Africa Becoming an Increasingly Central Hub for Latin American Drug Cartels

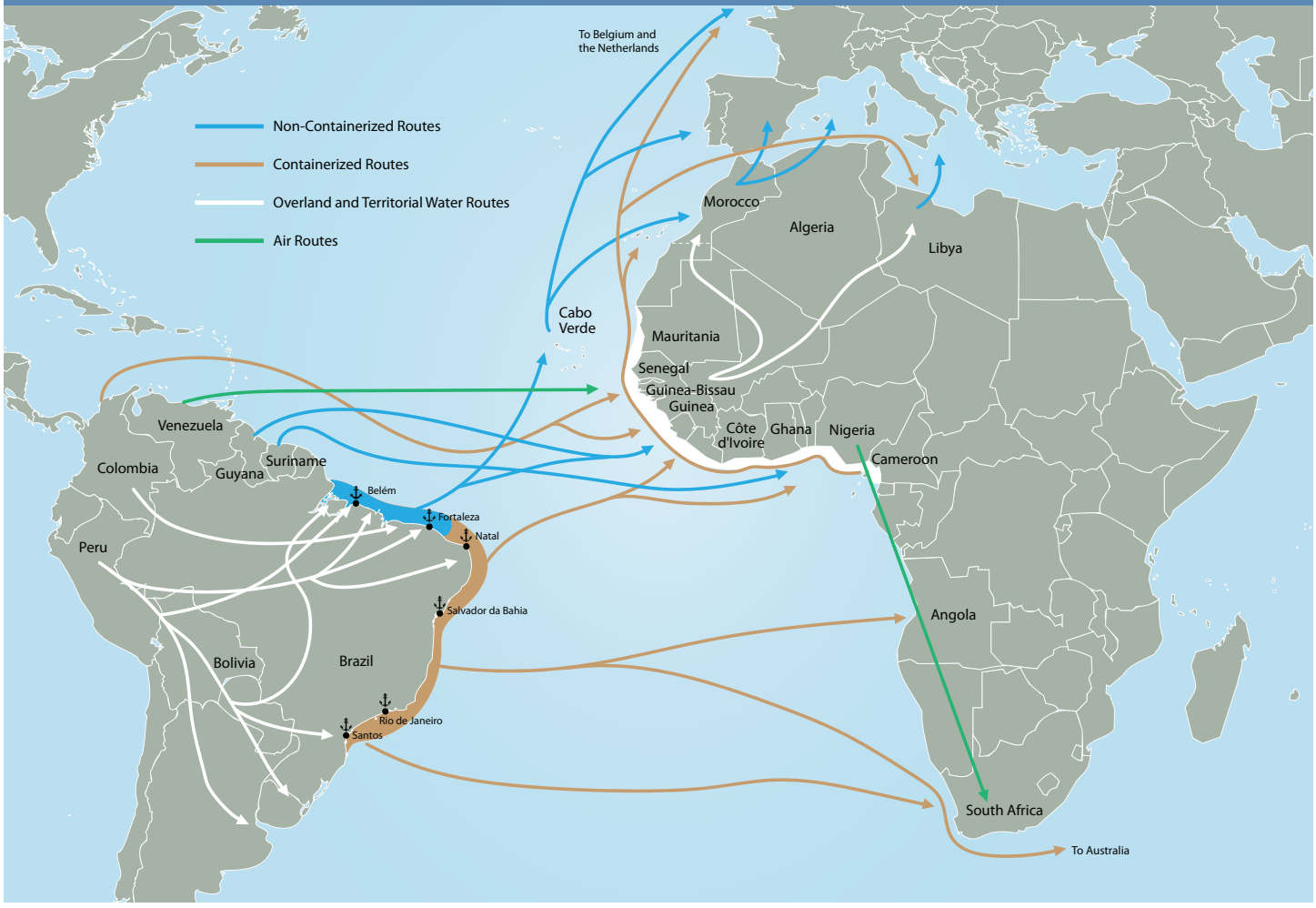
AFRICA CENTER FOR STRATEGIC STUDIES

By the Africa Center for Strategic Studies

October 21, 2026

Africa is becoming an increasingly important hub for Latin American drug trafficking networks, facilitating the production, transportation, and marketing of cocaine and methamphetamine.

