

Challenging the so-called trafficking–terror finance nexus

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The assertion of a causal relationship between trafficking and terror financing is called into question by poor evidence and weak data, and its troubling policy implications.

Since 2015, progressively bolder assertions about the connections between trafficking and terrorism have been made in a series of UN Security Council (UNSC) instruments. Most significantly, Resolution 2388 of 2017 asserted that trafficking is a major contributor to terror financing.¹ And in 2019 the UNSC’s Counter-Terror Executive Directorate (CTED) published a report that claimed to provide evidence for a genuine nexus between “human trafficking, terrorism, and terror finance”.²

Claims about the nexus developed in the context of the rise of the Islamic State (IS) group in Syria and Iraq, and EU and EU Member States’ renewed efforts to contain irregular migration after the 2015 refugee ‘crisis’. France initiated discussions around Resolution 2388 in response to media reports about sub-Saharan African migrants being sold at slave auctions in Libya and reports of IS affiliates profiting from trafficking operations there. These news stories seemed to offer evidence that was used to substantiate European claims that irregular migration was being driven

by transnational trafficking networks rather than by complex migration dynamics.

The UNSC cites Libya as part of a global trend of terror groups profiting from human trafficking, alongside enslavement and trafficking by IS in Iraq, Syria and Turkey; human smuggling by Al-Qaeda affiliates in the Sahel; kidnapping, forced marriage and forced recruitment by Boko Haram in Nigeria; ransoming by Al-Shabaab in the Horn of Africa; and the forced recruitment of child soldiers by the Lord’s Resistance Army in central Africa. Although these cases are undoubtedly troubling, basic social science research methodology casts doubt on their comparability and on the necessary causal relationships implied by the term ‘nexus’. Moreover, the term ‘nexus’ is often employed rhetorically in order to push for productive pairings between two seemingly disparate policy fields.³ There is reason for concern about the UNSC’s policy agenda since it affirmed the existence of a trafficking–terror finance nexus, then commissioned research to provide evidence for it.

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I make this claim based on the chronology of resolutions and because I was a consultant to the CTED report. I delivered four main findings. First, the cases were idiosyncratic and did not provide evidence of a nexus. Second, weak data on trafficking and terror financing in general make it impossible to estimate the proportion of funding which terror groups derive from trafficking, although it is likely to be insignificant in comparison with other sources.⁴ Third, terror groups exploit irregular migration routes that traverse their territory and rarely orchestrate international trafficking. Fourth, addressing trafficking with anti-terror tactics would potentially lead to more militarised policy agendas and ignore best practice relating to victim-centred approaches, the alleviation of root causes, and ensuring safe and legal migration channels. While the CTED report included some of these caveats, the evidence it presents does not support its claim of a clear nexus between trafficking and terror financing.

The purpose of this article is to persuade policymakers and researchers to approach the purported ‘trafficking–terror finance nexus’ with scepticism and to avoid disseminating such claims without more detailed research and reliable data. My findings are based on desk research and interviews with expert respondents from international organisations at headquarters and regional offices, think tanks, and international law enforcement in the US, Turkey, Egypt, Nigeria and Europe.⁵

Weak and uncomparable data

The main impediment to claiming the existence of a nexus between trafficking and terror finance is the absence of strong, comparable data from which to make observations about causal relationships between variables. First, the paucity of data on trafficking is evident when examining the relevant annual studies. For example, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) Global Report on Trafficking in Persons is limited to State-level prosecution statistics. The nature and reliability of these statistics vary widely, tell us little about overall trafficking rates,



A 17-year-old Eritrean refugee puts his handprint on a UNHCR #EndHumanTrafficking banner at Shagarab refugee camp, Sudan. Members of the refugee and host community came together to demonstrate solidarity against human trafficking in eastern Sudan.

