



## Terrorism and Human Trafficking: A Dark Alliance of Organized Crime

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**Abstract:** This link between human trafficking and terrorist financing is part of a wider criminal ecosystem where terrorist organizations and trafficking networks collaborate to maximize their profits. Modern terrorist organizations such as ISIS, Boko Haram and Al-Shabaab have been able to exploit power vacuums, local conflicts and social discontent to expand their influence. They use brutal and effective tactics to spread terror and achieve their ideological and political goals. Analyzing them is essential for understanding the dynamics of contemporary terrorism and for formulating effective strategies to combat it.

**Keywords:** terrorism; human trafficking; organized crime; terrorist organizations; trafficking networks

### 1. Introduction

The economic and political development of society is always associated with the worsening of relations between its members (Pusat, 2023, pp. 41-49). In the context of rapid transformations, social, economic and political tensions can lead to the accentuation of conflicts and, implicitly, to the multiplication of deviant behaviors. That is why we consider it appropriate to address two crimes that reflect these tensions: terrorism and human trafficking.

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Terrorism is the deliberate use of violence or the threat of violence against civilians, governments or institutions in order to generate fear, gain political, religious, economic or ideological advantage. It is a premeditated act, involving planning and strategic deployment, intended to strike terror into a wider audience than the immediate victims of the violence. In essence, terrorism is a method used by groups or individuals to influence the behavior or decisions of governments and societies. It is important to note that the definition and perception of terrorism can vary depending on the political, social and cultural context. For example, some groups or governments may call the violent actions of other groups or individuals "terrorism," while the latter may consider themselves "freedom fighters" or "resistance fighters." Thus, there is often debate and controversy around the precise definition of terrorism (Pusat, 2024, pp. 49-63).

Trafficking in human beings (TFU) is a modern form of slavery that involves the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring or reception of persons, through coercion, fraud or deception, for the purpose of exploitation. Exploitation can take various forms, such as forced prostitution, forced labour, slavery, begging, organ harvesting or other similar activities. From a social point of view, human trafficking is considered to be one of the modern forms of slavery (so-called "white slavery"), and from a criminological point of view - one of the most dangerous and profitable forms of international organized crime (Pusat, 2023, pp. 118-128).

In order to prevent, combat and effectively investigate trafficking in human beings, this phenomenon needs to be understood as a whole, taking into account its dimensions, origins, causes, stages, consequences and legal regulations (Năstas, 2024, p. 8).

## **2. The Relationship between Terrorism and Human Trafficking**

The relationship between terrorism and human trafficking is a complex and dangerous one, as these two phenomena feed off each other. In a global security context, effective counter-terrorism cannot be separated from the fight against human trafficking, as both contribute to the exploitation and destruction of human lives, the destabilization of societies and the perpetuation of violence.

Terrorism and human trafficking overlap in many ways, as terrorist groups use human trafficking both as a source of funding and as a strategic means to achieve their ideological and military goals. We believe that the two phenomena intersect from several points of view:

- Terrorism is logistically and financially expensive, and some terrorist organizations use human trafficking to obtain funds. These funds come from the sale and exploitation of victims and ransoms;
- Terrorist groups use human trafficking to recruit new members, including child soldiers and women for various roles such as fighters, spies or even the wives of combatants;
- Trafficked women are often used for sexual exploitation within terrorist groups, to motivate fighters or create bonds between different members;
- In areas controlled by terrorist groups, human trafficking is used to maintain control and subjugate the population;
- Human trafficking can be used by terrorist organizations to radicalize vulnerable individuals.
- Human trafficking can facilitate the mobility of terrorists, allowing them to cross borders illegally and evade strict migration control measures. Through trafficking networks, terrorists can reach different countries undetected and recruit vulnerable people to use for terrorist missions;
- Both terrorism and human trafficking contribute to the creation of social instability and chaos in the affected regions;
- Money obtained from human trafficking is often reinvested in other criminal activities related to terrorism, such as the purchase of weapons, explosive materials or logistics.

