

Transnational Organized Crime and Peacebuilding in East Africa

By Messay Asgedom Gobena, Southern Voices Network for Peacebuilding Scholar

July 2020

Over the last three decades, several transnational organized crime (TOC) networks have become entrenched across East Africa. This policy brief focuses on three: small arms and light weapons (SALW) smuggling in Ethiopia; drug trafficking in Kenya; and al-Shabaab's trafficking of charcoal from Somalia to the Persian Gulf countries and sugar to Kenya. Ethiopia, Kenya, and Somalia are each engaged in political transitions that include broad-based peace/reform initiatives. In each case, these difficult transitions and peacebuilding efforts are undermined by the transitional organized crime networks operating within and across their borders.

The Ethiopian government, under the leadership of Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, is conducting political, economic, and social reforms.¹ A major obstacle to Abiy's reforms is the presence of illicit criminal networks, especially smugglers of SALW.² This deadly flow of weapons is steadily increasing in Ethiopia. For instance, in April 2019 the Ethiopian government seized 21 machine guns, 33,000 handguns, 275 rifles, and 300,000 bullets.³ More recently, in March 2020, the Ethiopian government seized "two containers of illegal firearms smuggled into Ethiopia via Djibouti by a global arms trafficking team."⁴ The illicit SALW trade is intensifying Ethiopia's ethnic rivalries and civil conflict that have resulted in the death of hundreds and the displacement of more than 2.6 million people over the past two years. The boom in Ethiopia's SALW trafficking is attributed to multiple factors: ethnic tensions and rivalries, incendiary rhetoric, general societal insecurity, the country's gun culture, lax licensing of firearms possession, and porous borders. Although Ethiopia is a signatory state of the 2004 Nairobi Protocol for Prevention, Control in Reduction of SALW in the Great Lakes Region and the 2001 UN Protocol against the Illicit Manufacturing and Trafficking in Firearms, domestic measures have come more slowly. Until January 2020, Ethiopia did not enact a comprehensive law to address the country's SALW problem, leaving the country's SALW administration and control measures in a decentralized and uncoordinated state. The enactment of the new SALW Administration and Control Law represents commendable progress; however, the law will not by itself solve the growing threat posed by illicit SALW trafficking in Ethiopia. The problem is deeply entrenched in the country and, therefore, requires additional measures to address the drivers and facilitators of the illegal arms trade.

Kenya is working to ease decades of election-related violence and instability. Most recently, the country has

The Southern Voices Network for Peacebuilding (SVNP) is a continent-wide network of African policy, research and academic organizations that works with the Wilson Center's Africa Program to bring African knowledge and perspectives to U.S., African, and international policy on peacebuilding in Africa. Established in 2011 and supported by the generous financial support of the Carnegie Corporation of New York, the project provides avenues for African researchers and practitioners to engage with, inform, and exchange analyses and perspectives with U.S., African, and international policymakers in order to develop the most appropriate, cohesive, and inclusive policy frameworks and approaches to achieving sustainable peace in Africa.

This publication was made possible by a grant from the Carnegie Corporation of New York. The statements made and views expressed in this paper are solely the responsibility of the author and do not represent the views of the Wilson Center or the Carnegie Corporation of New York.

For more information please visit <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/the-southern-voices-network-for-peacebuilding>.

been focused on solving the political tension between supporters of President Uhuru Kenyatta and the main opposition leader, Raila Odinga.⁵ However, Kenya, like Ethiopia, does not appear to have put adequate emphasis on the negative impact of illicit networks, especially drug traffickers, on its peacebuilding initiatives. Drug trafficking is increasing in Kenya and the country is now becoming an important transit point and, to a lesser extent, a destination point for narcotics, namely heroin and cocaine.⁶ Drug trafficking undermines Kenyan peacebuilding by corrupting the country's politics—drug kingpins are even getting elected⁷ to public office—and opening the door to other crimes like small arms trafficking, wildlife poaching, cattle rustling, and charcoal trafficking.

