

PARADIGM SHIFTS IN MEDITERRANEAN PIRACY: BOKO HARAM AND AL-QAEDA IN THE ISLAMIC MAGHREB

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Security prognostication can be a tricky undertaking. That is why a clear distinction must be made between what is accepted as fact and the inference of where future possibilities lie. Such is the case for Mediterranean piracy. As opposed to piracy anywhere else, the Mediterranean deserves future consideration for a myriad of reasons. As isolated issues, the Eurozone, fledgling ‘Arab Spring’ governments, illicit trafficking and terror have select, dedicated audiences that sift, analyze and construe significance specifically tailored to their sponsors. Having stated this up front it is entirely plausible that as a whole, Mediterranean piracy could eventually surpass similar events occurring around the Horn of Africa, the Gulf of Guinea and the Strait of Malacca. As a result, the prognostication I intend to explain is how and why a sophisticated matrix of large-scale theft and extortion might have an added dimension of graphic attacks on Mediterranean vessels.

Loosely defined, piracy can mean the looting of maritime vessels as well as the counterfeiting of intellectual property. Granted there will be some goods that will attempt to evade EU excise taxes such as cigarettes and alcohol but the context here is the maritime trade going through the Mediterranean. While history is said to repeat itself, these narratives are nonetheless newer versions to the same stories. The opening line of the United States Marine Corps Hymn talked about storming the ‘shores of Tripoli’ to fight pirates back in 1801.¹ Today NATO and the U.S. African Command (AFRICOM) might have a similar mission to contemplate in the future. Likewise Greek Merchants suffered for two hundred years under an Ottoman Empire that could do little to defend it.² Not to be outdone, the Greek Government is contemplating selling basing rights, shrewdly placing them in a position to be both paid and protected. This means that any re-emergence of piracy will most likely add the involvement of the Russian Navy base that will move from Syria to Piraeus, Greece.³

Despite the significance of the ‘Arab Spring,’ some of the fledgling governments along North Africa’s coast remain susceptible to graft or indifference. Worse yet is the diminished security capacity that accompanied the departure of the deposed strongmen. The danger is that safe

havens may once again accommodate would-be pirates like their Barbary Pirate and Corsair forbears. The culprit this time appears to be ‘al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb’ (AQIM) (North Africa) and their merged alliance with Nigeria’s Boko Haram. According to Nigerian security authorities, paramilitary training by AQIM to Boko Haram included looted Libyan military arms, some of which were later identified in Nigeria. Both have been seen fighting alongside Tuareg rebels in Mali. Aside from kidnapping the Algerian consul and several other diplomats, the AQIM leader in the region Mokhtar Belmokhtar is also linked to smuggling narcotics from South America to Europe.⁴ As I will explain later this is key to understanding what is unfolding in the Mediterranean.

Boko Haram is already engaged in piracy off of Africa’s West Coast, particularly the Gulf of Guinea. In a meeting by the 15 security chiefs of ECOWAS (Economic Community of West African States), the activities threaten to undermine the socio-economic and political development of the region.⁵ The costs of piracy in the Gulf of Guinea is expected to eclipse the \$7-10 Billion in losses occurring on the other side of Africa off the Somali coast.⁶ In comparison Boko Haram appears even more eager to murder Christians and can move more illicit money than their Somali compatriots.⁷ The clues that lead to their shifting of operations to the Mediterranean are as readable as any business plan: size of the market; strengthening the supply chain and the decision not to invest into on-going operations where the margin of return decreases. Regarding the latter, why foment trouble at home in the Gulf of Guinea when the prospects of the Mediterranean are more promising? Rather than invite civil war along religious-geographic lines in Nigeria, Boko Haram and Abuja are said to be engaged in peace talks.⁸

Instead of making things uncomfortable in one’s own backyard then this might rationalize the possibility of North African safe havens in anticipation of a bigger, more profitable environment. In regards to strengthening the supply chain Nigerian Organized Crime is truly global. The reason other Organized Crime Groups outsource heroin and cocaine smuggling to the Nigerians⁹ is largely due to the Diaspora obtaining student visas worldwide and communicating in largely in-penetrable languages such as Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba. Since Nigerian nationals have been increasingly targeted by customs authorities in recent years, Nigerians have deftly adapted by recruiting other nationals to act as ‘mules.’ This is not to say that all local organized crime groups welcomed them with open arms either. From 1999 until 2011, Nigerian gangs in Italy waged a deadly turf battle with La Camorra in Naples. With an uneasy truce now in place, business in Italy is again booming.¹⁰ As the last significant resistance wanes, Nigerian Organized Crime along the northern Mediterranean can strengthen their illicit supply chains with safe havens positioned along the southern Mediterranean. This notion of a ring around the Mediterranean brings us back to Boko Haram and an AQIM with links to narcotics trafficking.