### **3. The Historical Context and Evolution of the Phenomenon**

Modern terrorist organizations such as ISIS, Boko Haram and Al-Shabaab have emerged in the context of geopolitical, economic and ideological factors that have facilitated their development in recent decades. These groups use violent tactics to achieve political, religious or ideological goals, and have had a significant impact on global security.

**a) ISIS** had its origins in Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), a group founded in 2004 by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi during the Iraq conflict. In 2011, during the Syrian civil war, the organization split from Al-Qaeda, becoming known as the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS). ISIS gained notoriety in 2014 when it conquered vast territories in Iraq and Syria, proclaiming a caliphate led by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. The group imposed

a brutal regime based on strict interpretations of Sharia law and used highly effective propaganda methods to recruit followers from around the world. Although the group has lost most of its occupied territories to international interventions, ISIS remains active through terrorist cells and sporadic attacks. The group uses asymmetric warfare tactics such as suicide bombings, public beheadings, kidnappings and exploitation of natural resources. The group's ideology is an extremist form of Salafist jihadism, which aims to establish a global caliphate.

**b) Boko Haram** was founded in 2002 in Nigeria by Mohammed Yusuf as a radical Islamic religious movement opposed to western education. The group turned violent in 2009 after the death of its founder in police custody. After 2009, it was known for attacks on civilians, including mass abductions, such as the case of more than 200 girls in Chibok, Nigeria, in 2014. In 2015, the group pledged allegiance to ISIS. The group uses kidnappings, public executions and attacks on schools and government institutions to spread terror. Its ideology is based on the complete rejection of Western influence and the imposition of a strict interpretation of Islamic law in the region.

**c) Al-Shabaab** emerged in Somalia in 2006 as an offshoot of the Union of Islamic Tribunates (UTI), which controlled parts of southern Somalia. After UTI was defeated by government and Ethiopian troops, Al-Shabaab split off and became the main jihadist group in Somalia. The group uses tactics such as suicide attacks, executions and kidnappings, as well as imposing Sharia law in areas it controls. The group advocates an extremist form of jihadism and has been affiliated with Al-Qaeda since 2012.

#### **4. History of Human Trafficking and Links to Organized Crime**

Human trafficking is one of the most serious forms of organized crime, involving the exploitation of human beings for purposes such as forced labour, prostitution, forced marriage and other forms of abuse. This is a global problem that affects millions of people and is closely linked to the activities of organized crime groups.

Human trafficking practices existed in various forms since ancient times, when people were captured and sold as slaves within the societies of Ancient Egypt, Rome or Greece. Also in the Middle Ages, slavery and forced labor were perpetuated through the transatlantic slave trade and other systems of human exploitation. One of the most documented forms of human trafficking in history was the transatlantic slave trade. Between the century XIX and the beginning of the century. 20th century,

the number of cases of trafficking of women for prostitution began to increase, a phenomenon known as “white trafficking”. Trafficking rings recruited women from Eastern Europe and Asia and transported them to America and other parts of the world, exploiting them in brothels. After the fall of the communist regimes in Eastern Europe and the breakup of the Soviet Union in the 1990s, human trafficking in these regions increased significantly. The political and economic disorder created a breeding ground for organized crime groups, which took advantage of social vulnerability and poverty.

The contemporary concept of organised crime is heterogeneous and con-tradictory. If we focus on the general perception of this concept we can state: organised crime equals a formal, homogeneous, multifunctional, criminal organ-isation that aims to undermine and dominate the legal institutions of society (Pasat, 2023, pp. 209-228).

Human trafficking is one of the main activities of international “organized crime”, generating annual profits of billions of dollars. The main links between trafficking and organized crime groups include: high profitability, exploitation of vulnerabilities, recruitment and transport networks, related activities such as drug trafficking, money laundering and production of false documents.

