

The nexus between terrorism and transnational organized crime

North Africa and the Sahel, and Latin America: a brief introduction

by Chiara Bologna and Christian Vianna de Azevedo

Introduction

Over the last decade, South American based drug trafficking organizations have increasingly partnered with African based terrorist organizations such as Boko Haram, Al Qaeda and ISIL's affiliates and breakaways in West Africa and the Sahel, mainly. Terrorist organizations in Africa have been taking advantage of the opportunities for profit generated by their knowledge of the trans-Saharan land routes. They charge a fee per kilogram to escort,

transport or store cocaine across North Africa to be delivered at the Mediterranean shores to Europe-based drug trafficking organizations. Therefore, West and Northern Africa have become key transshipment points for South American cocaine destined for Europe and the Middle East. Moreover, these terrorist organizations mentioned above are also involved in moving other types of drugs such as heroin and cannabis through the main hubs located in Africa.

Apart from the crime-terror nexus on drug trafficking, there are other myriad of instances in which different criminal activities may converge with terrorism. In the case of the Sahel there has been a lot of interplay between migrant smugglers and traffickers, and terrorists, as well as between them and cultural heritage smugglers, for instance. On top of that, criminal organizations launder the revenue acquired by terror organizations in an array of countries in Latin America and Africa, especially in real

state enterprises and through different kinds of businesses.

Illicit trafficking and smuggling have been present in Africa for decades and the profits they generated amount for a large portion of the economy. The African continent plays a significant role in the global criminal economy, especially over the last two decades. It has a strategic geographic position, which connects the Americas with Europe and Asia and enables smuggling and trafficking between these continents.

The complex ties that link jihadist groups, criminals, smugglers, traffickers and local communities in West and Northern Africa and the Sahel areas have for years been the subject of scrutiny and concern. Therefore, financing of terrorism through engagement in organized crime activities is often discussed broadly by the international community regarding this region.

Several sources indicate connections between smugglers and terror groups/organizations in West and Northern Africa and the Sahel. As introduced above, the terror groups benefit from the collaboration more specifically in relation to funding. However, collaboration in the following

areas is also present: tactical collaboration; taxing or protection money for smuggling and trafficking activities; mutual tolerance; individual conversions or radicalizations; and provision of weapons, among others.

fit in the category of "terrorism" or "transnational organized crime" – corruption is a good example. The nexus can manifest in numerous ways, taking on distinct characteristics, depending on the geographic region in question and the political predis-



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What is the nexus

The nexus that exists between organized crime and terrorism (henceforth called the nexus for short) is complex and dynamic. There are a variety of ways in which the two phenomena, which are distinct in nature, either overlap or form varying degrees of stronger bonds together. This nexus often involves a range of peripheral and facilitating crimes which may not

position of a particular state or region in which the nexus operates.¹ The way the nexus develops has been seen to be opportunistic, as it grows and operates in the most convenient form, which allows for smoother operations by the different groups. Moreover, the nexus is transnational in nature, cutting across different countries and regions and spanning across continents.

Although the objectives of organized crime and terror-

¹ The Policy Toolkit on The Hague Good Practices on the Nexus Between Transnational Organized Crime and Terrorism, UNICRI and GCTF, p.2