To explain the prognostication angle, Chinese philosopher Sun Tzu noted that ‘what enables leaders to strike and conquer, and achieve things above ordinary people is *foreknowledge*.’ For Sun Tzu, ‘*foreknowledge*’ is broken down into five categories of people or spies: local; inward;

converted; doomed and surviving.¹¹ With these five, the leader according to Sun Tzu enjoys the ‘*divine manipulation of the threads.*’ In terms of Boko Haram, AQIM and Nigerian Organized Crime, ‘local’ spies are inhabitants such as dock workers, office personnel and insurers. ‘Inward’ spies are officials such as security guards, customs and law enforcement. ‘Converted’ spies are turning around those sent to spy on them such as police informants and undercover investigators. ‘Doomed’ spies sacrifice themselves to achieve deception and report back. These could very well be smugglers and other operatives apprehended by police. For those released, ‘surviving’ spies are those that bring back news from the enemy’s camp. While we will never know the full degree of the first three, the last two categories are assured.

Why is this important? With smuggling partnerships linking Latin America, Europe and the Middle East, Nigerian Organized Crime has access to not only ports but manifests and bills of lading. Second, having an origination and destination by sea negates the current business model of numerous humans ingesting dozens of narcotics pellets and boarding the same plane to the same destinations. Using expendable mules over several years have only increased awareness and detection, meaning that the ‘law of large numbers’ eventually erodes revenues. Should the scourge of piracy truly shift from the Gulf of Guinea to the Mediterranean, the narcotics can be dropped off the exact same ship but closer to its markets. In turn this same ship can be pilfered or ransomed. Where Boko Haram and AQIM benefits from piracy then is the ‘*foreknowledge*’ provided by Nigerian Organized Crime. While this in itself can be incentive enough, the diversion of authorities responding to a cargo ship in distress enables smugglers to slip behind or around the responding authorities as well. This also means that competitors in the narcotics trade might pay a ‘transit tax’ to get through the Mediterranean unharmed. It could also mean that shippers NOT involved in the trade might be extorted as well or face grave consequences. In an environment where it is cheaper to pay than report, no security interest is served if this is allowed to gestate.

In summary, history does repeat itself however each iteration emerges slightly different than the one preceding it. While piracy enjoys specific geographic advantages, it is the political climate that tolerates it and enables it to thrive. While anything operating as nefariously as organized crime and terror offers some facts to digest, it is the responsibility of the security field to rationalize the possible for its constituency. Until countered, the associations, the motives and the incentives between Nigerian Organized Crime, Boko Haram and AQIM are to a large degree known. What is not known is the growth model – whether foregoing violence in Nigeria and piracy in the Gulf of Guinea incentivizes targeting the Mediterranean for larger profits and the achievement of political aims. While the status quo is always an option, the notion of greed or achieving glory in whatever form argues against it. As it stands now the three have encountered little to no resistance to cause them to abandon reaching for more.

Endnotes:

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² Green, M. (2010). "Catholic Pirates and Greek Merchants: A Maritime History of the Early Modern Mediterranean." Princeton University Press: Princeton, NJ.

³ Investors Fresh News. (2012). "Greece: Moscow's New Naval Partner?" [online], 20 Apr 2012, [Accessed 20 April 2012] <http://investorsfreshnews.com/2012/03/21/greece-moscows-new-naval-partner/>

⁴ UPI.com. (2012). "Nigerian Islamists 'get looted Libyan Arms.'" UPI.com [online], 12 Apr 2012, [Accessed 17 Apr 2012] http://www.upi.com/Top_News/Special/2012/04/12/Nigeria-Islamists-get-looted-Libyan-arms/UPI-61471334260074/

⁵ France24. (2012). "Boko Haram has links to al-Qaeda, Nigeria's military chief says." France24 [online], 24 Feb 2012, [Accessed 17 Apr 2012] <http://www.france24.com/en/20120223-nigeria-boko-haram-al-qaeda-islamist-militant>

⁶ Maplecroft. (2012). "Why Piracy is Increasing in the Gulf of Guinea." Maplecroftblog [online], 17 Feb 2012, [Accessed 17 Apr 2012] <http://blog.maplecroft.com/tag/nigeria/>

MaritimeSecurity.Asia (2012). "Piracy Increases in W. Africa." [online], 27 Feb 2012, [Accessed 17 Apr 2012] <http://maritimesecurity.asia/free-2/piracy-2/piracy-increases-in-w-africa/>

⁷ Murphy, M. (2011). "Somalia: The New Barbary? Piracy and Islam in the Horn of Africa." Columbia University Press: New York.

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⁸ The News. (2012). "Boko Haram: Peace Beckons." The News [online], 19 Mar 2012, [Accessed 19 Apr 2012] <http://thenewsafrika.com/2012/03/19/boko-haram-peace-beckons/>

⁹ UNODC. (2012). "Drugs, Organized Crime and Terrorism." United Nations Office for Drugs and Crime: Nigeria [online], n.d., [Accessed 20 Apr 2012] <http://www.unodc.org/nigeria/en/drug-prevention.html>

¹⁰ Rotella, S. (2009). "Nigerian Gangsters get a Foothold in a Violent Italian Landscape." Los Angeles Times [online], [Accessed 20 April 2012]
<http://articles.latimes.com/2009/jan/07/world/fg-africa-naples7>

¹¹ Phillips, T.R. (ed.) (1985). "Roots of Strategy: Volume I." Stackpole Books: Harrisburg, PA.