

Murky waters - Smuggling through the Mediterranean

Date Posted: 02-Mar-2011

Publication: Jane's Intelligence Review

The problems of drug smuggling and people trafficking into Europe are increasing, but while law enforcement and security agencies are well set up to tackle these on land, *Chris Jagger* finds the Mediterranean Sea lacks a transnational interdiction strategy that is fit for purpose.

Key Points

- Recent events in North Africa have contributed to a heightened awareness of the vulnerability of the Mediterranean and its attraction as a route for people smuggling and drug trafficking.
- Geographical and logistical factors mean that different areas of the Mediterranean tend to attract different types of organised criminal activity.
- More co-ordination between military and civil security communities is necessary to combat the problem, as a lot of information exists but is not currently shared.

On 13 January, Spanish police arrested four people and seized 162 kg of cocaine, with an estimated street value of EUR16 million (USD22 million) in a raid in the port city of Algeciras on the south coast of Spain. Originating from Guayaquil in Ecuador, the shipment had crossed the Atlantic and entered the Mediterranean Sea through the Straits of Gibraltar undetected. The cocaine was secreted inside fake plastic bananas and then placed in wooden crates. According to Spanish police, this technique had also been used earlier in the year, with crates containing 80 kg of cocaine accidentally ending up in Spanish supermarkets in early January.

Spanish police said the 13 January arrests were linked to an ongoing police operation that also led to arrests at the start of 2010. The arrests provide further evidence of changing cocaine trafficking routes and the relevance of the Mediterranean Sea.

An increased number of crime and security related incidents in 2010 and early 2011 has placed the Mediterranean region squarely in the spotlight of both national and international law enforcement and security communities. Key events include a series of operations against organised crime groups, major arrests and numerous large scale narcotics and tobacco seizures. This has been accompanied by what appears to be a major shift in cocaine routes into Europe involving West Africa and the Mediterranean.

Migration patterns have also changed. There has been a shift away from the long-standing Libya-to-Italy route, with an estimated 100,000 migrants crossing the Turkish-Greek border in 2010, according to Christos Papoutsis, the Greek minister for public order. These events, coupled with turmoil in North Africa in early 2011, have led to a heightened interest in the security of the region.

A Mediterranean security official working for a large international organisation told *Jane's* in a maritime security meeting in late January: "The increase in the illegal movement of drugs, human

beings and arms, as well as the increasing flow of illegal immigrants, particularly from Africa to Europe, has raised the problem of effective maritime governance and border control in the Mediterranean to an all-time high."

However, many European law enforcement agencies have been quick to respond to the changes in the security environment and numerous success stories have been reported in recent months.

Transnational organised crime

The western, central and eastern parts of the Mediterranean each have their own role to play in how transnational organised crime is facilitated. This is best understood when the Mediterranean is seen in a global context.

From a criminal perspective, the Mediterranean plays the role of a maritime superhighway connecting Europe to the Atlantic, Africa, the Middle East and beyond. A large proportion of the illegal commodities entering Europe comes via the sea, much of it through the Mediterranean. Maritime routes are often the preferred choice of criminals when smuggling bulk cargo. Air and land infrastructure alternatives are unable to cope with the high levels of movement required, and these alternatives also present law enforcement and security agencies with greater opportunities for intelligence gathering and interdiction.

The Mediterranean is not only the world's largest inland sea, but also Europe's single largest multi-country border. Global shipping has grown sharply in the last century and is responsible for an estimated 90 per cent of global trade. The tankers and container ships have become the modern-day workhorses of the global economy and international criminal networks have taken full advantage. Organised crime groups engaged in Mediterranean smuggling activities will often have global reach and use cutting-edge technology and the latest business principles. A key characteristic of their success is their ability to exploit the differences between countries' legislation, loopholes in jurisdiction and weaknesses in law enforcement capabilities.