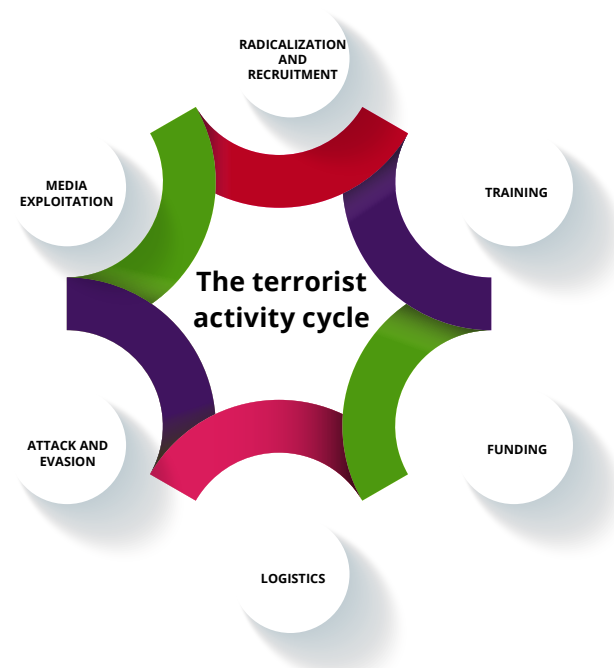
ists groups are discrete, as traditionally organized crime groups seek material (monetary) gain,² whereas terrorist groups carry out their activities to incite political or social change, the nexus can occur through various means along what we can perceive as a continuum of connecting points, i.e.: alliances between the groups for operational purposes, through the sharing of tactics, based upon mutual operational territory, or a desire for profit or personal connections – including those developed within a prison setting. There is also evidence that in different regions of the world members of organized criminal groups are increasingly using terrorist-like tactics, and terrorists are benefiting from a myriad of transnational organized crime activities.³ This demonstrates that the different ways in which one group can benefit from the other, and vice-versa, are plenty and are highly dependable on specific needs or on certain groups and the geographical and political area they operate in.

In order to clarify the nexus, it's important to introduce a concept that is closely attached to the crime and ter-

ror nexus dynamic, which is the “terrorist activity cycle”. Terrorism functions as a cycle – with discrete activities leading up to the attack and being followed after the attack. The ‘terrorist activity cycle’ comprises the following actions: radicalization/recruitment, training, funding, logistics, attack, evasion and media exploitation.⁴ When we see the word ‘terrorism’ from outside the discipline we tend to focus only upon the attack. However, the attack is actually only one of the stages in the context of the terrorist activity cycle. Consequently, it is important to understand that

terrorist attacks are the product of a long chain of actions and accurate planning. In all the steps of this long chain of actions one can observe the nexus between crime and terrorism.

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2 As per UNTOC (2000), and ‘organized crime group’ is a: “structured group of three or more persons existing for a period of time and acting in concert with the aim of committing one or more serious crimes or offenses in order to obtain, directly or indirectly, a financial or other material benefit.”

3 Including from the illicit trafficking of arms, persons, drugs, and cultural property and artefacts and from the illicit trade in natural resources including gold and other precious metals and stones, minerals, wildlife, charcoal and oil, as well as from kidnapping for ransom and other crimes including extortion, and bank robbery.

4 These are the steps of the terrorist activity cycle we chose to work with. However, it is possible to decompose some of these steps into other steps.

The nexus: theoretical framework

In recent years a growing number of case studies revealing the impact of the nexus across the globe have helped push authors to revisit the relationships between crime and terror and thus formulate a more adequate and more straight forward framework to categorize it. These new suggested concepts/categorizations were introduced in 2019 through the “[Policy Toolkit on The Hague Good Practices on the Nexus between Transnational Organized Crime and Terrorism](#)” published and researched in tandem by the United Nations Interregional Crime and Justice Research Institute (UNICRI) and the Global Counterterrorism Forum (GCTF), under the framework of the “Nexus Initiative.”⁵ This initiative has categorized the

interactions between crime and terror as transactional nexus and organizational nexus, to be described in the coming paragraphs.

