

# Demystifying ‘Narcoterrorism’

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## Key Points

- Although the term ‘narcoterrorism’ emerged in the early 1980s to describe the attacks by the Shining Path and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) against counternarcotics police, its meaning has expanded and lost clarity since then, while the term gained significant traction after September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001.
- The term is problematic in that it suggests a ‘symbiotic relationship’ between drug traffickers and terrorists that is very rarely confirmed by evidence, as the case studies of Peru, Afghanistan, Mali and Mexico demonstrate.
- ‘Narcoterrorism’ is a red herring as it diverts attention away from other important issues, such as corruption, state abuses, arms trafficking, human trafficking and other types of organised crime and violence.
- This simplistic label often overestimates the importance of the drug trade in funding terrorism, and of the use of terrorist tactics by drug traffickers.
- Drug trafficking and other types of illicit trade and organised crime are important issues in their own right, and should not need the ‘terrorism’ label to attract attention.
- While simplifying complex problems may be appealing, it may lead to ineffective and at times counterproductive policy responses.

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## INTRODUCTION

In the aftermath of September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001, the links between international terrorism and the international drug trade became a source of increased activity in law enforcement, government, the media and academia, particularly in the US - as shown in Graph 1. The term ‘narcoterrorism’, often used then, was in fact not new: it emerged in the early 1980s to describe the activities of groups such as the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) in Colombia, and the Shining Path (*Senderoso Luminoso*) in Peru.

Since then, the term has proved problematic given its lack of clarity, its suggestion of a systematic merging between drug trafficking groups and terrorist organizations not backed up by evidence, its emphasis on a set of illicit activities at the expense of others (including arms trafficking, corruption and state abuses), and its policy implications - favouring a conflation of counterterrorism and counternarcotics policies and a militarisation of the policy response to tackle inherently political, economic and social issues.

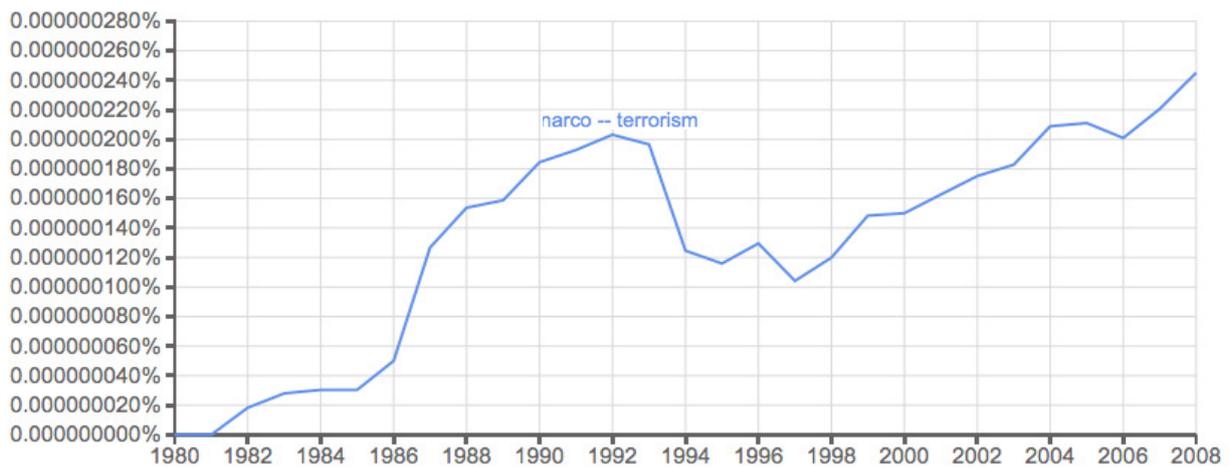
This policy brief considers the way in which the term has evolved since the early 1980s and the main official and academic attempts at defining it. Through the examination of four main case studies, namely Peru, Afghanistan, Mexico and Mali, it highlights the main flaws in the ‘narcoterrorism’ analysis and attempts to offer a more nuanced understanding of the main challenges in those countries. It identifies some of the potential factors behind the widespread emphasis on the links between the drug trade and terrorism, and explores the dangers of oversimplification.

## THE HISTORY AND DEFINITIONS OF ‘NARCOTERRORISM’

There has been much debate about the definition of the term ‘narcoterrorism’. Former President Belaúnde of Peru reportedly first used it in 1983 to describe the attacks against the country’s anti-narcotics police.<sup>1</sup> Rapidly, the phrase also began to qualify similar attacks perpetrated by the FARC in Colombia. In 1990, Rachel Ehrenfeld, one of the first scholars on the issue, defined ‘narcoterrorism’ as ‘the use of drug trafficking to advance the objectives of certain governments and terrorist organizations’<sup>2</sup>. The inclusion of ‘governments’ can be deemed problematic. Despite the efforts of former Secretary General Kofi Annan, terrorism expert Prof Alex Schmid and others at the United Nations (UN), there is no international consensus on a single definition of the term ‘terrorism’. However, a large number of available definitions on the topic only includes *non-state* actors as potential ‘terrorists’, in part given the existence of international law, humanitarian law and law of war frameworks to deal with the behaviour of *state* actors.<sup>3</sup>

Since the early 1990s, the definition of ‘narcoterrorism’ has expanded, and much confusion remains. Emma Björnehed points out that the definition of ‘narcoterrorism’ is ‘almost dual in character’, and ‘the emphasis placed on the drug aspect or the terrorism aspect may vary considerably’. She argues that it is a ‘problematic concept’ – in part as it may imply the ‘merger of the two phenomena’ – that ‘can be argued to complicate rather than facilitate discussions on the two concepts that it embodies’.<sup>4</sup>

Disagreements persist within the US government itself. The Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) defines ‘narcoterrorism’ as ‘a subset of terrorism, in which terrorist groups, or associated individuals, participate directly or indirectly in the cultivation, manufacture, transportation, or distribution of controlled substances and the monies derived



Graph 1: Number of books published in English with the term ‘narco-terrorism’ in their title between 1980 and 2008

Source: Google Books Ngram Viewer

from these activities. Further, narco-terrorism may be characterized by the participation of groups or associated individuals in taxing, providing security for, or otherwise aiding or abetting drug trafficking endeavors in an effort to further, or fund, terrorist activities’.<sup>5</sup> The Department of Defense (DOD) uses a more restrictive definition: ‘Terrorism conducted to further the aims of drug traffickers. It may include assassinations, extortion, hijackings, bombings and kidnappings directed against judges, prosecutors, elected officials, or law enforcement agents, and general disruption of a legitimate government to divert attention from drug operations’.<sup>6</sup>

In other words, ‘narcoterrorism’ may refer a wide range of situations, including violence perpetrated by drug traffickers to further and protect their economic interests; the resort to drug trafficking and terrorist tactics by state actors; the use of drug trafficking or directly and indirectly related activities by terrorist organizations to fund their operations; cooperation between drug traffickers and terrorist organizations for mutual gains; and the merger of drug trafficking organizations and terrorist organizations to carry out both drug trafficking and terrorist activities.