Although transnational organised crime groups do not restrict themselves to a particular method for smuggling illicit cargoes across the Mediterranean Sea, certain geographical and logistical factors help to create constants in their *modus operandi*. The weather, for example, can play an important part both in both facilitating and restricting illegal shipments. During the summer months, when the seas are calm, much of the Mediterranean coastline is awash with fishing, tourist and pleasure vessels that provide useful cover for smugglers. Short distances between land masses, such as between Morocco and Spain or Libya and Italy, offer an obvious choice of route. In addition, legitimate maritime traffic is high on such routes, providing cover, and the routes will often be well serviced by ferries, which provide opportunities to smuggle goods via vehicles and passengers.

Western Mediterranean

The Western Mediterranean has long been a major route for cannabis smuggling into Europe. However, a Spanish law enforcement official told *Jane's* in late January: "We are beginning to see what we think is an increase in cocaine trafficking through Mediterranean ports."

The consumption of cocaine in Europe is now at its highest ever level and continuing to rise, according to a report published by European law enforcement agency Europol in November 2010. The UK sits at the top of the league table, closely followed by France, Germany, Italy and Spain. Further to this, the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) noted in its 2010 world drug report that the majority of cocaine trafficked into Europe comes via maritime routes through Spain and

the Netherlands; in 2008, around 70 per cent of all seizures of cocaine took place in Belgium, the Netherlands, Portugal and Spain, although they were responsible for only around 25 per cent of consumption.

At their closest point in the Straits of Gibraltar, Africa and Spain are separated by 7.8 nautical miles. The Straits are one of the busiest maritime zones in the world, with more than 300 commercial vessels, countless pleasure craft and regular ferry services crossing the waters every day. Small vessels such as fishing boats and ridged hull inflatable boats (RHIBs) are favoured by criminals in this area, as legitimate traffic provides good cover. A stretch of sea used as a smuggling highway has been observed by both Spanish law enforcement and the Spanish Navy. This runs parallel to the Mediterranean coastline of Spain, although outside its territorial waters, and transactions can take place inside it out of the reach and view of Spanish law enforcement.

Fishing vessels are frequently used for smuggling illegal goods. Occasionally, smaller fishing boats will meet up with larger ships outside territorial waters in order to collect illicit cargo.

Traditional cocaine trafficking routes from South America to Spain and Portugal, which once accounted for the majority of cocaine smuggling into Europe, began to change as early as 2004. One contributing factor was a series of interdiction successes in the Atlantic, the product of increased co-operation between European law enforcement agencies and navies. This led traffickers to change their route to incorporate West Africa as a stepping stone prior to entry into Europe. Significant evidence of this change was confirmed between 2004 and 2007, when a series of arrests and seizures of contraband took place in West Africa.

In 2006, the inauguration of the Maritime Analysis and Operation Centre - Narcotics (MAOC-N), based in Lisbon, Portugal, formalised and centralised already long-established relationships between law enforcement agencies across Europe. MAOC-N is an inter-governmental working group or task force, comprising seven EU member states - France, Ireland, Italy, the Netherlands, Portugal, Spain and the UK - set up to tackle maritime drug smuggling in Europe.

The success of MAOC-N operations in the Atlantic is at least partially responsible for the change, pushing the route further south into West Africa. Although comprehensive UNODC analysis of police data collected from its member states indicates that cocaine seizures in West Africa may have decreased in 2008 and 2009, a notable increase in seizures has been recorded in various western Mediterranean ports. One possible explanation for the reduction in seizures in West Africa may be that organised crime groups have now secured and stabilised their networks after being forced to find alternative ways to smuggle cocaine into Europe.

Cocaine smugglers in particular employ a wide variety of often elaborate methods to secure entry into Europe and therefore there is no single vessel profile to monitor. The majority of cocaine is moved in bulk shipments by organised crime networks with varying levels of sophistication. However, opportunistic criminals frequently attempt to smuggle drugs into Europe. They can do this by embarking on ferries and cruise ships and by travelling independently in private boats and even private aircraft. They are often unsuccessful and such individuals are usually caught through customs controls at ports. For example, on 24 December 2010 Moroccan law enforcement seized 15 kg of cocaine hidden in a car destined for France.

