



# **GULF OF GUINEA AND THE SAHEL: WHERE PIRACY, TERRORISM, AND ORGANIZED CRIME MEET**

*Posted on November 1, 2022 by Enrico Magnani*



There is a tendency to believe that proximity is a key determinant of whether events that take place within a state and/or geographic area will have an impact on the day-to-day functioning of a neighboring state and even on the same geographic area. Based on this logic, a state perceived as distant is believed to have no influence in a neighboring area, either because of its geographic location, lack of knowledge about its past or present, let alone knowing that it even exists.

In a globalized and interconnected world of today, it is not possible to remain isolated from events happening in other places, affecting different areas, whether political, economic, legislative or social. In the case of unlawful acts, although some types of crimes are committed (and not properly opposed) at the national level, it is possible that these and/or their consequences cross borders and affect other nations and/or geographical areas by affecting the lives of individuals and groups, as well as the economy, security and politics. In this sense, some criminal phenomena are more striking than others, as in the case of terrorism (so far only in the Sahel); and its consequences may be much more obvious, in comparison with other phenomena, such as organized crime (still Sahel) or piracy (now growing alarmingly in the Gulf of Guinea).

However, these criminal phenomena impact on a scale that exceeds the regional scope and in different ways, and they impact the political, economic, and security relations of areas geographically far removed from both the Sahel and the Gulf of Guinea.

### **The Gulf of Guinea: New Epicenter of Maritime Piracy after the Indian Ocean**

The Gulf of Guinea is a maritime region of the Atlantic Ocean that includes approximately 6,000 km of its coasts; and, as part of West and Central Africa, two sub-regions meet there—there is the northern region, which includes Senegal, Benin, Togo, Sierra Leone, Ghana, Liberia, Guinea, Guinea Bissau, Cape Verde and the southern one with Angola, Cameroon, Gabon, Equatorial Guinea, Nigeria, Republic of the Congo, Sao Tome and Principe, Democratic Republic of the Congo (even if for a very short coastline). Among these nations are some of the leading producers of hydrocarbons (this immense space has large reserves of crude oil and natural gas currently exploited and planned-to-be exploited), along with other mineral, agricultural and fishing reserves.

All these resources are exported by sea and are relatively close to Western markets, and they contribute to energy security for the Gulf of Guinea—a very topical issue, given the situation between

Russia and Ukraine, and its consequences for Europe, for those countries that import hydrocarbons, as those of the EU. In this way, and due to the geographical position of these countries, the Gulf of Guinea acquires special significance when used as possible transit area for maritime traffic between America and sub-Saharan Africa with Europe.

Thus, it is a hub for the entry of energy supplies to Europe, as well as for other resources of the area, such as iron, gold, diamonds, peaches, agricultural products and fruit, among others. However, its energy potential in particular, and its economic potential in general, is reduced, since the Gulf of Guinea is considered a highly insecure and unstable area.

As often happens, maritime security and stability problems originate and/or contribute to problems on the ground—and all the states mentioned have serious problems, ranging from weakening or the disappearance of centralized power, corruption, the spread of violence—all of which bring instability several countries. In other words, governance is very weak and many states can be considered as being nearly bankrupt. The reasons for this are many.

First, there are internal ethnic-religious divisions, artificial borders and the phenomenon of the irredentists/separatists (a legacy of both colonialism and the re-formulating of former German colonies after WWI as in Togo and Cameroon), and the harmful effects of a post-colonial robbery, in which leadership, enslaved to economic and external political powers (especially France and the UK), exploits local resources and upsets assets and balances, such as agriculture, which provided self-subsistence (for example, with the super-production of coffee and cocoa).

The showcase of this is Nigeria, where this situation has created an explosive mix that has led, among other things, to a significant development of crime, especially maritime crime, manifested through illicit piracy, trade and fishing. This situation threatens the stability and fluidity of maritime trade—it is estimated that up to 90% of world trade is transported by sea—generating serious consequences for sea routes which are greatly impacted because of criminal acts, leading to insecurity, higher costs for maritime transport (starting with insurance and freight), and putting lives at risk, thus leading to severe economic and material damage.

