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Countering the growing sphere of influence of transnational organized crime

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Introduction

Transnational organised crime (TOC) today represents one of the most powerful non-state threats to global security, with a scale and scope that outpaces many legitimate industries. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) estimates that TOC generates between $870 billion and $1.5 trillion annually, equivalent to up to 7% of global GDP. Within this vast criminal economy, the illicit drug trade alone accounts for nearly 1% of global GDP, while human trafficking generates approximately $235 billion per year, affecting victims in more than 140 countries. Other forms of TOC — from arms trafficking to cybercrime and environmental crimes such as illegal logging and wildlife trade — collectively drain state resources, fuel corruption, and divert billions away from legitimate economies.

The growing influence of TOC is not merely economic but profoundly political and social. Networks exploit porous borders, weak judicial systems, and technological advancements such as cryptocurrencies and encrypted communications to outpace law enforcement efforts. According to INTERPOL, global cyber-enabled financial fraud alone resulted in losses exceeding $1 trillion in 2020, a figure that continues to rise as criminal groups expand into digital spheres. Moreover, TOC's convergence with terrorism magnifies the threat, as groups ranging from insurgencies in Africa to global terrorist organizations increasingly rely on criminal revenues to fund their operations. This dual challenge undermines governance, destabilizes regions, and perpetuates cycles of violence and insecurity.

Despite decades of international action — including the 2000 UN Convention Against Transnational Organized Crime (Palermo Convention), the establishment of the Financial Action Task Force (FATF), and a growing number of multinational operations led by INTERPOL, Europol, and national agencies — TOC has proven highly resilient and adaptive. Its ability to infiltrate legitimate markets, exploit global trade, and harness emerging technologies underscores why it is not simply a law enforcement problem but a systemic global issue. Countering the expanding sphere of TOC requires a comprehensive response that integrates financial regulation, international cooperation, state capacity-building, and innovative technological tools.

Definition of key terms

Cybercrime

Criminal acts committed using computers, digital networks, or information and communication technologies (ICT), either as the tool, the target, or both.

Drug Trafficking

The illegal cultivation, production, manufacture, distribution, sale, transport, import, or export of narcotic drugs, psychotropic substances, or their precursors, in violation of international drug control laws,

Human Trafficking

The recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation.

Money Laundering

The process of concealing or disguising the origins of illegally obtained money, typically by passing it through a complex sequence of banking transfers or commercial transactions

Transnational Organized Crime (TOC)

Criminal activities carried out by organized criminal groups that involve more than one country, either in their execution, planning, or impact.

General Overview

Different types of TOC

Human trafficking

One of the more heartbreaking examples of TOC is human trafficking. In 2020 alone, according to a UNODC report, more than 50.000 cases of human trafficking were reported in over 140 countries. The International Labour Organization (ILO) estimates human trafficking generates roughly $235 billion annually, making it one of the most lucrative forms of TOC. Victims of human trafficking often go through unimaginable hardships, from excessive forced labour and forced sex work to being killed for the sake of organ harvesting. Victims of human trafficking are moved forcibly, either to other locations within the nation from which they came or across borders with the help of border officials who are part of the TOC enterprise, after which they are used for various purposes. The difficulty in combating TOC human trafficking arises partly from the vast reach TOC enterprises possess, with them having access to a large number of people who can recruit and transport victims. Another issue is the fact that human trafficking is often done in poorer countries with limited resources to effectively combat human trafficking and more judiciary differences with neighbouring states, which slows down the investigation and prosecution necessary to fight human trafficking.

Drug trafficking

Another very lucrative form of TOC is drug trafficking. In fact, according to some estimates, the illicit drug trade is as high as 1% of global GDP. The illicit drug trade is very international in its nature and the complexity that comes from that makes the trade difficult to intercept. The raw materials for the drugs are first produced in remote or politically unstable locations. After that, the materials are refined into drug forms ready for sale (e.g. coca leaves into cocaine). These drugs are placed in concealed packaging and, through very complex routes, brought to target markets, where whole distribution networks exist to spread these drugs to the public. Problems with combating drug trafficking, in large part, stem from the extensive financial resources TOC-networks have access to, which often allows them to run circles around government action, which is often very slow. Moreover, illicit drug production often takes place in LEDC's with lackluster government reach, making the fight with gigantic TOC-networks quite difficult.

Money laundering

One of the most essential aspects of TOC, arguably, because it allows them to conceal the origins of their illicit profits, the reason TOC-networks are able to operate at such large scales, is the laundering of money. According to a UN report on financial integrity, about 2.7% of global GDP, roughly $1.7 trillion USD, is laundered annually. The laundering of money legitimizes profits TOC networks make off of their activities, thus enabling them to use that money for more illegal enterprises and hindering potential prosecution, which often relies on illicit monetary transits. Combating money laundering is getting more and more difficult as national markets globalize and integrate, which enables wealthy individuals to move money across borders within seconds. This makes tracing illicit payments extremely laborious, especially due to inconsistencies in financial law between nations, which TOC networks are more than happy to exploit.

Illicit arms trading

One of the types of TOC that speaks to the imagination is illicit arms trading. A 2018 report by the UN showed that, out of the 850 million firearms in circulation at that time, only 12% was registered. This firearm wild west can, of course, only lead to death and chaos and the data clearly shows it does. In 2021, 260.000 people were killed by small arms, amounting for 45% of all violent death that year. The sourcing of illicit firearms by TOC networks is extremely complex. First, weapons are stolen from insufficiently armed military stockpiles, manufactured illegally or taken off of the legal market. Then, they are shipped off through concealed shipments with the use of false identification and the help of corrupt officials. These firearms often end up in high-conflict zones through deals with militia groups. Dealing with illicit arms trading is highly complicated, partly because of the multi-step process of getting the firearms to their buyer and partly because of the high amounts of corruption that takes place within said process.