By contrast, the majority of bulk cocaine seizures are the result of long-term, complex, intelligence-driven and highly sophisticated law enforcement investigations, often requiring collaboration between numerous countries. If a vessel is identified as being potentially involved in a cocaine smuggling investigation, its movements can often be tracked through a variety of classified and non-classified methods. On 30 December 2010, Spanish law enforcement seized a

shipment of 360 kg of cocaine and arrested six South Americans, of Colombian and Paraguayan nationality, in Valencia. The cocaine had been secreted in timber including wooden planks that were smuggled in sea containers originating in Paraguay.

However, despite this increase in cocaine seizures, the drug most often smuggled across the western Mediterranean remains cannabis. Since 2009, Moroccan security officials have reported that several thousand individuals have been arrested in Moroccan territories for international drug trafficking. Most of them were in possession of cannabis, and approximately 50 per cent of them were non-Moroccan nationals. In total, 180 tonnes of cannabis resin were seized by Moroccan security forces in 2009, according to numerous Spanish news agencies in interviews with Moroccan Interior Minister Taib Cherkaoui.

Although cultivation of cannabis is increasing across Europe, much of the imported herbal cannabis originates in Africa; the majority of cannabis resin originates in Morocco and Afghanistan and is smuggled into Europe through the Iberian Peninsula, first crossing the Mediterranean in a variety of commercial and tourist vessels, fast boats, RHIBs and pleasure craft.

On 12 November 2010, Spanish police arrested three Dutch nationals and seized 20 tonnes of cannabis resin after tracking and then boarding the *Nancy II* fishing vessel. The cannabis had been collected from a Moroccan port only hours before the interdiction, which took place in international waters around 120 miles off the southern coast of Spain.

A Spanish customs officer told reporters: "This is the largest seizure in Spain for over 10 years and possibly one of the largest of all time." The vessel had been tracked by Spanish law enforcement agencies for almost a month before the arrests were made.

Central Mediterranean

The central Mediterranean has for the past decade or so been a major route for illegal migrants travelling between Africa and Europe. However, a series of initiatives has stemmed the flow and redirected it towards Turkey and Greece, whose land and sea borders are being used by migrants to cross into Europe. It was announced in December 2010 that the EU border security agency Frontex would be extending its RABIT (rapid border intervention teams) operation, designed to tackle this new flow of migrants, until March 2011.

On 3 January, Greece announced plans to build a fence along its land border with Turkey to try to curb illegal immigration. The proposed 12.5 km fence will run along the short section of shared border that does not lie alongside the Evros River. Approximately 128,000 illegal immigrants are estimated to have crossed into Greece in 2010, with around a third of those crossing in the Evros region.

Throughout 2010, Frontex detected an average of 245 individuals per day trying to enter Greece, although early indications reported in January by the agency suggest the volume of people moving via this route is reducing. It is too early to assess whether this is due to successful counter-migration strategies, such as those driven by Frontex and Greece, or simply due to adverse weather conditions for sea transit. In 2010, an estimated 90 per cent of illegal immigrants to the EU arrived through Greece, according to Frontex.

The methods migrants use to cross the Mediterranean vary according to a wide variety of factors. The key factors are linked to weather conditions and the cost associated with the transit. In calm seas, numerous migrants may attempt crossings between North Africa and Italy alone or in small groups in vessels unsuitable for sea conditions, such as rubber dinghies, rowing boats and other

small craft. Many of these attempts have failed and many would-be migrants have died as a result. The social uprising in January in Tunisia prompted thousands of migrants to land on the Italian island of Lampedusa; but they told reporters that several had died in the attempt.

Depending on the financial resources available to the migrant, organised people smugglers provide a range of transit options, ranging from open-topped wooden powered craft through to out-of-service ferries and luxury pleasure craft. The cheaper options are the most risky and offer less chance of successfully arriving at the intended destination. 'Detected' migrants will occasionally destroy their identity documents, if they have any, to make it more difficult for their place of origin to be established in the hope that their stay in Europe will be prolonged. More expensive options may include a covert transit, a new identity and even guaranteed employment at the intended destination.