AFRICA'S EXPANDING ROLE IN THE LATIN AMERICA-EUROPE COCAINE CORRIDOR



Date sources: Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, Brookings, UNICRI, U.S. State Department, Daily Maverick

Africa has for decades been a transit point for Latin American cocaine making its way to European markets. The explosion in demand for cocaine and synthetic stimulants (notably methamphetamine), coupled with growing interdiction efforts in the Western Hemisphere, has resulted in a significant scaling up of Latin American cartel operations in Africa in recent years.

While the organizational arrangements between Latin American and African criminal networks often remain opaque, the growing influence of Latin American criminal organizations in Africa is having far-reaching implications for security, the enrichment of African criminal organizations, threat to licit markets, and accountable governance on the continent.

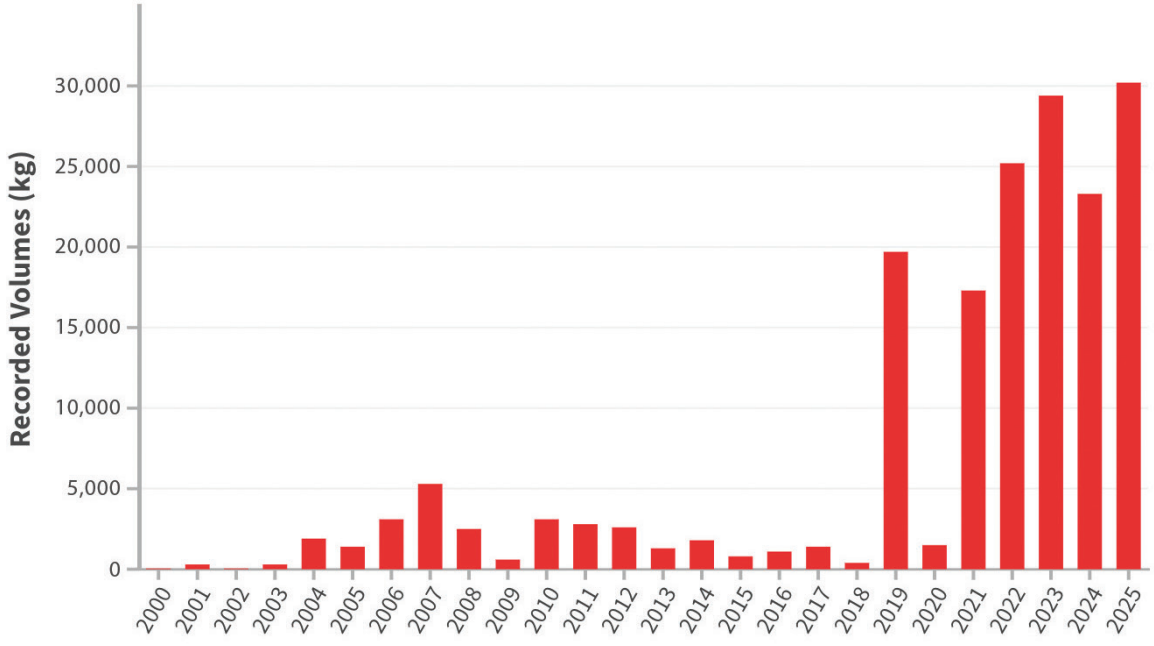
AFRICA AND THE LATIN AMERICA-EUROPE COCAINE SUPPLY CHAIN

The global cocaine trade is at an all-time high, with production estimated at 4,100 metric tons (MT), a fourfold increase from a decade ago. Much of this increase has occurred since 2019, driving the global value of the cocaine sector to between $218 billion and $374 billion. This is mirrored in figures of annual interdiction seizures of cocaine in West Africa, which have jumped from roughly 1 MT in 2018 to 30 MT in recent years.