Military officials, policy makers and analysts from many countries and international organizations often affirm the existence of

systematic links between terrorism and drug trafficking. ‘Fighting drug trafficking equals fighting terrorism’, declared Antonio Maria Costa, the then executive director of the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), at a conference held in Kabul in February 2004.<sup>7</sup> In 2009, Admiral James Stavridis, then Commander of the US European Command (USEUCOM) and NATO’s Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR) pointed to the increasingly dangerous nexus between illicit drug trafficking, ‘including routes, profits, and corruptive influence’ and ‘Islamic radical terrorism’.<sup>8</sup> Weeks prior to France’s military intervention *Opération Serval* in Mali, French Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius warned of the ‘rise of narcoterrorism’ in Mali, where ‘several hundreds of people very heavily armed are linked to trafficking of hostages and drugs’ He added that without any action, ‘the whole of Africa, Eastern and Western, and Europe would be threatened... If we want to avoid that in the next few months our countries are under the influence of narco-terrorism, we must act’.<sup>9</sup> In addition, analysts often refer to violence perpetrated by drug trafficking organizations in Mexico as ‘narco-terrorism’, highlighting the killing and intimidation of civilians for political and territorial purposes. More recently, reports have emerged on Boko Haram, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and other Islamist groups increasingly funding their operations through drug trafficking. Spain’s intelligence

and counterterrorism unit CITCO noted that 20 per cent of those detained in the country on suspicion of working with ISIS and related jihadist groups have previously served prison sentences for offences including drug trafficking and counterfeiting.<sup>10</sup> Former DEA agent Edward Follis told a Fox News programme entitled ‘Drugged-up Terror’ that ISIS was in ‘the nascent stages... to dabbling in methamphetamine and ecstasy’ as part of a diversifying portfolio.<sup>11</sup>

Beyond definitional debates, political declarations and media reports, field research and qualitative and quantitative data reveal that there is no strong sign of automatic integration between terrorism and drug trafficking, and that the term ‘narcoterrorism’ tends to oversimplify and misrepresent complex situations. The examination of four case studies, namely Peru, Afghanistan, Mexico and Mali – some of the countries most often recognized as key ‘narcoterrorism’ hotspots – proves revealing in that regard.

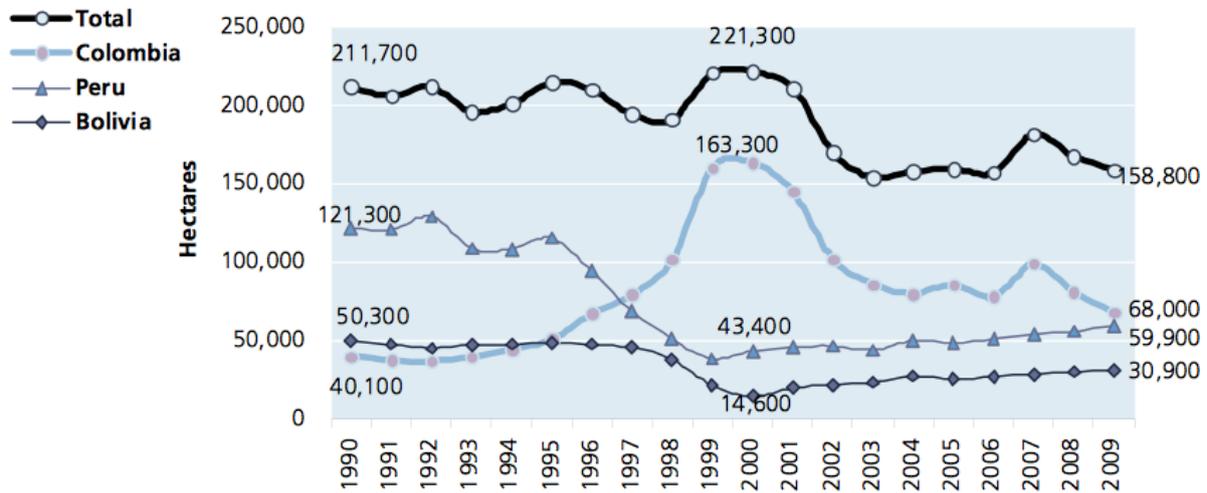
## PERU

In the country where the term was first coined, the Shining Path has been the main focus of ‘narcoterrorism’ allegations. The organization is also known as *Senderoso Luminoso* and the Community Part of Peru – Shining Path, as it initially emerged as a breakaway from the country’s communist party in 1970. From an initial membership of a few dozen members to more than 500 by 1980 when it declared war on the state and 3,000 at its peak in 1990, the Shining Path has remained small. However, the country’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission found it guilty of killing 31,000 people between 1980 and 2000, as part of a war that is thought to have killed over 70,000. Following the capture of their leader Abimael Guzman in 1992, the group broke into two main factions. One – which has drastically weakened in recent years – is based in the Huallaga Valley and has remained loyal to Guzman after he called

on his followers to make a peace deal with the government. The other faction is based in the Apurimac, Ene and Mantaro River Valleys (VRAEM) and considers Guzman a traitor.<sup>12</sup>

According to some accounts, the Shining Path had developed a ‘symbiotic relationship’ with cocaine growers and traffickers at the time of Guzman’s arrest.<sup>13</sup> The term ‘narcoterrorism’ continues to be used by US officials including from the State Department<sup>14</sup>, the DEA<sup>15</sup> and even Peruvian officials. Peruvian Army Major General Leonardo José Longa López, Military and Defense Attaché at the Peruvian Embassy in the United States, has even puzzlingly used the term ‘passive narcoterrorists’ to describe the ‘population that collaborates with these new armed drug trafficking organizations either willingly or forced by the circumstances and the lack of economic and social opportunities’.<sup>16</sup> A recent indictment of the Shining Path commanders claims that the group has ‘sought to control all aspects of the cocaine trade’ in the Upper Huallaga and VRAEM valleys, including by ‘cultivating and processing its own cocaine for sale’, thereby portraying it as a ‘fully-fledged drug trafficking organization’, as Hannah Stone writes in *Insight Crime*.<sup>17</sup>

Peru is an important drug producing country. In 2014, the US State Department noted that ‘Peru remained the world’s top potential producer of cocaine for the third consecutive year, and was the second-largest cultivator of coca’.<sup>18</sup> UNODC estimates that the country surpassed Colombia as the world’s top producer of coca and cocaine in 2012.<sup>19</sup> Some of these estimates have been disputed, and important caveats on data collection on the illicit drug trade are explored in Box 1.<sup>20</sup> However, production has reportedly increased in recent years, in part an illustration of the well-known ‘squeezing the balloon’ effect, whereby decreases in production in one country (Colombia) led to an increase in neighbouring countries (Peru and Bolivia), as Graph 2 illustrates.<sup>21</sup> (also see Map 1 for resultant cocaine flows).