East Mediterranean

In the eastern Mediterranean, large all-sea condition vessels are generally used in criminal enterprises owing to the large distances between landing sites. According to law enforcement officials working in the region, illegal migrants, weapons, heroin, counterfeit goods and illicit cigarettes are believed to pass through the eastern Mediterranean on a regular basis, although evidence of such movements is limited. As an example, the UNODC estimates that only 20 per cent of the total global heroin flow is intercepted.

Traditionally, the most widely reported forms of smuggling in this area involve counterfeit goods and cigarettes. Cigarette smuggling into Europe is reported to have significantly increased since the global economic crisis began in 2008.

More than 50 per cent of the world's seizures of illicit goods takes place at sea ports. The port of Naples, on the southwest coast of Italy, is reported to be one of the major entry points for illicit goods into Europe, according to research conducted by the World Health Organisation (WHO). Its central location in the Mediterranean, along with high unemployment, high rates of petty crime and high levels of corruption, makes Naples an ideal entry point into Europe for smuggled goods. The bulk of smuggled cigarettes entering maritime ports are secreted in sea containers and hidden in the bulkheads of large fishing boats.

A tough space to control

A significant capability gap exists between monitoring and controlling the security environment in the maritime domain. The gap is particularly prominent on the high seas where sovereign jurisdiction is limited.

The sea is a complex and difficult space to police. Jurisdiction for conventional policing is limited to 12 miles beyond a country's coastline, which presents law enforcement agencies with little time to monitor and intercept suspicious incoming maritime traffic. For example, in a calm sea a typical fast boat smuggling drugs could cover 12 miles in a little more than 10 minutes.

The nationally owned assets capable of assessing the situation beyond the coastline, such as satellite imagery, signals and radar tracking, as well as aerial and surface surveillance by navy assets, which could possibly provide an early warning, are more often than not out of reach to law enforcement, as military assets are not always shared with the civil authorities. Moreover, the Mediterranean section of the Spanish coastline, for example, is several hundred miles long, covering thousands of square nautical miles, which gives smugglers in fast boats numerous places to land.

Few countries bordering the Mediterranean have any significant capability or jurisdiction beyond the 12 miles of their territorial waters, although some will operate on a case-by-case basis out to 24 miles within the contiguous zone. Others will operate on the high seas within their 200-mile exclusive economic zones (an area in which a state has special rights over the exploration and use of marine resources) through a liberal interpretation of the law.

In an interview with *Jane's* in January 2010, an experienced maritime lawyer said: "Existing international law tackling serious crime is limited by irregular interpretation, and UN conventions that encompass the high seas are rarely employed and slow to legislate for in national law." This principle has slowed efforts to enhance maritime capability against criminal threats. Therefore, the Mediterranean is often outside the law's reach.

Border controls at most seaports are normally concerned with physical security, health control and tax rather than serious crime. However, in policing terms borders are an opportunity to funnel and interdict the movement of contraband without the need for complex and time-consuming investigations.

Based on profiles of suspicious and criminal activity, police are able to focus their questioning, and stop and search operations, with greater success. These successes are most common in relation to easily identifiable commodities such as counterfeit documents and currency, cash proceeds of crime and revenue evasion (such as cigarette smuggling). Unfortunately, most law enforcement agencies have little success against more serious and organised criminal activities as these tend to pass through ports covertly and are therefore undetected.

The economic requirement imposed by the Schengen agreement on visa-free travel to ensure a quick passage of legitimate goods and people has reduced opportunities to conduct intensive border controls at European ports. Under this agreement, visitors to Europe can apply for a single visa that covers all EU member countries. However, it has frustrated the efforts of police to control maritime flows and therefore increased opportunities for criminals. Of course, not all illegal shipments will come into ports, with many, such as fast boats carrying drugs between North Africa and Spain, making landfall at various locations along the long and hard-to-police coastlines.