The country's unpatrolled coastline, extensive air transportation system, rampant corruption, and the intermingling of politics, crime, and business all serve as drivers of drug trafficking in Kenya. While much remains to be done, the government has taken some encouraging steps. Kenya is a signatory to the 1988 UN Convention against Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances. In addition, Kenya has enacted the Narcotics and Psychotropic Substances Control Act No. 4 of 1994, and it established the Anti-Narcotics Unit in 1983. In 2016, the Kenyan and U.S. governments signed a memorandum of understanding to combat the ever-growing threat of drug trafficking on the Eastern African coastline.⁸ As a result of this cooperation, in August 2019 the U.S. sentenced one of the most violent Kenyan drug traffickers, Baktash Akasha, to 25 years in prison and fined him USD\$100,000 after a long process of extradition.⁹ Unfortunately, the Akasha case may be reflective of a growing and much wider problem for the country.

Like many terrorist groups around the globe, al-Shabaab finances much of its operation through transnational organized criminal activity. The focus of such activity is on trafficking charcoal to the Persian Gulf countries and sugar to Kenya. This illicit trafficking constitutes the group's main source of financing for its terrorist operations in the Horn of Africa, including the salaries of its personnel. This steady source of income has made al-Shabaab resilient in the face of recent setbacks against the combined forces of the Somali government, AMISOM, and other international and regional actors who are engaged in stabilizing Somalia. Thus, al-Shabaab remains one of the top security threats in the region. Countermeasures such as the 2012 ban by the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) and Somali government on the exportation of charcoal from Somalia have, unfortunately, had limited effect.

Policy Options and Recommendations

Unquestionably, arms smugglers in Ethiopia, drug traffickers in Kenya, and al-Shabaab's traffickers in Somalia undermine regional peacebuilding initiatives. Connecting the various measures that have been taken against the illicit networks with the region's peacebuilding initiatives would boost the effectiveness of both. Consequently, this brief provides the following recommendations for the governments of the three East African countries and their international partners.

1. For the Ethiopian, Kenyan, and Somali Governments

- a. Counter state corruption:** The leadership in the three countries must recognize this stark reality: TOC can only prosper if its activities are supported or condoned by state authorities. The Ethiopian government, for example, should realize that SALW trafficking networks cannot operate effectively unless corrupt state officials are somehow collaborating with them. Similarly, the Kenyan government should recognize that drug trafficking across its borders flourishes only when crooked state officials are part of it. Likewise, without the assistance of corrupt Somali authorities, al-Shabaab would find it much harder to run its illicit businesses. Therefore, combating these illicit criminal networks requires genuine political commitment to anti-corruption measures in addition to law enforcement efforts.
- b. Integrate anti-TOC strategies into peacebuilding:** Illicit networks have infiltrated and undermined the peacebuilding initiatives of Ethiopia, Kenya, and Somalia. For these countries to achieve their intended peacebuilding outcomes, their broad-based reform agendas must be integrated with their anti-TOC strategies, such as tracing, freezing, seizing, and confiscating the proceeds of crime; managing porous borders; and, promoting financial inclusion and transparency. Moreover, because TOC is borderless, cross-border cooperation and information sharing is necessary to combat and prevent TOC from undermining peacebuilding efforts. Building up professional state institutions, specifically the security and law enforcement sectors, is another crucial prerequisite for both peacebuilding and countering TOC to succeed.
- c. Engage civil society, especially media:** Given TOC's clandestine nature and the support it often enjoys from corrupt officials, encouraging free media to conduct investigative journalism is essential for counter-efforts to succeed. So is incentivizing other civil society entities to advocate against illicit business and corrupt activities. Government partnership with civil society and media would make a significant contribution to tracing, exposing, and defeating TOC networks.

2. For the UNSC, U.S., and Other International Actors

- a. Disrupt al-Shabaab criminality before ending AMISOM:** The UNSC is preparing to close out AMISOM by December 2021, thus handing full responsibility for Somalia's stabilization to the Somali Security Forces. This transition, if done without first cutting off al-Shabaab's illicit sources of income to incapacitate it financially, would provide an opportunity for the terrorist group to rebound and thrive. In other words, starving al-Shabaab of funds is a prerequisite for defeating the group and bringing sustainable peace to Somalia and the greater Horn of Africa.