Graph 2: Global coca bush cultivation (ha), 1990-2009

Source: UNODC (2011) 'The Transatlantic Cocaine Market'. Research Paper. April. p.7.

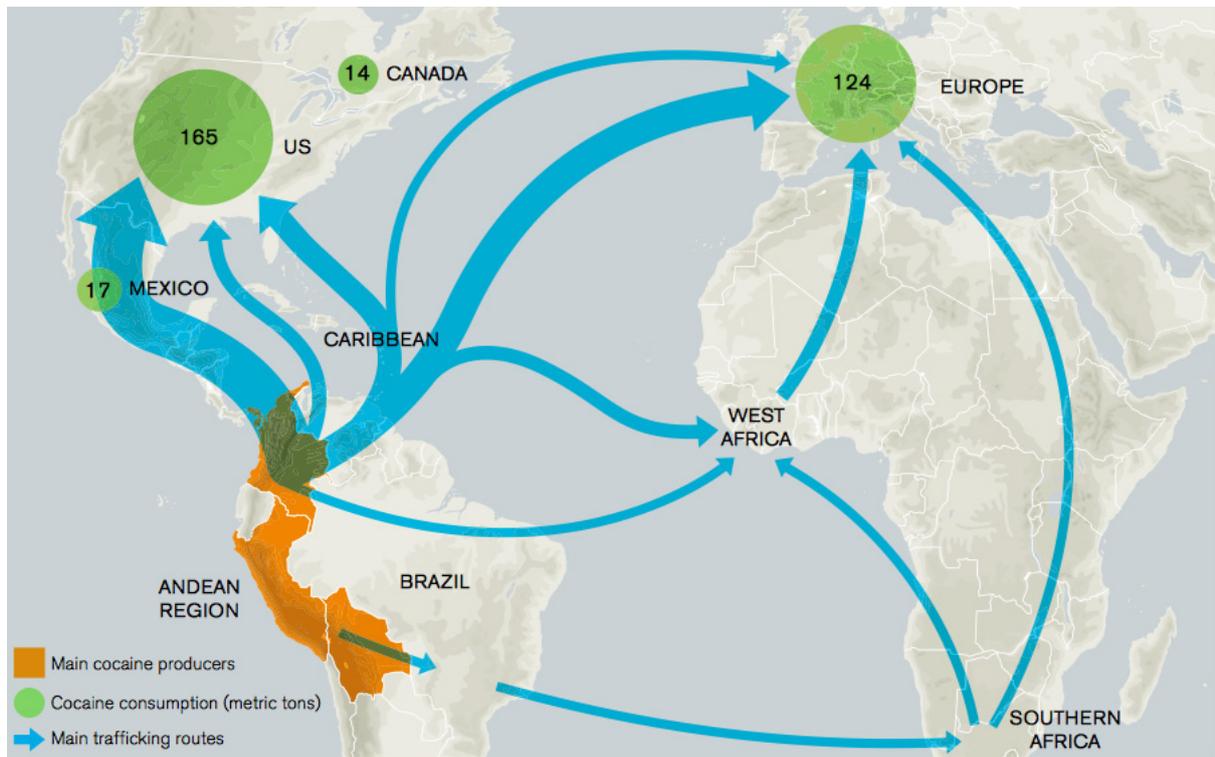
### Box 1. Challenges related to data collection on the illicit drug trade

While UNODC data is arguably the most reliable in the field of drug policy, a few caveats are worth highlighting here. Simply put, the drug trade is difficult to measure particularly because it is an illegal activity. By definition, the most successful criminals are either those who do not get caught because they evade law enforcement, or those who do not even appear on the radars of police and intelligence forces in the first place. Drug trade estimates are often based on voluntary reports from relevant national agencies around the world, some of whom simply do not have the manpower and capacity to produce the most accurate estimates, and may lack the incentive to do so: a more substantial drug problem might either mean receiving more assistance or facing tougher sanctions. In addition, drug seizures, arrests of suspected traffickers or areas of illicit drug crop eradicated, on which many estimates are based, are often misleading: more seizures, arrests and crops eradicated might either mean an increase in the drug trade itself or in law enforcement capacity, activity or luck. Problems of measurement are also compounded in many countries by the overlaps between the legal and illegal economies.

There is evidence that the Shining Path is involved in the drug trade. Offering protection and escort to drug traffickers may be the group's primary source of revenue. Traffickers arrested in October 2013 revealed that the Shining Path imposed a tax of \$5,000 and collected weapons and equipment for each ton of drugs transiting through their territory.<sup>22</sup> That region is an important strategic hub, close to the Bolivian border and the cocaine trafficking route towards Brazil.<sup>23</sup>

However, the drug trade and terrorism have in no way merged in Peru, or amounted to any 'symbiotic relationship'. According to

Ricardo Soberon, former drug czar and now head of the *Centro de Investigación Drogas y Derechos Humanos* (CIDDH), the Shining Path factions have lacked the 'logistical, political or military capacity to take control of all the stages in the processing of drugs', and have not had 'control or command' of 'transport, storage and shipment'.<sup>24</sup> Investigative journalist Gustavo Gorriti notes that local drug traffickers prefer not to pay the Shining Path's taxes, and have thus increasingly used small planes to transport cocaine out of Peru.<sup>25</sup> This sheds light on the competitive – rather than 'symbiotic' or even collaborative – nature of the relationship between drug traffickers and



Map 1: Global cocaine flows

Source: *The World Today* (2012) Vol. 68, No. 5, August-September. p.10

See also Box 1. Challenges related to data collection on the illicit drug trade

the Shining Path. Disputes between the two even led to violent confrontations in 1987.<sup>26</sup> Louise Shelley argues that the example of Peru is relevant in how the term ‘narcoterrorism’ leads to oversimplification, and ‘ignores the high-level corruption of government officials that facilitates this drug trade’. As she points out, Vladimiro Montesinos, former right hand of President Fujimori, was found guilty of involvement in death squads and selling weapons to the FARC - an illustration of the centrality of arms trafficking and the existence of illicit activities other than the drug trade in financing terrorism and organized crime.<sup>27</sup>

