of its partners in the government and local administrations, it should be the national government's primary responsibility to address sociopolitical and economic exclusion, provide basic services, build institutional resilience, develop viable economic alternatives, and generate mechanisms to curb corruption and money laundering—in addition to a solid, but not isolated, law-enforcement framework. Despite current weaknesses and politicization, civil society and the media have an important role to play in contributing to this transformation. Panelists observed that the 2013 legislative elections in Mali already helped to re-entangle some criminal agendas in national politics. International partners should not succumb to a “business as usual” attitude—in Mali and beyond, momentum must be seized to prevent criminal structures from cementing their leverage.
- **Streamline United Nations support.** While authorizing MINUSMA, the UN Security Council expressed its “continued concern over the serious threats posed by transnational organized crime” in Resolution 2100 (2013), yet it did not provide the mission with a clear mandate to address the issue. Seminar participants acknowledged the risks of explicitly mandating a mission to tackle organized crime—for example, it could endanger personnel, limit viable options, and raise unrealistic expectations. They noted that the key challenge for multilateral peace operations to deal with transnational organized crime lies in developing a strategic vision and generating creative ideas to implement existing mandate provisions in a more meaningful way. To this end, participants offered a number of recommendations beyond the mission's ongoing support to the government in the negotiation process, in implementing peace agreements, and in strengthening effective and legitimate state presence and stability throughout the country:
 - Reassert strong member state and headquarters backing of the mission's stabilization mandate.
 - Develop strategic guidance on how to factor in organized crime as a cross-cutting issue at the mission level, building on improved analysis, assessment, and reporting capabilities (e.g., through the ASIFU, better inter-mission cooperation, and operational integration with the United Nations Office for West Africa).
 - Work toward elaborating common goals and visions between the UN and the government, with a focus on building institutional resilience against organized crime and citizen involvement based on innovative approaches.
 - Balance regional strategies, such as border control, with local initiatives, such as community policing.
 - Maintain realistic expectations of what peacekeeping can achieve in supporting strategies to address organized crime, which usually require long-term transformational approaches to economic incentive structures.

– Maximilian M. Meduna