



THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ORGANIZED CRIME AND TERRORISM: THE CASE OF THE AFRICAN COAST

Dr. Antonin Tisseron

Researcher and expert on issues of extremism and conflict

The fact that terrorist groups are flagrantly involved in drug trafficking, in general, and in the Sahel, in particular, has become well-established; it is a blatant phenomenon regularly opened up for public discussions. Despite the fact that the United Nations Security Council emphasizes in Resolution 2482 of 2019 that terrorism and crime are inextricably intertwined, this interrelationship and the method thereof are two complex matters. This is more evident in the Sahel, whether it is related to cocaine in northern Mali, or to tramadol in the Lake Chad Basin. In the following sections, we will discuss the levels of the relationship between organized crime and terrorism across the region.

CRIME AND TERRORIST FINANCING

The relationship at this level is limited to the link between terrorist financing and criminal activities. This is most evident in the Sahel by terrorist groups involved in various criminal practices to finance their activities, including but not limited to kidnapping local citizens or international figures to obtain ransom, extorting citizens in areas under their control, stealing livestock or other goods. Anti-state armed groups perpetrate different crimes and actions that fall under revolutionary banditry.

In the context of examining the dependence of terrorist groups on crime financing, two things should be referred to. First, the availability of local and foreign donations; terrorist groups finance each other to support and expand the scope of the war against the government authorities, especially when creating a new cell or branch. Second, it is related to drug trafficking; despite what is rumored about drug jihad, the real actors in drug trafficking are not necessarily members of terrorist groups. Terrorist groups undoubtedly benefit from the funds associated with such activity in various indirect fashions.

More importantly, on the issue of financing armed terrorist groups and their involvement in drug trafficking, two basic matters need to be discussed: the relationship between criminals and terrorists, and the methods of spreading crime-based terrorism.

CRIMINALS AND TERRORISTS

Criminals and terrorists are closely related, and this is manifested through four types of relationships:

1. **Coexistence:** Criminals and terrorist groups share the same geographical space, and each category works for a different purpose: criminals seek material gains; while, terrorists pursue a political, ideological and social change. Both categories interact with each other to achieve their goals.
2. **Cooperation:** The symbiotic relationship of coexistence generates actual cooperation based on specific foundations. A telling example is when smugglers and traffickers support a terrorist attack while terrorists protect a convoy controlled by smugglers and traffickers.
3. **Harmony:** it is a state of acculturation between the two parties; terrorist groups adopt some criminal knowledge and practices, and criminals adopt some methods of terrorist action.
4. **Transformation:** This is when a terrorist group abandons its political engagement to carry out criminal practices, seeking only financial gain, or a criminal group adopts a political and ideological conflict.

Whatever the relationships between terrorists and criminals are, the following features draw a line between the two categories:

- a) **Pragmatic mutual interest:** None of these actors has a real interest in fomenting and sowing conflict with the other.
- b) **Dependence on the nature of their environment:** the nature of the environment in the Sahel has a special situation, which should be taken into account.

c) **Taking into account the inter-group differences:** each group has its own goals, objectives, methods and means.

In 2012, many analysts made a reference to the existing links between the “Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa” and the key drug traffickers of Mali. Yet, such a relationship was not direct, and discussions were heated internally between members of terrorist groups due to the illegality and illegitimacy of drugs.

The same was the case in Kidal and Timbuktu, as the positions differed, swinging between acceptance and rejection, and may reach hostility towards the contraband dealers.

In recent years, as a result of international military pressure on both sides, terrorist groups have become more tolerant of drug traffickers, as their priority is to survive and continue their operations.

In this regard, a team of experts from the United Nations in Mali denounced the cooperation of contraband traffickers with terrorist groups. This cooperation is due to two drivers:

First, the symbiotic existence of common interests for both parties; traffickers provide operational field facilities to terrorists in exchange for protection, so drug traffickers have a great interest in not antagonizing terrorists lest they would ban their activities in specific areas.

Second, the persons involved in illicit trafficking and the terrorists belonging to the same ethnic groups or tribes; some of them may even come from the same family.

Alongside this close cooperation, criminals integrated into terrorist groups. Some old contraband traffickers joined terrorist groups, bringing with them their skills, knowledge and experience; some of them did important work in these groups. It seems that the close relationship has increased in recent years as banditry has risen to prominence. In the borderline areas in particular, young criminals who are attracted by terrorist propaganda and the concessions provided are recruited; they merge into the groups on a part-time basis, and provide terrorist groups with their field knowledge and their relations with local communities.

ORGANIZED CRIME MAKES A BREEDING GROUND FOR TERRORISM

This is related to the influence of criminal groups in the environment in which terrorist groups operate. Through their practices, the active and influential criminal groups facilitated the process of establishing terrorist groups, empowerment and expansion, as organized crime contributed to increasing social and ethnic unrest, which in turn allowed terrorist groups to snowball into reality, capitalizing on these favorable conditions of turmoil and divisions. The smugglers and traffickers communicated with government agencies to invalidate the legitimacy of government representatives. Against this chaos, the political and social reality has become charged with speeches calling for reforming the general situation and a moral and political revolution. Capitalizing on this uncertainty, terrorist groups fed on the tug-of-war in their propaganda by denouncing elite corruption, in addition to anti-colonial arguments.

The political unrest and religious movements had a major contribution to fragmenting and enfeebling the political and social fabric, and paving the way for the emergence of political and religious groups that demand to take up arms and support the revolution in the name of religion. Violence per se fueled revenge, conflict mounted and terrorist recruitment increased. The combination of political, religious and social causes that contributed to the emergence and development of terrorism does not reduce the risk of organized crime and the impact on societies and governments, generating a breeding ground for terrorist extremist groups to mushroom ubiquitously.

The fight against organized crime, especially trafficking, which generates profits and gains in abundance and causes a whole host of rampant, rife and endemic corruption, should not be separated from the fight against terrorism. The great challenge in the fight against organized crime is the risk of influential criminals joining terrorist groups. Therefore, wisdom must be exercised and the danger and difficulty of the issue must be taken into account, especially in borderline areas, and to better develop various programs aimed at promoting integration, strengthening ties between the government and local communities, taking into account the specificity of the environment, addressing the conditions that fuel organized crime to balloon into greater dangers. This also includes working out solutions that dry up the sources of crime and limit the influence of members of criminal groups.