## **5. Involvement of Terrorist Organizations in Human Trafficking - From Kidnapping to Exploitation for Financial and Strategic Purposes**

Terrorist organizations began to actively engage in human trafficking at various historical times, but especially after the 2000s, when instability in the Middle East and Africa increased, and organizations such as Al-Qaeda, ISIS and Boko Haram exploited this phenomenon both to generate income as well as to spread terror. Today, human trafficking continues to be an economic and ideological weapon for many extremist groups, reflecting a tragic trend in recent history.

**a) Contemporary Period: 70s - 90s.** During the Cold War and after the collapse of the Soviet bloc, various terrorist groups in the Middle East, Latin America and Africa began to use kidnappings as a source of income. This included kidnapping political or diplomatic figures for ransom. A classic example is the involvement of groups such as Hezbollah in Lebanon, which used the kidnapping of Western citizens in the 1980s as part of a political and financial strategy.

**b) 2000s: Increased Involvement of Al-Qaeda and the Taliban.** After the attacks of September 11, 2001 and the intensification of the “War on Terror,” groups such

as Al-Qaeda and the Taliban began increasingly to use kidnapping and human trafficking for strategic and financial purposes. Afghanistan and Pakistan have become hotspots for kidnappings of journalists, contractors and aid workers.

**c) 2010s: The Creation and Expansion of ISIS.** With the emergence of the Islamic State (ISIS) in 2013-2014, there was a significant jump in the scale of human trafficking by terrorist organizations. ISIS has used mass kidnappings and the sale of people, especially women and children from minority communities (e.g. Yezidis), as part of a funding and propaganda campaign. Sexual slavery became a central element of ISIS ideology, and the sale of human beings was used both to obtain funds and to demoralize enemies.

**d) Terrorist Groups in Africa: Boko Haram and Al-Shabaab.** During the same period, African terrorist groups such as Boko Haram and Al-Shabaab have stepped up kidnappings in Nigeria, Somalia and other regions of sub-Saharan Africa. Boko Haram, for example, became internationally known in 2014 for the kidnapping of more than 200 schoolgirls in Chibok, Nigeria. These actions had multiple purposes: obtaining ransoms, sexual slavery, forced recruitment and political propaganda.

**e) Civil Wars and Chaos in the Middle East and North Africa.** In the context of the civil wars in Syria and Libya, various terrorist groups and rebel militants have used human trafficking for funding and influence. Groups such as Al-Nusra Front and other Al-Qaeda-affiliated factions in Syria have engaged in human trafficking to raise funds, either from ransoms or the sale of prisoners of war and vulnerable civilians.

**f) Ideological and Political Goals.** In addition to financial motivations, human trafficking has become a strategy to terrorize communities, force displacement and destabilize areas controlled by governments or enemies. For example, ISIS used kidnapping and slavery to undermine social cohesion and eliminate minority populations that did not align with its ideology.

## **6. Facilitating Factors that Contributed to the Involvement of Terrorist Organizations in Human Trafficking**

- The weakening of the state and lack of government control in conflict or unstable areas has created fertile ground for terrorist groups to take control of human trafficking. Fragile states like Somalia, Syria and Libya have allowed these practices to flourish;

- Money and resources obtained from trafficking are vital for many terrorist organizations. Human trafficking, along with other criminal activities such as arms and drug trafficking, is becoming one of the main sources of funding for these groups;
- Modern technologies and social media networks have been used to amplify the impact of these crimes, giving terrorist groups a global propaganda and recruitment platform. At the same time, it should be noted that the offender who commits crimes in cyberspace has several advantages over the traditional offender: 1) the offender can choose his victim from a very large, global area; 2) the offender may remain unknown to the victim; 3) the offender does not interact directly with the victim, does not use a physical weapon; 4) there is a low risk of the offender's actions being discovered, the offender does not have to flee the scene of the crime (Pasat, 2023, pp. 41-53).