This ‘coming together’ mate-

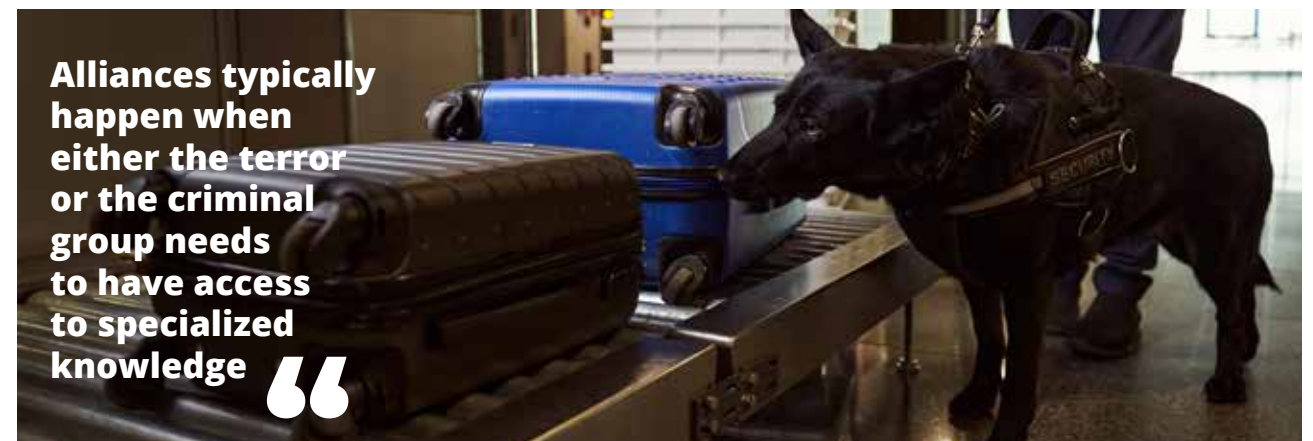
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The transactional nexus normally involves the coming together of a criminal organization and a terrorist group to execute specific operational needs

rializes in basically two forms: an alliance or an appropriation of tactics through organizational learning. The alliances do not generally occur as a long-term relationship, due to the vulnerabilities posed in such type of association. The appropriation of tactics, on the other hand, features the

ability of either the crime or terror group to learn how to better integrate the tactics of the other.

Alliances typically happen when either the terror or the criminal group needs to have access to specialized knowledge (e.g. money laundering), specialized service (e.g. counterfeiting) or operational support (e.g. access to a smuggling network), and/or financial support (e.g. money transfers, access to markets).

The appropriation of tactics refers to the situation in which either the crime or the terror group will adopt the tactics of the other in order to develop in-house capabilities. For example, a terror group gets involved in profitable criminal activities (drug trafficking, arms trafficking, extortion, etc.) to finance its terrorist and political goals. Or a criminal



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5 The “Nexus Initiative” involved representatives of governments, international experts and practitioners, international and regional organizations and academia to discuss on existing knowledge and practices and to provide information on regional contexts. The Initiative was developed after an extensive collection and analysis of data from different regions as follows: West Africa and the Sahel, The Balkan Region, Southeast and South Asia, and the Horn of Africa and East Africa.

organization that learns how to conduct terror acts in order to instil fear within a segment of the society it wants to control or to influence.

Furthermore, there are two associated ideas attached to the 'appropriation of tactics' stemming from the current global environment; the first is 'organizational learning', and the second is 'prison radicalization, as follows:

Organizational learning essentially refers to the ability of a group to evolve over time by actively adapting to its operational environment. All organizations, whether licit or illicit, obtain knowledge from individuals within the group, from the group's past failures and successes, and from other groups. It is through this process that groups will gauge the need to adopt new tactics, explore the uses of technology, shift their geographic focus, or target recruitment to obtain a required skill-set. Dissecting the evolution of various terrorist groups, and the composition of ad hoc militant cells, provides strong indications that some degree of organizational learning has taken place.

UNICRI (2019), Policy Toolkit on The Hague Good Practices on the Nexus between Transnational Organized Crime and Terrorism (p. 3).

Organizational learning has been conceptualized within a typology of learning and innovation that identify and presents four main categories in which it may happen: first, intergroup learning within a single domestic setting; second, intergroup learning between two or more groups across a state/nation boundary; third, intergroup learning through the interactions of transnational groups with one or more domestic ones; and fourth, intragroup learning.

Additionally, throughout the years 'prison radicalization' has been seen in the constant evolving of recruitment tactics. Nowadays, there is enough evidence demonstrating that in several terror groups, people with criminal pasts not only expedite radicalization, but are also given a key-role in the recruitment process. This indicates that terror groups value recruits with criminal experience.⁶

Prison radicalization, or prison recruitment, has been identified as a very specific point of organizational learning that has had a significant impact on the increasingly nuanced evolution of the Nexus; particularly in the more politically stable countries of Western and Northern Europe. More pointedly, (former) prisoners – and by extension, communi-



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ty-based criminals – have increasingly become the driving individuals of many militant cells. This was seen as early as the 2004 Madrid attacks, perpetrated by several former criminals and nuanced through the sale of drugs; and regularly through to the more recent attacks perpetrated in Europe.