## AFGHANISTAN

Officials often pointed to a direct link between Bin Laden and the drug trade after September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001. As early as October 3, 2001, the US House of Representatives Subcommittee on Criminal Justice, Drug Policy and Human Resources of the Committee on Government

Reform held a hearing entitled ‘Drug Trade and the Terror Network’. Committee Chairman Mark Souder then declared that ‘the Afghan drug trade has given direct financial support for the Taliban regime to harbor international terrorists and at least indirectly assisted Usama bin Laden and the al-Qaeda terrorist network to grievously attack the United States of America’.<sup>28</sup> Asa Hutchinson, of the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) added that ‘the very sanctuary enjoyed by Bin Laden is based on the existence and control of the Taliban, whose modest economy is dependent upon opium. This connection defines the deadly symbiotic relationship between the illegal drug trade and international terrorism’.<sup>29</sup> In the UK, then Prime Minister Tony Blair was quick to establish the connection as well, referring to a British intelligence report: ‘The Taliban regime... has provided Bin Laden with a safe haven within which to operate, and allowed him to establish terrorist training camps. They jointly exploit the Afghan drugs trade. In return for active Al Qaida support

the Taliban allow Al Qaeda to operate freely, including planning, training and preparing for terrorist activity. In addition they provide security for the stockpiles of drugs'.<sup>30</sup> Two years later, the then French Defense Minister Michèle Alliot-Marie assuredly noted: 'drugs are now the principal source of funding for Osama bin Laden's al-Qaeda network'.<sup>31</sup> The same year, US Democrat Representative Joe Biden declared: 'Afghanistan: the connection between the warlords, drugs and terror is as clear as a bell',<sup>32</sup> while Republican representative Mark Kirk went as far as saying that 'bin Laden is one of the world's largest heroin dealers'.<sup>33</sup>

Officials were not the only ones conveying this analysis. Among others, Gretchen Peters pointed out that 'every time a U.S. soldier is killed in an IED attack or a shootout with militants, drug money helped pay for that bomb or paid the militants who placed it'.<sup>34</sup> While this statement contains some truth, and while there is indeed evidence of a linkage between terrorism and drug trafficking in Afghanistan, studies have found that the reality on the ground was much more nuanced.

The opium trade out of Afghanistan is a substantial source of revenue for the country. Afghanistan produces approximately 90% of the world's opium.<sup>35</sup> Production decreased sharply in 2000/2001, largely as a result of the Taliban ban on harvest completed in August 2001, but increased again drastically from 2002 onwards, with average production soon surpassing the levels of the 1990s.<sup>36</sup> Taliban commanders have been reported to collect agricultural taxes (*ushr*) from poppy farmers and roadside taxes (*zakat*) from traffickers. Taliban commanders are also reportedly involved in the drug trade through facilitating migrant flows towards poppy farms, providing security to traffickers, protecting labs and shipments of precursor chemicals and preventing poppy eradication efforts, while local Taliban commanders may also engage more directly in drug trafficking activities for additional revenues.<sup>37</sup> However,

research has found that Bin Laden in fact never was 'one of the world's largest heroin producers', nor that he played any major role in heroin production at all. Jason Burke notes that 'there has never been any evidence that Bin Laden has ever been involved in narcotics production, and everyone involved in the trade in Pakistan, Afghanistan and elsewhere, from farmers through to the UN experts monitoring drugs production, denies the allegation'.<sup>38</sup> The 9/11 Commission itself found no evidence linking Bin Laden and the drug trade: 'While the drug trade was a source of income for the Taliban, it did not serve the same purpose for al Qaeda, and there is no reliable evidence that Bin Laden was involved in or made his money through drug trafficking'.<sup>39</sup>

The Taliban have been involved in the drug trade as a marginal player, and Al Qaeda has been an even more remote player. Looking at UN data released in 2009, University College Dublin researcher Julien Mercille found that the Taliban only collected 3% of the proceeds of the drug trade, while 75% of revenues in fact benefited state officials, the police, various power brokers and traffickers.<sup>40</sup> As Mercille points out, UNODC estimated in 2009 that between \$200–400 million of drug-related funds ended up in the hands of 'insurgents and warlords', and that the Taliban had an annual opium-related revenue of \$90–160 million. This is an important sum, yet one which only represents roughly 3% of an estimated \$4bn harvest and only 10–15% of the Taliban's revenue, as per UNODC estimates.<sup>41</sup> In a report for the Center on International Cooperation (CIC), Caulkins, Kulick and Kleiman note that the Taliban take somewhere between '2 [and] 12% of a \$4bn industry', while 'farmers, traffickers, smugglers, and corrupt officials collectively earn much more'.<sup>42</sup> With this in mind, assertions made in the immediate aftermath of 9/11, directly linking Al Qaeda and the Taliban and the drug trade, can be qualified as overstatements not entirely supported by quantitative and qualitative analysis.

## MALI

In Mali, a similar dynamic has emerged in recent years. Mali has become a country with regional and international security significance, in part because of reported links between the drug trade and terrorist groups in the country and the broader regions of West Africa and the Sahel. French Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius has qualified security challenges in the area of 'narco-terrorism'.<sup>43</sup> The country's security problems have caused significant concerns, particularly in France, largely related to historic and strategic ties between the two countries. In March 2012, military officers carried out a putsch against then President Amadou Toumani Touré. Their main grievance was the lack of resources devoted to the military campaign in the north of the country, against the Tuareg rebels of the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA). Other extremist groups, including AQIM, had been causing much disruption as well.<sup>44</sup> This instability led France to launch an intervention in the country in January 2013, with the support of a number of partner countries.