This is especially true in the Gulf of Guinea, where there are around 1500 fishing boats, oil tankers and merchant ships that navigate its waters on a daily basis. The threat was accentuated after COVID-19, which saw limited public resources allocated to maritime safety, along with the reduction of world trade, and thus of economic growth, with the consequent increase in poverty and unemployment. In

connection with this, there was an extension of piracy, right up to the Ivory Coast and south of Gabon, in that piracy became a source of an alternative income and livelihood for the population. However, this scenario got worse when later, in 2020, the price of oil collapsed, which (among other reasons) led to limited maritime safety and a greater demand for necessary resources by the population. This left oil tankers vulnerable to increased piracy.

In 2020, according to the International Maritime Bureau, the Gulf of Guinea saw 84 attacks against ships, with 135 seafarers kidnapped for ransom. The Gulf of Guinea recorded an increase of nearly 50 percent of ransom kidnappings between 2018 and 2019, and around 10 percent between 2019 and 2020. The region now accounts for just over 95 percent of all kidnappings for ransom at sea.

However, official data for 2021 offers a contradictory picture, with 132 incidents, 115 of them approaches, 11 attack attempts, 5 sustained attacks and one case of a vessel hijacked. These are the lowest figures recorded for piracy and armed robbery since the year 1994, and show a decrease in maritime piracy offenses in this sector. This is the result of greater cooperation from regional authorities and a greater presence of international warships, precisely because of the importance of the resources involved and the geographic location.

This apparent contradiction may be due to the so-called “dark figures”—those criminal acts that are not officially notified, and therefore do not appear in institutional statistics and should therefore be interpreted with caution, as it is estimated that up to half of the cases are not reported and, therefore, unknown. Among the reasons that lead to this lack of reporting include the costs that a delay in an investigation can entail for companies whose goods are transported on the ship, or bad publicity for the shipping company, and for the port where the attack took place, or for the ship itself on a global scale. Therefore, and despite the potential inaccuracy of the data in itself, the Gulf of Guinea is a very important center of maritime piracy.

## **Maritime Piracy in the Gulf of Guinea**

To profit economically, maritime piracy has developed an entrepreneurial profile—the illegal oil market: The oil industry is the mainstay of the Gulf area's economy—and thus there is also the existence of a large black market for crude oil—that is oil stolen from ships, which requires a network of sophisticated organized crime that makes oil piracy profitable. Also, the pirates profit from other revenue related to the hijacking of ships, such as the ransom-money for the captured crew.

## **Effects of Piracy in the Gulf of Guinea for Europe**

Indeed, the evolution and rise of maritime piracy in the Gulf of Guinea is a concern for Europe, as many shipping and fishing companies operate in the region. Piracy also leads to the increase in the cost of maritime transport insurance, which means higher costs for companies, and thus higher costs for the consumer of those goods.

For these reasons, Spain deployed ocean-going patrol boats in the region in 2010, in support of the 2009-2012 Africa Plan, in an attempt to help the countries of the area to exercise sovereignty and influence in their maritime spaces, as well as offering safety in these spaces. This was done by way of surveillance activities, operations, exchanges of information and bilateral activities, or at the request of the countries in the region, the purpose of which was to increase these nations' maritime capacity.

In addition, efforts are being made to improve maritime and military capabilities of the police forces of the Gulf of Guinea countries; insecurity generated by piracy not only affects the maritime environment, but also facilitates the access of illicit products through sealed containers in legitimate shipments, thanks to bribery or coercions. This allows the entry of people, weapons and drugs, among others things, which benefit not only organized crime but also localized terrorist groups in the Sahel.

## **The European, US and International Response**

To cope with growing instability and to protect its interests, the EU has launched a complex approach, dedicated to the Gulf of Guinea, since 2014, to support the objectives of the so-called "Yaoundé Architecture," the intra-regional commitment between ECOWAS, ECCAS and GGC, signed at the Yaoundé Heads of State Summit in June 2013, to counter maritime crime in its broadest sense (proving that despite the difficulties, several states of the region are aware of the risks of destabilization and reputational damage).