## **7. Ways of Exploitation of Human Trafficking by Terrorist Organizations**

Human trafficking has become an important source of funding for terrorist organizations, which use this means to support their activities in several ways:

- kidnapping ransoms. Terrorists may kidnap or take hostages to promote their demands and to force governments or communities to fulfill certain conditions. Hostage-taking and kidnappings are designed to intimidate and put pressure on authorities and populations (Pasat, 2023, pp. 49-63);
- exploitation of sexual slavery - some terrorist organizations use sexual slavery as a direct source of income. Women and girls are abducted, then sold or trafficked to sex-exploitation networks. ISIS has been known to sell women from minority communities (e.g. Yazidis) in sex slave markets. Boko Haram has kidnapped and trafficked women and girls, using them both as sex slaves and as bargaining chips for resources;
- exploitation of forced labor - terrorist organizations use forced labor to finance their operations. Trafficked persons are forced to work in exploitative conditions in agriculture, construction, mining or other industries that bring income to the group. In Africa, various extremist groups use captive civilians for forced labor in agriculture and mining;

- sale and exploitation of child soldiers - in some regions, terrorist groups traffic children to turn them into soldiers. These children are used both as fighters and for other logistical or support tasks;

- charging and extorting human trafficking - In some regions, terrorist groups are not directly involved in human trafficking, but control areas through which this activity takes place, extorting fees from the criminal networks involved. For example: in Libya, after the fall of the Gaddafi regime, various militant and terrorist groups took control of human trafficking routes to Europe. They impose taxes or take a share of the traffickers' profits to allow migrants and refugees to pass;

- forced recruitment for payment - some terrorist organizations demand payment from families to release kidnapped persons or prevent forced recruitment. In other cases, families pay to release captured family members or to avoid being trafficked for sex or forced labor;

- exploitation of human trafficking in the context of migration - terrorist organizations take advantage of humanitarian crises and mass migration to traffic people and make profits. They exploit the vulnerability of refugees and migrants in regions affected by war and poverty.

## **8. The Methods by Which Terrorists Maintain Control Over Trafficked Victims**

Terrorists use a variety of methods to maintain control over trafficked victims, combining tactics of “physical coercion,” “psychological abuse,” and “social exploitation” to prevent escape and ensure submission.

The use of physical violence and threats is one of the most common and direct ways terrorists maintain control over trafficked victims. This includes:

- beatings and torture, to intimidate the victims and weaken their physical and psychological resistance;

- death threats to victims or their families, to prevent attempts to escape or revolt;

- demonstration killings - terrorists may kill victims in front of other prisoners or slaves to show them what fate awaits them if they disobey. ISIS used extreme methods of violence and torture to maintain control over prisoners and sex slaves, especially Yezidi women and children;



- psychological abuse and mental manipulation. Trafficked victims are often subjected to psychological tactics designed to break their will and create a sense of helplessness and dependency;
- dehumanization - victims are treated as goods or objects, which undermines their dignity and hope of being treated as human beings;
- isolation - terrorists isolate victims, separate them from other people and limit their contact with the outside, which makes them feel isolated and helpless;
- indoctrination - in some cases, victims are subjected to brainwashing and ideological propaganda to make them accept their state of slavery or the role imposed by terrorists. Boko Haram uses isolation and brainwashing methods to turn abducted girls and women into forced wives or suicide bombers;
- food restriction - victims are often malnourished and emaciated, making them less able to resist or attempt escape;
- controlled access to medical resources - in many cases, terrorists control access to medical care for injured or sick victims, conditioning treatment on their submission. ISIS controlled all aspects of its victims' lives, including access to basic resources, to ensure total obedience;
- mobilizing fear and shame - the feeling of "shame" and "stigma" is used to control victims, especially those trafficked for sexual exploitation. Terrorists exploit the fear of "social judgment" and "public shaming" to prevent victims from seeking help or trying to escape. Sexually abused women and girls may be so stigmatized by their communities that they fear returning home, creating a psychological barrier that prevents them from escaping.

## **9. Legislative Framework and International Policies**

Terrorist organizations involved in human trafficking are a major challenge to international security, and the international community has developed a legislative framework to regulate combating both phenomena. This framework includes international conventions and treaties that seek to establish common norms and coordinate the efforts of states to combat both terrorism and human trafficking.