and cannot be extrapolated to form global trafficking statistics. The International Labour Organization’s Global Estimates of Modern Slavery reports focus on forced labour and forced marriage, take pains to highlight data limitations, and caution against extrapolation to global statistics. The US State Department’s Trafficking in Persons (TIP) reports are perhaps the most influential, ranking States by compliance with international law and efforts to combat trafficking. Although TIP used to incorporate estimated trafficking rates, this was abandoned following criticism from the US Government Accountability Office about unverifiable data.⁶

While discussions around the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration placed a renewed focus on UN Sustainable Development Goal 16.2’s call for more robust monitoring tools being reached through common indicators, it was also recognised that fundamental barriers exist to comparative research on trafficking, particularly around disparities in legal regimes, terminology and case identification methods. Furthermore, traffickers (and often survivors of trafficking) have strong incentives to behave in ways that frustrate data collection.

The Walk Free Foundation’s Global Slavery Index (GSI), which has gained influence by framing trafficking as a form of ‘modern slavery’ (and is widely cited,

including by CTED), purports to offer country-level and global metrics, but relies on shaky estimation strategies derived from a range of activities which do not have a cross-border element – the factor that is largely used by law enforcement and international organisations to detect cases and estimate and collate data. Experts interviewed during my research made rather pointed criticisms about its reliability.⁷ They argued that despite anticipated scepticism among scholars over the statistics' rigour, there is widespread acceptance of the estimates at UN level, partly because of intense lobbying by the Walk Free Foundation and partly because the GSI appears to provide a solution to complex estimation problems.

The next step in identifying a causal nexus would be to estimate the scale of trafficking-related earnings made by terror groups. Here again we run into major issues. There is no doubt strong evidence that terror groups rely on criminal activity for financing. However, personnel from UNODC and from the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe relayed how terror financing figures are often based on classified intelligence from agencies who have a vested interest in over-emphasising the issue. Assessments are not made available for independent review, and instead researchers often simply cite official statistics. Likewise, respondents argued that there is a good deal of misunderstanding among policymakers around the connections between transnational criminality and terrorism, noting a trend of conflating geographical overlap with operational convergence.

The Financial Action Task Force (FATF) – an inter-governmental watchdog organisation – has emphasised the difficulties with tracing proceeds from irregular migration in general.⁸ While they were familiar with the cases cited in the UNSC instruments, UNODC respondents I interviewed were adamant they knew of no statistics (classified or otherwise) to support the claim that groups like Al-Qaeda, Boko Haram or IS earned a significant portion of their profits from trafficking. Since smuggling and trafficking are more often localised, there

might very well be limited transnational activity to measure in the first place.

Opportunism, oppression and recruitment

Trafficking carried out by IS is the most obvious case of terrorists trafficking for profit. Most notoriously, IS enslaved thousands of Yazidi women and girls in Iraq who were given as spoils of war, subjected to systematic rape, sold locally or trafficked to Syria and Turkey. At its peak, this involved complicated logistics organised by a dedicated IS committee but, organisational sophistication aside, the FATF acknowledges that “it is difficult to envisage human trafficking as a lucrative source of revenue” for the group when weighed against other sources like oil, antiquities, ransom money and taxing local populations.⁹

Evidence suggests that terror groups more often use trafficking and allied crimes for operational and ideological purposes rather than financing. Groups use slavery and forced marriage to recruit, retain and reward members, or to terrorise local populations, and routinely engage in forced recruitment of combatants and child soldiers. Most of these practices, however, do not amount to international trafficking. UNSC Resolutions therefore bundle long-standing crimes and human rights abuses with the new focus on Syria, Iraq and Libya. As one respondent who worked in the Obama administration observed, “The Security Council seems to be conflating trafficking with types of exploitation we’ve been combatting for a couple of decades.” More broadly, whereas traffickers seek to remain clandestine, terrorists court political attention, which is uncondusive to the bribery, collusion and corruption necessary to move people across borders. For example, in the Libyan coastal town of Sabratha, smugglers bankrolled the fight against IS because the presence of the group was jeopardising their revenues.