UNICRI (2019), Policy Toolkit on The Hague Good Practices on the Nexus between Transnational Organized Crime and Terrorism (p. 3).

As for the organizational nexus, it occurs when the criminal and the terrorist activities occupy the same space and time. When the nexus emerges as an organizational one, there are variations in extent of the activities' overlap. Theoretically speaking this can be basically divided into: integration, hybrid, transformation and black hole.

Integration can be actually split into two distinct situations, the first one results in an alliance that evolves to an extent that the criminal organization is integrated into a terrorist one, or vice versa. The second one happens when there is a targeted recruitment into a terrorist cell. The reason behind this type of integration is to obtain tactical capability within a potentially short time frame. This is

6 This observation comes from the authors' extensive fieldwork in the issue.

not about mobilizing individuals with criminal background, but integrating a radicalized group of experienced criminals, generally the ones that already operate in the immediate community.

The hybrid type of nexus occurs when there is a shift in the core purpose of a group. A hybrid group will feature simultaneously ideological and economic motivations by conducting terror attacks and also engaging in profitable criminal enterprises. The group in question can be either defined as criminal or terrorist. This type of group is the one that has the greatest potential of being overlooked by both anti-crime and counterterrorism agencies.

As for transformation, this is an evolutionary instance of the nexus, it happens when a terrorist group evolves both organizationally and operationally into a criminal network or vice versa. The transformation is corroborated when the essential aims and motivations of the group change to a point that the original *raison d'être* ceases to exist. Or, in other words, a terrorist group becomes a criminal one, or vice versa.⁷

There's another concept, which is not actually a manifestation of the nexus, but

rather an expression that can be described as an extreme environment that is the perfect breeding ground for the nexus in many of its forms: the "Black Hole Syndrome". This is generally associated with a geographical defined area that lacks governance and security, where territorial rule is normally taken by the groups that control the illicit economy and people. The 'Black Hole' is the worst-case scenario for the nexus manifestation, in which the convergence of crime and terror help perpetuate the extreme insecure conditions of a region where groups vie for the control of the economic and/or political power through the spread of violence and an array of criminal activities.

In short, we could summarize it as follows:

Transactional nexus:

1. Alliances: Seeking efficiency, each group begins to *outsource* services such as forgery or bomb making.
2. Appropriation of tactics: terror and criminal groups may *imitate* each other methods.

Organizational nexus:

1. Integration: two forms, first an alliance between the groups that evolves

and they start to *collaborate more regularly* and share goals and methods; or second, which is a targeted recruitment into a terrorist cell through the integration of a radicalized group of experienced criminals.

2. Hybrid: The group's terror and crime activities become *equally important* for the group and central to its existence.

Transformation: This happens when the essential aims and motivations of the group *change* to a point that the original *raison d'être* ceases to exist. Or, in other words, a terrorist group becomes a criminal one, or vice versa.

Now that the essence of the elements that characterize crime/terror nexus have been delineated in this section, it is important to understand how the United Nations has been approaching this theme through many actions that have converged into the making of the Policy Toolkit mentioned above which was published in 2019.

The United Nations response

The evolving relationship between terrorism and organised crime has posed



⁷ Criminal entities evolving to become terror groups are much less frequent. It can be said this is an exception to the rule. There is one documented case which is the group called D-Company (Dawood Ibrahim Group).

significant challenges to the international community. Progressing from simple co-existence towards a symbiotic relationship, the lines between these seemingly distinct activities are now becoming increasingly blurred, making it difficult to differentiate between “pure” terrorist groups, their criminal counterparts, or something in-between. Therefore, in time, the Security Council resolutions on this topic, starting from the first being 2195 (2014), have increasingly developed into something more focused in order to clarify the relations between crime and terrorism in a progressive way.

