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The New Criminal Blitz: Mali, Iraq and the Business of Asymmetry

What does the ISIS insurgency in Iraq have in common with recent Islamist activity in Mali? Ivan Briscoe believes they've both elevated the obtaining of illicit income to new levels, thereby linking crime, jihadism and the sectarian decomposition of the nation-state in more unpredictable ways.

By Ivan Briscoe for ISN

It is an unusual form of asymmetric warfare when the weaker party leads an overland offensive towards a nation's capital. Yet the military audacity in Syria and Iraq of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIS) is not the first instance of an extremist ideological faction declaring quasi-sovereign powers in the face of what would seem to be insurmountably superior opposition.

Four non-state armed groups, three of which had been cobbled together only months beforehand, managed a similar feat in Mali in 2012. Although their experience as the ultimate authority in northern Mali – or Azawad, the land of seasonal movement, as the Tuareg separatists named it – did not last more than a year, it did offer an introductory glimpse into a variety of Islamist radicalism that was brutal, territorially expansive, and claimed a questionable capacity to exert legitimate political authority over civilians. Jihadism has learned and borrowed from its counter-insurgent antagonist: it clears and holds, albeit briefly.

Of course, non-state armed groups have frequently assumed the prerogative to quasi-state control over territories and civilians, whether through their claim to represent an ethnic or national demand for self-determination, resist state repression, or foster a revolution rooted in social and political grievances; in shorthand, the historic models of rebellions in Kenya, Kosovo and Cuba. What is striking and distinctive about the feats of ISIS, or the Malian Islamists, is not the state-like aspiration, or their deployment of forces resembling the concentrated *focos* of Che Guevara, but the seeming scarcity of their personnel, the swiftness of their ascent and the feebleness of what passes as the official state authority in each case.

From what is now known of the methods of ISIS, its blitz to the east has depended greatly on spot bargains with other disgruntled parties: uprooted Baath officials, restless Sunni leaders, and fellow sectarian patrons in certain Gulf states. Likewise in Mali, the novelty of a group such as the Movement for Oneness and the Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO), whose first kidnappings date from late 2011, or of Ansar Dine, established by the Tuareg notable Iyad ag Ghali largely out of pique that he had not been chosen to front the insurgency driven by returnees from post-Gaddafi Libya, contrast sharply with the

exponential rise of these factions thereafter. The institutions of the 50-year-old Malian state and its 20-year-old democracy crumbled, whereas these armed start-ups, along with the longer-standing Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), accrued exclusive control over the urban and commercial centres of the north: Timbuktu, Kidal and Gao.

Walking through a minefield

As in Iraq, the explanation for this insurrectionary spasm focuses on the transactional and networked allegiances that each group had been able to achieve in a domain best described using the word of military theorist Emile Simpson: a “highly politicised, kaleidoscopic conflict.” Frictions between and within northern Mali’s four main ethnic groups, compounded by extreme poverty and the absence of any semblance of state arbitration or defence of the disadvantaged, has previously manifested itself in different forms. Oral histories gathered by anthropologist Charles Grémont and colleagues indicate how the insurgency of 1991 soon mutated into banditry and intra-ethnic violence. Although relations were restored by community leaders, the competitive escalation between groups in a context of extreme scarcity manifested itself again in the local elections of 2009 (“a war of all against all” according to one well-connected witness I interviewed in Bamako last year). According to a leading Timbuktu politician, “if from one day to the next I doubt what my neighbor thinks, that destroys the social fabric. There has been terrible mistrust.”

In this context of deep social fissures, manipulation of group grievance reverted to the basis of state policy in Bamako, where a government estranged from northern society systematically chose its allies from among subordinate clans. It also became the motif of AQIM, whose sympathetic reception amongst the high-caste Tuaregs of Kidal can be traced to the sense of exclusion generated by the Malian state’s preference for the subaltern rungs on the ethnic ladder. This shift in Kidal’s allegiances is extensively reported in US embassy cables from 2008 to 2009. Meanwhile, even as AQIM honed its strategy of local flattery and tactical alignment, its leaders appear to have found the local political landscape distasteful. “You are walking in a minefield full of tribalism, conspiracy, and revenge, corruption and arrogance,” wrote the [group’s emir](#) in Timbuktu in correspondence discovered after the French military intervention of January 2013, which scattered the Islamist fighters.

The spread of crime

These ethno-political rivalries, stretching from local feuds to pan-regional cleavages, are fundamental to understanding the shape and structure of armed conflict in Mali. Yet if we wish to grasp the ebb and flow in such competition, or the way competitive advantage was accumulated within the 2012 conflict, it becomes essential to grasp the part played by crime.

Reports from the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, the West Africa Commission on Drugs and the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organised Crime, from scholars and researcher, or from the journalist Serge Daniel (author of the recently published *Les mafias du Mali*), have explored in depth the way Mali graduated from a two-way smuggling link to Algeria to a poly-functional role in the regional and transnational illicit marketplace, above all in the period from 2006. However, there is no prima facie reason why inclusion in global crime – whether in drugs, kidnappings, arms or bootleg products – should generate armed violence. Transnational criminal flows through Central America have produced exceptional violence in certain areas; but they have not in post-war Kosovo, nor have they in Peru, where criminalization (an estimated \$4.5 billion a year in illicit exports of gold and cocaine) has been rather more pacific than rural Maoism.