The global cocaine trade is at an all-time high.

Nearly all of the world's cocaine is produced in three Andean countries bordering South America's Pacific coast—Colombia, Peru, and Bolivia. Moreover, with Europe consuming roughly a quarter of global cocaine supply, Africa has long been a crossroads of this illicit trade. Cocaine shipments have typically traversed the Atlantic coastline of Brazil—concealed in containers destined for West African ports along the Gulf of Guinea—before onward routing to Europe.

COCAINE SEIZURES IN WEST AFRICA



Data source: GI-TOC

As interdiction efforts on both sides of the Atlantic have escalated, traffickers have grown more adaptable and sophisticated. This includes sending smaller shipments on small vessels (from private yachts to unmanned submersibles) from less-active ports in northeastern Brazil, Guyana, and Suriname. These ships transit a wider expanse of the West African coastline from Nigeria to Cabo Verde. Other methods include offloading drugs from containerships before they reach an African port, the parcels swiftly collected by African-based criminal groups in small vessels who have been waiting. These groups then bring the cocaine onshore where it is warehoused, repackaged, and shipped toward Europe.

AVERAGE WHOLESALE PRICE FOR COCAINE



Data source: International Center for Research and Analysis Against Maritime Drug Trafficking (CMCON), 2024.

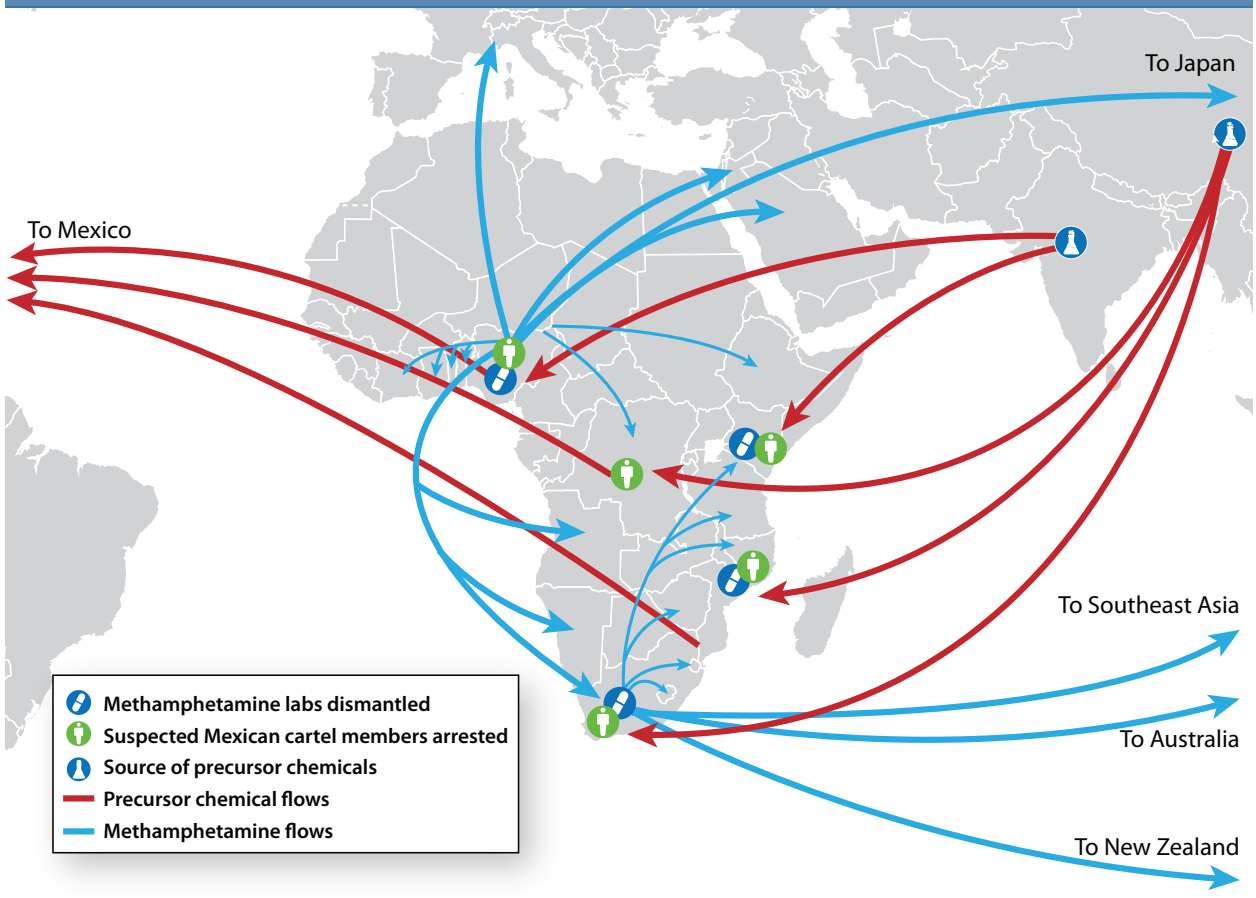
Reflecting the risk premium for evading interdiction, the wholesale price for a kilogram of cocaine dramatically increases in value as it passes along the supply chain and toward the end user. The average wholesale price for a kilogram of cocaine in the Andes is $1,650. By comparison, a kilogram of cocaine is worth roughly $44,000 in Europe. In Oceania, it is $164,000. This also underscores that the criminal entity that controls the final wholesale transfer of the drug stands to profit most.

