



**COVITE**

Colectivo de Víctimas  
del Terrorismo



**OIET**

OBSERVATORIO INTERNACIONAL  
DE ESTUDIOS SOBRE TERRORISMO

# TERRORISM, HUMAN TRAFFICKING AND MIGRANT SMUGGLING

## SITUATION ANALYSIS IN AFRICA AND THE MIDDLE EAST



GOBIERNO  
DE ESPAÑA

MINISTERIO  
DE ASUNTOS EXTERIORES, UNIÓN EUROPEA  
Y COOPERACIÓN



**COVITE**

Colectivo de Víctimas  
del Terrorismo



**OIET**

OBSERVATORIO INTERNACIONAL  
DE ESTUDIOS SOBRE TERRORISMO

# TERRORISM, HUMAN TRAFFICKING AND MIGRANT SMUGGLING

SITUATION ANALYSIS IN  
AFRICA AND THE MIDDLE  
EAST

---

ANA AGUILERA | 2024

© Edition: COVITE, 2024

COVITE

Apdo. de Correos 3358

20080 San Sebastián (Guipuzkoa) (Spain)

© of the texts: The author

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form by any means, including photocopying, recording, or other electronic methods without the prior written permission of the author, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in reviews and certain other noncommercial uses permitted by copyright law. For permission requests, write to the author.

Cover image: REUTERS/Rodi Said

Text: Ana Aguilera

Coordination: Carlos Igualada

Design: Romina da Silva

## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

The dynamics of the illicit economy surrounding human exploitation have intensified among criminal actors, extending to those with extremist political agendas. This association has linked the exploitation of vulnerable individuals to terrorist activities. The proceeds from these crimes have directly and indirectly supported terrorist agendas, perpetuating a continuous cycle of exploitation that is difficult to dismantle.

Terrorist groups, like many other non-state armed actors, have shown significant interest in the human exploitation industry due to its multifunctional capabilities, using it as both an operational and financial tactic. This interest has led them to incorporate organized crime activities into their operations. Consequently, regardless of military setbacks or territorial losses in certain areas, terrorism remains one of the most active perpetrators of crimes associated with “modern slavery”. This includes sexual crimes against women and children, forced recruitment, and activities of intimidation and indoctrination.

This report analyzes the links between terrorism and organized crime dedicated to human trafficking and smuggling. Based on a comprehensive analysis of information from open sources, local sources, and public security agencies, the study aims to update and solidify the existing relationship and identify ways to combat this hybrid relationship.

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>1. INTRODUCTION .....</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>2. TERRORISM AND ORGANIZED CRIME: HYBRID PHENOMENA.....</b>	<b>8</b>
2.1. HUMAN EXPLOITATION AS A METHOD OF TERRORISM FINANCIN.....	9
2.2. HUMAN EXPLOITATION AS AN OPERATIVE METHOD OF TERRORISM.....	15
2.2.1. Use as a Warfare Tactic.....	15
2.2.2. Use as a Recruitment Tactic.....	16
2.2.3. Use as an Identity Tactic.....	17
2.2.4. Use as a Mobility Tactic.....	18
<b>3. FACTORS PROMOTING HUMAN EXPLOITATION IN AFRICA AND THE MIDDLE EAST.....</b>	<b>19</b>
3.1. POROUS AND POORLY CONTROLLED BORDERS.....	20
3.2. INSTITUTIONAL FRAGILITY, CORRUPTION, AND LACK OF POLITICAL GOVERNANCE.....	21
3.3. UNDERDEVELOPMENT AND POVERTY.....	22
3.4. ARMED CONFLICTS.....	23
<b>4. FROM THEORY TO PRACTICE: CASE STUDIES.....</b>	<b>25</b>
4.1. ISLAMIC STATE OF IRAQ AND SYRIA.....	26
4.2. ISLAMIC STATE IN LIBYA.....	31
4.3. JNIM IN THE WESTERN SAHEL.....	39
4.4. BOKO HARAM IN NIGERIA.....	45
4.5. AL SHABAAB IN SOMALIA.....	49
<b>5. EFFORTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS.....</b>	<b>53</b>
<b>6. CONCLUSIONS.....</b>	<b>57</b>
<b>7. REFERENCES.....</b>	<b>60</b>

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Human trafficking, the third-largest criminal industry in the world after drug and arms trafficking, constitutes the main criminal market in Africa according to the Global Organized Crime Index (2023). According to figures from the International Labour Organization (ILO, 2019), this business generates approximately \$150 billion annually by exploiting nearly 50 million people who, at some point in their lives, suffer what the 2023 edition of the Global Slavery Index calls a new form of “modern slavery” (Global Slavery Index, 2023).

Migrant smuggling is also significant. As a phenomenon that has reproduced over centuries, this migratory diaspora has been facilitated in the current era of globalization and the interconnected reconfiguration of the global economic and financial system, including developing and developed countries. Transnational organized crime has capitalized on this process, expanding its range of activities to offer transportation services through legal and illegal channels.

The clandestine nature of migrant smuggling and the variables affecting the final price prevent this criminal market from having precise statistics. However, some research has uncovered figures for established routes in regions of Europe and America, amounting to \$6.75 billion in revenue (FATF, 2022). In the historic trans-Saharan trade routes, this reality is even more pronounced. Well-established trafficking and smuggling routes between Chad, Mali, Niger, and Sudan run from the eastern flank to the interior of West Africa, as well as between sub-Saharan Africa and North Africa. In these regions, significant terrorist groups affiliated with Al Qaeda and the Islamic State operate, along with rebel groups and ethnic militias, each with a portfolio of interests facilitated by organized crime from which they benefit greatly, involving drugs, arms, oil, and, naturally, people.

Migrants traveling these routes face criminal groups that facilitate their transit in exchange for later payment, often resulting in a debt that is difficult to repay and frequently leads to forced labor, sexual slavery, or servitude. Forced prostitution and



trafficking of women in Nigeria are so economically significant that they often result in their sale to traffickers in other parts of Africa, connected through corridors controlled by networks and other criminal syndicates.

Human trafficking is a widespread criminal activity involving a multitude of actors and countries. It is a mistake to think that only organized crime or terrorism participates in this activity. In countries like Nigeria and Somalia, both rebel militias and national troops are responsible for indiscriminate sexual violence against women and mass recruitment of child soldiers, as confirmed by some accounts from rescued victims<sup>1</sup>.

This issue is not trivial. Human trafficking and migrant smuggling are crimes that directly violate fundamental human rights and generate billions of dollars in annual profits globally, a volume that significantly increases in contexts of war, conflict, and protracted crises. Factors such as political instability, erosion of the rule of law, lack of opportunities, and economic underdevelopment are increasingly intertwined with the dynamics of human exploitation, leading to the destruction and desolation of entire communities that continue to lack the necessary response from national and international authorities.

More recently, we observe a new actor joining this criminal ecosystem: terrorist actors. Whether in a remote scenario or the neighborhood closest to the conflict, investigations point to the Islamic State (IS), Al Qaeda (AQ), or Boko Haram as some of the main organizations involved in this illegal business based on goals that, as we will see, range from financial needs to their own strategic and operational objectives. One of the most egregious cases illustrating this phenomenon, though not the only one, is the persecution and subsequent abuse of the Yazidi community by the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria during the peak of their caliphate project in 2014, widely documented for its continuity over time and its particular severity.

Through this and other case studies, this research aims to address how terrorism is related to human trafficking activities as a tool to control and exploit vulnerable populations, promote ideology, and increase recruitment while benefiting the group's finances.

.....  
1 Sources from the Spanish General Information Commissioner's Office (CGI) consulted by the author, October 2023.

Despite the abundance of evidence pointing to a connection between these two criminal phenomena, demonstrating and delineating the link between human exploitation and terrorism remains a significant challenge, especially in war and conflict zones where these crimes are prevalent but often go unnoticed due to chaos and the proliferation of other criminal activities. This difficulty in assessing the terrorism-organized crime relationship, particularly in conflict contexts, does not mean we should ignore the issue. In such situations, large groups, especially the most vulnerable, are preyed upon by traffickers and become victims of exploitation that transcends borders and ideologies. However, it is necessary to keep these limitations in mind throughout this reading to find research opportunities related to this phenomenon in the future, including a situational analysis based on specific contexts.

Aside from the introductory and concluding sections, the research is divided into four main blocks. The first section discusses the increasing connection between terrorism and organized crime, often treated as a single entity through a process called hybridization. After examining their commonalities, we will explore the factors contributing to the growth of human exploitation in West Africa, North Africa, and the Middle East. This will be supported by case studies focusing on the regional affiliates and central structures of the two global terrorism movements: the Islamic State and Al Qaeda. A case study on Boko Haram will also be analyzed for its relevance and utility to the research objective. Finally, a series of recommendations will be identified to shed light on the way forward and deploy possible improvement strategies to combat the hybridization process and its associated criminal activities.

## **2. Terrorism and Organized Crime: Hybrid Phenomena**

The United Nations Security Council held its first meeting on human trafficking in the context of armed conflicts in December 2015. During the debate, the UN's highest security body condemned all acts of trafficking perpetrated by the Islamic State, Boko Haram, and other groups, considering that such abuses in a conflict context could constitute war crimes. To support this statement, the Council welcomed Nadia Murad Basee Taha, UNODC Goodwill Ambassador for the Dignity of Survivors of Human Trafficking, who shared her experiences as a sexual slave of the Islamic State (CTED, 2021: 16).



As mentioned in the introductory chapter, human trafficking is the third-largest criminal industry in the world, making it an attractive market for terrorist organizations. Over time, the link between terrorism and various human trafficking activities, such as sexual violence or kidnapping, has not been new, although their interconnection has only recently been recognized by the highest levels of United Nations bodies and governments worldwide. Despite often being understood as separate phenomena, terrorism and organized crime frequently share common needs and conditions conducive to collaboration<sup>2</sup>. These dynamics of mutual interrelation have been widely debated, particularly regarding the versatility and opportunism terrorist organizations demonstrate when exploiting these illicit activities (Jespersen, Ochieng & Burudi, 2022: 6).

Understanding the reasons and methods terrorists use in these activities is not an easy task, especially since research often relies solely on the existence of permissive environments or the inadequacy of an international legal and judicial framework against terrorism financing. However, this approach does

not truly capture the complexity of the network.

Researchers Nazli Avdan and Mariya Omelicheva (2021) go beyond this theoretical reductionism and offer two major categories that explain the motivations behind terrorist involvement in human trafficking and other criminal phenomena: financial motivation and strategic or operational motivation. Despite the practical reality that terrorist instrumentalization of human exploitation usually has multiple interrelated uses, these categories provide a solid methodological framework for classifying the different motives and justifications that foster violent extremism's involvement in this criminal market. Both are complementary and based on 1) bolstering the finances of the terrorist structure, thereby ensuring its survival, and 2) legitimizing their political and ideological goals in the eyes of their militants and the society they seek to subjugate.

## 2.1. Human Exploitation as a Method of Terrorism Financing

Records and evidence gathered on terrorist activities related to human trafficking demonstrate primarily that this

.....  
 2 For more information on the relationship between terrorism and some of the main criminal industries, see the following research: Aguilera, A. (2022). *Tráfico de drogas y yihadismo en África*, and Aguilera, A. (2023). *Terrorism and organized crime: trafficking and smuggling of arms in North Africa and the Sahel*, available on the Observatorio Internacional de Estudios sobre Terrorismo website in both Spanish and English versions.

enterprise serves as a critical source of income for armed groups.

Unlike individual terrorists or small scattered groups worldwide with moderate economic needs, central structures and satellite organizations require an extensive financial network to ensure their survival, train their troops, maintain their strongholds and command centers, and deploy robust recruitment campaigns that lead to territorial expansion and ideological dominance. Therefore, it is unsurprising that they often resort to trafficking and smuggling various goods—from drugs, people, and weapons to objects, antiquities, natural resources, or oil—to maintain their financial health.

In this scenario, leveraging human exploitation as a method of terrorism financing is no longer considered a residual phenomenon, with data recording its use on multiple occasions. Since 1990, specific cases of this phenomenon have been documented in Kurdish, Chechen, and other organizations located in the Indian subcontinent, as well as various separatist, nationalist, and guerrilla groups that use the human industry as a preferred source of funding. The greater the opportunity, capabilities, and potential benefits, the higher the

likelihood of armed actors engaging in criminal activities.

Focusing on jihadist groups, we see that since the emergence and increasing presence of Islamist organizations worldwide, investigations into networks in the Middle East and Europe responsible for engaging in these illicit activities have been documented, enabling them to earn millions of euros in profits. One of the early 21st-century cases is the Ansar Al Islam network established in Milan, responsible for providing shelters, recruiting volunteers, and raising millions of euros by infiltrating Kurdish migrants into Europe (Townsend & Mili, 2008).

Indeed, mafias have observed recurring fundraising patterns in Europe dedicated to smuggling operations in a continent facing one of the highest migration pressures globally. Routes traversing India, Uzbekistan, Moscow, Ukraine, Slovakia, Austria, Italy, and Belgium have been documented—a transit map that, in the context of the Ukrainian conflict and increased tensions in other territories, offers multiple opportunities to advance and expand this criminal business in Europe.

# THE GARSALLAOUI NETWORK

The Garsallaoui network exemplifies how criminal networks can leverage various illicit activities to finance their operations. In the first decade of the 2000s, human smuggling was a key component of their strategy, allowing them to move between Pakistan and Europe and establish connections with Al Qaeda. They used their expertise on these routes to expand their business into smuggling illegal immigrants to Europe.

The connection between Garsallaoui and Mohammed Akremi Gharsallaoui with Al Qaeda's central command in Pakistan highlighted how these networks become interconnected, using different criminal activities to complement each other. From drug trafficking to Islamist recruitment, these organizations exploit any opportunity to expand their reach and income (Makarenko, 2012: 46).



Al-Qaeda and Islamic State-affiliated organizations levy fees on transit routes for goods and other merchandise, including migratory flows. Although their presence in territories controlled by other criminal groups often prevents them from monopolizing the migration business entirely, they manage to benefit economically by controlling transit routes and offering protection during the journey. It is also important to note that certain terrorist groups have evolved from previously established criminal bases, particularly in West Africa. Therefore, despite elements of these groups settled in the Sahel prioritizing infiltration and clandestinity among the diverse communities inhabiting these areas, collaboration with criminal syndicates that share dialects, history, and culture has been preferred. Given that human traffickers generally "recruit" from their own ethnic and cultural pools, it is not surprising that the common practice in these cases involves blending roles, information, routes, and benefits among all involved parties.

In this context, it is important to highlight the significant revenue that can be generated from human trafficking compared to other types of criminal activities. In the case of human smuggling, the trafficker does business during the journey from the point of origin to the final destination. The same applies to drug trafficking or natural resource trafficking, as they are single-use goods that seek to generate profits or income only during the process of delivering the merchandise, the distribution channel, market information, and competitors, or the sale to the final consumer, to name a few key points in the chain where one can truly find profit. However, human trafficking provides multiple simultaneous benefits and performs many more functions than any other resource that can be bought and sold, making this aspect of human exploitation one of the most interesting and promising markets for many actors. This “commodification” of human life depends on the value the seller intends to give it, meaning that the criminal seeks to maximize their product’s return, even if it means engaging in severe practices against human dignity<sup>3</sup>.

