Navigating the symbiosis between organised crime and terrorism: Assessing the impact of foreign terrorist fighters on criminal networks ([25])

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Abstract

The modern global security landscape is increasingly challenged by organised crime, fuelled by economic globalisation and technological advancements that expand criminal networks and their illicit activities. European Union strategies emphasise disrupting high-risk criminal networks, acknowledging their impact on socioeconomic systems, legal economies and the rule of law. This paper highlights the growing threat of such networks in Europe, exacerbated by the involvement of foreign terrorist fighters and returnees over the past decade. The intersection of organised crime and terrorism has gained attention in academic and law enforcement circles. Moving beyond traditional views that treat them separately, recent studies explore their interconnectedness, focusing on conditions that foster cooperation and motivations for terrorist engagement in criminal activities. The Syrian conflict has amplified these dynamics, with foreign terrorist fighters intensifying illicit financial flows and collaborating with transnational criminal groups. Shared financial channels further blur distinctions between terrorism and organised crime, implicating fighters in diverse illicit activities. Using a desk-based approach, this research analyses literature and open-source data to trace the evolution of this nexus, examine the hybrid nature of these activities and assess the risks posed by foreign terrorist fighters. The findings reveal a dynamic relationship with global impacts, posing significant security threats and driving political, economic and social instability.

Keywords: organised crime, terrorism, criminal networks, foreign terrorist fighters, returnees, foreign terrorists.

([25]) This study incorporates and builds upon content from the author's previously published work, which has been significantly revised and expanded with new sources and original sections to address the current research scope: Tinas, M. (2023), 'Symbiotic relations between terrorism and organized crime in the Levant: Cases of PKK and DAESH', in: Ahmet Demirden (ed.), *Emerging Issues in Terrorism Studies*, Nobel.

1. Introduction

The relationship between organised crime and terrorism has long been a focal point in both academic research and law enforcement practices. Recent trends and incidents, particularly in the last decade, have underscored how individuals with criminal backgrounds have leveraged their connections to illicit networks to support terrorist operations. The collapse of governance and public order in the Levant has further exacerbated this issue. Terrorist organisations have significantly enhanced their capabilities in generating, transferring and laundering funds, as well as in transnational smuggling and trafficking activities. In the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, the interplay between terrorism and organised crime has moved beyond opportunistic cooperation, shedding light on the shared social environments and networks that facilitate their convergence. Among these organisations, the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) ([26]) stand out for their ability to exploit these hybrid networks to sustain and expand their operations.

This study aims to delve deeper into the intricate and evolving relationship between organised crime and terrorism, with a particular focus on foreign terrorist fighters who have recently become pivotal links within these networks. The paper begins with a theoretical exploration of the evolution of these relationships, followed by an in-depth analysis of the scale and characteristics of the nexus between crime and terrorism. This study is based on a qualitative, desk-based research design that combines descriptive and analytical approaches. The research primarily relied on secondary sources, including academic literature, official government reports, institutional publications and policy-oriented analyses. The analysis involved thematic categorisation of data, focusing on three interrelated research questions: (1) How does cooperation between organised crime and terrorism evolve from opportunistic to symbiotic forms? (2) In what ways do foreign terrorist fighters facilitate this transformation? (3) What implications do these interactions have for security policy and law enforcement cooperation?

In conclusion, this study highlights how the hybrid nature of these relationships exacerbates instability across the Levant, undermining political, economic and social structures in the region. While the connection between organised crime and terrorism is not a new phenomenon, the last decade has seen a significant transformation of these ties from temporary alliances to deeply interdependent, symbiotic relationships, further fuelled by the involvement of foreign terrorist fighters.

2. The symbiotic relationship between terrorism and organised crime

The intersection between terrorism and organised crime has long been a subject of academic debate and a focal point for law enforcement agencies (Schmid, 1996; Makarenko, 2004; Shelley et al., 2005; Reitano et al., 2017). This nexus challenges the traditional dichotomy that views terrorism and organised crime as distinct phenomena with diverging goals and operational methods. Alex Schmid's (1996) seminal study brought this discussion to the forefront by highlighting their interconnections, paving the way for broader discourse on the conditions under which these entities cooperate and why terrorist groups increasingly resort to criminal activities to sustain their operations. Then, there are even studies examining how organised criminal groups and terrorist organisations form alliances, adopt each other's tactics and occasionally integrate operations, especially in unstable regions (Makarenko and Mesquita, 2014).