Limited co-operation

Not only is the Mediterranean vast, but its complexity in terms of cross-border co-operation significantly hinders law enforcement and security agencies' capacity to tackle international crimes. Almost without exception, all smuggling activities in the Mediterranean are transnational and therefore require bilateral and often multilateral co-operation between law enforcement agencies in response. Although co-operation on organised crime between European countries has significantly improved in recent years, there is much room for further improvement, especially on matters relating to maritime security.

Further to this, co-operation and information exchange between Europe, Africa and the Middle East is in many cases limited. Most European law enforcement agencies are reluctant, and sometimes unable, to share sensitive operational data with non-EU Mediterranean countries. Co-operation between Morocco and Spain on issues of security and law enforcement is perhaps the single most significant exception to this rule, and the success of this collaboration is widely reported in the media in the form of regular arrests and seizures.

Limited knowledge

The risk to Europe from illicit commodity movements across the Mediterranean is therefore difficult to specify and measure. None of the agencies with responsibility for monitoring criminal activities have been able to develop a comprehensive security assessment covering threats and trends in the Mediterranean basin. For the most part, the maritime domain sits outside of their mandated areas of interest and expertise.

Existing, publicly shared crime and security assessments of the Mediterranean are in short supply. Threat and trend assessments are usually born out of information gleaned from investigations, such as profiling criminal structures and arrest and seizure data. Law enforcement agencies are limited in jurisdiction and investigative capability at sea. As the majority of investigations in Europe take place inland, it follows that available knowledge is also focused on land issues despite the obvious importance of the maritime domain.

Strategy requirements

The organised crime groups smuggling goods through the Mediterranean are transnational and therefore a transnational response is required. Such a strategy is currently lacking. That said, numerous successful - if highly targeted - bilateral and multilateral relationships between law enforcement and security agencies continue to develop through a series of policing and security initiatives. However, such initiatives are usually only effective at tackling isolated crimes and individual organised crime groups. Therefore, they have a limited effect on reducing and deterring the use of the Mediterranean as a facilitator in international organised crime, as criminals simply move between jurisdictions.

Despite a plethora of national law enforcement and security agencies that encircle the Mediterranean, supported by numerous international agencies, no single forum currently exists for them to exchange information or collaborate on maritime security issues.

Most of the Mediterranean law enforcement and security agencies are overwhelmed and under-resourced to cope with the increasing scale of crime and terrorism threats. Most are therefore focused on the land, where they possess clear jurisdiction and stronger investigative capability, have more time to build intelligence and evidence and are generally more experienced. The seas have conventionally been controlled by customs officers and coastguards, who are, in general, mostly concerned with revenue enforcement and maritime safety.

Benefits observed from the work of the MAOC-N have led to one initiative that may pave the way for heightened transnational co-operation. This was set out in the 2011 European Commission (EC) security strategy. On 23 November 2010, the EC announced the "five steps towards a safer Europe". This strategy includes a pilot project to pull together Europol, Frontex, MAOC-N and the Centre of Co-ordination for the Fight against Drugs in the Mediterranean (Centre de Co-ordination pour la Lutte Anti-Drogue en Méditerranée: CeCLAD-M), based in France, to "explore synergies on risk analysis and surveillance data in common areas of interest concerning different types of threats such as drug and people smuggling". Europol and CeCLAD-M, which primarily focuses on the Mediterranean, are together expected to play a central role in developing intelligence under this initiative.

NATO has also taken steps to improve Mediterranean security through the development of its new maritime security concept, which seeks to build a human security network with relevant law enforcement and security agencies throughout the Mediterranean region. The evolution of operation Active Endeavour (NATO's article 5 anti-terrorism operation in the Mediterranean) in increasing maritime situational awareness has also helped to build a comprehensive picture of

shipping across the Mediterranean through the collection and sharing of Automatic Identification System (AIS) data.