ECOWAS—The Economic Community of West African States was established on May 28, 1975, by the Treaty of Lagos, with its stated mission to promote economic integration across the region. A revised version of the treaty was agreed and signed on July 24, 1993 in Cotonou, to include Cape Verde, Gambia, Guinea (membership suspended due to a coup in the country), Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, Mali (membership suspended due to a coup in the country), Senegal, Benin, Burkina Faso (membership

suspended due to a coup in the country), Ghana, the Ivory Coast, Niger, Nigeria, Togo.]

[ECCAS—The Economic Community of Central African States is an international organization established October 18, 1983 for the economic, social and cultural development of Africa, with a view to the creation of regional structures that can gradually lead to a Common Market. Member states of the organization are: Angola, Burundi, Cameroon, Central African Republic, Congo, Democratic Republic of Congo, Gabon, Equatorial Guinea, Rwanda, Chad, Sao Tome and Principe.]

[GGC—The Gulf of Guinea Commission was established by the Treaty signed in Libreville, Gabon, on July 3, 2001, comprising Angola, Congo, Gabon, Equatorial Guinea, Nigeria and Sao Tome and Principe. GGC shall constitute a framework of consultation among the countries of the Gulf of Guinea for cooperation and development, as well as for the prevention, management and resolution of conflicts that may arise from the delimitation of borders and the economic and commercial exploitation of natural resources within the territorial boundaries, particularly in the overlapping Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZ) of the participating states. It constitutes a permanent institutional framework for cooperation amongst the countries bordering the Gulf of Guinea in order to defend their common interest and promote peace and socio-economic development based on the bases of dialogue, consensus and friendship. GGC started operations in March 2007, with the establishment of its Executive Secretariat in Luanda, Angola. Cameroon and Democratic Republic of Congo joined GGC in 2008.]

The "Code of conduct relating to the repression of piracy, armed robbery against ships and illegal maritime activity in West and Central Africa," also known as "Yaoundé Architecture," has as its objective the promotion of regional maritime cooperation and a stable maritime environment that can contribute to regional prosperity. The signatory states have established regional centers for sharing and coordinating information. These include the Interregional Coordination Center (ICC) in Yaoundé, Cameroon; the Regional Center for West African Maritime Security (CRSMAO) in Abidjan, Ivory Coast; and the Center Central African Maritime Security Regional (CRESMAC) in Pointe Noire, Congo, where experts and military and civilian personnel from both participating European nations, the EU and the local authorities cooperate.

Following the definition of the action plan, Brussels has defined a strategy for the region, aimed at supporting regional efforts to address the many challenges of maritime security and transnational organized crime, substantially increasing the capabilities of the local forces and collaborating closely

with regional organizations and international institutions, such as IMB, Interpol and UNODC's Global Maritime Crime Program.

[IMB—The International Maritime Bureau is a specialized department of the International Chamber of Commerce, established in 1981, and its responsibilities lie in fighting crimes related to maritime trade and transportation, particularly piracy and commercial fraud, and in protecting the crews of ocean-going vessels. It publishes a weekly piracy report and maintains a 24-hour piracy reporting center in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. IMB is part of ICC Commercial Crime Services bodies like the Counterfeiting Intelligence Bureau, the Financial Investigation Bureau, FraudNet. IMB has observer status with Interpol and a Memorandum of Understanding with the World Customs Organization.]

As for the option of a stabilizing European naval presence, similar, if possible, to the operation “Atalanta” and the establishment of specific training and support missions for local forces, like EUCAP Somalia—it seems unrealistic, at least at the moment, due to the necessity of concentrating the Euro (Atlantic) naval forces in other areas, and for a general pause for reflection on future of these activities.

[EUCAP Somalia, the Maritime Capabilities Support Mission in Somalia is a European Union civilian mission. Originally established in 2011 and called EUCAP Nestor, in tribute to the Greek hero of the Trojan War, the mission changed its name in 2016 to EUCAP Somalia to illustrate a refocusing of the mandate on Somalia.]

