Organized Crime and Violent Extremism across the Sahel Sahara

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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.