Cybercrime

A more recent addition to the illicit arsenal of TOC networks and one of the most rapidly growing forms of TOC is cybercrime. From identity theft and online fraud to child exploitation and financial crimes, the internet has provided transnational criminal groups with a plethora of new crimes to commit, and highly lucrative crimes at that; in 2023, TOC networks gained roughly $1.1 billion USD from cybercrime. Cybercrime is particularly hard to fight because of its constantly evolving nature. The internet of 20 years ago is almost indescribably different from the internet of today, and throughout the process of change it has brought about such radical new forms of cybercrime so rapidly that government agencies often simply struggle to keep up. Another problem is that fighting cybercrime effectively requires a lot of technical expertise, something that many nations lack. Finally, because of the borderless nature of the internet, cybercrimes are often hard to trace by authorities.

Links to terrorism

Transnational organized crime (TOC) and terrorism, though motivated differently—profit for criminal groups and ideology for terrorist organizations—are increasingly interconnected. Terrorist groups often rely on criminal markets such as drug trafficking, arms smuggling, human trafficking, and cybercrime to finance their operations, while TOC networks benefit from the instability and weakened governance that terrorism creates. The global illicit economy is estimated at USD 3–5 trillion annually, with drug trafficking generating up to USD 1 trillion and human trafficking around USD 235 billion each year, while cybercrime contributes hundreds of billions more through fraud and ransomware. Groups such as al-Shabaab and Hezbollah have been documented profiting directly from these criminal networks, using the proceeds to fund attacks, acquire weapons, and sustain operational networks. Shared smuggling routes, money-laundering channels, and logistical methods further link criminal and terrorist activities, particularly in regions with porous borders, weak institutions, or ongoing conflict. This convergence undermines governance, fuels violence, and complicates law enforcement and counter-terrorism efforts, demonstrating the critical need for coordinated international strategies that address both transnational crime and terrorism simultaneously.

Major parties involved

Transnational organized crime networks

The central actors in TOC, their illicit acts contribute to the loss of money, lives and livelihood around the world.

The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC)

The UNODC is the primary international organization for assessing the scale of and addressing TOC. Many times, their reports have shown light on important TOC-related issues and through initiatives like the UN Convention against Transnational Organized Crime they have set standards and frameworks for combating TOC effectively.

Interpol

Interpol is an international policing organization that facilitates cooperation between law enforcement agencies throughout the world. Through enabling the sharing of knowledge on criminal networks it has aided law enforcement in combating TOC.

Financial Action Task Force

The FATF is an international organization focused on fighting money laundering and terrorist financiering. It monitors compliance with international law and publishes guidance on financial risks. Through its work it continues to close gaps in financial law that TOC networks might exploit.

Europol

Europol is the European Union's law enforcement agency that coordinates actions against organized crime and terrorism by means of supporting member states with data analysis, operational planning and technical expertise. It facilitates cross-border investigations and prosecutions within the EU and publishes regular reports on TOC.

Timeline of events

1987, July 14th	The Financial Action Task Force is established by the G7
2000, November 15th	The UN General Assembly adopts the UN Convention against Transnational Organized Crime
2013, May 27th	Interpol launches operation Lionfish, targeting drug trafficking networks and resulting in seizures of stockings and arrests
2015, November 11th	Interpol launches operation Thunder, targeting wildlife and timber trafficking
2016, December 21st	The UNODC releases its first Global Report of Trafficking of Persons
2019, June	The FATF revises its standards to to include binding measures for the regulation and supervision of virtual assets
2024, April & May	Interpol launches and acts out operation Lionfish Hurricane, resulting in the seizure of 615 tonnes of illicit drugs across 31 countries
2024, April - June	Interpol launches and acts out operation Jackall III, targeting West-African crime groups involved in online financial fraud
2025, June - August	Interpol launches and acts out operation Serengeti 2.0, a large-scale cybercrime crackdown across Africa, resulting in the arrest of 1200 individuals and the recovery of $12 million USD

Possible solutions

Strengthening international cooperation

TOC thrives on weak cross-border enforcement. Expanding joint operations under bodies like INTERPOL, Europol, and UNODC, as well as harmonizing legal frameworks through conventions such as the Palermo Convention, can make it harder for criminal networks to exploit jurisdictional gaps. Information-sharing, joint task forces, and synchronized extradition laws are vital tools to dismantle networks that operate globally.

Targeting financial flows

Since profit is the driving motive, cutting off TOC's financial backbone is crucial. Expanding the mandate of the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) to cover new risks such as cryptocurrencies and shell companies, while requiring stricter financial transparency measures (e.g. beneficial ownership registries), would make money laundering more difficult. Freezing assets and seizing illicit proceeds can weaken networks more effectively than arresting individuals alone.

Expanding the use of technology

New tools like artificial intelligence, blockchain analytics, and cyber-forensics might help identify and track organized crime online. Partnering with the private sector could also increase effectiveness. At the same time, questions remain about access to such technologies, their cost, and potential ethical issues in their application.

Strengthening state capacities

Addressing weak governance and corruption may reduce the space in which TOC thrives. Investments in judicial reform, law enforcement training, and anti-corruption programs could make states more resilient. However, this is a long-term process, and outcomes often depend on domestic political will.

Addressing the link between crime and terrorism

Exploring the overlap between organized crime and terrorism could help target the funding streams that sustain both phenomena. Integrating counter-terrorism and anti-crime strategies may offer mutual benefits, though it also raises questions about prioritization of resources and respecting national sovereignty.

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