One of the most internationalized cases of terrorist engagement in the human trafficking business, due to its ability to influence individuals beyond the local domain, is kidnapping for ransom. Multiple terrorist organizations, from the Islamic State and its affiliates to Al Qaeda and its territorial branches, have taken advantage of and continue to use this terrorist tactic to obtain large sums of money. Despite the prohibition of ransom payments for the release of hostages, there have been cases where international governments have yielded to terrorist pressure to free their nationals from captivity.

Generally, kidnappings in the Western Sahel are more focused on obtaining financial returns<sup>4</sup>, while groups active in the Lake Chad area often use them for operational purposes<sup>5</sup>. In specific geographic points such as North Africa, this practice, especially towards Westerners, has been very profitable for a large number of Salafist groups.

.....

3 In the case of the Islamic State, its fighters have even forced their victims to take contraceptives to prevent pregnancies that would hinder the resale of enslaved women (Kenny & Malik, 2019).

4 Sources from the Spanish General Information Commissioner’s Office (CGI) consulted by the author, October 2023.

5 While this reality is well-documented, the security scenario in West Africa is so fluid that both sets of motivations often find exceptions, again influenced by context, opportunity, and available resources.

**Unlike individual terrorists or small scattered groups worldwide with moderate economic needs, central structures and satellite organizations require an extensive financial network to ensure their survival**

Of all the cases that could be mentioned, the kidnapping of 32 European tourists by the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC) in February 2003 stands out as one of the main incidents that paved the way for subsequent similar actions by the same group before and after its conversion to Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). The ransom sum, elevated by some reports to a figure ranging between five and ten million dollars, confirms the high profitability to the organization's fighters (Forest, 2019: 6). Subsequently, it was estimated that AQIM had raised nearly 90 million dollars in revenue from ransom payments alone between 2003 and 2012 (CSS, 2013). The political motivations behind these acts played a limited role, as the profits and the exchange of conditions (such as the release of prisoners linked to

AQIM or MUJAO) seem to be the focus of the explanation (Lacher, 2012: 9). Despite a significant decline in Western kidnappings since 2012, trends in 2022 suggest this decrease might be reversing. In fact, between 22% and 44% of JNIM's annual income in 2017 came from ransom payments from nationals and foreign individuals (Berger, 2023).

Al Qaeda and its regional forces in Africa and the Middle East are not the only groups benefiting from the practice of kidnapping for ransom as a financial method for their organization. Records of this activity by the Islamic State are also widely documented. Later, we will focus on the Yazidi genocide in Iraq and Syria due to its severity and longevity. However, significant evidence of these practices by Islamic State affiliates in Africa also exists. In the Lake Chad basin region, the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) competes with Boko Haram for this criminal activity, while the Islamic State Central Africa Province (ISCAP) has used kidnappings as a recurrent mechanism since its integration and formation of the franchise in 2019 (Weiss et al., 2023: 36).

Beyond the African scenario, some investigations point to Islamic State franchises, such as the one operating in



Khorasan (IS-K), as entities capable of generating significant income through the practice of kidnappings and extortion (United States Department of the Treasury, 2024), amassing wealth for a franchise currently holding the greatest capacity to attack European soil on a global scale.

In addition to the practice of kidnapping for ransom, another terrorist tactic involved in human trafficking activities for financial purposes is the sale of organs. Although controversial and underexplored in literature, several documented cases highlight this practice being justified by the core structures of some organizations.

In 2015, U.S. Special Forces in Syria recovered a *fatwa* from the Islamic State justifying the extraction of organs from “infidels”, stating that “the apostate’s life and organs don’t have to be respected and may be taken with impunity” (Reuters, 2016). Interviews by the International Center for the Study of Violent Extremism (ICSVE) with Islamic State defectors included the account of the organization’s former surgeon, who claimed to have removed kidneys and corneas from prisoners under the justification that “jihadists were more deserving of organs”. A fighter also claimed he was prevented from killing

slaves because he was informed that the organization needed “to use their bodies to make money [for organ trade]” (CTED, 2021: 37). In February 2015, Iraqi Ambassador Mohamed Alhakim requested the United Nations Security Council to investigate the death of twelve doctors in Mosul, who he claimed were killed by Islamic State fighters after refusing to extract organs from corpses, some of which were mutilated with a cut on the back where the kidneys were located (Beqiri, Maluku, & Maluku, 2023).

Subsequent analyses suggest that most kidneys and other organs sold on the black market came from Syrian, Sudanese, Somali, and Eritrean refugees in Syrian camps who crossed into Lebanon from temporary settlements controlled by the then Al Qaeda affiliate Jabhat Al-Nusra and its associates (CTED, 2021: 38). Thus, the trafficking and sale of organs can constitute a moderate but still significant part of the financing of the larger cause of the organization, encompassing virtually all possibilities of human trafficking in their strategic financial plans.



## 2.2. Human Exploitation as an Operative Method of Terrorism

Terrorist organizations use human exploitation not just for economic gain but also to advance their operational goals. These groups seek to legitimize their actions to challenge and eventually overthrow regimes by gaining popular support (Paul, Clarke, & Grill, 2010). This ultimate goal often justifies the use of dubious methods for fund acquisition and strategy implementation (Avdan & Omelicheva, 2021: 5).

For instance, Hezbollah issued a *fatwa* in the mid-1980s justifying drug trafficking from a religious perspective (Hernández, 2013). Similarly, the Islamic State defended slavery and sexual violence through its *Dabiq* magazine, claiming these practices align with their ideological goals (Malik, 2017). Numerous other terrorist groups also justify, sympathize with, and even encourage acts that may initially appear impure or contrary to their fundamentalist doctrine. This justification applies to human trafficking and smuggling, akin to the moral basis of the drug trade (Aguilera, 2022: 21).

In the following subsections, we will break down the main objectives behind the justification of terrorist

participation in human exploitation as an operational method. To this end, four areas have been identified<sup>6</sup> to categorize the justificatory basis of terrorist groups: the use of human exploitation as a tactic of warfare; recruitment; identity; and mobility.

### 2.2.1. Use as a Warfare Tactic

Human exploitation as a warfare tactic aims to terrorize and destabilize communities, undermine trust in the government, and create a climate of fear and distrust in society (Crawford, 2017). This allows terrorist groups to sow terror and achieve their goals.

The United Nations Security Council Resolution 1820 (2008) recognized rape and other forms of sexual violence can constitute a “war crime, a crime against humanity, or a constitutive act with respect to genocide”. It highlighted that “women and girls are particularly targeted by the use of sexual violence, including as a tactic of war to humiliate, dominate, instil fear in, disperse and/or forcibly relocate civilian members of a community or ethnic group; and that sexual violence perpetrated in this manner may in some instances persist after the cessation of hostilities” (UNSC, 2008).

.....  
<sup>6</sup> These domains are not mutually exclusive. Evidence suggests that human trafficking and smuggling likely overlap in two or more simultaneous areas.

This tactic continues in many parts of the world, from Boko Haram's intimidating sexual violence in Nigeria to Al Shabaab in Somalia using human trafficking to terrorize civilians and challenge state structures (Avdan & Omelicheva, 2021: 6). These groups also use sexual predation to strengthen bonds among their fighters and create a sense of power among those committing violent acts (Malik, 2017).

Thus, human trafficking has become an opportunistic tactic to spread terror and subjugate the population. The 2018 Secretary-General's Report on Conflict-Related Sexual Violence mentioned sexual assault precisely as a weapon of war and a significant source of profit for both state and non-state armed groups. Similarly, forced pregnancies, marriages, and conversions are part of the modus operandi of organizations seeking to subjugate a specific population, ensuring the spread of ideology and a future pool of combatants for their cause (Kenny & Malik, 2019).

Even if these individuals are liberated in an optimistic scenario, their path remains challenging. Their status as sexual victims often turns them into outcasts, breaking family ties through shame and stigma. The Secretary-General

reported this in 2017 (UNSC, 2017a: 4), indicating that these vulnerable and displaced groups often lack the option to return to their communities or leave behind those who have caused them such harm.

### 2.2.2. Use as a Recruitment Tactic

In addition to being a warfare tactic, terrorist organizations use victims of trafficking and sexual exploitation as a means to maintain discipline among their members and as an incentive to recruit and retain new fighters. This practice is based on offering those interested in joining the possibility of having enslaved people as servants or spouses, which becomes a strategy to both increase their base of soldiers and reward members who achieve more success in their operations (Cohen, 2013). Another option is to use these slaves as a punishment towards rival groups and communities that cooperate with the enemy or are defiant, a common practice in the tri-border area between Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, where Al Qaeda's affiliate (JNIM) and the Islamic State (IS-Sahel) operate.

The issue of child soldiers is even more delicate. This type of recruitment is common in both terrorist organizations and other armed groups and govern-

ment forces<sup>7</sup>. The appearance of child combatants in the Democratic Republic of Congo repeating the Islamic State's slogan of "remaining and expanding", broadcasted in a video by the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF) in July 2020, highlights the use of minors in armed conflict, from frontline soldiers to the use of children as suicide weapons<sup>8</sup>. The latter generates global exposure of the message, greater media attention, and a deeper impact than that caused by terrorist violence carried out by men, exerting even more pressure on governments and seeking to force a response (Avdan & Omelicheva, 2021: 7).

Children can be employed in various roles, such as soldiers, messengers, cooks, guards, or sexual slaves, without the need for explicit consent. This is particularly interesting for terrorist organizations, as trafficking adults usually requires coercive means such as threats, kidnappings, or deception to obtain the victim's consent. In the case of children, this element is not necessarily essential, as only the consent, submission, or deception of the family is needed. When human trafficking is used as a recruitment tactic, alliances between criminal groups and terrorist organizations become mutually beneficial, with the latter drawing from the same pool of recruits in exchange for offering safe passage to the former.

### 2.2.3. Use as an Identity Tactic

The use of human exploitation as a tactic of coercion and intimidation is starkly evident in campaigns aimed not only at terrorizing communities but also at eradicating entire identities or cultures. This tactic is most vividly illustrated by the Islamic State's treatment of the Yazidi community. One of the most infamous cases occurred on August 4, 2014, when Islamic State fighters swept through hundreds of villages and towns, slaughtering and capturing thousands of Yazidis in a ruthless campaign to annihilate their entire community (CTED, 2021: 22). The Yazidis have long been a prime target of Islamic State violence, which seeks to eradicate their customs, traditions, and places of worship, ensuring they can never reclaim their identity in the future.

.....  
7 Section 402 of the US Child Soldiers Prevention Act (CSPA) includes a list of foreign governments whose governmental armed forces, police or other security forces, or government-supported armed groups recruit or use child soldiers. Between 2022 and 2023, countries such as Somalia, Libya, Syria, Democratic Republic of Congo, Mali, Egypt, and Yemen are included in this list.

8 Sources from the Spanish General Information Commissioner's Office (CGI) consulted by the author, October 2023.

A similar strategy is employed by the Islamic State in Pakistan against the Hazara community. In 2021, 11 Hazara miners were kidnapped and brutally murdered in Mach (Balochistan) by the IS-K affiliate. Recent investigations indicate that Pakistani Hazaras have faced systematic ethnic cleansing by Salafist groups (Khan, n.d.). The Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) has documented nearly 3,000 cases of Hazaras killed in individual attacks, suicide bombings, and car bombings over the past two decades, echoing the persecution faced by Hazaras in neighboring Afghanistan at the hands of the Taliban.

These examples illustrate that human exploitation and violence are not merely tools of terror but are also used to erase minority identities and entire cultures. The tactics employed—such as massacres and kidnappings—are intended not only to instill fear but also to eradicate any trace of the past that might contradict the narrative these terrorist groups seek to impose.

#### 2.2.4. Use as a Mobility Tactic

After discussing various examples that illustrate the blending of terrorism and organized crime, it is crucial to highlight that one of the main benefits of their collaboration is the mutual cover

they provide each other, particularly in terms of mobility.

Individual terrorists needing to move across territories and countries often rely on criminal networks involved in human trafficking and migrant smuggling to facilitate their clandestine movements. These networks possess expertise in evading border controls and providing necessary resources for transportation (such as false documents and contacts within customs or at the destination), which are highly valuable for terrorists attempting to infiltrate heavily guarded areas.

These alliances also create new opportunities by facilitating cross-border operations and cooperation with like-minded groups elsewhere. A 2024 report from the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) specifically notes the collaboration between these two criminal sectors, which intertwine in a cooperative environment where terrorism and organized crime reinforce each other (UNODC, 2024: 20).

In this context, the proliferation of smuggling and trafficking often occurs as a result of violence perpetrated by terrorist organizations, leading to forced displacements. This tactic generates substantial profits by charging fees to traffickers and smugglers to cross their

territory, thus avoiding direct involvement in the human trafficking business. For instance, in May 2015, the Islamic State adopted this practice by taxing groups aiding in the transport of migrants from the Middle East and North Africa to Europe. Some sources suggest that IS attacks on refugee camps in western Syria during this period aimed to increase the flow of people into areas controlled by the group to maximize tax revenue from these transactions. In the Horn of Africa, the Islamic State has relied on smuggling networks to transport its fighters from Yemen to Somaliland, while in Mozambique, the group is known for recruiting children as fighters and girls as sex slaves (Jespersen, Ochieng, & Burudi, 2022: 9).

In Mali, the criminal network becomes intricate due to the presence of various armed groups—jihadists, rebels, and criminal networks—that exploit the vulnerability of migrants. The International Organization for Migration (IOM) and the United Nations Group of Experts in Mali have documented cases where smugglers collaborate with armed groups on the ground. This reveals how migrant smugglers like Baye Coulibaly provide migrants to the Tuareg Imghad and Allies Self-Defense Group (GATIA) and recruit for JNIM, perpetuating chronic human trafficking across the region encompassing Mali, Algeria, Libya, Niger, and Mauritania.

### **3. FACTORS PROMOTING HUMAN EXPLOITATION IN AFRICA AND THE MIDDLE EAST**

When examining the connections between criminal activity and terrorist entities, several common factors emerge, observed to varying extents in the examples discussed earlier and in case studies in the subsequent section. As emphasized by the United Nations Counter-Terrorism Executive Directorate (CTED), key indicators include 1) porous borders and weak state control; 2) institutional fragility, fostered by a long history of corrupt practices and a clear absence of political governance; 3) key economic elements such as underdevelopment and poverty rates; and 4) the context of stability, especially in scenarios of armed conflict.

These factors are interconnected; in many cases, the increase of one forces the rise or fall of another and vice versa. Therefore, the relationship between terrorism and organized crime must be understood in the context of multiple economic, political, social, and security indicators operating simultaneously and with a high capacity to impact the dynamics of the illicit economy.

### 3.1. Porous and Poorly Controlled Borders

The porousness of borders is a critical factor in scenarios where terrorist groups directly challenge state control over their criminal areas of interest. In many cases, their primary goal is to control illicit markets.