AIS is an automated tracking system used on ships and by Vessel Traffic Services (VTS) for identifying and locating vessels by electronically exchanging data with other nearby ships and VTS stations. NATO is also drawing on lessons learnt in counter-piracy operations off the east coast of Africa. Although no piracy has been reported in the Mediterranean for many years, the risk of it emerging is a subject that both NATO and Tunisia have agreed to study in a conference scheduled for April 2011 (although recent events may see this event being cancelled).

The conference, which is scheduled to take place in Hammamet, Tunisia, will aim to discuss "how to help predict, recognise and deter maritime piracy through the use of collaborative human-centric information support systems".

Organised crime groups exploiting the Mediterranean are constantly developing new routes and techniques to gain secure access into Europe. They often do this by testing port security and coastal surveillance. Although the methods used to secrete illegal commodities vary dramatically, profiles can be constructed by studying arrests and seizures data, deconstructing individual foiled smuggling attempts and plotting hotspots of activities on a map over an extended period of time.

However, law enforcement agencies around the Mediterranean are reluctant to share information with each other about the techniques and methods, or 'profiles', employed by criminal groups. All the same, the sharing and centralisation of such profiles could lead to heightened awareness and detection in ports and territorial waters.

One initiative that is trying to capture such profiles, conduct open source research on illicit activities and make sense of the vast volumes of commercially available data about ship movements in the Mediterranean is being realised by the United States Counter NarcoTerrorism Technology Program Office (CNTPO), together with the US Sixth Fleet Navy.

The Sixth Fleet Navy has established a maritime security cell charged with building a network of experts on the Mediterranean across Europe. Although its primary focus is to support the Sixth Fleet Navy, the knowledge it uncovers will be widely shared with the law enforcement and security community at the centre of the network.

A lead CNTPO security analyst for the Mediterranean told *Jane's* on condition of anonymity: "This initiative is being backed up by Lockheed Martin, who have developed a data-mining tool designed especially for researching the internet in support of intelligence activities. The tool allows us to locate just about any ship in the Mediterranean."

There is limited communication between the military and civil security community. A vast quantity of knowledge on maritime security is scattered throughout these two communities. The armed forces, particularly the navies of many of the littoral countries of the Mediterranean, possess much of the capability needed to plug the current gap, and are experienced and skilled in operating beyond national legal jurisdictions. For European and non-EU countries to begin to take control of the Mediterranean and curtail its use as a free space for illicit activities, greater effort would have to be made to connect these two communities, and build mature, unified and mutually supportive partnerships. As yet, only limited steps have been made towards this goal, with traditional separation of responsibilities and the difficulties of working across jurisdictions hampering co-operation. However, ad hoc cases of co-operation may begin to point the way for potential longer-term engagement between the two groups.



Cannabis plants pictured in 2006 near the village of Ketama, northern Morocco. Morocco is the world's largest producer of hashish. (PA)

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In this image released by Dutch prosecutors in March 2010, plastic pineapples have been stuffed with cocaine. (PA)

1425615



Migrants arrive in Ragusa, Italy, after the Italian coastguard intercepted a boat carrying 32 people, believed to be from Egypt, off the coast on 15 February. The unsettled political situation in North Africa is causing fears among EU countries that the numbers of migrants will rise. (PA)

1425616



Spanish customs agents speed past a sailing boat off Spain's Atlantic coast in 2005, after seizing three tonnes of cocaine from the vessel. Two Belgians and an Albanian were apprehended on board, while 16 Spaniards were also arrested. (PA)

1425617



Sacks of rice seized by the authorities, each carrying three kg blocks of cocaine from Ghana, West Africa. (PA)

1425618



The bay of Naples, Italy. According to research by the World Health Organisation, Naples is one of the major entry points into Europe for smugglers and traffickers. (PA)

1425619



People watch cargo being unloaded from a speedboat at a quay in Guinea-Bissau in West Africa. Boats of this kind are used in drug smuggling as they can land almost anywhere along the vast coastline of the Mediterranean Sea. (PA)

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