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Organized Crime and Violent Extremism across the Sahel Sahara



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Impact through Insight

Trends in Violent Extremism and Organized Crime

- The seeds for coexistence were first sewn in Algeria's civil war where in the late 1990s' regime forces drove VE groups towards the country's southern periphery.
- In this geographical space, both VE groups and criminal networks overlapped, tolerated and indirectly benefited from each other's existence.
- Algerian terrorist groups found in this broad trans-Saharan geography, marked by porosity and permeability, the financial lifeline to evolve and thrive.

- The emergence of the high-profit kidnap-for-ransom industry in the early 2000s was **the second major development** that brought VE groups and criminal organizations in contact.
- Locally ingrained criminal gangs leveraged their contacts and knowledge of the terrain to conduct the abductions and then sell the Westerners kidnapped to VE groups.
- But cooperation was mostly ad hoc, and never truly developed into partnerships or enduring alliances.

- The flow of cocaine through West Africa in the mid-2000s was **the third major trend**.
- Most significantly, this brought narco-traffickers to the same spots occupied by VE groups.
- This coexistence has sparked numerous claims about a budding entente between dark networks who have no ideological connections but plenty of common interests.

Terror-Drug Nexus?

- The issue of convergence or even collaborative alliance between VE groups and drug traffickers is deeply contested.
- Beyond anecdotal evidence, proponents of such links have struggled to provide any hard empirical evidence of VE groups' involvement in the business of drug trafficking.
- To the extent that there is involvement in drug trafficking, the links concern individuals or groups within or close to VE groups rather than the organizations themselves.

The 2010's Tectonic Shifts

- The 2011 Libyan crisis and the 2012 rebellion in northern Mali opened new strategic opportunities for armed groups, criminals and VE groups to strengthen their operational capacity.
- The most resourceful criminal actors leveraged their strength to carve out a bigger share of existing criminal markets as well as emerging new trafficking spots.
- VE groups had also to reposition themselves in a context where alliances are fluid.

New Phase of Consolidation and Diversification

- The French-led intervention in northern Mali in early 2013 and Algeria's substantial military deployments in its border areas caused significant displacement of terrorists, criminals, and organized bandits.
- By the mid-2010's, widespread insecurity and instability, coupled with the increasing militarization of the region, have also had a significant effect on the business activities of criminals and VE groups.
- The high value business of drug trafficking, human smuggling, movement of weapons, and kidnapping of Westerners contracted.

- As criminal economies contracted, most VE groups, trafficking and smuggling networks adapted their operations.
- For VE groups, the financial squeeze on the kidnap for ransom business have made them more reliant on local illicit markets, notably artisanal gold mining, poaching and livestock.



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