Furthermore it must be remembered that France, which has a strong tradition of presence in the region, has set up a training center for the region's navies (which are nothing more than coastguards) in Equatorial Guinea, while Spain has deployed ocean-going patrol boats in the region in 2010, in support of the 2009-2012 Africa Plan, as part of an assistance program to the countries of the area to exercise sovereignty and influence in their maritime spaces.

As well, in a broader perspective of the G7, a “steering group” was set up, the G7 ++ FOGG (Friends of the Gulf of Guinea), which carries out an important role in advancing the maritime security agenda in the region by bringing together coastal states, private actors and regional and international stakeholders in its efforts to promote greater international cooperation.

[The G7++ Group of Friends of the Gulf of Guinea (FOGG) is a multilateral maritime security group that

supports the implementation of the Yaoundé Code of Conduct for regional maritime security, established in 2013 during the UK Chairmanship of G7 and include Germany, Canada, USA, Italy, Japan, UK, and France), the G7++ FoGG include Belgium, Brazil (observer), South Korea, Denmark, Spain, Norway, Netherlands, Portugal, Switzerland, EU, UNODC and Interpol.]

## **The Sahel as a Center of Operations for Criminal Organizations**

The Sahel is a strip of land located south of the Sahara Desert, and which includes the borders between twelve countries, extending from west to east of the continent, about 5,500 kilometers long and with an average width of 400 kilometers. It is characterized by being a large transition space in which community and tribal structures have prevailed over time, with the constant search for resources and for the development of its activities; in essence in the primary sector which tend to be linked to different ethnic groups.

For this reason, it is the climate, as well as its accidents, that dictate the pace of life of its inhabitants. However, the constant increase in the population and the struggle for its resources—rather scarce—generate disputes that quickly lead to ethnic conflicts.

To all this must be added the movements of caravans and businesses that circulate along the same routes, as they have done for thousands of years, and which have created a network of communication in Africa. This network has managed to transcend the continent to connect with Europe and thus obtain advantages, both for trade and for the possibilities of mobility it offers to the population. Therefore, the Sahel is a center of very important interconnections that unite peoples, countries and continents through their ancient routes.

However, this very network in the vast territories that make up the Sahel has been exploited by new non-state and transnational structures which, in the face of border permeability—the lack of effective border control by national authorities that facilitate complete freedom of movement— groups have established dynamics of social relations based on illicit trade and trafficking, thus facilitating the establishment of criminal and terrorist groups in the region. These groups then took advantage of the great political instability and distrust in the system. Given the limited resources of the state for its defense and the great breadth of its territories and the growth of the culture of impunity, the capacity for action for these nations has greatly diminished, and this has contributed in strengthening the dominance of criminal organizations among the population.

In this way, the Sahel, which has long been a trade and mobility route, today is a favorable space, due to these circumstances, for organized crime and terrorism which have firmly established their strongholds and centers of operations in these regions, by subduing the local population. This is how violent armed groups have increased their actions in the Sahel region, expanding their activities and creating major destabilization and impacting development and security, with alarming effects. In short, the region is a paradise for criminal activity.

### **Coexistence of Terrorism and Organized Crime in the Sahel**

The fact that terrorism and organized crime form alliances is well known, given their freedom and ability to act, in that both have established dynamics characterized by adaptation to circumstances and the local population, acquiring a leading role as the new "power manager," and thus creating a new political context and a new dynamics of socioeconomic. This is how the formation of alliances gives continuity to business and allows for the survival of organized crime and terrorism, for it is the lack of control, governance and the instability of the territory which allows for high degrees of mobility and impunity.

In any case, for their survival, these groups need an ever-increasing flow of human, financial and material resources. For this reason, the recruitment of new followers or criminals is crucial. In fact, on many occasions, they are more trained and better equipped than the armed forces and security organs of the area. However, to get of these resources, requires the control of the ancient routes of the Sahel, which initially were used by nomads, who controlled who crossed the Sahara desert and tolled the merchants who passed through them. Today they are used by several criminal networks, be they organized crime or terrorists, for the control of the territory and the development of illicit trade in the region, including drug trafficking, tobacco, weapons, food, fuel and humans, among others.