When migration routes pass through areas with a terrorist presence, violent groups often exploit the situation by facilitating passage routes, safe zones, and protection for smugglers and other criminals involved in human trafficking. Except for the case of the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq, where the group acted as an independent criminal organization, terrorism generates revenue by taxing smugglers operating on these routes or extorting migrants and traffickers to allow safe passage. Even though terrorism may not be directly responsible for human trafficking, it benefits from weak border management and control, which these markets exploit.

In regions closer to Europe's southern border, the proliferation of illicit businesses in North Africa is a primary concern. Since the collapse of Libya in 2011, the region has seen a rise in these activities, which have become a lucrative form of livelihood for armed groups, criminals, and later, terrorist fighters. The porous borders in countries like Algeria, Mali, Niger, Mauritania, and Libya have allowed armed and criminal groups to smuggle weapons, drugs, and fuel across much of West Africa. This illegal economy has also integrated into human trafficking, thanks to minimal cross-border surveillance, which facilitates the transportation of migrants for various purposes.

In the case of migrant smuggling, operational groups in both eastern and western Libya introduce their victims depending on their origin. West African migrants typically enter from the southern flank, while those from the Middle East or East Africa come from the borders with Egypt and Sudan (CTED, 2021: 19). Once in Libya, migrants, whether refugees or asylum seekers, are often detained and forced to work as a means to secure their release or continue their journey. During captivity, they endure physical and sexual abuse. Additionally, smugglers, traffickers, and other criminal networks may extort their families in their countries of origin for greater profit from the hostage situation (CTED, 2021: 20).



The intricate relationship between criminal syndicates and terrorist organizations in various study areas is extensive. Their activities intertwine, cooperate, and are sustained by a network of contacts on both sides, facilitating the movement of people across different regions and implicating terrorism in transborder criminal operations.

### 3.2. Institutional Fragility, Corruption, and Lack of Political Governance

The absence of political stability, weak governance, and widespread corruption provide an environment conducive to the proliferation of human trafficking and terrorist activity. According to the Corruption Perceptions Index published annually by Transparency International (2023), countries most affected by violent extremism also exhibit the worst corruption-related data within state institutions, undermining transparency and public services intended to ensure institutional integrity and social order. Libya scores 18 out of 100 on the corruption impunity index (with 0 being “highly corrupt” and 100 indicating an absence of corruption). Mali (28/100), Niger (32/100), and Burkina Faso (41/100) also report alarmingly high indices, as do Syria (13/100) and Iraq (23/100) in the Middle East.

These data are not altruistic: they respond to a reality where higher indicators of corruption and governance deficits create greater opportunities for investment in criminal economy markets and the continued practices of organized crime in a consolidated phase. In Mali, the government’s inability to exercise effective control and provide basic services has created a power vacuum and prolonged instability in certain northern regions, allowing organized criminal groups to thrive and become difficult to disband. The lack of leadership and political corruption in Bamako’s government, which was evident until recently, has fostered an informal economy based on illegal activities, including arms smuggling, drug trafficking, and human trafficking, as well as the exploitation of natural resources and the criminal manipulation of certain political positions through patronage networks within the state (Caparini, 2022: 28). This corruption among state authorities has further weakened the government’s capacity and willingness to eradicate organized crime throughout the country, plunging Mali into an unprecedented political, economic, and security crisis. The rivalry between government forces and armed groups for control of trafficking routes has intensified existing tensions and violence in a nation already overwhelmed by the terrorist threat across its entire territory.

Elements related to democratic governance and criminal indicators act as drivers not only of irregular migration but also of criminal networks that exploit human trafficking as a lucrative source of economic gain. This situation has bred social discontent and frustration, even bolstering support for terrorist groups with political aspirations for territorial expansion. Moreover, institutional crises reveal a discordant judicial environment, where the lack of unified legislation perpetuates impunity or results in inadequate sentences, further eroding public trust in judicial institutions as arbiters of conflict resolution.

Thus, governance indices and corrupt practices within political and judicial systems play pivotal roles in shaping and solidifying organized crime. This industry benefits public figures, rebel groups, community leaders, and terrorist organizations alike, intertwining them in networks that facilitate transnational movements and implicate terrorism in cross-border criminal activities.

### 3.3. Underdevelopment and Poverty

In addition to porous borders and low governance indices, underdevelopment and poverty are fundamental factors that often drive human exploitation in Africa and the

Middle East. These regions typically experience low levels of human and economic development, creating fertile environments for criminal activities and new forms of systemic violence.

Firstly, the lack of economic opportunities acts as a social catalyst, pushing people towards desperate means of survival. High unemployment and resource scarcity make individuals vulnerable to the organized crime industry. In many cases, they fall victim to exploitation through forced labor, sexual exploitation, or are recruited into terrorism with promises of income and stability. Key indicators such as the Human Development Index highlight that Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger, and Nigeria are classified as “low development” countries in the most recent study (UNDP, 2024). Economically, Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger exhibit GDP per capita growth below the regional threshold, with annual inflation rates exceeding the regional average, according to World Bank data (n.d.).

The lack of access to quality education and basic health services further perpetuates the cycle of poverty and vulnerability in these countries. Literacy rates are lower than regional averages, particularly among young women aged

15-24 in Sub-Saharan Africa, according to available official records<sup>9</sup>. Out of sheer necessity, individuals living in extreme poverty are more likely to fall prey to traffickers promising job opportunities or a better life abroad, only to face exploitation upon arrival. In 2018, more than 50% of Niger's population and over a third of Burkina Faso and Nigeria's population were categorized as living in extreme poverty<sup>10</sup>.

However, it's important to note that the poorest segments of the population do not necessarily constitute a significant portion of irregular migration flows. Irregular migration tends to rise as GDP per capita increases — indicating higher economic development. This suggests that as people gain resources and aspire for mobility, they seek economic opportunities and a better quality of life elsewhere (CTED, 2021: 54).

The lack of economic development, low literacy rates, and inequality are significant vulnerability factors that adversely impact communities, exposing them to various forms of exploitation, including practices akin to modern slavery. The latest Global Slavery Index (2023) confirms that several West African and Middle Eastern countries have

conditions conducive to various forms of modern slavery, such as forced labor, the use of children in armed conflicts, and forced marriages at young ages.

### 3.4. Armed Conflicts

In situations of armed conflict, vulnerability to involvement in human trafficking and smuggling networks significantly increases and tends to be more prevalent and problematic.

According to the Uppsala Conflict Data Program, the number of armed conflicts has been increasing for over a decade. In 2020, there were 56 conflicts involving state actors and non-state armed groups — the highest number since World War II. More than half of these conflicts (30) occurred in Africa. The number of actors involved in armed conflicts has also risen significantly. In 2018, only a third of conflicts involved two parties, while almost half involved three to nine parties, and nearly a quarter involved ten or more actors. In some cases, like Libya and Syria, non-state factions number in the hundreds, forming fluid alliances that can quickly split or merge (Caparini, 2022: 3).

.....  
9 Since 2014, Mali has only provided data on three occasions, the last in 2020. Nigeria only did so in 2018 and Niger in 2022.

10 Year of the last data provided by all three to the World Bank.

In this context, researcher Nadine Liv identifies two main profiles of traffickers in conflict-affected areas. Firstly, there are opportunistic traffickers, criminal groups or individuals motivated by economic gain who view the human trafficking industry as a profitable opportunity amidst the chaos of armed conflict. This category includes historically involved organized crime vectors like nomadic tribes in North Africa and the Sahel or opportunistic situations following the fall of Gaddafi in Libya and the subsequent state collapse in 2011, which created permissive environments for organized crime operations and major trafficking routes to Europe (Liv, 2019: 24). Existing smuggling and illicit goods trafficking networks substantially influence this scenario, serving as smuggling corridors or expanding the human trafficking industry. Evidence indicates that organizations involved in illegal goods movements tend to increase the prevalence of human trafficking (CTED, 2021: 54). When combined with terrorist motivations for territorial expansion, the problem escalates further. It is no coincidence that pre-established migration routes in West Africa often coincide with territories controlled or influenced by terrorist organizations. This is a stark reality for anyone living in Burkina Faso, Niger, and Mali, posing significant risks to migrants who may find themselves caught in conflicts while

seeking a better life or falling victim to terrorist objectives in the area.

In Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan, violence has also driven migration towards Turkey and Europe. A report by the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) underscores how internal conflicts and instability in these countries prompt migration that generates substantial income for terrorist organizations through illegal activities or extortion of migrants. In some instances, migrant smuggling activities are controlled by terrorist groups in collaboration with criminal networks established near transit country borders (FATF, 2022: 27).

Similar to arms trafficking and smuggling, the onset of violent conflicts heightens the need for clandestine movement or diversion of materials that do not follow legal channels (Aguilera, 2023b: 22). The exploitation industry also sees a surge under these conditions, with widespread instability, insecurity, and economic desperation from conflict fueling its emergence. The absence of an effective rule of law and the need for personal security drive many to flee their homes during conflicts, making them easy targets for traffickers. Local populations, stripped of legal protection and facing dire conditions, become even more vulnerable to exploitation by traffickers who promise a better life but deliver exploitation instead.

Moreover, in conflict scenarios where civilians choose to remain in their homes, they face significant dangers, especially in communities under terrorist control. In these cases, terrorist groups exploit local vulnerabilities during armed conflicts and the resulting chaos and violence to engage in human exploitation industries, such as human trafficking. Boko Haram in Nigeria and Al Shabaab in Somalia serve as prime examples. Beyond their political goals of regime change, these groups have a history of abducting women and girls for purposes including sexual slavery or forced labor, capitalizing on the vulnerability of local populations during armed conflicts (Liv, 2019: 25).

## **4. From Theory to Practice: Case Studies**

Multiple jihadist groups are accused, to varying extents, of being part of networks involved in illicit economies dedicated to human trafficking and smuggling. As observed in previous sections, the connection between terrorism and activities exploiting humans illegally can manifest in various forms and motivations, including economic goals. These organizations may facilitate the smuggling of migrants through controlled routes, exploit homeless children for fundraising, engage in kidnapping for ransom, or even participate in the trade of organs. Human exploitation can also involve operational activities such as recruitment, coercion, intimidation, or mobility, often aimed at bolstering morale among their fighters, fulfilling their needs, or investing in labor for tasks that members of the organization are unwilling or unable to perform.

The motivations behind the human exploitation business are varied, as are the objectives, with each group exercising control over these activities based on their capacity, goals, and opportunities. Focusing on groups with a transnational character and sufficient capacity to cause significant harm to multiple countries, this research identifies three organizations with a clear and continuous history of involvement in the illicit human exploitation business: Islamic State (and its regional branches), Al Qaeda (and its regional branches), and Boko Haram.

#### 4.1. Islamic State of Iraq and Syria

Human trafficking is not confined to specific countries but occurs worldwide to varying degrees. Factors such as armed conflicts, displacement due to violence, economic underdevelopment, and poverty—common in many Middle Eastern countries in recent years—contribute significantly to increased trafficking.

Focusing on how terrorism exploits this criminal industry, the most contemporary instances of slavery carried out by the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), particularly against the Yazidi community, represent some of the most well-documented cases of terrorist involvement in organized criminal activities for fundraising and supporting operational endeavors.

As previously discussed, human exploitation is a criminal enterprise that serves multiple purposes, unlike single-use markets such as drugs, antiquities, or oil. This conclusion aligns perfectly with the operations of the Islamic State, where exploited individuals served diverse roles: from sexual slaves performing domestic tasks or being sold to sympathizers, locals, or smugglers, to individuals subjected to forced labor and eventually transferred as exploitable labor for other armed groups and criminal organizations. All of these

activities aimed to foster collaboration among groups, recruit new members, and sustain financial flows through taxes on traded goods, significantly enriching the organization, which amassed nearly two billion dollars by 2014 (Levallois, Cousseran, & Kerrello, 2017: 14).

The Yazidi community, primarily located in the Shaykhan and Sinjar regions of northern Iraq, has faced systematic persecution from various actors, particularly during the territorial and communal control of ISIS between 2014 and 2019. In August 2014, ISIS challenged the power of the Peshmerga forces controlling Sinjar, part of the Iraqi Kurdistan region, forcing their retreat and leaving the predominantly Yazidi community at the mercy of ISIS fighters (Ruíz, 2024: 7). This marked the beginning of a genocide known for its extreme cruelty and brutality, with the systematic exploitation of the entire community being one of its most distinctive characteristics.

One primary justification for the Islamic State's exploitation of the Yazidi community was economic gain. In the realm of migrant smuggling, evidence suggests substantial revenue generation solely through taxes levied on transportation from the Middle East and North Africa to Europe, a business



actively promoted through their actions<sup>11</sup>. Kidnappings also contributed significantly to their income: in 2014 alone, returning some Yazidi women and girls to their families in exchange for ransom earned the group between 35 and 45 million dollars (Jespersion, Ochieng & Burudj, 2022: 7).

These transactions often involved intermediaries between families and the organization for hostage exchanges and payments. These intermediaries frequently turned out to be the smugglers, incorporating organized crime members as an additional fundraising element<sup>12</sup>.

The systematic sale of Yazidis, particularly women and girls, represents the most significant known example of using sexual slavery as a fundraising method. Investigations into sexual exploitation by the United Nations Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate (CTED) summarized the criminal network as follows:

*Following the August 2014 attack on Mount Sinjar, ISIL forcibly transferred captive women and girls to holding sites in Iraq and the Syrian Arab Republic. Eighty percent of the slaves were made available to the fighters for individual purchase. The remainder were held as collective property of ISIL and distributed in groups to military bases throughout Iraq and the Syrian Arab Republic (United Nations Human Rights Council, 2016: 12 cited in CTED, 2021). In some instances, ISIL allowed its fighters to buy a group of Yazidi females in order to take them into rural areas without slave markets and sell them individually at a higher price.*

*ISIL's slave trade was well organized and involved significant logistical investment: a network of warehouses in which to hold the victims; viewing rooms in which the victims were inspected and purchased; and a dedicated fleet of buses, used to transport them. In the Syrian Arab Republic, the bureaucracy of the Yazidi slave market was organized by a central body called the "Committee for the Buying and Selling of Slaves".*

*103 Where this Committee authorized the opening of a slave market in a*

.....  
11 Evidence suggests that the Islamic State attacked refugee camps in western Syria to accelerate migration flows to safer spaces, thereby fattening the pockets of smugglers, which in turn increased terrorist revenues.

12 An example of this is seen in Hoda Alias and her three children, who were kidnapped and enslaved by Islamic State members during the Sinjar massacre in 2014. They were released in November 2015 after paying a sum of money to the group through an intermediary in Gaziantep. Source: CTED, 2021.