International instruments have played a key role in "strengthening global norms" to combat human trafficking and terrorism. These treaties and conventions contributed to:

- Creating common standards: International conventions have established clear definitions of human trafficking and acts of terrorism, facilitating concerted action globally;
- Strengthening international cooperation: The Treaty of Palermo and other conventions have promoted cross-border cooperation between states in the investigation and prosecution of trafficking and terrorism networks;
- Protecting victims: By protecting victims' rights and providing legal and medical assistance, conventions contribute to preventing their re-traumatization and their reintegration into society.

Although these conventions are essential in the fight against terrorism and human trafficking, there are some "important limits":

- uneven implementation: many member states do not effectively implement these conventions. Lack of resources, corruption and a lack of strong political will make enforcement difficult at the national level;
- insufficient coordination: although there are separate conventions to combat human trafficking and convention terror, they are not always sufficiently integrated to address the complex relationship between the two phenomena. This leaves room for the exploitation of legislative loopholes by terrorist groups;
- the legal status of terrorist organizations: the definition of an organization as "terrorist" differs from one country to another, making a unified approach to tracking and punishing these groups difficult. This affects efforts to combat human trafficking that is linked to terrorist activities;
- conflict areas and fragile states: In many cases, international conventions are difficult to implement in "conflict zones" or "fragile states", where terrorist organizations operate without many constraints. States weakened by war, such as Syria, Libya or Yemen, lack the capacity to implement these international legal frameworks.

In order to improve the success of the legislative framework and simultaneously combat human trafficking and terrorism, some additional measures are needed:

- strengthening international cooperation: greater cooperation between international agencies and governments is needed to share information, track cross-border networks and enforce laws uniformly.

Current trends in crime clearly show that the efforts of one or more states are not enough to effectively and quickly counter criminal manifestations. Only effective international cooperation and the strengthening of common potential can ensure concrete progress in the fight against crime (Pasat, 2023, pp. 129-143).

-increasing the capacities of weak states: the international community must invest in building the capacities of states affected by conflict and instability to implement these conventions and effectively combat human trafficking and terrorism.

-integration of anti-trafficking and anti-terrorism policies: legislative and operational approaches should be better integrated to recognize and combat the direct connections between human trafficking and terrorism.

## **10. Conclusion**

Terrorism and human trafficking are complex, transnational phenomena that transcend national borders. Terrorist groups and trafficking networks often operate in multiple countries, using “legal loopholes,” “conflict zones” and “states with weak governments” to carry out their activities. In this context, international cooperation is essential to prevent and dismantle these networks. Cross-border cooperation is based on the exchange of information, concerted law enforcement actions and the harmonization of national and international legislation. Terrorist and people-trafficking networks operate quickly and use advanced technologies, so it is particularly important that countries work together to share real-time intelligence, including financial data, people’s movements and suspicious operations. Many counter-terrorism and anti-trafficking operations require close collaboration between police forces, security agencies and international organizations to make arrests and dismantle transnational networks. Legal differences between countries are exploited by terrorist and trafficking networks. International cooperation helps to harmonize legislation, thereby facilitating the prosecution and extradition of traffickers and terrorists. Human trafficking networks often involve victims from multiple countries. Protecting these victims and reintegrating them requires international collaboration to provide legal, consular and psychological assistance.

Financial investigations are also an essential tool for combating terrorism and human trafficking. By tracking money flows, identifying suspicious transactions and freezing assets, governments and international organizations can prevent the financing of these criminal activities. However, the increasing use of

cryptocurrencies and informal financial systems, as well as the lack of effective international cooperation, allow terrorist groups to benefit from funding.

Although there are separate international conventions to combat terrorism and human trafficking, a better “integration” between these two areas is needed. A unified framework could explicitly recognize and combat the connections between terrorism and human trafficking. I believe that it is opportune to draw up a specialized UN Convention to address the link between terrorism and human trafficking, clearly defining the way in which these two phenomena support each other and establishing coordinated combat mechanisms.

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