Mali and West Africa have become parts of an important drug trafficking route in recent years, especially for cocaine originating in Colombia and the broader Andean region, largely as a result of tightened law enforcement measures in Europe in the early 2000s.<sup>45,46</sup> While the cocaine trade seems to have declined since 2007 following an earlier sharp increase, UNODC points out that drug traffickers may have adapted their techniques, moving to smaller shipments from Brazil dispatched by local actors in West Africa, and therefore making drug law enforcement more difficult. In addition, there are indications that trafficking of heroin and methamphetamines may be on the rise.<sup>47</sup> As a consequence, there is increasing evidence that the region is becoming an important market for the consumption of drugs as well as for producing drugs (notably methamphetamines). Countries like Guinea-Bissau have been particularly affected, and Mali has become a major transit point for

cocaine going to Europe and the Gulf, seen by traffickers as a crucial emerging market.<sup>48</sup> In addition, smuggling of Moroccan cannabis resin through Mali has reportedly increased in the past decade.<sup>49</sup>

Officials and analysts often oversimplify the relationship between the drug trade and terrorist groups in the region, and the importance of drug-related revenues for these organizations. The situation on the ground is complex, with various types of relationships between multiple stakeholders, but it is clear that there is no automatic merging between terrorists and drug traffickers. A 2013 Foreign & Commonwealth Office (FCO) paper notes that the term 'narcoterrorism' 'does not accurately describe a reality: terrorists are usually not the same as drugs traffickers. But they are useful to each other for political and social power, access to resources and for personal connections'.<sup>50</sup>

Based on extensive field research, Wolfram Lacher has debunked the myths of the so-called 'drug-terror nexus' in the region, noting that 1) the evidence presented to suggest the existence of a nexus is often flaky or impossible to verify; 2) AQIM and the Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (commonly referred to through its French acronym MUJAO, which stands for *Mouvement pour l'unicité et le jihad en Afrique de l'Ouest*) are far from being unitary organizations with clear objectives and consistent tactics, and its members are 'driven by multiple, and at times, conflicting motivations'; 3) terrorist groups are part of a long list of actors playing an equally or more important role in drug smuggling; 4) the focus on the connections between drug trafficking and terrorism in the region often serves as a distraction from the much more important role played by state actors in organized crime; 5) kidnapping, and more precisely kidnap-for ransom (often referred to as Kfr) seems to be a more lucrative business for AQIM and MUJAO.<sup>51</sup>

Other types of organized crime activities also provide revenues for Mali and its broader region, historically well known as a smuggling route for various kinds of licit and illicit items, including weapons and cigarettes. Mokhtar Belmokhtar, an Algerian terrorist operating in the region and leader of MUJAO, earned the nickname of ‘Mr Marlboro’ for his predominant role in cigarette smuggling in the region. He was charged over the attack on a gas processing facility in a remote part of the East of Algeria, near the border with Libya, in January 2013, during which over 800 people were taken hostage and at least 40 hostages were killed.<sup>52</sup>

What is less often reported is the role of official actors in organized crime in the region, including state actors, as Lacher points out. There are numerous relevant examples of low-, mid- and high-level officials’ involvement in drug trafficking throughout West Africa in recent years. In Guinea-Bissau, top military and government officials have been actively participating in drug trafficking, including President João Bernardo ‘Nino’ Vieira, armed forces chief Batista Tagme Na Wai, Navy chief Rear Adm. José Americo Bubo Na Tchuto, and Air Force Chief of Staff Ibraima Papa Camara.<sup>53</sup> In Sierra Leone, Mohamed Bashil Besay (also known as Ahmed Sesay), cousin of former Minister of Transport and Aviation Kemoh Sesay, was found to be directly involved in a cocaine trafficking scheme.<sup>54</sup>

In Mali, the most infamous drug trafficking case revolves around the Boeing 727 dubbed ‘Air Cocaine’, which crashed in the northern part of the country in November 2009. This incident highlights three key elements: First, the transnational nature of the business. The cocaine is said to have been produced in Colombia, shipped by plane to Mali, then smuggled overland by individuals from Spain, France, Morocco, Mali and Senegal to Morocco, and likely later dispatched throughout Europe.<sup>55</sup> Second, the government has often encouraged drug trafficking. According to numerous sources, Malian government officials

and soldiers have been directly involved and actively participated in smuggling operations, facilitating the flow of drugs through the country, at best ignoring evident signs of ostentatious wealth related to smuggling (a lavish neighborhood of Gao with expensive villas has been dubbed ‘Cocainebougou’ or ‘Cocaine Town’)<sup>56</sup>, and ensuring that the prosecution against top officials involved in drug trafficking would eventually falter.<sup>57</sup> Third, unsanctioned corruption has fuelled tensions and resentment in Mali. In February 2013, a crowd of protesters nearly lynched two officials suspected of an active role in the ‘Air Cocaine’ case. Mohamed Ould Awainatt, an alleged billionaire drug trafficker, is reportedly a close friend to former President Amadou Toumani Touré and was released from prison in February 2012 in exchange for his militia’s support to the Malian army’s operations against Tuareg rebels in the north of the country.<sup>58</sup> The second individual, Baba Ould Cheikh, is the mayor of Tarkint, a village in the Gao region.<sup>59</sup>

Private companies have also been taking part in and facilitated criminal activities. British American Tobacco (BAT), among other transnational tobacco companies, has been actively involved in the contraband and smuggling of cigarettes across Africa. Through an extensive study of internal documents and industry publications, LeGresley et al. demonstrated in 2008 that BAT had ‘relied on illegal channels to supply markets across Africa since the 1980s’, noting that ‘smuggling has been an important component of BAT’s market entry strategy in order to gain leverage in negotiating with governments for tax concessions, compete with other transnational tobacco companies, circumvent local import restrictions and unstable political and economic conditions and gain a market presence’.<sup>60</sup>

In sum, there is some overlap between organized crime groups and extremists in the region. Field research suggests that MUJAO is directly involved in smuggling,

while AQIM has provided protection to drug convoys in exchange for a fee, and facilitated and financially benefited from smuggling in general.<sup>61</sup> However, actors in the region are largely connected through loose, local and evolving relationships, rather than robust regional networks. Moreover, drug trafficking only constitutes a source of revenue among many others for smugglers and extremists of the region. What is often ignored or underestimated is the central role that governments and private companies play in the region. In this context, the most important common feature between drug trafficking and terrorism in Mali, West Africa and the Sahel seems to be not the nexus between the two types of threat, but their close collusion with governments.

## MEXICO

According to UNODC data, over 120,000 people died in homicides between 2007 and 2012 in Mexico. Some reports noted that over 70,000 of these homicides were ‘drug-related’.<sup>62</sup> These figures should be taken with precaution: Mexico’s National Institute for Statistics and Geography (Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía - INEGI) itself estimated that in 2013 over 90% of crimes were in fact not reported and almost 94% were not investigated.<sup>63</sup> In other words, with so little police investigation, how could one confidently put forward a reliable estimate of the proportion of these killings that were drug-related?