It has been seen that the nexus erodes the security and development of states and entire regions. It undermines the rule of law and state ca-

phenomena. And indeed, in recognition of this, numerous Security Council resolutions have addressed this topic, the most recent being [2482 \(2019\)](#) which states that the nexus can complicate conflict prevention and resolution efforts, and calls for Member States to strengthen, where appropriate, their criminal justice, law enforcement and border-control capacities, and to develop their capacity to investigate, prosecute, disrupt, and dismantle trafficking networks to address the linkages between terrorism and organized crime, whether domestic or transnational.

UNICRI has been working since 2016 on better understanding and addressing the links between organized crime and terrorism, as called upon by Security Council resolution

the Institute began working on the [Nexus Initiative](#) in partnership with the Global Counter-terrorism Forum (GCTF) under which regional meetings were organized to cover different global areas.⁸ This led to the development by UNICRI of [The Hague Good Practices on the Nexus Between Transnational Organized Crime and Terrorism](#). The 25 good practices provide non-binding recommendations for Member States and interested stakeholders to assist them in developing policies and strategies to counter the nexus. To support Member States further in operationalizing the good practices, UNICRI developed the [Nexus Policy Toolkit](#),⁹ which is divided into two sections: the first provides a conceptual overview of the nexus and its manifestations in diverse settings and ena-

bling factors; and the second provides guidance on actionable steps to implement each good practice, and suggests actors to involve. The Toolkit has been used since 2019 for tailor-made awareness-raising and capacity-building activities, for practitioners of different levels and different sectors, and from requesting Member States across different continents.

Conclusions/ Recommendations

Considering the differences in how the nexus is manifested in the Sahel region and in Latin America, despite there being clear links between the two, the recommendations on what to look out for in terms of identifying and addressing the nexus are similar in most regions, the latter two included. Following the extensive research carried out in different regions, as well as information gained through discussion with Member States in different regions, the below are the conclusions about

how an effective approach to counter the nexus should be structured.

1. It is paramount that coordination and cooperation between countries takes place to counter the nexus. Since the nexus usually happens as a cross border activity and is transnational in nature. We have seen from the above examples that trafficking routes and the links between the different steps of activities can occur across different regions and even continents.



capacities to combat these... **“The nexus erodes the security and development of states and entire regions”**



⁸ Regions covered included: East Africa and the Horn, West Africa and the Sahel, the Balkans, and South Asia and Southeast Asia regions.
⁹ We encourage readers to take a quick look at the Nexus Policy Toolkit.

2. Considering that the nexus involves several types of crimes within the distinct steps of the 'terrorism cycle' (which includes the terrorist incident but also the radicalization and recruitment, the financing, and so on), interactions between criminals and terrorists make up a matrix of relations that demand a whole-of-society approach within a given country. Hence, the lack of interagency (and private sector) cooperation when it comes to sharing intelligence and fieldwork, inevitable prevents an effective State response.
3. Governments should engage civil society actors in the process of raising

awareness on the nexus. Actors such as NGOs, religious leaders, scholars, community leaders, journalists, and others at the community level should be involved. These actors are not only very often the first to notice the development of the nexus within the community, but they are also strategic partners needed to build community resilience towards the nexus and peripheral activities occurring in and around their community.

4. Many actors remain unaware of the nexus, not understanding how to recognize it and its enabling factors, and lacking analytical, investigative and prosecutorial capacity to

better address this threat. Thus, judicial officers, prosecutors and those in other sectors should be trained to recognize the nexus when they see it, and trained to effectively develop strategies to address it.

5. Addressing the prevention aspect of the nexus is paramount. It is important to look at what the grievances are: this means that countries should focus on human rights issues, civil liberties and social inclusion policies which are fundamental to ensure that lack of these does not create a fertile ground for the nexus to propagate.



“ Governments should engage civil society actors in the process of raising awareness on the nexus ”



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As an academic researcher, his main themes of research are: terrorism/CT, insurgency/COIN, countering transnational organized crime and asymmetric conflicts. He is a research fellow at research centres in Brazil and abroad. He has written and published a number of articles and book chapters in Portuguese, English and Spanish. He is also a lecturer and instructor at post-graduation level in Brazil and overseas.

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