AFRICA EMERGING AS A SIGNIFICANT PRODUCTION HUB FOR METHAMPHETAMINE

Methamphetamine production is also at a record high, with a global market for amphetamine-type stimulants valued at between $17 billion and $29 billion—and growing at a rate of 13 percent per year. In 2019, 317 MT of methamphetamine was seized globally. This was double the amount interdicted in 2014. By 2024, this figure had risen to 487 MT.

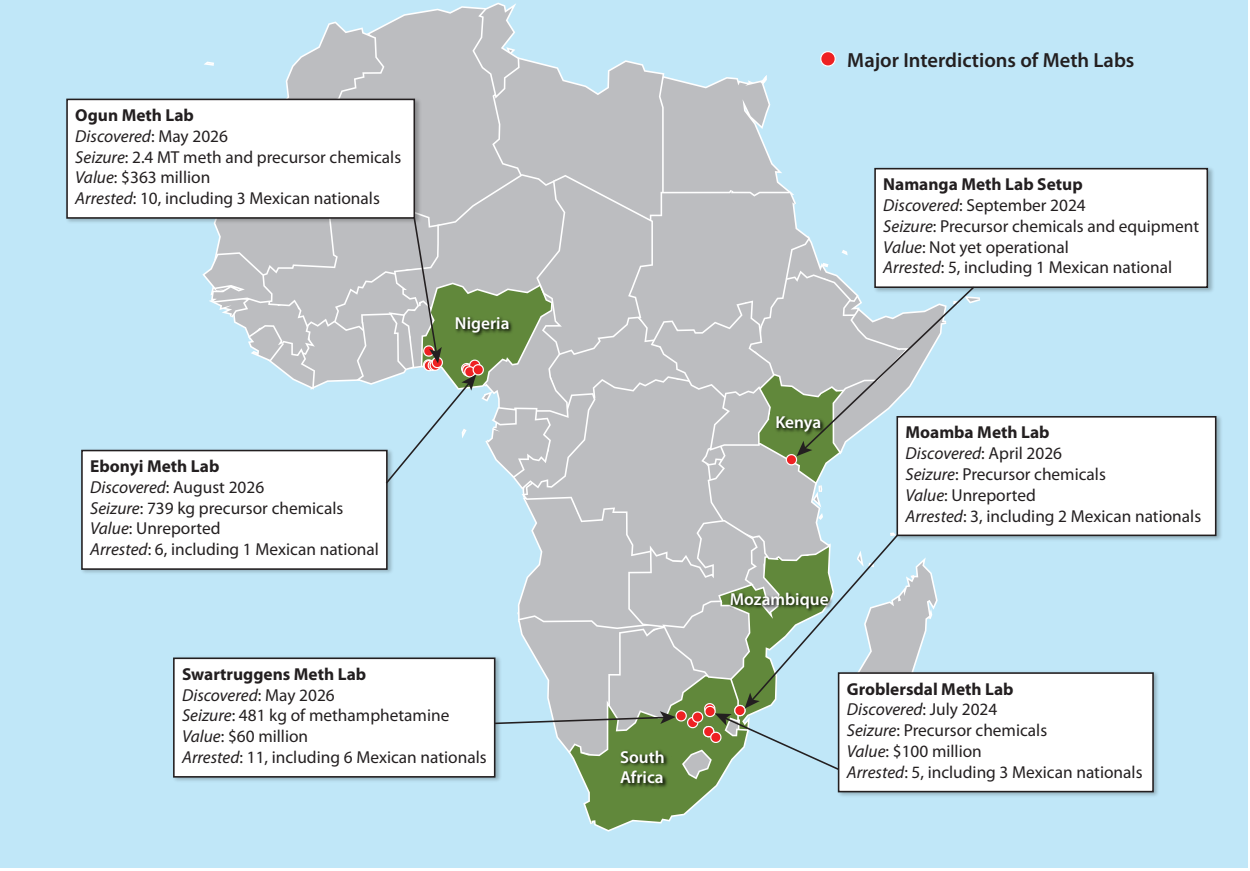
Africa has emerged as an increasingly integral hub for this illicit synthetic drug as cartels seek to exploit permissive environments for manufacture and trafficking. Latin American drug cartels have partnered with African criminal groups to secure logistics, land, and protection in establishing meth labs on the continent.