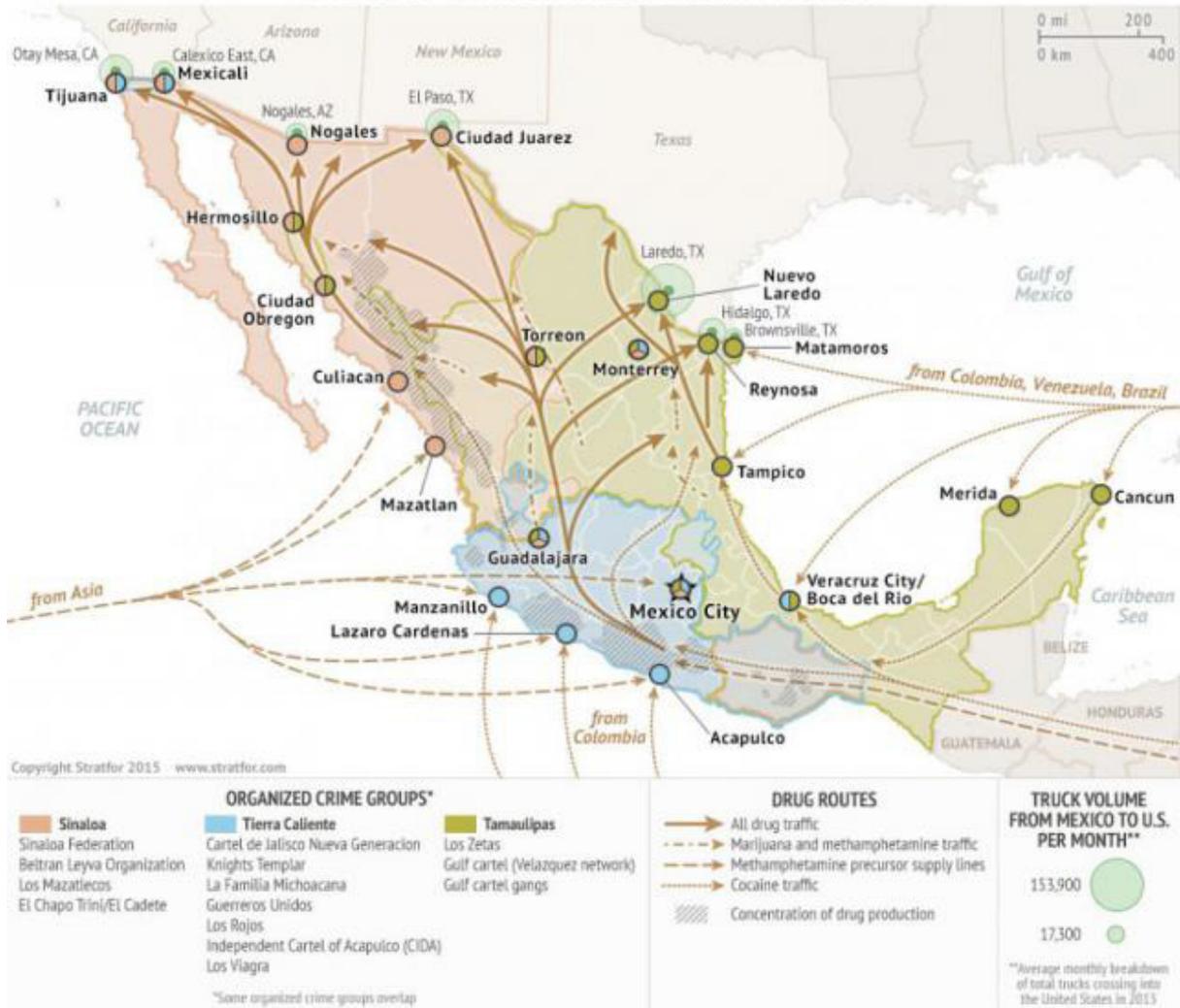
The rise in violence follows a crackdown on so-called drug ‘cartels’ under President Calderón (2006–2012), increased competition between the drug trafficking organizations, and an increase in flows of weapons coming from the US. This latter point, often ignored, is worth expanding upon. A study by Arindrajit Dube of the University of Massachusetts and NYU researchers Oeindrila Dube and Omar Garcia-Ponce found that the 2004 expiration of the US Federal Assault Weapons

Ban ‘exerted a spillover on gun supply’ in Mexican municipalities across the border and a subsequent increase in homicides. California retained a pre-existing state ban, and homicides, the study found, ‘rose by 60% more in *municipios* at the non-California entry ports’.<sup>64</sup> Up to 80% of the guns in circulation in Central America come from the US and roughly 253,000 guns are smuggled from the US to Mexico annually.<sup>65</sup> Over the last decade, the number of firearms being smuggled into Mexico has tripled.<sup>66</sup>

In this context, Mexico’s homicide rate almost tripled between 2007 and 2012 - from 8.1 per 100,000 to 23.7 per 100,000.<sup>67</sup> Degrees of violence vary substantially from one region to another: in 2013, the state of Chihuahua had a rate of 194 homicides per 100,000 inhabitants, while Yucatán, Mexico’s safest state, had a rate of 1.74.<sup>68</sup> 80% of drug trafficking-related homicides between December 2006 and July 2010 occurred in 162 of the country’s 2,456 municipalities (less than 7%).<sup>69</sup> In addition, despite the recent spike in violence, Mexico remains more peaceful than some of its closest neighbours. Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala have much higher homicide rates, with respectively 91.6, 70.2 and 38.5 homicides per 100,000 inhabitants in 2011 according to UNODC.<sup>70</sup> These countries rarely receive the same kind of media attention as Mexico. This may be due to the fact that rates have not increased as dramatically as in Mexico in recent years, and because these countries rarely produce any data on deaths related to drug trafficking. Mexico is of course a direct neighbour and a close partner in trade, energy and security matters to the US, which has made the violence there all the more important in the eyes of US and international media.

Violence related to drugs and organized crime in Mexico is a significant issue, which has had a negative impact in human, financial, social and institutional terms. Criminal organizations in Mexico are often called ‘drug cartels’, which can be misleading. In business language,

## AREAS OF CARTEL INFLUENCE IN MEXICO



Map 2: Areas of 'cartel' influence in Mexico

Source: Stratfor (2015) 'In Mexico, the Delineation of Cartel Power Becomes More Complex' January 22

a cartel can be defined as 'a group of similar, independent companies which join together to fix prices, to limit production or to share markets or customers between them'.<sup>71</sup> It is misrepresentative to imply that criminal organizations in Mexico form an association to control the illicit drug market, given the violent competition between those groups. Given the scope of their activities, they are perhaps more accurately characterized as 'organized crime groups'. The proportion of revenue sources varies between these groups, but in addition to drug production and trafficking, they include extortion, human trafficking, racketeering, armed robbery, money laundering, oil theft (In 2013, the national oil company Pemex

reportedly discovered 2,614 illegal siphons on its pipelines compared to 155 in 2000)<sup>72</sup> and kidnapping (Mexico is now the country with the highest kidnapping rate in the world, as reported kidnappings increased by 188% between 2007 and 2013).<sup>73,74</sup> It is fair to assume that these figures underestimate the reality, as Pemex may wish to downplay the issue for economic purposes, and as individuals and families affected rarely report occurrences of kidnapping for fear of reprisal.

