



Increasing links between drug trafficking, corruption and other forms of organized crime, including trafficking in persons, in firearms, cybercrime and money-laundering and, in some cases, terrorism, including money-laundering in connection with the financing

Presentation by Leif Villadsen, Deputy Director

United Nations Interregional Crime and Justice Research Institute

CND 19 October 2021

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a pleasure to attend this important session here today on behalf of the United Nations Interregional Crime and Justice Research Institute (UNICRI) and to share UNICRI's experience to address the links between drug trafficking, organized crime and terrorism.

UNICRI's technical cooperation and activities in the fields of crime prevention, criminal justice, and counter-terrorism are based on the findings of our action-oriented research. This includes our work to support Member States to combat the Nexus between organized crime and terrorism. My intervention today will focus on this aspect.

As our research has demonstrated, this linkage or Nexus is complex and dynamic. The links can be manifested in various ways and are shown to have distinct characteristics in different regions. Increasing case studies reveal that the Nexus has impacts across the globe and leaves no region unscathed.

In extreme cases, the Nexus has a direct negative impact on security and development, contributing to the erosion of political, economic, and social stability. It can also have severe implications on the identity of a nation or a community, as in the case of trafficking in cultural property; and escalate to crimes against humanity, human right violations and genocide, as in the case of trafficking in persons.

When exploring the nexus through the lens of drug trafficking, the basis of what we understand to be the relationship between organised crime and terrorism does not change. On the contrary, looking at the nexus through drug trafficking highlights the complexities of the threat that emanates from the nexus occurring.

The involvement of terrorist groups in the trafficking of drugs is often exclusively focusing on the angle of financing, whether that be through taxation of farmers, producers and traffickers; or eventually via direct control over cultivation and production. In these instances, examples focused on highly unstable environments where terrorist engagement with or involvement in the drug trade was facilitated by instability and a lack of government control over the territory in which drugs emanated.

However, the ties between terrorism and drug trafficking – as with terrorism and organised crime more generally – have evolved rather considerably the last 15-20 years. In fact, when we analyse the evolution of the nexus and drugs, we can isolate notable developments and trends that hav shaped the nature of the security threats that emanate from both phenomena.

The trends that we have observed are as follows:

First. The drug trade continues to provide a source of strategic financing to larger - more traditional - terrorist groups that depend on securing significant financial resources to finance organisational development and activities.

That these groups may continue to benefit from drug trafficking infers some sort of continued instability, corruption and weak government control; and, as such, drugs in these geographic areas will continue to provide funding to more hierarchically structured terrorist groups.

Second. The emerging trend, however, is of a more localised crime-terrorism / drugs-terrorism nexus. This has particularly been the case in Europe, with drug dealing (amongst other more petty crimes) identified as one of the most common sources of funding for militant Islamist cells plotting attacks – increasingly throughout the past decade.

A number of cases reaffirm an emerging pattern of criminals becoming involved in terrorism, a trend that has also recently been identified by several government and academic analysis.

Third. Involvement in drugs can lead to prison. We know that certain prisons have acted as incubators for radicalisation, and thus for recruitment to terrorist cells. So, it is prison radicalisation and recruitment that constitutes the third trend that we are seeing with regards the nexus and drugs.

Finally, fourth. Some of the radicalised criminals actually made up a considerable percentage of known foreign fighters who travelled from Europe to Iraq and Syria. In fact, studies suggest that a disproportionate number of these militants had links to criminality, particularly drugs. The former affiliation of such individuals to criminal networks or, more generally, their criminal background, has also served as “push factor” enabling them to reach the final destinations completely undetected including through the infiltration of illegal migrant routes, and the usage of forged documents.

All these aspects have been taken into account in a study recently launched by UNICRI on “Assessing the interplay between movements of people and the evolution of the threat stemming from jihadist terrorism in Europe”. A report on the main findings collected through research, analysis and interviews will be presented in the next weeks.

So what has UNICRI been doing to address these linkages.

Since 2016 UNICRI has been working to address this Nexus, in line with Security Council resolution 2195 and 2482. In 2017, UNICRI launched the Initiative on the Nexus Between Transnational Organized Crime and Terrorism, in close cooperation with the Global Counter Terrorism Forum (GCTF).

Under this Initiative, UNICRI developed the *GCTF The Hague Good Practices on the Nexus Between Transnational Organized Crime and Terrorism*, to provide Members States and interested stakeholders with non-binding recommendations to assist them in developing policies and strategies to counter the Nexus phenomenon and to serve as a basis for international engagement, assistance, and training.

Following this, UNICRI developed the *Policy Toolkit on The Hague Good Practices on the Nexus Between Transnational Organized Crime and Terrorism*, which goes one step further in supporting practitioners and policy-makers to put the identified Good Practices into action.

The Policy Toolkit has a dual function: the first is to increase knowledge and awareness on the Nexus by providing definitions and examples of nexus manifestations in different geographical regions. The second is to provide action points to implement each of the 25 Good Practices, focusing on legal considerations, research and information sharing, local engagement and capacity building, and law enforcement.

The Policy Toolkit, available in Arabic, French, English, and Albanian, has been used for capacity-building activities since 2019. The activities benefited diverse national practitioners and policy-makers from law enforcement officers to civil society representatives. NATO and UN officers focusing their work on East Africa, North Africa, West Africa, and the Sahel regions have participated.

UNICRI is integrating the Nexus Good Practices into our programmes and projects across our mandate. This includes on-the-ground practical advice, technical tools, and programmes related to sharing information, reinforcing border security, increasing safety and security of major events and vulnerable targets, rehabilitating and reintegrating violent extremist prisoners, and empowering communities to build resilience against transnational organized crime and terrorism.

Currently UNICRI is preparing new activities to increase the understanding and capacity of selected actors to recognize and effectively address the Nexus; for example, in Libya for actors working on local engagement, as well as in support of UNODC for activities targeting law enforcement officials in the Sahel region.

Moreover, through our research and capacity-building initiatives on countering all forms of illicit financial flows, we have contributed to provide up-to-date technical advice on how to trace, freeze, seize, confiscate, and recover assets linked to complex illegal activities – including corruption – and promoted a cultural of “transparency”.

In conclusion, our research, data and lessons learned tell us clearly that manifestations of the nexus must be addressed comprehensively. Time and time again we find that information is not shared and key actors work in silos. More cooperation at the national and regional levels is critical if we want to dismantle the linkage around the world. UNICRI continues to support requesting Member States in their efforts to prevent and counter the Nexus, which negatively affects the rule of law, peace and security, and development. I feel confident that coming together to share our knowledge and expertise in important fora as the one today takes us one step closer to our goal.

I thank you all and wish you an engaging and thought-provoking session.