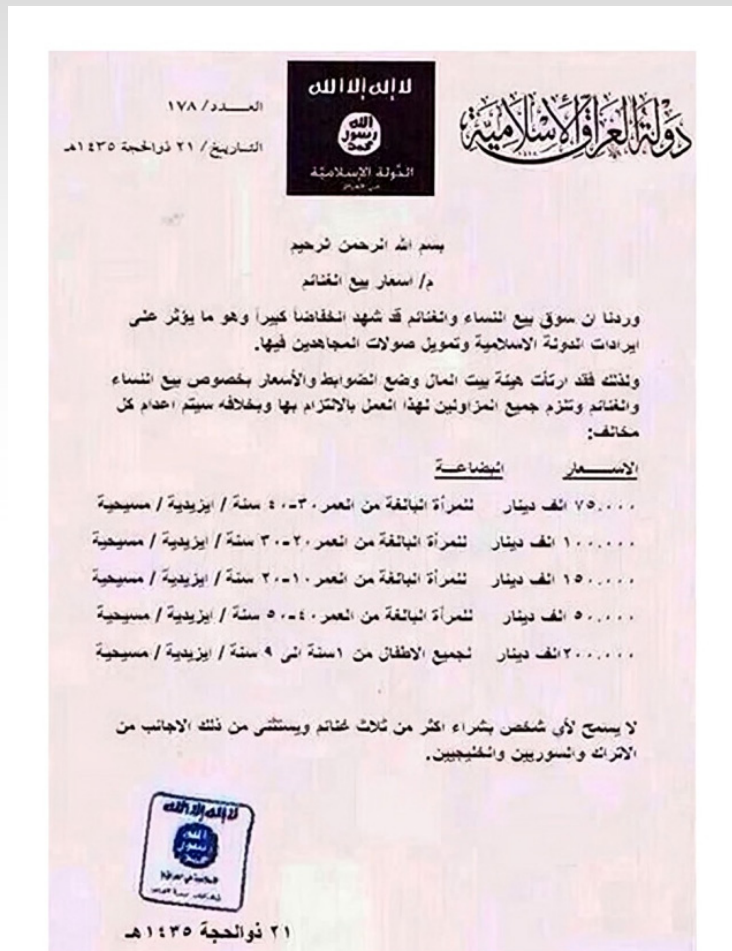
*particular town, it devolved some of its functions to a local committee and commander.*

*According to an ISIL document<sup>105</sup> – released online and considered to be authentic – fighters were required to pre-register if they wished to attend a slave market in Homs (Jawad, 2016 cited in CTED, 2021). In most cases, the sale was finalized through a bidding process. The offer was submitted in a sealed envelope at the time of purchase and the fighter who had won the bid was obliged to buy the slave.*

*Women and girls were exposed, both at the slave markets and at the holding sites, as chattel. Interested buyers could check their hair or teeth and ask them to walk through the room, as if parading on a catwalk (United Nations Human Rights Council, 2016: 13 cited in CTED, 2021). Their price was based on marital status, age, number of children and perceived beauty, and could range between \$200 and \$1,500 (CTED, 2021).*

The digital environment played a critical role in facilitating the dissemination and amplification of the operations conducted by the Islamic State. Potential buyers could view online photographs of captured women and girls, along with details such as their age, marital status, location, and price, before making purchases<sup>13</sup>. Preferences could be communicated through encrypted messaging applications like Telegram.

.....  
<sup>13</sup> Among the many testimonies of this practice, the case of Hoda stands out, who after being enslaved by a fighter for over a year, was put up for sale along with her three children on an Islamic State website, identified as “slave number 12”. Abu Mital, one of the intermediaries who facilitated their release, claimed to have negotiated directly with the Islamic State through online chats and WhatsApp.



### Price List for Sexual Slaves Distributed by Islamic State. Source: Bloomberg

In addition to generating revenue from the sale of Yazidis, whose prices were inflated by Islamic State fighters, these women and girls served purposes beyond mere economic value. Evidence suggests they were treated as “reusable objects”, enslaved not only for economic reasons but also as a recruitment tactic, to maintain morale among members, and to attract recruits. Apart from being sexual slaves for Islamic State militants, they were forced to perform domestic chores in their own or their captors’ households. For instance, a 13-year-old Yazidi girl held captive for 11 months in Raqqa and sold multiple times, recounted her experience of being a sexual slave and domestic servant, cooking, cleaning, and doing laundry for her captor and his family (United Nations Human Rights Council, 2016: 15).

Human exploitation by the Islamic State was also wielded as a weapon of war during the Yazidi genocide. In addition to the thousands killed and hundreds of thousands displaced, the organization imposed a reign of terror where sexual violence was systematically used as a weapon.

While it might be assumed that the Islamic State engaged in indiscriminate violence across all territories it controlled, several studies have revealed a discernible pattern in their violent actions (Ruíz, 2024: 12). These investigations underscore how the organization developed an organizational policy justified by ideology, defining specific targets for their violence (Revkin & Wood, 2021 cited in Ruíz, 2024).

Similar to other markets exploiting Yazidis, such as organ trafficking, justification for the sale of women for sexual and other purposes was provided by the highest religious authorities through a document titled “Questions and Answers on Taking Captives and Slaves”. This communication sanctioned the capture of non-Muslim women for subsequent trade, exchange, or gifting as slaves, considering them little more than property (Liv, 2019: 20).

Internally, the Islamic State’s propaganda targeted young men during its peak in Iraq and Syria, offering them women and girls as part of their “property”. Muslim women were portrayed as potential “wives” to help populate their self-proclaimed “caliphate”, while individuals of other ethnicities and faiths, such as Yazidis and Christians, were viewed as spoils of

war and sexual slaves (United Nations University, 2016).

Documented incidents also reveal forced recruitment regardless of age, gender, or religious affiliation, particularly targeting children and teenagers. Following the attack on Mount Sinjar, the group led by Al Baghdadi conducted a systematic and selective indoctrination campaign, forcibly separating Yazidi children aged seven and older from their mothers and transporting them to various training centers and military camps in Iraq and Syria. During this indoctrination process, children were given new Islamic names, indoctrinated with propaganda videos depicting armed conflicts, beheadings, and suicide missions, and compelled to memorize verses from the Quran (CTED, 2021: 28). In January 2017 alone, the organization abducted 400 Yazidi children in Iraq as a new reserve of recruits for training and combat, later kidnapping another 150 children for the same purpose a few days later (United States Department of State, 2019: 234).

The primary goal of this strategy, besides recruitment, was to eradicate the personal, cultural, and religious identities of these children, molding them into future generations of the organization’s fighters. Some were trained as suicide bombers,

aiming to maximize international media impact and amplify their propaganda for future recruits, while others were sent out to beg, economically exploiting them in various ways.

Men, on the other hand, were subjected to forced labor in agriculture, livestock, and construction projects. An example of the latter includes the construction of underground tunnel systems beneath the streets of Mosul, a task that sometimes resulted in the death of workers and prolonged the city's siege (CTED, 2021: 33).

In summary, the central command of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria engaged in human exploitation through smuggling and trafficking, driven by operational and economic motives that persisted until the collapse of their Islamist project in 2019. The distinction between a criminal enterprise seeking economic gain and a terrorist organization with pronounced political objectives becomes blurred in this context. Indeed, based on years of accumulated evidence, it can be concluded that the actions and goals pursued by ISIS predominantly fit into the category of organized crime.

Today, although to a lesser extent due to territorial and ideological losses in the region, the Islamic State continues to kidnap, recruit, and deploy children

in combat and support roles, including as human shields, informants, bomb-makers, and even suicide bombers, some as young as eight years old (United States Department of State, 2019: 234). Reports suggest that human trafficking remains a viable revenue source for the Islamic State, particularly as they face territorial setbacks in Iraq and Syria, utilizing those under their control to sustain them financially and operationally (Secretary-General on Conflict-Related Sexual Violence, 2018: 13). This could potentially provide them the means to pursue the revival of their caliphate project in the future.

#### 4.2. Islamic State in Libya

According to the latest 2023 edition of the Global Organized Crime Index, human trafficking and migrant smuggling rank as the largest criminal markets in Africa, with Libya placed fifth overall for crime indices on the continent, showing an increase compared to 2021. It also ranks poorly on resilience indices, indicating high levels of criminal activity, placing last on this scale.

Libya's criminal economy is rampant. Strategically located at the gateway to Europe and with a Mediterranean coastline, Libya is one of the most attractive settings for criminal organizations. The country is characterized by a com-

plex web of patronage networks, informal contacts, and blurred relationships where criminal and terrorist dynamics intertwine. Due to its institutional fragility and lack of unified public governance, Libya has become a hub for a wide variety of criminal markets, ranging from oil smuggling and drug and arms trafficking to human trafficking and migrant smuggling (Aguilera, 2023a: 169).

The country serves as a transit point both nationally and transnationally. Migration routes to the Libyan, Tunisian, or Algerian coast begin at the end of an old desert caravan route still used for trade and illicit smuggling, stretching from Somalia or Eritrea through East Africa, and from Senegal, Mali, Niger, and Nigeria along the West African route. Libya receives an influx of displaced people traveling overland due to conflicts, particularly with the current trend of jihadism in the Sahel and the Horn of Africa. Additionally, there is a growing number of migrants arriving by air from other countries such as Egypt, Bangladesh, and Pakistan (Chatzis, 2024: 13).

The lack of resources and the corruption within the state apparatus controlled by the Government of National Unity (GNU, recognized by the United Nations) has allowed traffickers to

exploit the power vacuum west of Tripoli. The GNU's efforts are primarily focused on the armed conflict with the Libyan National Army, leaving limited capacity to address trafficking and other illicit activities (Viriyapah, 2020). Additionally, there are criminal ties to the political force challenging the GNA's power, led by Khalifa Haftar.

The state disintegration resulting from the uprisings of the 2010s, which preceded Gaddafi's overthrow, has led to the proliferation of militias and the emergence of protection economies. This has significantly increased illegal trade activities and exponentially grown the number of actors—both state and non-state, violent and non-violent—engaged in various illicit markets. The opportunities to exploit these illicit sectors, exacerbated by the eruption of violent conflicts in their immediate surroundings, have also driven armed groups to participate in increasingly diverse areas of the criminal economy.

In this context, we find evidence of multiple actors involved in the trafficking and smuggling of weapons to and from neighboring countries in conflict, predominantly in the Sahel. This includes the smuggling of migrants displaced by violence seeking an escape route through Libya and the human trafficking



opportunities that arise from mass migration, among other activities. The latter represents one of the most lucrative markets related to human exploitation. Migrants traveling overland often face vulnerability, making their exploitation a recurring phenomenon. The migration route from the Horn of Africa northward through Sudan and Libya, as well as from Sahel countries, has become a critical corridor for human exploitation. Along these routes, criminal networks commonly employ extortion, rape, and kidnapping for ransom<sup>14</sup>.

Due to Libya's unique characteristics and the current historical and political situation, those involved in the criminal economy since the revolution in 2011 have diversified their activities out of necessity, opportunity, or inertia<sup>15</sup>. The actors involved in the human exploitation industry include traffickers, smugglers, and their intermediaries, as well as public officials<sup>16</sup> and armed groups.

In the first case, one of the major points of interaction between public officials and organized groups occurs in Zawiya, a significant hub for multiple organized crime networks with influence in cities like Zuwara, Sabratha, and Warshafana. In Zawiya, the link between law enforcement and criminal activity is notable and has even seen a steady increase since 2020, according to the United Nations Libya Panel of Experts. The report even details the illicit drug market known as "Sifaw for the sale of hashish and Bafra rolling paper", which is somewhat intriguing considering that Mohamed Sifaw heads the Anti-Drug Department of the Ministry of Interior in Zawiya<sup>17</sup> (Panel of Experts, 2023a: 7). Meanwhile, the Commander of the Coast Guard in Zawiya, Abd Al Rahman Salim Ibrahim Al Milad, is himself on the list of sanctioned individuals for his involvement in violence against migrants and for protecting criminals engaged in illicit operations related to trafficking and smuggling of migrants.

.....  
14 Moreover, many of these migrants are forced to perform forced labor in extremely precarious conditions, as documented by inhuman work experiences in gold mines in countries such as Sudan, Chad, and Libya. These jobs not only involve occupational hazards but also lead migrants to incur debts with their employers for food or accommodation in case they fail to meet labor expectations. Source: Counter-Terrorism Centre of Excellence.

15 An exemplary case is that of Fahmi Salim Musa Ben Khalifa, a known smuggler of petroleum products in the black market who also engaged in arms and human trafficking until his arrest in 2017, earning him the nickname "king of smuggling" (Aguilera, 2023a: 177).

16 Indeed, the participation of public officials, law enforcement officers, and surveillance personnel in command posts, ports, airports, and roads represents one of the main obstacles limiting the prevention of the proliferation of human exploitation as a lucrative method.

17 The Group of Experts has also received confirmation from various sources of ministry vehicles spotted trafficking illicit narcotics under a bridge in that area.

Another relevant figure responsible for transporting immigrants to the Libyan coasts, disguising them as Haftar’s fighters, is Abdulah Hagani, a former Chadian military officer who joined Khalifa Haftar’s ranks in 2022. Currently, the two are in dispute, and since then, Hagani has been involved in human trafficking, drug trafficking, and arms trafficking between Niger and Libya, operating a network in northern Niger<sup>18</sup>.

**Due to Libya’s unique characteristics and the current historical and political situation, those involved in the criminal economy since the revolution in 2011 have diversified their activities out of necessity, opportunity, or inertia**

Despite multiple eff to reduce opportunities for crossing the Mediterranean, such as international agreements with security forces and political sectors that aimed to decrease public actors’ involvement in the informal economy<sup>19</sup>, these attempts have had unintended consequences. They have

empowered militias controlling detention centers and checkpoints in areas lacking legitimate political oversight. Over time, smuggling has become a significant source of employment and income in Libyan cities facing economic hardships and labor difficulties (Farley, 2018), leaving them vulnerable to illicit enterprises due to the absence of viable economic alternatives.

In addition to various public officials, armed groups have been involved in migrant smuggling within and outside Libya for decades. This involvement intensified with the migration crisis in Libya following the overthrow of Gaddafi’s regime and subsequent violence in neighboring regions. Waves of migrants from Niger, Chad, Egypt, and Sudan traveled to Libya seeking to escape economic turmoil and instability in their home countries. Libya’s governance failures further heightened the vulnerability of these populations, making them easy targets for traffickers and terrorists, transforming Libya into a key nexus and transit point for various criminal activities<sup>20</sup> (Viriyapah, 2020).

.....  
18 Local sources consulted by the author, April 2024.

19 United Nations has even accused Libyan security services of profiting from smuggling and has sanctioned several individuals affiliated with the coast guard.

20 Currently, and considering that the majority of migrants arriving in Libya do so through smugglers, either into the interior of Libya via southern borders or from the Middle East and East Africa via Egypt and Sudan, this practice is highly profitable both financially and operationally. Especially if added to the business of moving

Examining Libya's human exploitation industry within a broader context, armed actors closely connected to criminal activities include militias, individuals, and terrorist groups.