AFRICA GROWING AS A HUB OF GLOBAL METH PRODUCTION



Sources: GI-TOC, DEA, ISS

MEXICAN CARTEL TIES TO AFRICAN METH LABS

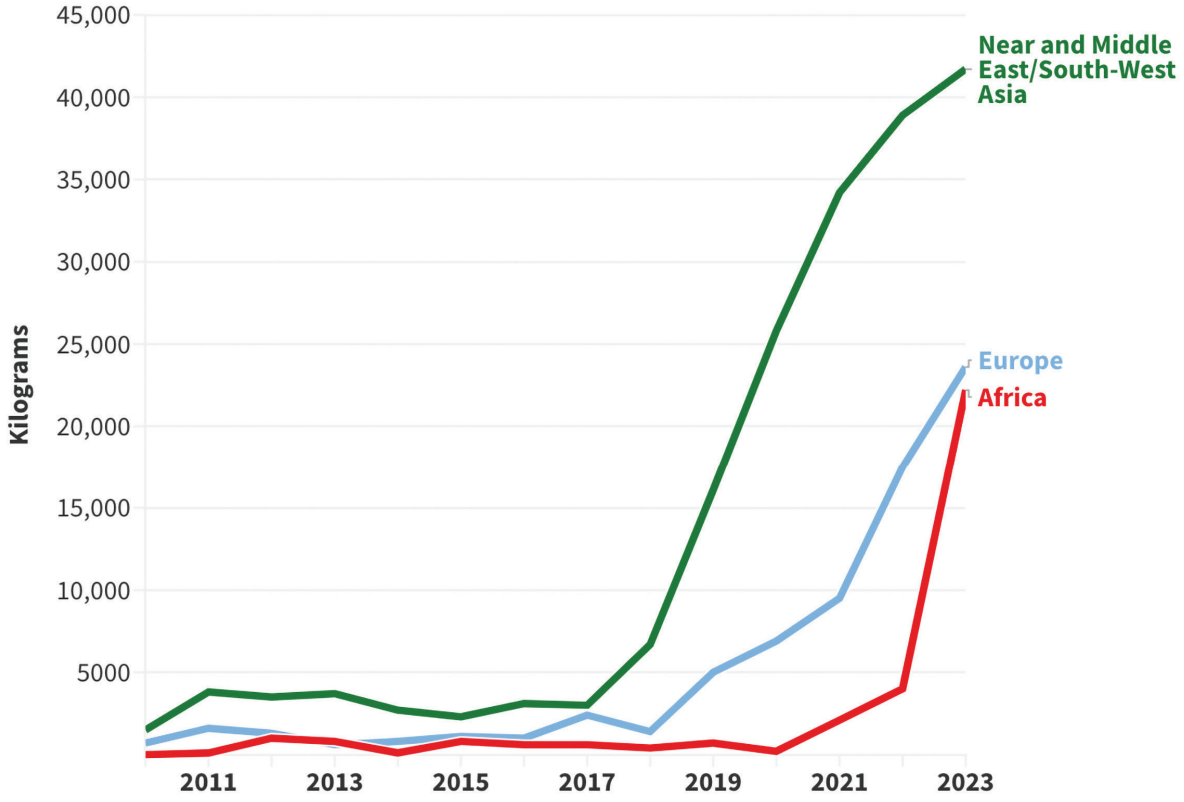


The first African meth labs were discovered in West Africa in the early 2010s. In recent years, meth labs have been dismantled in South Africa, Nigeria, Kenya, and Mozambique—and are most likely operating in other African countries that have less experienced drug-interdicting law enforcement agencies. In addition to access to shipping hubs and potential markets, the ability to co-opt local police is often a determining factor in where the Latin American cartels establish labs.

Set up in provincial farms or abandoned factories, African labs typically receive precursor chemicals from China and other parts of Southeast Asia, manufacture the drugs under the direction of Mexican "cooks," and then ship the finished products to markets in East and Southeast Asia, Europe, and Oceania. It is believed that these Mexican laboratory technicians and chemists advise African operators on procuring precursor chemicals for methamphetamine production, establishing and operating the labs, and smuggling the drugs to target markets.

Of 12 raids on African meth labs aided by U.S. intelligence, 11 have involved arrests of Mexican nationals, underscoring the expanding collaboration between Latin American and African criminal enterprises.

METHAMPHETAMINE SEIZURES IN EMERGING MARKETS



Data source: UNODC, 2025

The rising volume of methamphetamine seizures and the high profits generated by the relatively low-cost production methods underscore the lucrative earnings attracting criminal actors. A kilogram of methamphetamine produced in Africa for $1,500, for example, can fetch $150,000 at retail prices in East Asia and roughly $210,000-$350,000 per kilogram in Australia and New Zealand (where most African-made meth is shipped).

Average Wholesale Price for Methamphetamine	
Continental Subregion	**Average Estimated Price**
East Asia	$122,500
Oceania	$120,000
Western Europe	$30,000
North America	$23,000
South Africa	$13,500
West Africa	$6,700
East Africa	$3,000

Data source: CMCON, 2024

LATIN AMERICAN DRUG CARTELS WITH AN EXPANDING PRESENCE IN AFRICA

Africa provides a convenient hub for Latin American drug cartels for a host of reasons, including established illicit trafficking networks, centuries-old smuggling routes, weak maritime and coastal interdiction capabilities, and extensive Chinese and other illegal fishing vessels operating off the coast of West Africa that provide cover for drug reloading. Following are some of the most prominent criminal organizations involved.