([26]) Both the PKK and ISIS have been designated as terrorist organisations internationally by numerous states including the Member States of the European Union, the United States, Canada, Australia, Türkiye and many international organisations.

One of the key challenges in addressing this nexus lies in defining terrorism itself. While there is no universally accepted definition (Schmid, 2023), the political and ideological motivations behind terrorist acts set them apart from purely profit-driven criminal activities. However, over the past few decades, the financial aspects of terrorism have gained significant attention (Biersteker and Eckert, 2008; Schmid, 2018). This shift is primarily due to two reasons. First, in the past, counterterrorism efforts were predominantly understood as a direct military confrontation aimed at eliminating terrorists through armed force. However, contemporary perspectives have shifted, recognising that combating terrorism is intrinsically tied to disrupting its financial streams. This paradigm shift has not only expanded the scope of counterterrorism strategies but has also highlighted the intricate relationship between terrorism and organised crime. Understanding how terrorist groups generate, transfer and utilise funds, often through criminal activities such as smuggling, drug trafficking and money laundering, has become crucial. This evolution in counterterrorism practices underscores the necessity of addressing the crime–terrorism nexus to effectively dismantle the operational capabilities of terrorist organisations.

Second, a notable transformation has occurred within terrorist organisations in the last decades, particularly in their operational and financial strategies. Historically, ideologically driven groups were often reluctant to engage in direct organised criminal activities, as such actions were perceived to contradict their ideological narratives and undermine their legitimacy. However, the current trend reveals a growing involvement of terrorist organisations in profit-driven ventures, effectively blurring the lines between ideological and criminal motivations. This shift reflects both pragmatic and strategic adaptations, as these groups increasingly rely on illicit activities such as drug trafficking, smuggling and extortion to sustain and expand their operations. By integrating criminal enterprises into their frameworks, terrorist organisations not only secure funding but also exploit the vulnerabilities of global financial and governance systems, further entrenching their influence and resilience. These activities are carried out in two ways. The first group consists of legal activities that serve criminal purposes like charity fundraising, collecting donations or trading manufactured commodities. The second group of profit-making financial activities involves organised criminal activities like raising money through illegal migrations and smuggling (Shelley and Melzer, 2008; Shelley et al., 2005).

The interplay between ideological and financial objectives increasingly shapes the nature of cooperation between terrorist and criminal actors. While organised crime groups remain primarily motivated by profit, terrorist organisations often rationalise their participation in illicit markets through ideological narratives that frame criminal proceeds as legitimate means of sustaining a so-called higher cause. In this regard, foreign terrorist fighters play a pivotal bridging role, blending ideological justification with criminal expertise. Many of them possess practical experience in smuggling, trafficking and money laundering, yet remain ideologically aligned with extremist networks. This duality creates an operational and motivational overlap where profit-seeking and ideological commitment reinforce each other rather than contradict one another.

In the last decade, converging methods and shared networks have started to be a focal point in both academic research and law enforcement practices. Terrorist organisations and organised crime groups share many operational methods, including illicit fundraising, money laundering and smuggling. They also rely on similar networks and techniques to achieve their goals. For instance, both utilise alternative financial systems like hawala and cryptocurrencies, exploit false documentation and engage in cross-border illicit trade. These shared practices are particularly evident in conflict zones like Syria and Iraq, where the collapse of state authority has created a conducive environment for criminal and terrorist activities to flourish (Kupatadze and Argomaniz, 2019, p. 269; Adal, 2021, p. 2). Studies have shown that during the Syrian conflict, the smuggling of oil, antiquities and other commodities surged, facilitated by the breakdown of governance and the proliferation of terrorist groups (Nellemann et al., 2018, p. 22; Napoleoni, 2004). Organisations like the PKK and ISIS capitalised on these opportunities to finance their operations.

