

Ivory and Terror: Fact or Myth?

The illegal wildlife trade, and the poaching which feeds it, has in some places reached unprecedented levels. With increased attention being given to this issue at the highest levels of government, and its impact on broader issues such as rule of law and security, there has been growing speculation that the high profits from this trade—particularly the ivory trade—is financing the operations of terrorist networks. Immediately following the Westgate Mall killings in Nairobi in September 2013, where gunmen from the terrorist group al-Shabaab killed at least 67 people, some media and organizations seized upon the claim from a little-known report *Africa's White Gold of Jihad*, that 40% of the terror group al-Shabaab's operational budget came from moving 1–3 tonnes of ivory through Somalia every month. Since then, well-known organizations have mounted public campaigns using this terror and ivory theme, promoting the direct connection between ivory trade and terrorism.

The Royal United Services Institute for Defence and Security Studies (RUSI), a British defence and security think tank, last September released a report that attempted to examine the evidence for these widespread claims, particularly in relation to the role of al-Shabaab. Using extensive surveys, desk-based research and fieldwork in Nairobi and Kenya, the report, *An Illusion of Complicity: Terrorism and the Illegal Ivory Trade in East Africa*, concluded that the claim that al-Shabaab receives up to 40% of its running costs through the illegal ivory trade alone is largely wrong. It noted that available data (including from the Elephant Trade Information System managed by TRAFFIC) showed that only small amounts of ivory appear to have moved through Somalia during the current poaching crisis—far smaller than the volumes transiting Kenyan and Tanzanian ports. Any small benefit al-Shabaab may derive from this trade is apparently significantly dwarfed by its main sources of funds—smuggling of charcoal and sugar. The al-Shabaab income from charcoal trade is previously documented consistently and widely accepted by the institutions with expertise in al-Shabaab's operations.

The report, in fact, concludes that the main drivers of illegal ivory trade across East Africa are not terrorist networks but highly networked organized crime groups, brokers and corrupt government officials and warns that the ivory-terrorism narrative serves as nothing more than a distraction from the international community's efforts to tackle these groups. The report also warned that the current bias towards militarized anti-poaching

operations in some areas of East Africa needs to be addressed, and that aggressive front-line activities need to be complemented by community-engagement and development programmes.

The militarization of poaching was the subject of a Roundtable Meeting organized by RUSI and the Global Initiative against Transnational Organized Crime in the UK in October 2015. Organized crime and anti-poaching experts at the meeting noted that teams of poachers from African countries like Mozambique were often well-armed with high-calibre hunting rifles and automatic weapons, night vision goggles and GPS equipment. In comparison, it seems that most African rangers employed to protect wildlife are considered under-paid, under-trained and under-resourced, and are putting their lives in danger on a daily basis. One participant stressed the phrase “professionalization, not militarization”, emphasizing better wages and more support for rangers, through training and provision of equipment, and new technologies being employed with this increased professionalism, rather than instead of it.

Other experts warned that heavy-handed militarized responses to poaching may in fact be detrimental in some areas. Another participant stressed the importance of research that will inform anti-poaching activities to ensure that real causal factors are addressed with sustainable solutions rather than just “firefighting” the issue in the field. This means understanding the drivers of poaching and looking at alternatives from a community point of view that will contribute to the efforts aimed at reducing poaching.

While controversy remains on the role of terrorist networks and militarization of anti-poaching operations, few will dispute the real impact of wildlife crime on security in the context of rule of law, governance, national development and the local communities directly affected. There is too a wider debate emerging among the intelligence sector regarding the convergence of terror and organized crime networks that may with time generate a different picture. Wildlife trafficking does unfortunately remain, in general, a high profit and low risk enterprise that organized crime is capitalizing on, but there is no public evidence these are the same crime groups that are enabling terror. The RUSI report certainly is clear where they believe the solutions lie—the international community working together to enforce current laws and provide sustainable economic alternatives.

Penny Wallace, Wildlife Crime Initiative Support Officer, TRAFFIC. E-mail: penny.wallace@traffic.org
Sabri Zain, Director of Policy, TRAFFIC
 E-mail: sabri.zain@traffic.org

TRAFFIC STAFF RECOGNITION

Tom Milliken, TRAFFIC's Elephant and Rhino Programme Leader, is one of six people to be awarded the Sir Peter Scott Award for Conservation Merit, the highest honour granted by the IUCN Species Survival Commission (SSC) to recognize individuals for their significant and long-term service to conservation, through their work with the SSC or associated institutions. Milliken's award was “in recognition of his unrelenting work in TRAFFIC and the SSC over three decades to understand and find solutions to the problems of illegal trade in ivory and rhino horn, including his exceptional leadership of the Elephant Trade Information System”.



TRAFFIC