Approaching the study of armed militias, the first thing to note in the Libyan scenario is the overt transformation of certain militias into outright organized crime groups. There are several examples, such as Ahmad Al Fitouri, commander of the Anas Al Dabbashi militia. In June 2018, the United Nations Security Council sanctioned Ahmad Al Dabbashi<sup>21</sup>, along with five others, placing them on a list involving asset freezes and travel bans. The designation pointed out that Al Dabbashi, leader of the Anas Al Dabbashi militia active in the coastal cities of Sabratha and Zawiyah<sup>22</sup> led a range of illicit activities linked to migrant trafficking. Following clashes with other militias and smuggling organizations in October 2017, the report states that this militia directly engages in illegal migrant trafficking and smuggling, controlling departure areas, camps, safe houses, and boats. The report also details a list of human rights abuses against migrants committed by Al Dabbashi, subjecting

them to inhumane, sometimes deadly conditions both at sea and on land (UNSC, 2018a).

The Al Dabbashi clan draws from various sources to maintain its influence and power in the strategically located enclave near Malta and Italy. They have maintained close relationships with operational armed factions in the region, as well as with transnational criminals. One such figure is Mus'ab Mustafa Abu Al Qassim Omar, also sanctioned by the United Nations in 2018 for his role as "central actor in human trafficking and migrant smuggling activities in the area of Sabratha" and surrounding regions (UNSC, 2018b). The interconnected and transnational nature of their contacts with other criminal groups has been well-documented<sup>23</sup>.

In the case of Al Qassim, his network extends from Libya to Europe, Sub-Saharan Africa, and certain Arab countries. His involvement in human trafficking and smuggling activities reportedly involves Ermias Alem (also sanctioned), an Eritrean responsible for a significant migrant trafficking network in Libya and a supply chain for Al Qassim.

---

them to wealthier countries in Europe via land, sea, and air.

21 The official name included in the sanctions list is Ahmad Oumar Imhamad Al Fitouri.

22 The Al Dabbashi militia is an armed group active primarily in western Libya, especially in the city of Sabratha and the Tallil area west of Tripoli. It was originally created as a resistance force against Gaddafi's regime during the 2011 Libyan civil war. Following the regime's fall, the Al Dabbashi militia has continued to operate in the area.

23 Al Qassim maintained close relations with the Al Dabbashi clan of Sabratha until a conflict broke out between them over tax-for-protection issues.

Also, there's Mohammed Al Amin Al Arabi Kashlaf, leader of the Al Nasr brigade and commander of the Petroleum Facilities Guard in Zawiya, controlling one of the main hubs for fuel trafficking operations in western Libya, despite officially being under the control of the GUN. According to EU Regulation 2016/44, Kashlaf also oversees the human trafficking network in Zawiya (known as the Zawiya Network) alongside Al Milad and Osama Al Kuni Ibrahim, despite all three being sanctioned by the UN Security Council (2016: 30).

Kashlaf and Abd Al Rahman Salim Ibrahim Al Milad have expanded their network since being sanctioned in 2018, incorporating additional operational armed entities in Warshafana, Sabratha, and Zuwara, including elements from Brigade 55, the Stability Support Force Command in Zawiya (particularly its maritime units), and some members of the Libyan Coast Guard. This is how they manage to execute their plan and generate substantial economic income and other assets, fully exploiting the capabilities offered by human trafficking and migrant smuggling (Panel of Experts, 2023a: 22).

All these individuals, often with the tacit complicity or direct interest of authorities and government bodies, are

responsible for severe human rights violations against migrants. These violations include illegal detentions, rape, torture, and other degrading treatment. This illustrates how certain militias, once contenders for power in Libya, now wield considerable influence over large territories, prioritizing economic interests over political objectives, even while maintaining an ideological façade.

A significant portion of militias and criminal individuals have established close ties with extremist jihadist groups. The Al Dabbashi network, for instance, has been accused of maintaining links with the Islamic State and its affiliates. Some Islamic State members have originated from their ranks, including Abdallah Al Dabbashi, who rose to become the "caliph" of the Islamic State in Sabratha.

Similarly, investigations suggest that Al Qassim has provided monetary bribes to individuals connected to militant groups in the Sabratha area, in exchange for authorization to traffic migrants on behalf of these extremist factions. Sources also point to Al Qassim's ties with a trafficking network involving "Salafist armed groups" from Tripoli, Sabha, and Kufra (UNSC, 2018b).

This underscores how terrorism exploits the economic opportunities of human trafficking, operating within highly lucrative sectors and complex networks. The presence of overlapping criminal entities and entrenched networks has allowed terrorist individuals and groups in Libya to coexist, cooperate, and actively participate in organized crime.

Terrorist groups and the criminal human exploitation industry not only thrive in unstable situations but also mutually benefit from a symbiotic relationship. Terrorist organizations create both the supply and demand for traffickers, establishing a cycle of mutual benefit. By acquiring trafficking victims to provide services for their recruits, these organizations increase the vulnerable populations that traffickers can exploit (Viriyaiah, 2020).

Unlike the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, where the organization directly established a criminal network for human trafficking and smuggling as a primary financial and operational method, in Libya, individuals and terrorist groups have maintained indirect involvement, particularly during their peak period. Between 2015 and 2016, numerous agreements were documented between the Islamic State and armed groups with extensive connections to

traffickers and smugglers based in Kufra, southeast Libya (Romanet, 2020: 17). Economically, before the group was expelled from its main stronghold in Sirte, its fighters benefited from a fee system imposed on smugglers passing through their territories (Crowcroft, 2015). They also generated substantial income through the kidnapping and torture of migrants, extorting payments from their families to allow them to continue their journeys (Gebrekidan, 2016). Regarding recruitment, there is evidence that Libyan groups pledging allegiance to the Islamic State engaged in kidnapping and sexual abuse. Between 2015 and 2016, the affiliate in Libya abducted and held captive 540 migrants and refugees, including 63 women forced into sexual slavery for the group's fighters (Liv, 2019: 21).

Due to territorial losses and reduced ideological influence, the Islamic State no longer exploits the same financial opportunities it once did during its peak nearly a decade ago. However, this decline in capabilities has not diminished its desire to regain strength. In 2019, a Europol report warned of the Islamic State's limited but existing capacity for recruitment and radicalization among vulnerable migrant groups in southern Libya, to whom its fighters had "imminent access". The report also noted the

Islamic State's exploitation of migration routes to Europe, although the full extent was unknown, and confirmed limited cases of terrorist infiltration among migrants (Trauthig, 2019: 12). Other sources indicate the group still controls trade routes and acts as a tax collector for traffickers, extortionists, and looters, occasionally engaging in kidnappings for ransom when opportunities arise (Panel of Experts, 2023b: 18). Additional reports mention the detection of returning terrorist fighters who, via Sudan, attempt to reach Europe through Libya, illustrating an informal yet existing collaboration between organized crime and terrorism for regional fighter transfers<sup>24</sup>.

From the perspectives of the European Union and Libyan security forces, there is awareness that members of the Islamic State collaborate with migrant traffickers connected within Libya and across borders. For instance, Alagie Touray, a Gambian who arrived

in Messina, Italy in 2018 and awaited a refugee application decision, was found planning an attack in Europe<sup>25</sup>. Another example is Ali Hussein Ali, an Islamic State terrorist arrested in 2017, who played a crucial role as a liaison in the smuggling and human trafficking industry<sup>26</sup>. Known as "the trustworthy", Ali played a pivotal role within the Magafe criminal network<sup>27</sup>, facilitating recruitment travel from Kenya to Somalia for ISIS operatives in Libya, ensuring safe passage for irregular migrants to Europe via Libya, and overseeing financial operations for an ISIS network extending across Libya, Somalia, South Sudan, and Sudan (CTED, 2021: 13). Ali, originally from Somalia, traversed three countries before joining the Islamic State in Tripoli in 2010, where he became instrumental in both the terrorist organization and the Magafe smuggling and human trafficking network in Libya by 2016<sup>28</sup>.

.....  
24 Sources from the Spanish General Information Commissioner's Office (CGI) consulted by the author, October 2023.

25 Following his arrest in Italy, a video was found containing an oath of allegiance to the ISIS caliphate, recorded and sent via Telegram "to a series of recipients". Source: Europol.

26 At the time of his arrest, Ali was demanding over half a million dollars from his "boss". The money was a "facilitation fee" he was supposed to receive after delivering recruits and irregular migrants to their destinations. Source: CTED.

27 Libyan-origin criminal organization operating in 12 countries and suspected of maintaining links with the Islamic State. The Magafe network is known for carrying out kidnappings and activities related to human trafficking and smuggling.

28 According to investigations, Ali and his partners harbored recruits and irregular migrants in Kenya before helping them travel to Libya, Syria, and Europe. Upon arriving in Libya, criminal syndicates, especially Magafe, detain and release them only after paying a ransom ranging from \$2,500 to \$7,000. The money was sent to Mogadishu through the Hawala system in Kenya and then channeled to the Islamic State in Libya. Captured migrants sought help from their relatives in Kenya to pay the ransom and secure their release, while recruits extorted their families with false capture claims, using the money to fund their activities. Source: CTED.



The ability of the Islamic State to exploit and attract migration flows passing through Libya largely depended on its territorial control. With the loss of Sirte, evidence of exploitation and recruitment of migrants on the ground has become scarce. However, sources suggest such activities persist, with its members intending to expand operations in southern Libya, where the group currently has a presence. The willingness of the Islamic State to engage in the human exploitation industry remains significant, given the ample opportunities this business presents in Libya.

### 4.3. JNIM in the Western Sahel

JNIM is currently the most active terrorist organization in the Sahel. The group has managed to exploit local dynamics to extend its influence beyond its traditional strongholds in northern Mali and the tri-border area of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger. It has solidified its role as a significant political and social actor, thriving on local intercommunal and interethnic conflicts to fuel its expansion (Aguilera, 2024: 74).

Similar to its activities during the French presence, JNIM focuses on attacking foreign forces supporting local security agents and exploiting the security vacuum resulting from the departure of international troops<sup>29</sup>. Geographically, JNIM's actions in recent years have significantly impacted the southern Sahel, extending its presence into Gulf of Guinea countries such as Benin, Togo, and Ivory Coast, thereby entering the rampant criminal economy of the region.

Al Qaeda and its territorial franchises interact with organized crime in various ways, depending on context, capabilities, and opportunities. In Libya, figures like Abdelhakim Belhadj (aka Abu Abdallah Assadaq), an Islamist politician and military leader, resurfaced under Al Qaeda's political umbrella alongside the Muslim Brotherhood through the Al Watan party. Since 2012, militias led by the former head of the Tripoli Military Council and the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group have been responsible for mass migrations of immigrants from Libya to Europe<sup>30</sup>. In the case of Al-Nusra, Al Qaeda's former affiliate in Syria, revenue was increased through kidnappings, although direct involvement in human trafficking activities was unclear (Fanusie & Entz,

.....  
29 As a result of the reconfiguration of regional defense and security structures, between 2022 and 2023, the French mission in Mali (Operation Barkhane), the UN mission in Mali (MINUSMA), and European missions in Niger (EUCAP and EUMPM) withdrew from the Sahel. The regional G5 Sahel alliance and its Joint Force were also dissolved.

30 Between 2015 and 2022, Belhadj was based between Turkey and Qatar. Since 2022, he has been considered responsible for the militias controlling much of Libya, regardless of his usual residence.

2017, as cited in Avdan and Omelicheva, 2021: 2). Similar to Libya, current terrorist organizations in the Western Sahel take advantage of the ecosystem of illicit and informal economies to advance governance strategies in their areas of influence. This expansion goes beyond ideological aspirations and aims to control key corridors traversing the historic Trans-Saharan trade route.

Before the formation of JNIM and with Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), Al Qaeda has derived significant indirect benefits from the trafficking and smuggling of various legal, illegal, and criminal goods. They offer safe passage, provide vehicles, and facilitate safe houses used by smugglers, receiving payment for the services rendered (Jespersion, Ochieng & Burudi, 2022: 6). Criminal actors also play a significant role by accepting and sustaining JNIM's presence in their areas of influence, sharing information and local terrain knowledge, and leveraging local criminal networks' willingness to advance terrorists' political agendas, often maintaining friendships, affiliations, and/or kinship ties with them. Thus, much of JNIM's current financial resources have enabled robust income-generating strategies from the

criminal economy through its affiliates and contacts, partly inherited from AQIM and other preceding groups (Afriyie, 2024: 9).

Similar to industries such as oil, drugs, weapons, and natural resources, human trafficking and smuggling have become markets with which JNIM is intimately familiar and frequently benefits both financially and strategically.

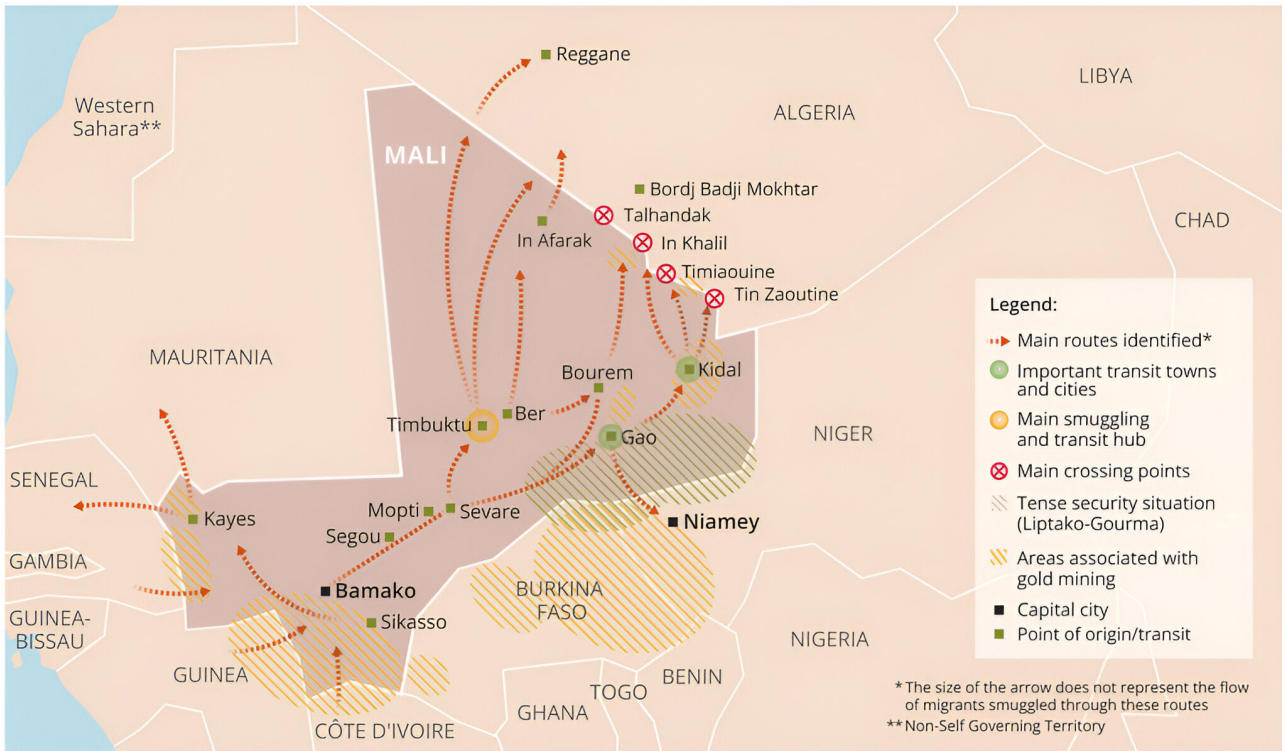
In terms of economic or financial objectives, JNIM primarily engages in the criminal economy through a payment-for-passage system across its areas of influence, regardless of the illicit commodity being traded. Examining smuggling, we see transit routes through the Sahel aiming to reach major Libyan criminal hubs like Zuwara following ancient desert caravan routes still used for trading and smuggling arms, drugs, and people. These routes stretch from the Horn of Africa through East Africa, and from Senegal, Niger, and Nigeria through the West African corridor. All these routes inevitably pass through Sahel territories controlled by Al Qaeda, making it implausible for human smugglers to operate in terrorism-controlled areas without their cooperation and approval.