The United Nations Security Council (UNSC) has similarly highlighted that certain terrorist organisations collaborate with transnational organised criminal groups in various capacities, such as money laundering, facilitating access to smuggling routes, forging documents and trafficking drugs to finance their operations (UNSC, 2015). The involvement of foreign terrorist fighters has further enhanced the ability of terrorist groups to generate, transfer and conceal illicit funds, and engage in transnational smuggling and trafficking. Reitano et al. (2017, p. 9) point out this connection by noting that many ISIS recruits relied on drug trafficking as a significant revenue source and operated within overlapping networks in Europe for recruitment. Moreover, both terrorist organisations and criminal groups utilise similar financial mechanisms, including cryptocurrencies and informal systems like hawala, to carry out their activities. It is also reported that, in certain instances, terrorists have obtained pyrotechnic substances, possibly sourced through networks involved in organised crime (Europol, 2023, p. 18). The recent *European Union Terrorism Situation and Trend Report* also indicates the fact that investigations revealed links between right-wing extremist groups and organised crime networks in a mix of online and offline channels for fundraising, including donations, merchandise sales and criminal activities like drug and weapons trafficking (Europol, 2024, p. 40). This overlap demonstrates that foreign terrorist fighters or returnees may participate not only in acts of terrorism but also in organised criminal activities, such as human smuggling and illicit financial transfers (Rekawek et al., 2019, p. 18). The UNSC (2020) similarly acknowledged the rising threat posed by the interconnectedness of terrorism and organised crime, emphasising that such alliances often emerge opportunistically based on shared interests, common operational territories or mutual adversaries. Additionally, it is important to note the role of prisons as environments that can foster radicalisation and recruitment, where personal relationships between criminals and extremists may strengthen these linkages (Basra and Neumann, 2016, pp. 30–32). Prisons thus serve as spaces where social connections are forged, facilitating collaboration between organised crime and terrorist networks (Europol, 2024, p. 25).

In summary, the relationship between terrorism and organised crime has evolved beyond a simple nexus into a genuinely symbiotic interaction (Reitano et al., 2017, p. 9), calling for a comprehensive re-evaluation of existing threat assessment frameworks. Traditional perspectives treat these two phenomena as separate categories of crime, largely due to their differing objectives, despite notable similarities in their methods and operations. However, this conventional approach falls short in capturing the evolving complexity of the threat. As Shelley et al. (2008, pp. 43–63) highlight, the interaction between terrorist organisations and criminal networks has become increasingly intricate and interconnected. Given the diminishing clarity of boundaries between the two phenomena, threat assessment methodologies must adapt by focusing on the shared methods and overlapping motivations that characterise these groups.

3. The role of foreign terrorist fighters in fostering the symbiosis between organised crime and terrorism

The issue of foreign fighters in general or foreign terrorist fighters in particular is not a new phenomenon in many respects as the involvement of foreigners in civil conflicts has been one of the fundamental features of many conflicts (Tınas, 2020, p. 132). However, the phenomenon of foreign fighters and foreign terrorist fighters has garnered increasing attention in the last decade from both academia and international institutions, particularly in the context of current transnational conflicts (Dawson, 2021). Despite their frequent interchangeable use in media and academic discourse, these terms represent distinct concepts with implications for policy, security and legal frameworks.

Malet (2013, p. 9) defines foreign fighters as 'non-citizens of conflict states who join insurgencies during civil conflict'. Similarly, Hegghammer (2010, pp. 57–58) refines the concept, emphasising four criteria: involvement in an insurgency, lack of citizenship or kinship links to the conflict state, absence of affiliation with official military organisations and absence of financial compensation. The UNSC (2014) defines the term as 'nationals who travel or attempt to travel to a State other than their States of residence or nationality, and other individuals who travel or attempt to travel from their territories to a State other than their States of residence or nationality, for the purpose of the perpetration, planning, or preparation of, or participation in, terrorist acts, or the providing or receiving of terrorist training, including in connection with armed conflict'. This definition emphasises the intent and purpose of the individual's actions, distinguishing foreign terrorist fighters from broader categories of foreign fighters. The distinction between foreign fighters and foreign terrorist fighters lies primarily in intent and association. Foreign fighters may engage in civil conflicts without necessarily adhering to a terrorist ideology or participating in terrorist activities. However, the boundaries between these categories are often blurred. Financial, ideological and political overlaps can lead foreign fighters to be categorised as foreign terrorist fighters, particularly when their actions align with recognised terrorist organisations.