Some analysts and officials suggest that organized crime groups in Mexico should be considered terrorists, given their use of violence against civilians for territorial

means. In April 2011, Michael McCaul, US Republican Representative of Texas and Chairman of the Homeland Security Oversight and Investigations Subcommittee, introduced a bill to add Mexico's six main 'cartels' (then listed as Arellano Felix, Los Zetas, Beltran Leyva, Familia Michoacana, Sinaloa Cartel and the Gulf Cartel) to the US State Department foreign terrorist organizations list, arguing that 'the [Mexican] cartels use violence to gain political and economic influence'. The unsuccessful bill would have increased US law enforcement powers in Mexico, including easier access to the cartels' finances and tougher sanctions against organizations and individuals providing them support. Arturo Sarukhan, then Mexican Ambassador to the US, provided an assertive rebuttal: 'if you label these organizations as terrorist, you will have to start calling drug consumers in the U.S. "financiers of terrorist organizations" and "gun dealers 'providers of material support to terrorists"'.<sup>75</sup> The Mexican government has been adamant that organized crime related violence in Mexico should not be considered terrorism, perhaps largely because of concerns over the wide-ranging consequences any legal move of the sort might have, including greater law enforcement, intelligence, and financial involvement from the US.

Vanda Felbab-Brown has offered a compelling argument about the motivations of Mexican organized crime groups: 'What is a more political act than controlling bullets and money on the street? If you are the Sinaloa Cartel and you determine how much violence takes place within a territory, and you - directly or indirectly, through illegal economies and their spillovers into the legal economy - provide income for 20% of the population, are you not a political actor?'.<sup>76</sup> In early August 2010, then President Calderón noted that drug trafficking organizations in Mexico represent 'a challenge to the state, an attempt to replace the state'. President Calderón thereby implied political motives, even though he refused to call 'cartels' terrorist organizations.<sup>77</sup>

Nonetheless, Alex Schmid's revised academic definition notes that terrorism involved 'direct violent action without legal or moral restraints, *targeting mainly civilians and non-combatants* [emphasis mine]'.<sup>78</sup> Civilians and non-combatants in Mexico have largely been collateral victims of fights between cartels, not primary targets. The 'cartels' also lack political or ideological motivations that would characterize them as terrorist groups according to a large majority of definitions of the term. Their motivations are primarily economic, and violence often remains localized between criminal organizations fighting for territorial control, and between those and law enforcement forces. Even the Global Terrorism Database, which defines terrorism as 'the threatened or actual use of illegal force and violence by a non-state actor to attain a political, *economic* [emphasis mine], religious, or social goal through fear, coercion, or intimidation', only lists 16 terrorist attacks in Mexico in 2012, leading to 17 fatalities.<sup>79</sup>

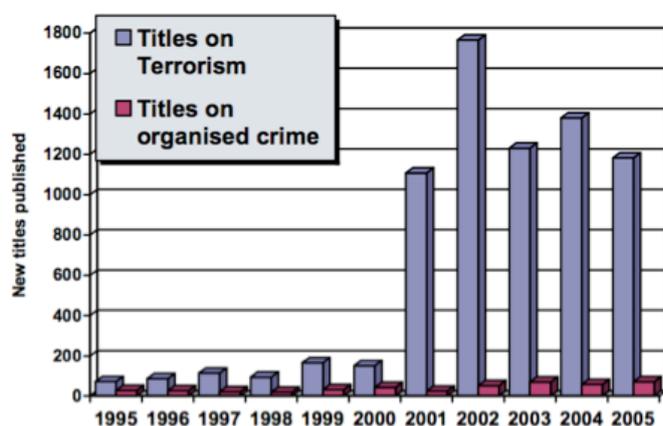
That is not to say that innocent civilians are not affected by the violence in Mexico. Map 2 demonstrates the reach and influence of organized crime groups across the country and abroad. Businesses and other parts of local populations have been extorted, kidnapped or intimidated, and 'inter-cartel' gunfights have caused civilian casualties. Civilians have also been more directly targeted. In 2011, members of Los Zetas burnt down a casino in Monterrey, in the northeast state of Nuevo León, and 52 people, including a majority of women, died as a result. It was later revealed that the attack was meant to scare the owners of the casino, who had refused to pay the 'cartel' a weekly extortion fee, and the situation escalated.<sup>80</sup> Los Zetas have been particularly brutal in their tactics, often publicly displaying bodies or body parts.

As the case of Mexico highlights, the 'terrorism' label is too often used as a way to demonstrate the severity of a given threat and to raise awareness on a given issue. However,

violence related to organized crime in Mexico is significant in its own right, even though it is arguably not ‘terrorism’ as such.

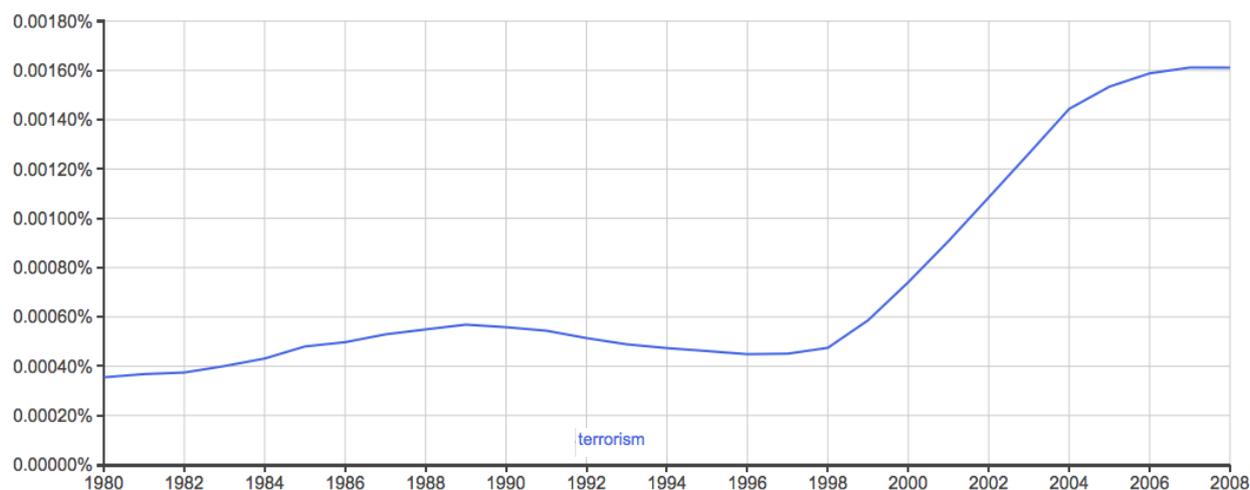
### FACTORS BEHIND THE EMPHASIS ON THE LINKS BETWEEN DRUGS AND TERRORISM

Given the lack of evidence confirming a systematic relationship between the drug trade and terrorism, how can one explain the widespread use of the term ‘narcoterrorism’ (or ‘drug-terror nexus’) amalgamating the two? As Virginia Comolli in particular has pointed out, three main factors can be identified to try and explain it.<sup>81</sup>