Armed groups have long operated along irregular migration routes. Before General Qaddafi was toppled in 2011, smuggling and trafficking in Libya were controlled by the regime and its allied forces. Migrants are now vulnerable to trafficking in areas controlled

by the Government of National Accord and by militants alike, but now face greater barriers to leaving Libya given migration deals with EU Member States. Indeed, entities funded by the international community (namely the Libyan Special Deterrent Forces, its coastguard, and Directorate for Countering Illegal Migration) have basically assumed control of the routes and now routinely engage in trafficking – and to a greater degree than did militants after the fall of Qaddafi.

Avoiding unproductive policy pairings

A final question is whether the reference to a trafficking–terror finance nexus offers a productive policy pairing – as was the case with the migration–development nexus. With the exception of one Nigerian security official, each of my respondents cautioned against using the kinds of militarised tactics associated with counter-terrorism policy. Several worried that treating trafficking as a hard security issue risked creating unintended, adverse results for international security and trafficking victims alike.

Military operations often destabilise States and regions, foster resentment and extremism, and act as a catalyst for displacement. They also create markets for trafficking. For example, the Kosovo Liberation Army and other armed groups in the former Yugoslavia trafficked women and girls to meet demand among NATO and UN forces. The same dynamics occur around international peacekeeping and humanitarian operations more broadly, which are often geared towards suppressing extremism.

There is ample evidence that securitised migration policies are detrimental to international protection norms, the rights of migrants, and State security. The pairing of trafficking with terror allows autocratic and authoritarian regimes to leverage Western preoccupation with Islamism and irregular migration in order to procure military aid and to consolidate domestic political control. As one senior post-conflict specialist asked: “What does it tell you when an authoritarian government confirms to the Security Council that yes, indeed, the threat du jour is a big problem in their territory? [It means] they

want more funding for security services [...] and best of all they want it off the books.”

Finally, deploying anti-terror policies in the fight against trafficking would ignore best practices advocated by scholars, practitioners and rights organisations, particularly around livelihoods, education and development provision, and around victim-centred legal regimes. Access to safe and legal migration channels could also alleviate vulnerability to trafficking on irregular migration routes. Unfortunately, the UNSC members who developed Resolution 2388 are increasingly reliant on cooperation with autocratic or authoritarian States as part of migration control agendas – which foster vulnerability to trafficking in the first place.

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1. For a full list of resolutions and associated statements see <http://unscr.com/en/resolutions/2388>
2. CTED (2019) *Identifying and Exploring the Nexus Between Human Trafficking, Terrorism, and Terror Financing* bit.ly/CTED-trafficking-terrorism-2019
3. The term ‘nexus’ implies a set of necessary causal relationships between two or more phenomena. To take a prominent example, the migration–development nexus describes a series of mutually reinforcing and complex causal relationships between different forms of development and (im)mobility.
4. Another issue with the purported nexus is the wide divergence in identifying terror groups. The EU lists 21 entities as terror organisations; the US State Department identifies 67 terrorist organisations; and the UN designates 82 entities as targets of sanctions for terror and terror-financing activities. The differences are the result of a rather broad divergence in designation criteria, interest groups, and political agendas.
5. Respondents drawn from international organisations including UNODC, the International Organization for Migration, the UN, UNHCR and OSCE.
6. UNODC *Global Report on Trafficking in Persons* www.unodc.org/unodc/data-and-analysis/glotip.html; ILO *Global Estimates of Modern Slavery: Forced Labour and Forced Marriage* bit.ly/ILO-Estimates-Slavery-2017; US Department of State *Trafficking in Persons Report* www.state.gov/trafficking-in-persons-report/
7. See also Gallagher A T (2017) ‘What’s Wrong with the Global Slavery Index?’, *Anti-Trafficking Review* 8: 90–112 <https://doi.org/10.14197/atr.20121786>
8. Financial Action Task Force (2018) ‘Financial Flows from Human Trafficking’ bit.ly/FATF-finance-trafficking-2018
9. Financial Action Task Force (2015) ‘Financing of the Terrorist Organization Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL)’, p13 bit.ly/FATF-finance-ISIL-2015