Latin American Actors

- Mexico's **Sinaloa Cartel** has operations in at least 50 countries worldwide, including seven in Africa. It often works through local proxies rather than establishing a large visible presence. Building on its long ties to cocaine trafficking on the continent, Sinaloa has been linked to multiple meth labs in Africa as it attempts to decentralize and franchise its model.
- The **Jalisco New Generation Cartel**, a major Mexican rival to the Sinaloa Cartel, is growing its own global footprint. The cartel has been characterized by extreme violence and uses military-grade weapons, rocket-propelled grenade launchers, armored vehicles, and weaponized drones.

These Mexican cartels are estimated to earn roughly $4.5 billion annually from their operations.

- The **First Capital Command (PCC)** is the largest criminal organization in Brazil and the most prominent supplier of cocaine through West Africa (primarily in Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Senegal, and Ghana). Established in a São Paolo (Brazil) prison in the early 1990s, PCC currently comprises an estimated 40,000 members and operates in 30 countries around the world. It asserts more direct control over its supply chain in Africa where the PCC has formed deep ties to Nigerian criminal networks. PCC is believed to generate at least $1.3 billion per year, primarily from cocaine.

- The **Gulf Clan, also known as Gaitanistas (Colombia)**, is the most powerful criminal organization in Colombia and one of the largest distributors of cocaine in the world. It uses go-fast boats, semi-submersible vessels, and containerized shipping to transport cocaine into Africa. It operates through transnational networks cooperating with European mafias and West African criminal groups. Estimates are that Colombian traffickers collectively earn between $1.2 billion and $2.6 billion annually from cocaine.

European and Middle Eastern Actors

- Italy's **'Ndrangheta** remains one of Europe's most entrenched cocaine traffickers with its long-standing relationships with suppliers in Latin America. Members of the 'Ndrangheta have been found operating in many African countries, from Côte d'Ivoire to Libya, to Kenya, to South Africa.
- Lebanon's **Hezbollah** has maintained criminal networks spanning the Americas and Africa, often leveraging members of the Lebanese diaspora to facilitate drug trafficking and money laundering.
- The **Mocro Mafia**, a collection of various criminal groups from the Netherlands and Belgium, is believed to control around one-third of the cocaine market to Europe. Working with Latin American counterparts, they tend to ship from Suriname and various Caribbean islands through North African ports, including Morocco, and West African countries, such as Sierra Leone.
- The **Western Balkan cartels**, a collection of southeastern European criminal groups, became deeply enmeshed in West Africa in the late 2010s. They are now among the most important actors in maritime trafficking and wholesale cocaine distribution into Europe.

African Actors

The African component of the cocaine and meth trafficking networks is least well understood. These actors fall into three primary functional categories: enablers, smugglers, and criminal partners.

Latin American drug cartels have partnered with African criminal groups to secure logistics, land, and protection in establishing meth labs on the continent.

Given the size and sophistication of the Latin American cartels, there is no lack of capacity for these syndicates to independently move the illicit products directly to Europe. Rather, African enablers provide the contextual knowledge to facilitate these operations while allowing the Latin American and European cartels to keep a low profile on the continent. This enabling ranges from:

- Ensuring limited oversight at ports, airports, and border crossings
- Support from lawyers, bankers, and accountants to facilitate the creation of shell companies for money laundering and movement of goods
- Political elites who ensure lax security and regulatory oversight



Aerial view of an abandoned clandestine methamphetamine laboratory in Ogun State, Nigeria. (Photo: AFP/ Toyin Adedokun)

Illustratively, Sierra Leone has come under intense scrutiny because it has refused to arrest and extradite the fugitive Dutch drug trafficker, Jos Leijdekkers, to the European Union. Leijdekkers is alleged to be managing his $2-billion-per-year cocaine trafficking operations in Sierra Leone under the protection of senior government officials.

African smugglers facilitate the transferring, reloading, and pick-up of parcels of cocaine dropped off the West African coast for repackaging, warehousing, and onward transport. Smugglers also provide expertise and protection for the movement of the drugs across critical overland routes through the Sahara and into North Africa, including through territories controlled by armed militias and militant Islamist groups.