Graph 3: Number of books published with the word ‘terrorism’ in their title between 1980 and 2008

Source: Google Ngram Viewer



Graph 4: Books published on terrorism and organised crime between 1995 and 2005.

Source: Silke, A. (2008) ‘Research on Terrorism: A Review of the Impact of 9/11 and the Global War on Terrorism’. In *Terrorism Informatics: Knowledge Management and Data Mining for Homeland Security, Integrated Series in Information Systems, Vol, 18*

First, terrorism draws attention, as Graph 3 and 4 illustrate. Between 2002 and 2007, it was estimated that one book was published in English on terrorism every six hours.<sup>82</sup> In the decade following 9/11, the amount of books ever published on the topic more than doubled.<sup>83</sup> Similarly, in the media’s search for sensationalist stories, terrorism often ranks high. For instance, Iyengar and Kinder found that between 1981 and 1986, the three US TV networks of ABC, CBS and NBC broadcasted more news stories on terrorism than on poverty, unemployment, racial inequality, and crime combined.<sup>84</sup> With this in mind, combining the captivating topic of terrorism with the issue of drugs, which many around the world can relate to on a personal level, may be deemed to attract further readership.

Second, establishing a link between drug trafficking and terrorism may be seen as a way to attract awareness, funding and external support - as the example of Peru illustrates. ‘When a connection to drug trafficking was found, the US decided to support us with greater force – financial support, logistical support’, Carlos Moran, a former head of Peru’s anti-drug police agency, told *Insight Crime*.<sup>85</sup> US counternarcotics and alternative development assistance to

the country increased from \$55 million in 2012 to \$100 million in 2013.<sup>86</sup> While Peruvian officials largely welcome the increased support from the US, former drug czar Ricardo Soberon finds it problematic: ‘The main mistake the government is making... is the idea of considering terrorism and drugs as the same thing – the concept of “narco-terrorism.” [The government] treat the drug trade as a military problem when it is basically an economic, political problem. Poverty and exclusion are the main reasons why people dedicate themselves to growing coca and to the illicit economy. Thinking militarily opens the door for an repressive, authoritarian response.’<sup>87</sup> Overall, linking the international drug trade to terrorism has often meant that a more simple counternarcotics strategy - focused on heavy-handed, reactive and coercive measures – could be more easily implemented. As Csete and Sanchez point out, merging counternarcotics and counterterrorism policies has largely led to an increase in law enforcement capacity to deal with the two ends of the spectrum. The US criminal code (Title 1 U.S. C. § 960a) ‘authorizes US agencies to pursue and prosecute drug offences outside the US if a link to terrorism is established’, and gives the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) ‘extraterritorial jurisdiction over drug offenses with some link to the US, even if there is no actual entry into US borders by the drugs at issue’ (Title 1 U.S. C. § 959).<sup>88</sup> In other words, merging the War on Drugs and the War on Terror has also been seen as a useful way to project police and military force in places where a more accurate reading of complex situations would have made intervention more difficult.

Third, emphasizing the links between drug traffickers and terrorism may be seen by corrupt government officials as an effective way to distract attention from their own criminal activities, including their involvement in the drug trade. Because the US and others often deem terrorism as the most immediate

security priority, corruption and state abuses tend to get overlooked as a result.

## **CONCLUSION: WHY DOES IT MATTER?**

The challenges posed by drug trafficking, organized crime and terrorism are so complex that attempts to simplify them are understandable. In order to gain public support for increased investment in law enforcement, a military intervention, or an increase in taxes for instance, policy officials often attempt to describe intricate problems in simplistic terms. This, notably coupled with the media’s inclination for sensationalist stories, academics’ search for government funding, and the immediate overreaction that ‘terrorism’ provokes, has contributed to the emergence of the term ‘narcoterrorism’ and related policies and analysis amalgamating terrorism and the drug trade.

However, this approach often has negative - albeit often unintended - consequences, including: skewing policy priorities and neglecting related issues such as arms trafficking, human trafficking, cigarette smuggling, corruption, state abuses as the focus remains on terrorism, drug trafficking and the links in between; ignoring local specificities by drawing on the widely-held assumption of an automatic relationship between any terrorist and drug trafficker; underestimating the differences in motives and interests between terrorist organizations and drug traffickers (e.g. very often, the former look for attention while the latter evade it), thus misjudging their potential responses to policy and law enforcement changes; putting in place misguided heavy-handed policies to respond to problems that are intrinsically political, economic and social; and ultimately creating a disproportionate sense of fear and causing political overreaction, thereby playing into the hands of terrorists, with potential counterproductive effects. Crucially, drug trafficking and other types of illicit trade and

organised crime are important issues in their own right, and should not need the ‘terrorism’ label to attract attention.

Given the persistence of international challenges related to drug trafficking, other types of illicit trade, organized crime, corruption, weak governance, and terrorism, developing a more nuanced understanding of the problems at stake would go a long way in addressing them more appropriately. The narratives and policies of the War on Drugs and War on Terror are increasingly recognized as inadequate, but much remains to be done towards a more balanced, comprehensive, and effective set of policies. No longer conflating terrorism and drug trafficking would be a first step in the right direction.

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## About the Global Drug Policy Observatory

The Global Drug Policy Observatory aims to promote evidence and human rights based drug policy through the comprehensive and rigorous reporting, monitoring and analysis of policy developments at national and international levels. Acting as a platform from which to reach out to and engage with broad and diverse audiences, the initiative aims to help improve the sophistication and horizons of the current policy debate among the media and elite opinion formers as well as within law enforcement and policy making communities. The Observatory engages in a range of research activities that explore not only the dynamics and implications of existing and emerging policy issues, but also the processes behind policy shifts at various levels of governance.

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