Therefore, the Sahel is a transitional space, and its roads, once used by caravans, are now the thoroughfares of criminal networks, resulting in new and greater sources of crime synergies that cross borders, including continental ones.

### **Effects of Violent Armed Groups in the Sahel for Europe**

As with the Gulf of Guinea, it has become clear that the Sahel is at the center of terrorist threats, illicit

trafficking and ethnic /religious /tribal conflicts.

The EU has a special interest in the Sahel, most particularly Spain, given its geographical proximity, and its two enclaves, Ceuta and Melilla (on the African mainland) and the Canary archipelago. Thus, Spain feels itself particularly exposed to outcomes related to the instability of West Africa and the Sahel. So it is not surprising that the Sahel region is of prime interest for Brussels (and Madrid), with a focus on military assistance and training missions on the continent.

For organized crime, the connections with terrorism represent new opportunities for illicit trade, from which it makes huge economic profits—generally, through extortion—which not only implies profit, but also expansion of their criminal or terrorist activities. At the same time, this promotes increased political and social corruption, further weakening the state supports of nations increasingly unable to face this landscape or take advantage of it.

Thus, the collaboration between different criminal networks and terrorism not only weakens states, but rather, it creates “failed states,” causing fractures in the governance that are then exploited by these networks, creating environments conducive to achieving the fulfillment of their objectives, and further nurturing activities necessary for their survival and growth.

The weaker the state, the greater the ability of these networks to develop their businesses and to go unpunished and to expand even further. In fact, these growth opportunities materialized in the Gulf of Guinea—among other regions—where organized crime has long found profitability in the smuggling of fuel and financing of pirate groups. At the same time, terrorist groups (Daesh and Al Qaeda territorial branches ) have succeeded in expanding south from the Sahel, through actions carried out last year in Benin, Ivory Coast, Congo and DRC—countries belonging to the Gulf of Guinea, and thus establishing the first alliances with violent Islamist groups that already existed in the territory, such as the ADF (Allied Democratic Force) or Ansar Al Sunna. This has allowed for an increase in their influence in these territories, and in finding new areas from which to recruit more members, stockpile weapons and gain financing.

Furthermore, the possibilities offered by the geographical position of the Gulf of Guinea, with its access to the sea, allows them to establish alliances with other criminal groups present in the area, such as those involved in smuggling, piracy or organized crime. And being close to the sea allows them to continue developing a form of terrorism—maritime—which in itself is not new, but which offers other

benefits to terrorist organizations, because of the vulnerabilities of the maritime traffic itself, such as the increased use of containers in the trade—which can be used by terrorist groups for the transport of weapons and people. As a result, the range and presence of terrorist groups increases costs, while organized crime and piracy continue to engage in illegal trade.

Such criminal phenomena complement each other, as long as their interests coincide, even if their goals are not the same. Indeed organized crime and piracy seek profit, while the jihadist terrorists seek to establish an Islamic state, although this is not it is an impediment in establishing alliances whenever they need them, even with entities that they do not agree with in their values, but which can be exploited in order to achieve their jihadist strategic objectives, such as with drugs which weaken the social structures of the Western world.

## **Conclusions**

The development, evolution and continuous adaptation of these groups means that criminal and terrorist alliances will continue to grow, devastating the societies of the region. Furthermore, and contrary to what it may seem, these criminal phenomena take place in spaces closer than it may seem, since the proximity of Europe to the African continent is evident. But the network of age-old routes that connect the Sahel and Europe is still active and increasing in use. Thus the events taking place in the Gulf of Guinea and the Sahel influence European policies, politics, security and commerce, among many other sectors.

Consequently, it seems obvious that all of this region is increasingly becoming an Eden for pirates, terrorists and groups of organized crime. But what is an Eden for these "evil" groups, becomes hell for "good groups," both in Africa and, through their connections, in Europe. Therefore, it is necessary to continue to monitor and to act positively in this area.

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