Yet in the case of Mali, illicit activity is inseparable from the escalation of pre-existing armed competition. It accounts for the rapid eclipse of the initial Tuareg uprising that had been channelled through the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA), a relatively weak and poorly

funded armed group that found itself usurped from all the north's urban centers by June 2012. AQIM, in its disinterred correspondence, makes clear its dependence on kidnapping revenues, as well as its efforts to legitimate its otherwise coercive rule by [patronage and selective hand-outs](#) (assistance to the sick, subsidies for dowries, or compensation for traders forbidden from selling alcohol). ISIS now appears to be doing something similar in Mosul in Iraq, and in al-Raqqa in Syria, by controlling the quality of products sold at markets. This is not unlike the archetypal service of consumer protection for "unstable transactions in which trust is scarce and fragile" that the Sicilian mafia once provided, according to Diego Gambetta.

In all these respects, the radicals' dependence on a strong illicit revenue base has proved crucial. Against a backdrop of extreme ethno-political tension, financial leverage entices local elites, enables the purchase of weapons, and silences the majority of citizens already alienated from their states. Alongside the meting out of sharia law, all of these characteristics can be detected in northern Mali in 2012. The reports of ISIS' extraordinary warchest, boosted by its protections rackets and the \$500 million heist on Mosul's banks, seem to have raised the threat posed by illicit income to a higher plane, in which crime, jihadism and the sectarian decomposition of the nation-state are intermingled in as yet unknown and unpredictable ways.

A policy non sequitur

On this basis, a simple and linear response to these conflicts would be to starve the radicals of their money, thereby severing the "crime-terror" nexus. However, this seemingly obvious response is deeply flawed in theory and practice. Acknowledging the evidence that successful armed factions accumulate criminal revenues does not mean that they are criminal groups, nor that fighting crime will weaken them.

There are a number of compelling reasons for this policy *non sequitur*. The first, as can be seen in the case of Mali, is that the most important criminal flows were co-ordinated by high echelons within the state, in league with transnational operators. The case of the Boeing jet carrying tons of cocaine from Venezuela to the northern Malian desert in 2009 is illustrative of these linkages to power. More mundane illicit transactions involving nepotism and fraud in public office are also rife, not least in the police and army. As a result, selectively fighting crime merely so as to starve the armed radicals in the desert will do nothing to undermine the systemic base that allows illicit activity to reproduce. It would also do little to improve the reputation of the state or the international community in northern Mali, where, according to the UN Security Council's report in June, there has been a "substantial increase in asymmetric attacks targeting the Malian security forces, MINUSMA and Operation Serval."

A second reason, which is not unconnected, derives from the undesired effects of full-frontal and aggressive assaults on parts of the criminal chain, particularly narco-trafficking, in Afghanistan, Mexico and Central America. Without wishing to ignore the nuances in each case, it is clear that the reliance on illicit business by many different constituencies and interest groups – not least, the poor and marginalized – imperils militarized operations to combat crime. Either these campaigns prompt a backlash that joins together many of these constituencies under one roof (the Taliban in Afghanistan), or it spawns an internecine criminal turf war (Mexico), with the state in both cases distributing protection and support through the actions of complicit officials.

Lastly, the porous borders and weak, fragmented states of Mali or Iraq pose an additional challenge to anything like conventional crime-fighting. In both cases, foreign states and non-state groups intertwine with illicit business in ways that blur the boundaries between crime, jihad, military strategy and foreign policy. Algerian intelligence, for example, employed a proxy in the Malian jihadist front – Ansar Dine. In so doing, it overlapped with illicit traffickers also linked to the group. Most recently, [reports suggest](#) Algeria is negotiating with rebels from the MUJAO, which is excluded from the peace

talks in Mali that Algiers nominally backs, in the hope of keeping its own vast southern territory stable. MUJAO also still holds a number of Algerian diplomats hostage.

Further evidence of these opaque amalgams and trade-offs, in which high strategy and low bargains are seamlessly combined, emerged during the negotiations to free four French hostages from Mali late last year. The success of these talks, which reportedly included the payment of \$20 million to the kidnappers, appears in large part to have depended on the mediation of Mohamed Akotey, a Tuareg noble and former government minister in Niger. Not by chance, Akotey is also on the board of a Nigérien company run by the French nuclear energy group, Areva – the company for which the hostages worked.

Such meetings of interest and tactical alignments are nothing new in the domain of transnational organized crime in Latin America, where vertically integrated cartels broke up long ago. But the membrane encasing “organized crime” is exceptionally thin in Mali, and the omnipresence of illicit activity, as well as its transactional usefulness, makes it essential for numerous other parties – states, politicians, ethnic leaders, businesses and intelligence services – to make use of it, or at least accommodate it within their plans.

Avoiding the rudimentary

For these three reasons, a campaign to stabilize Mali or Syria-Iraq would appear to depend less on combating crime than on dampening its most pernicious manifestations. The risk of empowered and enriched non-state armed groups co-opting populations and buying in the best weaponry is obvious; ISIS currently appears to embody this threat.

But instead of responding with a frontal assault, it would be well for the international community and local governments to reflect on how best to calibrate their interventions in these criminalized, violent environments. While armed groups gain finance and the potential to make shock advances, they also become subject to fragmentation; their fundamentalist ideologies dilute; and their support networks become materialistic. In many ways these groups become new cogs of patronage, and as such, become vulnerable to revolts from below, splits from within and trade sanctions from above. But not rudimentary attacks from outside.

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