In addition to drug and arms trafficking, in the tri-border area, JNIM earns revenue by offering safe passage for cross-border migrant transit through Algeria and Libya, ultimately targeting Europe. This revenue model remains a consistent and continuous source of finances for the group.

In Mali, migrant smugglers traveling through routes controlled by armed groups often have affiliations with or are members of these groups<sup>31</sup>, especially in Timbuktu, the primary hub for migrant trafficking northward. In 2022, Mahamadou Ag Rhissa (alias Mohamed Talhandak), a member of the High Council for the Unity of Azawad (HCUA), controlled migrant movements through Talhandak near the Algerian border. He was implicated in the sexual exploitation of migrant women, allegedly holding them captive and sexually abusing them until ransom payments ranging from \$300 to \$350 were made for their release (Garver-Affeldt, 2022: 27). The United Nations Expert Group reported that HCUA controls Talhandak and Tindiska, north of Gao and Kidal, near the Algerian border, key areas for human trafficking and smuggling (Expert Group, 2020: 40).

**Similar to industries such as oil, drugs, weapons, and natural resources, human trafficking and smuggling have become markets with which JNIM is intimately familiar and frequently benefits both financially and strategically**

.....  
31 In 2020, the movement of migrants between Timbuktu and In Afarak in Mali was mainly under the protection of MAA-CMA and some elements of the MNLA. In Gao, the situation is less clear, as the territory north of Gao, where migrants must pass through, is highly contested. Source: United Nations Panel of Experts (2020).



**Main migrant smuggling routes in Mali between 2020 and 2021.**

**Source: UNODC**

By 2024, at least two individuals are responsible for transporting thousands of sub-Saharan migrants to Algeria and Libya, and in smaller numbers to Tunisia. Al Izza Ould Yahia, a former member of the Arab Movement of Azawad of the Berabiche tribe, controls nearly all human trafficking routes to northern African countries, particularly Algeria. Ould Yahia joined the ranks of the Emirate of Timbuktu (AQMI) in January 2024, operating in northern Mali and the eastern border of Mauritania. He gathers migrants and delivers them to the Algerian or Mauritanian border, charging approximately €1,000 to €2,500 per migrant, with a portion going to JNIM’s guards, averaging around €300<sup>32</sup>.

In Burkina Faso, where the illicit economy thrives on smuggling various goods, JNIM has entrenched itself in key locations along the southern border with the Gulf of Guinea. These coastal countries, especially Togo and Benin, are significant sources of smuggled goods not only into Burkina Faso but also to neighboring nations (Beevor, 2022: 15). These connections are crucial for sustaining the smuggling business, collaborating with armed groups and JNIM.

32 Local sources consulted by the author, April 2024.

Regarding direct exploitation of humans for operational purposes, JNIM benefits primarily from recruitment and as a warfare tactic through the human trafficking market. In the realm of migrant smuggling, Baye Coulibaly<sup>33</sup>, a major human trafficker<sup>34</sup> in Gao since 2010, has leveraged his position to recruit migrants for the Groupe d'Autodéfense Touareg Imghad et Alliés (GATIA) and currently the Mouvement Patriotique Ganda Koi (MPGK). Coulibaly also supplies fighters for JNIM, utilizing his human trafficking network (UNODC, 2022: 27).

Ahmadou Ag Asriou is another figure involved in trafficking and smuggling activities in northern Mali and Niger. Sanctioned by the United Nations since 2018, Ag Asriou operates with the assistance of Mohammed Ben Ahmed Mehri, alias "Rougy", also sanctioned by the United Nations in 2019. The two oversee smuggling operations in Niger, with Ag Asriou accused of supporting terrorists from Al Murabitun, JNIM's faction in Gao, Mali, and Niger.

A notable case illustrating JNIM's involvement in human trafficking operations was the arrest of three

Maliens in Ghana, extradited to the United States, and charged with drug and human trafficking<sup>35</sup>. The detainees revealed during DEA interviews that AQMI provided security for their cocaine shipments crossing Togo, Burkina Faso, Ghana, and Mali. They also collaborated with AQMI to transport immigrants from Bangladesh, India, and Pakistan to Spain.

Turning to the W-Arly Pendjari Complex (WAP) located at the tri-border area of Burkina Faso, Benin, and Niger, JNIM exploits transit routes by imposing fees on residents rather than taxing smugglers. These protected areas, difficult for security forces to penetrate due to unfamiliar terrain and extensive hiding possibilities, serve as lucrative spaces for illicit activities involving traffickers, smugglers, and economically disadvantaged communities. JNIM capitalizes on this situation, allowing illicit activities to continue in exchange for legitimizing their authority over the region. The WAP complex also serves as a hiding place for hostages, benefiting from its effective concealment and deterrent to rescue operations (Sampaio et al., 2023: 9).

.....  
33 Coulibaly led multiple operations facilitating migrant smuggling. This included running a transportation company in 2019 that moved around 25 migrants per week, providing fake Malian travel documents, and controlling illegal 'checkpoints' on routes out of Gao. Source: UNODC.

34 Since the beginning of the current boom in gold mining in the Sahel, and before this activity attracted the attention of terrorist organizations, Coulibaly provided 30 workers per month for traditional gold panning.

35 For more information, see Aguilera, A. (2022). *Tráfico de drogas y yihadismo en África*. Observatorio Internacional de Estudios sobre Terrorismo.



In addition to the payment-for-passage revenue model, kidnappings play a significant role in JNIM's operations. Over the past two decades, organizations like AQMI have financed much of their activities through the abduction of foreigners across Algeria, Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger<sup>36</sup>. Since the 2010s, due to fewer potential foreign hostages, Al Qaeda in West Africa has significantly reduced its reliance on foreign ransom as a financial method, instead turning to the kidnapping of locals. These practices now form a core part of JNIM's economic activities, targeting prominent political and business figures in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger. By 2017, kidnappings contributed 40% of the group's annual funding (Global Terrorism Index, 2024: 57). According to ACLED data, between 2017 and 2023, JNIM conducted a total of 810 kidnappings in Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger, Togo, and Benin, with over half occurring in Burkina Faso in 2022 alone.

Beyond economic motives, kidnappings are employed as part of an operational strategy to accompany territorial expansion and serve as a consistent tactic in JNIM's *modus operandi*. At the core of this strategy lies the goal of influencing favorable

political and social dynamics, creating an environment of intimidation to encounter less community resistance in areas it seeks to dominate. An increase in kidnappings often serves as an early warning of potential JNIM incursions into new territories where its presence and influence are not yet established, providing valuable intelligence on villages, loyalties, and business dynamics in the region.

Especially since JNIM's expansion into the southern Sahel in 2022, the organization's movement into new territories in northern Benin has also seen an increase in kidnapping practices, aimed at forging alliances with key figures and exerting control over communities. While kidnappings for ransom by criminal gangs or other armed groups continue across the region, terrorist groups, particularly JNIM, have become the predominant actors behind kidnappings in the northern zones (Berger, Tagziria, & Mossi, 2024: 2).

With JNIM's expanding influence in the southern Sahel, its involvement in the region's informal economy will likely grow to sustain the group financially and operationally. This not only allows them to exploit illicit trade flows passing through the area but also compels

.....  
36 In November 2023, a German cleric kidnapped by criminals and brought before JNIM was released in Mali.



traffickers and smugglers to include payments to Al Qaeda fighters in their operational costs. This dynamic poses a risk of opening up an illicit corridor that, with JNIM's active presence in the criminal economy, could lead to a surge in criminal activities across West Africa and neighboring regions. JNIM's direct engagement in these activities will intensify instability, complicating governance and development efforts in coastal countries on the western and southern flanks of West Africa, thereby creating an even more volatile environment for local and regional authorities.

#### 4.4. Boko Haram in Nigeria

According to the 2023 Global Organized Crime Index, Nigeria ranks second among African nations and sixth globally in terms of crime rates (2023a: 12).

The country's extensive Gulf of Guinea coastline hosts a well-established network of organized criminal activities, predominantly involving drug trafficking, arms trafficking, and human trafficking, often facilitated by ethnic and familial ties. Institutional weaknesses and systematic corruption have created an environment conducive to organized crime, particularly human trafficking (GITOC, 2023b: 5).

Human smuggling is pervasive in Nigeria, driven by rapid population growth, acute poverty, and porous borders. Nigerian smuggling networks frequently target European destinations, typically transiting through the Sahel to North Africa. Unlike other West African countries, human smuggling from Nigeria is highly organized, involving Nigerian diasporas and transnational criminal organizations (GITOC, 2023b: 3).

Beyond human smuggling, Nigeria faces other criminal threats such as ransom kidnappings, extortion, and blackmail, primarily orchestrated by terrorist groups amidst national ethnic and religious conflicts, exacerbating violence and insecurity.



**Empty desks with the names of girls kidnapped by Boko Haram in Chibok.**

**Source: Brookings Institution.**

On April 14, 2014, the terrorist group Boko Haram abducted 276 girls from a boarding school in Chibok, Borno State, Nigeria, marking a pivotal moment in the group's trafficking of women and girls for operational and strategic purposes. According to firsthand accounts, Boko Haram fighters offered the captives a choice between marrying them or becoming their slaves (Amnesty International, 2024).

The gradual release of the "Chibok girls" was achieved through negotiations with the Nigerian government, involving the exchange of five Boko Haram leaders and the payment of approximately \$3.7 million in ransom (CTED, 2021: 36). This attack, alongside another in Dapchi in 2018, where the group kidnapped 110 schoolgirls under similar circumstances, solidifies Boko Haram as a prominent regional organization involved in human trafficking.

Boko Haram is one of the two main terrorist groups operating in the Lake Chad Basin region, alongside the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP). Its financial capabilities and human resources have varied significantly over its two-decade existence, depending on the success of its violent campaigns against government and civilian targets. Despite a decline in capabilities since its peak in 2020, due to intensified military operations by regional security forces and clashes with ISWAP, Boko

Haram has shown resilience to external and internal pressures. This resilience has resulted in systematic attacks causing thousands of deaths and displacing over two million people from northeastern Nigeria.

The group's modus operandi includes indiscriminate attacks on civilians, security forces, and entire communities, as well as humanitarian crimes such as mass kidnappings, hostage-taking, and human trafficking. This indicates that Boko Haram views human exploitation as a fundamental aspect of its violent actions.

Beyond operational purposes, Boko Haram's involvement in this criminal industry extends to recruitment methods, identity cleansing, and using abduction as a warfare tactic. The exploitation of children is systematic, with reports confirming that between 2009 and 2017, at least 8,000 children were recruited and used by the group in Nigeria (UNSC, 2017b: 18). In these kidnapping operations, children are primarily exploited as a means of recruitment for armed conflict. They are tested, sometimes even against their own families, to prove their loyalty to the group, and are also used as cooks, informants, and messengers. In contrast, girls are more often kidnapped to boost the group's morale, both sexually (through forced marriages and sexual violence) and domestically (as servants for cleaning and cooking). They also help transport equipment and weapons. Some of Boko Haram's attacks have specifically targeted children who refuse to join the group, as well as single women and girls.

Regarding women, Boko Haram has abducted thousands across Borno, Yobe, and Adamawa states for purposes including slavery, forced labor, and sexual exploitation since at least 2013. Survivors have described a hierarchy among female captives, where those who refuse to marry militants are treated as slaves to other wives. These women are coerced into converting to Islam<sup>37</sup> and subjected to domestic chores, forced labor, sexual abuse, and sometimes used as human bombs in military operations<sup>38</sup>.

Boko Haram's identity tactics are evident in the kidnappings of children and young people, aimed specifically at creating the next generation of fighters. This approach includes forced conversions, which allow them to increase their number of combatants

.....  
37 The organization has forced kidnapped women and girls to recite verses from the Quran.

38 Regarding sexual violence by its fighters, there has been a significant increase in recent years. In 2016, the number of verified cases of sexual abuse was 644, while in 2017, there were 997 recorded cases. Source: Secretary-General on Conflict-related Sexual Violence, 2018.



and to shape these individuals from a young age to adopt and promote the group's ideology. By specifically targeting groups (mainly Christians) with particular characteristics (school-age youth), Boko Haram seeks to dismantle the cultural and religious structures of the communities to which they belong, using kidnappings as a tactic to undermine the social fabric.

In addition to recruitment and ethnic cleansing purposes, increasing numbers of boys and girls are being used as methods of warfare. The use of children as human shields and suicide bombers has generated a media impact that has amplified the organization's message and undermined social trust. For instance, in May 2015, a girl around 12 years old was used to detonate a bomb at a bus station in Damaturu (Yobe State), killing seven people. Similar actions have been recorded in Cameroon and Niger (UNODC, 2017: 1). In 2017, Boko Haram used at least 158 children (boys and girls) as human bombs, a significant increase from the 19 used throughout 2016 (U.S. Department of State, 2019: 332).

While Boko Haram primarily pursues operational goals rather than economic objectives, it also funds its activities through kidnappings. Following the Chibok incident, Abubakar Shekau<sup>39</sup> announced plans to sell kidnapped women and girls to fighters as slaves or wives (CTED, 2021: 32). In the Zamfara-Katsina region, criminal groups known as "bandits" have carried out kidnappings for Boko Haram in exchange for financial compensation and other favors, indicating sustained collaboration over time<sup>40</sup>. Although Boko Haram's primary motive for kidnappings lies in operational purposes rather than economic gain, occasional financial benefits from these activities cannot be ignored.

Similar to Libya, organized crime operations in Nigeria, Niger, Chad, and Cameroon have significantly profited from terrorism activities in the region. Mass displacements and widespread insecurity resulting from Boko Haram and ISWAP activities in Lake Chad have created fertile ground for a criminal marketplace with increased opportunities for exploitation and supply<sup>41</sup>. Numerous criminal groups exploit the desperate situation of displaced persons due to

.....  
39 Leader of Boko Haram until his death in May 2021.

40 Sources from the Spanish General Information Commissioner's Office (CGI) consulted by the author, October 2023.

41 Women displaced by Boko Haram's activities often end up as victims of traffickers and recruited for forced prostitution. Source: International Institute for Counter-Terrorism.

conflicts, although Boko Haram appears less focused on human trafficking compared to other forms of smuggling<sup>42</sup>. Nonetheless, connections between traffickers and organization members have been documented along routes stretching from southern Nigeria through Niger and Libya to Europe (Liv, 2019: 23), suggesting that human exploitation also serves as a means of mobility, albeit to a lesser extent.