Latin American cartels are also forming partnerships with certain African organized criminal organizations to facilitate the production of methamphetamine and the trafficking of cocaine on the continent. The extent to which these are franchises, limited protection schemes, or business deals between independent entities varies from case to case. Nigerian and South African criminal groups appear to be the most active and organized in managing these arrangements.

IMPACTS ON AFRICAN COMMUNITIES

Latin American cartels, like other organized crime syndicates, are not just drug manufacturers and traffickers. They have been implicated in "arms trafficking, money laundering, migrant smuggling, sex trafficking, bribery, extortion, and a host of other crimes." Their presence has a corrosive effect on all facets of society. These foreign actors use their money to corrupt officials and exert economic, political, and social control over communities, either directly or through local proxies.

Given many African countries' weak institutions and government oversight mechanisms, African governments are particularly vulnerable to being captured by organized criminal actors who can then become embedded within sectors of the national economy. This contributes to further institutional erosion.

In Guinea-Bissau, for example, high-level military and political officials dating back to the early 2000s have had well-documented ties with the Sinaloa Cartel. The undertow of drug profits and criminality, in turn, has been a driving factor behind Guinea-Bissau's numerous coups and political instability.

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The growing influence of Latin American cartels in Africa is elevating security risks on the continent, including the potential introduction of drone technology to African criminal groups and collaboration with violent extremist groups. As in Latin America, when these cartels gain a foothold, they become a threat to legitimate businesses, economic sectors, and local government and law enforcement.

The payment by drug traffickers of protection fees to African armed actors for passage through overland routes, furthermore, enriches these violent groups and contributes to the entrenchment of conflict economies.

As Latin American cartels' business interests become more established in Africa, they are likely to back rival criminal groups in the effort to control markets. This could trigger more intense and organized urban violence. Illustratively, South Africa has experienced 78 organized crime–related assassination incidents in the first 9 months of 2026, including 4 execution-style killings in Limpopo (where some Mexican meth labs were discovered). By comparison, there were 44 in all of 2025.

The growing access to the synthetic drug market has similarly contributed to a rise in drug addiction, criminality, and a weakening of the rule of law in various African countries. South Africa, Kenya, and Nigeria have all seen spikes in methamphetamine use in recent years. In Nigeria, increased methamphetamine use has been linked to homicides and other violent crimes.

LATIN AMERICAN CARTELS GROWING RICHER FROM AFRICAN TIES

Latin American drug cartels have adapted their supply chains to take advantage of more unregulated operating environments in Africa. This has simultaneously deepened the redundancy and resiliency of these cartels' organizational structures. By expanding their operations into Africa, Latin American criminal organizations have been able to grow their profits and reach while assuming relatively little additional exposure.



An abandoned methamphetamine laboratory in Iroto, Ogun State, is dismantled by Nigeria's National Drug Law Enforcement Agency (NDLEA). (Photo: AFP/Toyin Adedokun)

The expansion of these Latin American criminal groups' operations—and the surge in drug production and trafficking more generally—is shifting the security landscape in Africa, with crime becoming more militarized and internationalized. The vast sums involved in the illicit trade are also exposing weak governance oversight capacities and empowering nonstate armed actors in Africa who are profiting from their partnerships with the Latin American drug cartels.

Higher rates of interdiction and arrests on the continent indicate that many African police and security agencies are pushing back on these criminal influences. Nigeria's National Drug Law Enforcement Agency (NDLEA), for example, seized roughly 4,888 MT of drugs and arrested 19,944 people in 2025. This represents a 17-fold increase from the 273 MT of drugs seized in 2020. Since 2011, the NDLEA has uncovered and dismantled roughly 25 meth laboratories. Nonetheless, so long as Africa is viewed as a relatively more permissive operating environment, pressures from Latin American criminal syndicates on African governance, security, and economic development are likely to continue to grow.