For an in-depth analysis on countering transnational organized crime as a peacebuilding strategy in the Horn of Africa, see the accompanying Africa Program Research Paper No. 27 by Messay Asgedom Gobena.

Messay Asgedom Gobena was a Southern Voices Network for Peacebuilding (SVNP) Scholar during the spring 2020 term. He is a Ph.D. candidate studying Peace and Security Studies at Addis Ababa University's Institute for Peace and Security Studies (IPSS), a member organization of SVNP.

-
1. Aly Verjee and Payton Knopf, "A Year of Change in Ethiopia: While many have welcomed Abiy Ahmed's reforms, serious challenges remain," *United States Institute for Peace*, April 2, 2019, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2019/04/year-change-ethiopia>.
 2. Duncan Miriri, "Ethiopia Passes Gun Control Law to Tackle Surge in Violence," *Reuters*, January 9, 2020, <https://reut.rs/38MEVIT>.
 3. Ibid.
 4. "Ethiopian Intelligence Service seizes two containers of illegal firearms," *Fana Broadcasting Corporate*, March 11, 2020, <https://www.fanabc.com/english/ethiopian-intelligence-service-seizes-two-containers-of-illegal-firearms/>.
 5. Adira Kallo, "Raila Odinga Explains Details of Deal with President Uhuru Kenyatta," *The African Courier*, January 9, 2018, <https://www.theafricancourier.de/africa/raila-odinga-explains-details-of-deal-with-president-uhuru-kenyatta>.
 6. Simone Haysom, Peter Gastrow, and Mark Shaw "The Heroin Coast: A Political Economy Along the Eastern African Seaboard," *ENACT*, no 4 (June 2018), <https://enact-africa.s3.amazonaws.com/site/uploads/2018-07-02-research-paper-heroin-coast.pdf>.
 7. Ibid.
 8. U.S. Embassy in Kenya, "United States Presents Kenyan National Police Service with Vehicles to Counter Drug Trafficking," January 22, 2016, <https://ke.usembassy.gov/us-knps-counter-drug-trafficking/>.
 9. The United States Attorney's Office Southern District of New York, "Former Leader Of Violent Kenyan Organized Crime Family Sentenced To 25 Years In Prison For Narcotics, Weapons, And Obstruction Offenses," August 16, 2019, <https://www.justice.gov/usao-sdny/pr/former-leader-violent-kenyan-organized-crime-family-sentenced-25-years-prison-narcotics>.

The Africa Program

The Africa Program works to address the most critical issues facing Africa and U.S.-Africa relations, build mutually beneficial U.S.-Africa relations, and enhance knowledge and understanding about Africa in the United States.

The Program achieves its mission through in-depth research and analyses, including our blog *Africa Up Close*, public discussion, working groups, and briefings that bring together policymakers, practitioners, and subject matter experts to analyze and offer practical options for tackling key challenges in Africa and in U.S.-Africa relations.

The Africa Program focuses on four core issues:






- i. Good governance and leadership
- ii. Conflict prevention, peacebuilding, and security
- iii. Trade, investment, and sustainable development
- iv. Africa's evolving role in the global arena

The Program maintains a cross-cutting focus on the roles of women, youth, and technology, which are critical to Africa's future: to supporting good governance, to securing peace, to mitigating poverty, and to assuring sustainable development.

SVNP Policy Brief and Research Paper Series

For the full series of SVNP Policy Briefs and Research Papers, please see our website at <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/the-southern-voices-network-for-peacebuilding>.

One Woodrow Wilson Plaza
1300 Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W.
Washington, DC 20004-3027

 www.wilsoncenter.org/africa
 africa@wilsoncenter.org
 facebook.com/africaprogram
 [@AfricaUpClose](https://twitter.com/AfricaUpClose)
 202.691.4118