**Boko Haram's identity tactics are evident in the kidnappings of children and young people, aimed specifically at creating the next generation of fighters**

#### 4.5. Al Shabaab in Somalia

In the Global Organized Crime Index 2023, Somalia ranks just above Libya in the low resilience category, underscoring the country's challenges in combating organized crime. Since the collapse of Siad Barre's regime in 1991, Somalia has been mired in anarchy and conflict, intensifying criminal activities that predate Barre's rule (Brooks, 2010: 4). Since then, Somalia has been labeled both a collapsed and failed state, with the chronic absence of an effective central

government creating a power vacuum exploited by various factions and criminal groups controlling large swathes of the country.

Organized crime has filled the void left by ineffective state institutions. Illegal arms trafficking, piracy, human smuggling, and drug trafficking are major criminal activities shaping Somalia's economy, generating substantial profits and impeding efforts at reconstruction and formal economic development. The criminal economy in Somalia not only impacts the nation itself but also has regional and international implications due to its strategic geographic location, facilitating strong transnational connections with illicit markets across Africa and extending to Yemen via the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden.

In a context of institutional fragility and widespread corruption, the terrorist group Al Shabaab has established itself as a significant player in Somalia's illicit economy, competing with clandestine militias, warlords, government agents, and transnational criminal networks, particularly entrenched in Puntland and Somaliland (Global Organized Crime Index, 2023).

.....  
42 See Boko Haram's involvement in arms smuggling in Aguilera, A. (2023). *Terrorism and organized crime: Arms trafficking and smuggling in North Africa and the Sahel*. Observatorio Internacional de Estudios sobre Terrorismo.

According to the 2023 Yearbook of Jihadist Terrorism, Somalia is among the most terrorism-affected countries, with Al Shabaab recognized as one of the most dangerous terrorist groups in Somalia and Kenya<sup>43</sup>. Al Shabaab, aligned with Al Qaeda, employs a range of tactics from ambushes and sieges to suicide attacks, having regained strength in recent years and openly challenging the government of Hassan Sheikh Mohamud and his administration (Igalada, 2024: 22).

Persistent instability exacerbates Somalia's social and economic vulnerabilities, with the lack of rule of law, collapsed state structures, gender inequalities, and inadequate government protection making civilians particularly susceptible to violence and abuse (de Brouwer, de Volder & Paulussen, 2020: 13). In this environment of continuous exploitation, Al Shabaab plays a pivotal role.

Similar to Boko Haram, Al Shabaab does not consider human exploitation a significant source of revenue but rather part of its operational strategy<sup>44</sup>. Al Shabaab's involvement in human trafficking primarily serves as a tactic for

recruitment and warfare, using coercion to force victims into various roles.

When examining child exploitation, Al Shabaab has one of the highest records for using children for recruitment and exploitation, with incidents increasing since 2017. A 2021 report by the UN Panel of Experts recorded a rise in verified cases of child recruitment and exploitation compared to the same period in 2020, with over three-quarters of these cases attributed to Al Shabaab. According to the report, a total of 631 children were recruited and exploited, and another 348 were kidnapped, presumably for recruitment purposes. The report also warned about young people being abducted from madrasas (United Nations Panel of Experts, 2021: 32).

In 2021, Somalia experienced one of the highest rates of child abductions by non-state actors globally, predominantly by Al Shabaab, for combat and support roles (United States Department of Labor, 2021: 2). These recruits undertake various tasks related to terrorist activities, such as placing explosives, acting as human shields, and executing suicide

.....  
43 For more information on global terrorism trends, see Igalada, C. et al. (2024). *Anuario del Terrorismo Yihadista 2023*. Observatorio Internacional de Estudios sobre Terrorismo.

44 However, multiple migrant routes pass through territories controlled by Al Shabaab in Somalia and Kenya, allowing them to take advantage by establishing checkpoints and levies on the main routes without needing to directly engage in the smuggling industry.



attacks. In addition to forced recruitment, victims endure sexual slavery, including children. Al Shabaab also pressures communities to provide male children as soldiers, imposing economic sanctions on non-compliant families.

As part of its recruitment strategy, the group targets schools and mosques, forcibly enrolling very young children in military indoctrination at madrasas (United States Department of State, 2019: 465). This tactic also indirectly promotes identity cleansing, akin to methods used by the Islamic State, aimed at grooming the next generation of Al Shabaab fighters.

In addition to the documented cases of sexual violence against children, women and girls are also the main victims of human trafficking, a hallmark of Al Shabaab's operations. Displaced individuals, especially from marginalized groups, are at the highest risk of experiencing violence from the group, including coercive practices and extortion such as kidnappings, sexual abuse, forced marriages, and corporal punishment (de Brouwer, de Volder & Paulussen, 2020: 13).

The recruitment of women as a method of sexual violence is often intended to satisfy the organization's fighters, keeping them from thinking

about returning home. As a result, many of these women end up being used as sex slaves or "wives" of the insurgents, while others are subjected to forced domestic labor in Al Shabaab's military camps.

Testimonies from those who managed to escape the organization reveal that women and girls, mainly from marginalized communities and impoverished areas, had been subjected to unimaginable abuses (Jespersen, Ochieng & Burudi, 2022: 9). Victims report having endured gang rapes, being forced to take drugs, and being compelled to perform domestic tasks such as cooking and cleaning in Al Shabaab's camps.

**Al Shabaab's involvement in human trafficking primarily serves as a tactic for recruitment and warfare, using coercion to force victims into various roles**

The group traffics women and girls from Kenya’s coastal regions to Somalia under false promises of employment abroad. Once in the group’s hands, these individuals are subjected to sexual slavery. Some are kept as sex slaves, while others are forced to be “wives” of the insurgents or assigned tasks like cooking and cleaning weapons, perpetuating a cycle of abuse and control. The practice of forced marriages and sexual slavery is so well-known among Al Shabaab fighters that even communities under the group’s control marry off their daughters, including minors, as a protective measure<sup>45</sup>.



**Girls in displacement camps in Somalia.**

**Source: UNICEF/Kate Holt**

.....  
45 A recent case was documented in which a man quickly married off his daughters to non-Al Shabaab members after one of their militants beat one of them for refusing to marry him.

Al Shabaab's engagement in human trafficking primarily serves recruitment purposes, while practices like sexual violence also function as warfare tactics, instilling terror and maintaining control over their areas of operation. Refugees, displaced persons, minorities, and residents in territories under Al Shabaab's control are most vulnerable to becoming victims of sexual trafficking and forced labor, effectively intimidating the population and ensuring cohesion and obedience.

Refugees and internally displaced persons settled in camps or navigating unsafe migration routes are prime targets for Al Shabaab, illustrating the interconnectedness between terrorism and displacement (de Brouwer, de Volder & Paulussen, 2020; CTED, 2021; Jespersen, Ochieng & Burudi, 2022), akin to tactics observed by Boko Haram in Nigeria. Beyond fostering terror and garnering media attention, Al Shabaab aims to provoke mass displacements and the formation of large refugee camps. These camps exacerbate tensions with local communities, increase radicalization risks among refugees, and provide strategic advantages in their quest for safe havens.

As a tactical component of their warfare strategy and coercion in their spheres of influence, Al Shabaab uses human trafficking to bolster their organizational structure and intelligence operations. Evidence indicates Somali women serve as informants for Al Shabaab's intelligence branch, the Amniyat, due to their low suspicion profile during incidents (West, 2019). There are also reports of Kenyan sex workers exploited by the group to glean critical information from clients, including law enforcement officers. Thus, sexual exploitation not only serves as a tool for control and terror but also facilitates espionage and the acquisition of valuable intelligence.

## **5. Efforts and Recommendations**

Previous case studies reveal two fundamental realities. On one hand, human trafficking is an industry exploited by terrorist groups for financial, operational, or both purposes. On the other hand, similar to drug, arms, and other goods trafficking, evidence of their involvement is not always easy to find. However, the absence of immediate proof does not mean that this hybridization between terrorism and organized crime does not exist. Throughout this document, it has been shown how

both types of criminal actors experience a relationship with blurred boundaries through networks strategically located in specific contexts. Therefore, it is expected that the interaction between human exploitation and terrorism will receive greater attention in the future, just as it does with other criminal enterprises.

The recommendations for addressing the terrorism-organized crime phenomenon are aligned with ongoing efforts to combat it. The United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime (UNTOC), or Palermo Convention, established two specific Protocols (2003 and 2004) that define human trafficking and the smuggling of migrants internationally, urging member states to adopt legislative measures to criminalize these actions (Jespersion, Ochieng & Burudi, 2022: 2). The United Nations Security Council has also addressed the relationship between terrorism and human trafficking through significant resolutions such as 2331 (2016) and 2388 (2017), recognizing the need to strengthen mechanisms to combat their interaction<sup>46</sup>.

In recent years, efforts to address the connection between these criminal phenomena have gained attention. However, much of the international community still treats them separately, despite clear evidence of their link. Implementing effective measures to combat them has also faced numerous challenges. Countries like Nigeria and Somalia lack specific legislation to address sexual terrorism, which complicates efforts to pursue and prosecute groups like Boko Haram or Al Shabaab. There's also a lack of unified laws in the regions where these terrorist groups operate alongside organized crime.

In Mali, civil society organizations and international bodies have had to provide urgent logistical and financial support to victims of sexual violence committed by JNIM. This includes training judges and lawyers, filing lawsuits on behalf of victims, and offering psychological support (CTED, 2023: 50). Meanwhile, 2024 marks the tenth anniversary of the Yazidi genocide by the Islamic State, a tragedy that has yet to see adequate accountability.

.....  
46 The Council strengthened tools to combat the link between both criminal actors, while Resolution 2195 (2014) recognized more directly the relationship between terrorism and human trafficking. By the time Resolution 2199 (2014) came into force, there was a firm condemnation of kidnappings, exploitation, and abuses committed by terrorist groups such as Islamic State and Al-Nusra Front. In subsequent resolutions, such as 2242 (2015), 2253 (2015), 2368 (2017), 2379 (2017), and 2427 (2018), the Security Council reiterated its concern about acts of sexual and gender-based violence perpetrated by terrorist groups, recognizing that human trafficking can financially support perpetrators and promoting accountability for these abuses and violations.

There is a long way to go in addressing these issues. Multiple avenues for action exist, including legal, institutional, political, and social approaches.

Addressing these challenges requires realistic and pragmatic strategies to understand the motivations linking human trafficking and terrorism. While the human exploitation industry is not new, its combination with extremist violence represents a current phenomenon driven by shared economic and strategic benefits. Vigilance over these evolving threats, particularly terrorism's dynamic nature, remains essential.

To effectively tackle the current situation, recommendations should embrace a comprehensive approach aimed at reducing or mitigating this issue. This entails integrating preventive measures across institutions, law enforcement, victim protection, social empowerment, and enforcement actions.

First, it is necessary to strengthen the institutional framework in affected countries and promote effective international cooperation. This involves creating, reinforcing, and enforcing national laws that criminalize human trafficking and migrant smuggling, ensuring these practices are clearly defined as crimes and aligned with

other regional legislative frameworks. Additionally, fostering cooperation and transparency among public administration, the executive, legislative, judiciary, civil society, and the private sector is essential for effective governance and to significantly mitigate corrupt practices. Improving the capabilities of the police, military, and border guards, as well as enhancing database interoperability and immigration data analysis, is also advisable (Townsend & Mili, 2008).

Regarding international cooperation, policymakers and law enforcement agencies play a crucial role. Current limited interaction, as reported by some sources, along with the lack of cooperation and information sharing among different departments and agencies, often creates vulnerabilities that criminal networks exploit. Therefore, countries should encourage multi-level collection and sharing of intelligence, from local to regional, among law enforcement and prosecution agencies (CTED, 2021: 43). Strengthening public-private partnerships is also vital. Civil society organizations, local agencies, community networks, and even the general population can significantly contribute by providing crucial information about human trafficking networks, their potential connections with groups and individuals, and their possible links to



other sectors, including militias and public officials. Furthermore, promoting greater international cooperation to keep information currently in use in regional and international platforms and databases, bilateral information exchange agreements, official sources, and updated on-the-ground data are recommended.

Enhancing technology and surveillance capabilities is essential for both national and international efforts. The application of advanced artificial intelligence tools and big data analysis can be invaluable in identifying patterns and connections between terrorist activities and human trafficking that might otherwise go unnoticed. Technological use should also involve a human component, with agencies identifying networks, victims, and collaborators on a case-by-case basis whenever possible.

Regarding penalties for smugglers in transit regions, the severity of sanctions must be increased. Unfortunately, human exploitation activities associated with terrorism or occurring in conflict or post-conflict environments continue to be met with significant impunity. For instance, no members of the Islamic State or Boko Haram have been prosecuted for sexual violence or other forms of exploitation associated with human trafficking to date

(CTED, 2021: 51).

Alongside legislative and institutional measures, empowering vulnerable or at-risk communities through awareness, education, and economic development programs is critical to reduce their involvement in criminal activities. Human exploitation and terrorism in Africa and the Middle East stem from interconnected risk factors. Therefore, improving living conditions in countries of origin is essential to combat these issues. These measures should not only focus on security policies but also include infrastructure improvements, educational reforms, economic development programs, and the provision of basic services to deter citizens from engaging in organized crime activities.

Victims play a significant role in the criminal networks discussed in this study. Robust mechanisms must be established to protect them, ensuring access to legal assistance, medical care, and psychosocial support to help foster a resilient civil society. Partnerships with civil society organizations working on programs to prevent and combat violent extremism are equally crucial in addressing stigma and combating the persecution of those who escape terrorist control, distinguishing between those forcibly recruited and those who joined



voluntarily. Grassroots education is vital to eliminate the stigma faced by victims, with women's organizations playing a key role in peacebuilding (Jespersion, Ochieng & Burudi, 2022: 16).

All measures should be approached from a perspective that ensures respect for the human rights of victims and affected communities. Given the persistent link between organized crime and terrorism, maintaining vigilance and continuously adapting strategies are essential for effective intervention.

## 6. Conclusions

The interaction between terrorism and organized crime dedicated to human exploitation profoundly impacts security scenarios in Africa and the Middle East. This study has examined various cases demonstrating how terrorism not only perpetuates conflicts but also exploits human trafficking as a means to achieve financial and operational objectives. From financial enrichment to recruitment and intimidation tactics, human trafficking and smuggling have become systematic methods employed by terrorist groups, often with the cooperation and sometimes convergence of organized crime to promote their goals and interests, exacerbating a cycle of violence and suffering with little prospect of resolution.

The underlying factors behind terrorist participation in human trafficking and smuggling activities are complex and dynamic. Border permeability, political instability, armed conflicts, or economic underdevelopment are some of the main variables contributing to the vulnerability of local populations, facilitating impunity for perpetrators and leading to the entrenchment of forces that have propelled criminality in both regions under study.

Each of the five case studies analyzed illustrates the diverse motivations behind terrorist involvement in the human exploitation industry. The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria provides a prominent example of how a terrorist organization leverages this criminal market. They use human trafficking not only to enrich their coffers significantly but also as a tool for recruitment, warfare, and identity cleansing. The brutal treatment of communities, especially the Yazidis, and the systematic nature of these practices demonstrate how the group effectively integrated organized crime into its terrorist strategy, particularly until 2019.

In the case of Libya, organized crime's intervention in the post-conflict economy has significantly impacted the power dynamics among rebel militias and other armed actors. During its peak

influence in the country between 2015 and 2016, the Islamic State played an active role in human exploitation, leveraging its high-level contacts and establishing relationships with local criminal leaders. Human trafficking and smuggling pose security risks that extend beyond Libya's borders, particularly towards Europe. Despite the Islamic State's decline in power and territorial control, there remains concern that organized crime could facilitate the movement of fighters from terrorist groups across European borders.

In the case of JNIM, both now and before its creation with AQIM, it has been confirmed that the Al-Qaeda affiliate has obtained substantial indirect benefits from human trafficking and smuggling by offering safe passage in exchange for a percentage of trafficked individuals' fees. Besides the financial aspect, JNIM pursues a strategy of terror and war on the communities it subjugates, both in the tri-border area between Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso and in the vicinity of Gulf of Guinea countries (particularly Benin and Togo). JNIM allows communities to continue their illicit activities in exchange for payment and political recognition, thereby legitimizing its presence and power through inaction and permissiveness. Collaboration with local criminal actors is essential to maintaining

and amplifying its influence, threatening to increase instability and criminalization in broader parts of West Africa as the organization expands southward into the Sahel.

Boko Haram exploits Nigeria's deeply entrenched criminal economy, leveraging institutional weaknesses and widespread corruption in key public sectors. Within this environment, it uses human trafficking for recruitment, identity manipulation, and as a tactic of warfare against communities. While its primary objectives are operational, Boko Haram also funds itself through kidnappings and extortion in this market. The group capitalizes on regional conflicts it fuels, benefiting from insecurity and mass displacements. Its main challenge lies in solidifying its position as the dominant terrorist force in the Lake Chad Basin to further expand its involvement in human exploitation activities.

Finally, Al Shabaab maintains a continued relationship with human exploitation as a recruitment and warfare method, especially targeting marginalized groups. Somalia has experienced over three decades of chaos and insecurity, exacerbating already present criminal activities. In this context of absent effective state authority, organized crime has emerged as a force imposing some

order, shaping the national economy through activities such as illegal arms trafficking, piracy, human smuggling, and drug trafficking. Al Shabaab has become a prominent actor within this Somali criminal economy, competing with other militias, military leaders, and transnational criminal networks. Besides its terrorist activities, Al Shabaab actively engages in human trafficking as part of its operational strategy. This includes recruiting children for various practical functions, such as planting explosives, executing attacks, and providing logistical support. The group also traffics women and girls, forcing them into sexual slavery, using them as “wives” for insurgents, and exploiting them to gather crucial information for its intelligence operations.

As with other criminal markets, organized crime, terrorism, and conflict are mutually reinforcing elements. Human exploitation not only has devastating consequences for individual victims but also threatens the security and stability of increasingly large regions, making it a global problem that undermines efforts to promote peace, sustainable development, and social order.

Given the active participation of terrorism in organized crime activities, as well as the expansion possibilities that the violent extremism agenda considers in specific areas of Africa, national and international efforts have sought to combat and prosecute these crimes to try to curb a greater intensification of their relationship. However, current legislative and cooperative frameworks lack several key points for their success, including regional mistrust in sharing information, the absence of a judicial culture in prosecuting certain crimes like sexual terrorism, or the lack of specific legislation for human rights violations by terrorist groups. Therefore, it is necessary to establish a new approach that addresses previous limitations, especially given the rapid terrorist rise and, thus, the greater likelihood of intensifying the relationship between both criminal phenomena.

Regional governments, international organizations, and civil society are three of the most important actors that must join forces in the fight against human exploitation and its links to terrorism. Only through coordinated and determined action can significant progress be expected in protecting human rights, security, and stability in Africa, the Middle East, and other interconnected scenarios in the global security system.

## 7. References

Afriyie, F. (2024). Weaving through the maze of terrorist marriages in Africa's Sahel region: Jama'at Nasr Al Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM) under review, *Cogent Social Sciences*, 10:1.

Aguilera, A. (2022). *Tráfico de drogas y yihadismo en África*. Observatorio Internacional de Estudios sobre Terrorismo.

Aguilera, A. (2023a). *El papel de Libia como centro consolidado de economías ilícitas y su impacto en el fenómeno terrorista del Sahel*. Revista del Instituto Español de Estudios Estratégicos, nº 23.

Aguilera, A. (2023b). *Terrorism and organized crime: Arms trafficking and smuggling in North Africa and the Sahel*. Observatorio Internacional de Estudios sobre Terrorismo

Aguilera, A. (2024). *Actividad yihadista en el Magreb y en África Occidental en 2023* en Igualada, C. (2024). *Anuario del Terrorismo Yihadista 2023*. Observatorio Internacional de Estudios sobre Terrorismo.

Amnesty International. (2024). *Ten years on: The women of Chibok speak out*.

Ani, N. (2023). *Economic warfare in southern Mali: Intersections between illicit economies and violent extremism*. ECOWAS Commission, OCWAR-T Research Report 13.

Avdan, N. & Omelicheva, M. (2021). Human Trafficking-Terrorism Nexus: When Violent Non-State Actors Engage in the Modern-Day Slavery. In *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 1-31.

Beevor, E. (2022). *JNIM in Burkina Faso: A strategic criminal actor*. Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (GI-TOC).

Beqiri, F., Maluku, E. & Maluku, A. (2023). *Human Organ Trafficking: Perspective from Criminal matters, Business, and Human Rights*. Access to Justice in Eastern Europe.

Berger, F. (2023). *The Silent Threat: kidnappings in Burkina Faso*. Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (GI-TOC).

Berger, F., Tagziria, L. & Mossi, A. (2024). *Hostage to violent extremism: Kidnapping in northern Benin*. Comisión de la CEDEAO, OCWAR-T Research Report 15.

Brooks, S. (2010). *Somalia: Illicit Economies, Criminal Networks and the Downfall of the Somali State*. Faculty of the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences, Georgetown University.

Caballero, A. & Crespo, R. (2018). Secuestros de españoles por grupos terroristas: ¿existen alternativas al rescate económico?, *Revista de Estudios en Seguridad Internacional*, 4:2.

Caparini, M. (2022). *Conflict, Governance and Organized Crime: Complex Challenges for UN Stabilization Operations*. Stockholm International Peace Research Institute [SIPRI].

Center for Security Studies [CSS]. (2013). *Kidnapping for Ransom as a Source of Terrorism Funding*. CSS Analysis n° 141.

Chatzis, I. (2024). *Links Between Smuggling of Migrants and Other Forms of Organized Crime Along the Central and Western Mediterranean Routes*. Human Trafficking and Migrant Smuggling Section, United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC).

Cohen, D. K. (2013). Explaining Rape During Civil War: Cross-national Evidence (1980-2009). *American Political Science Review*, 107:3.

Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate [CTED]. (2021). *Identifying and Exploring the Nexus between Human Trafficking, Terrorism, and Terrorism Financing*.

Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate [CTED]. (2023). *Towards Meaningful Accountability for Sexual and Gender-Based Violence Linked to Terrorism*.

Crawford, M. (2017). *International Sex Trafficking*. *Women & Therapy*, 40:1-2.

Crowcroft, O. (2015). *Isis: People trafficking, smuggling and punitive taxes boost Islamic State economy*. International Business Times.

Farley, A. (2018). *The New Slave Trade: Migration, Trafficking, and Terrorists in Libya*. New Security Beat.

Financial Action Task Force [FATF]. (2022). *ML/TF Risks Arising from Migrant Smuggling*.

Forest, J. (2019). *Crime-Terror Interactions in Sub-Saharan Africa*, *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*.

Garver-Affeldt, J. et al. (2022). *Smuggling of Migrants in the Sahel: Transnational Organized Crime Threat Assessment — Sahel*. Transnational Organized Crime Threat Assessment (TOCTA). United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime [UNODC].

Gebrekidan, S. (2016). *Special Report: Behind the refugee crisis, families in the West willing to pay and pay*. Reuters.

Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime. (2023a). *The Global Organized Crime Index 2023*.

Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime. (2023b). *Nigeria*.

Global Slavery Index. (2023).

Global Terrorism Index. (2024). Institute for Economics & Peace (IEP).

Hernández, J. (2013). *Terrorism, Drug Trafficking, and the Globalization of Supply*. *Perspectives on Terrorism*, 7:4.

Huckerby, J. (2019). *When Human Trafficking and Terrorism Connect: Dangers and Dilemmas*. Just Security.

Igualada, C. (2024). *Terrorismo yihadista global: tendencias, actores y escenarios in Igualada, C. (2024). Anuario del Terrorismo Yihadista 2023*. Observatorio Internacional de Estudios sobre Terrorismo.

International Labour Organization [ILO]. (2019). *Identifying and exploring the nexus between human trafficking, terrorism, and terrorism financing*.



Jawad, A. (2016). *Archive of Islamic State Administrative Documents*. Pundicity

Jespersion, S., Ochieng, I. A. & Burudi, W. (2022). *Addressing the Links Between Human Trafficking, Migrant Smuggling, and Terrorism in Eastern Africa*. Issue Paper 2 / 2022. EAPCCO CTCoE.

Kenny, C. & Malik, N. (2019). Trafficking Terror and Sexual Violence: Accountability for Human Trafficking and Sexual and Gender-based Violence by Terrorist Groups under the Rome Statute. In *Vanderbilt Journal of Transnational Law*, 52:43.

Khan, S. (n.d.). *Editor's Piece: The Ideological Roots of the Ethnic Cleansing of the Hazara – A Historical Perspective*. Tezhib-Habib University.

Lacher, W. (2012). *Organized Crime and Conflict in the Sahel-Sahara Region*. The Carnegie Papers. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

Levallois, A., Cousseran, J.C. & Kerrello, L. (2017). *The financing of the 'Islamic State' in Iraq and Syria (ISIS)*. European Union Directorate General for External Policies.

Liv, N. (2019). *An Examination of a Potential Connection between the Trafficking of Women on the Darknet and the Financing of Terrorism*. International Institute for Counter-Terrorism (ICT).

Malik, N. (2017). *Trafficking Terror: How Modern Slavery and Sexual Violence Fund Terrorism*. The Henry Jackson Society.

Panel of Experts. (2020). *Letter dated 28 February 2020 from the Panel of Experts established pursuant to resolution 2374 (2017) on Mali addressed to the President of the Security Council*. United Nations Security Council.

Panel of Experts. (2021). *Letter dated 5 October 2021 from the Chair of the Security Council Committee pursuant to resolution 751 (1992) concerning Somalia addressed to the President of the Security Council*. United Nations Security Council.

Panel of Experts. (2023a). *Carta de fecha 14 de septiembre de 2023 dirigida a la Presidencia del Consejo de Seguridad por el Grupo de Expertos sobre Libia establecido en virtud de la resolución 1973 (2011)*. United Nations Security Council.

Panel of Experts. (2023b). *Letter dated 13 February 2023 from the Chair of the Security Council Committee pursuant to resolutions 1267 (1999), 1989 (2011) and 2253 (2015) concerning Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (Da'esh), Al Qaida and associated individuals, groups, undertakings and entities addressed to the President of the Security Council.* United Nations Security Council.

Paul, C., Clarke, C. & Grill, B. (2010). *Victory Has a Thousand Fathers: Sources of Success in Counterinsurgency.* RAND Corporation.

Regulation (EU) 2016/44. European Union.

Reuters. (2016). *Islamic State sanctioned organ harvesting in document taken in U.S. raid.*

Revkin, M., & Wood, E. (2021). The Islamic State's pattern of sexual violence: ideology and institutions, policies and practices. In *Journal of Global Security Studies*, 6(2).

Romanet, J.L. (2020). *Human Trafficking, Smuggling and Governance In Libya: Implications for Stability and Programming.* USAID.

Ruíz, M. (2024). *Amarás y respetarás a Estado Islámico: la violencia sexual como arma de terror contra las mujeres yazidíes en Irak.* *Revista Internacional de Estudios sobre Terrorismo*, 11.

Sampaio, A. et al. (2023). *Reserve Assets: Armed Groups and Conflict Economies in the National Parks of Burkina Faso, Niger and Benin.* Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (GI-TOC).

Secretary-General on conflict-related sexual violence. (2018). *Informe del Secretario General sobre la violencia sexual relacionada con los conflictos.* United Nations Security Council. S/2018/250.

Townsend, J. & Mili, H. (2008). *Human Smuggling and Trafficking: An International Terrorist Security Risk?* CTC Sentinel.

Transparency International. (2023). *Corruption Perceptions Index.*

Trauthig, I. (2019). *Assessing the Islamic State in Libya.* Europol.

United Nations Development Programme [UNDP]. *The 2023/2024 Human Development Report*.

United Nations Human Rights Council. (2016). *They came to destroy: ISIS Crimes Against the Yazidi*.

United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime [UNODC]. (2017). *Handbook on Children Recruited and Exploited by Terrorist and Violent Extremist Groups: The Role of the Justice System*.

United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime [UNODC]. (2024). *Links Between Smuggling of Migrants and Other Forms of Organized Crime Along the Central and Western Mediterranean Routes*.

United Nations Security Council [UNSC]. (2008). *Resolución 1820 (2008)*

United Nations Security Council [UNSC]. (2015). *Declaración de la Presidencia del Consejo de Seguridad*.

United Nations Security Council [UNSC]. (2017a). *Report of the Secretary-General on conflict-related sexual violence*. S/2017/249

United Nations Security Council [UNSC]. (2017b). *Report of the Secretary-General on children and armed conflict in Nigeria*. S/2017/304

United Nations Security Council [UNSC]. (2018a). *Ahmad Oumar Imhamad Al Fitouri*.

United Nations Security Council [UNSC]. (2018b). *Mus'ab Mustafa Abu Al Qassim Omar*.

United Nations University. (2016). *Fighting human trafficking in conflict, 10 Ideas for Action*. United Nations Security Council.

United States Department of Labor. (2021). *2021 Findings on the Worst Forms of Child Labor: Somalia*.

United States Department of State. (2019). *2018 Trafficking in Persons Report*.

United States Department of the Treasury. (2024). *2024 National Terrorist Financing Risk Assessment*.

Viriyapah, M. (2020). *Mapping the Nexus between Human Trafficking and Terrorism in Libya*. American Security Project [ASP].

Weiss, C. et al. (2023). *Fatal Transaction: The Funding Behind the Islamic State's Central Africa Province*. Program on Extremism. George Washington University.

West, S. (2019). *Asset or Victims: A Portrait of Women Within al-Shabaab*. Terrorism Monitor Volume 17(6). The Jamestown Foundation.

World Bank. (n.d.). *Inflation, consumer prices (annual %)*.