Regarding the conceptualisation, an essential aspect of the debate revolves around what constitutes 'foreignness'. Conventional definitions emphasise citizenship and territorial boundaries, yet these criteria may oversimplify the complex identities of individuals involved. Jawaid (2017, p. 102) critiques this state-centric approach, arguing that shared ethnic, kinship or ideological ties can supersede formal citizenship in motivating participation in conflicts. This transnational dimension challenges traditional notions of state boundaries and citizenship, necessitating a more nuanced understanding of 'foreign' while using the concept. Another critical element in defining foreign terrorist fighters is their role within a conflict. The term 'fighter' often evokes images of individuals engaged in direct combat. However, many foreign terrorist fighters serve in non-combat roles, such as logisticians, propagandists, medics and recruiters. From this perspective, the use of the term 'fighter' in the concept of foreign terrorist fighters appears to fall short of adequately capturing the multifaceted nature of the phenomenon. This limitation becomes evident in its inability to precisely define the range of activities undertaken by such individuals, thereby creating conceptual ambiguities. Furthermore, the term 'fighter' inherently carries a normative bias, often connoting a positive struggle associated with noble or just causes. Such a connotation risks overshadowing the illicit and violent objectives of these actors. From this perspective, this study argues that the inclusion of 'fighter' is neither necessary nor appropriate, and that employing the term 'foreign terrorist' alone would offer a more precise and analytically robust representation of the issue.

The relationship between organised crime and terrorism is inherently complex and evolves over time, displaying distinct characteristics across different regions. Since 2010, this connection has manifested in various forms in the MENA region, with an increasing number of case studies highlighting its far-reaching and harmful consequences (Makarenko 2004; Shelley et al., 2005; Reitano et al., 2017). Regarding the connection and cooperation between these two groups, this study adopts a layered understanding of cooperation, ranging from opportunistic to symbiotic forms, emphasising that foreign terrorist fighters often act as key enablers in transforming temporary, transactional relationships into sustained symbiotic cooperation between terrorists and criminal entities. In this context, cooperation is not viewed as a static or uniform condition but as a continuum that evolves based on mutual needs, external pressures and shared operational environments (Kupatadze and Argomaniz, 2019; Makarenko, 2004). Opportunistic cooperation typically emerges in fragile or conflict-affected zones where both actors temporarily benefit from exchanges of resources such as weapons, routes or financial services. Transactional cooperation involves more systematic and profit-driven collaboration, often characterised by the provision of logistical or financial support in return for operational advantages. At the most advanced level, symbiotic cooperation reflects an enduring convergence in which criminal and terrorist organisations internalise each other's methods, adapt overlapping governance structures and co-opt similar recruitment and financing mechanisms. Foreign terrorist fighters, due to their mobility, transnational connections and hybrid skill sets, accelerate this transformation by bridging local criminal economies with global radical networks. As a result, cooperation in the crime–terrorism nexus increasingly transcends short-term pragmatism and evolves into a self-reinforcing system of mutual dependency that challenges conventional crime-fighting and counterterrorism frameworks.

The participation of foreign terrorists has introduced a complex layer to the crime–terrorism nexus. Foreign terrorists frequently serve as intermediaries between terrorist organisations and transnational criminal networks, facilitating collaboration through their expertise in areas such as smuggling routes, document falsification and illegal financial transactions (Reitano et al., 2017; Basra and Neumann, 2016; Gallagher, 2016). This specialised knowledge significantly bolsters the operational capabilities of terrorist entities. Moreover, upon returning to their countries of origin, many terrorists remain involved in criminal enterprises, thereby deepening the intertwined relationship between terrorism and organised crime. As Kupatadze and Argomaniz (2019, p. 262) have observed, this relationship has recently transitioned from a mere nexus to a symbiotic dynamic, wherein both entities adopt each other's methods to achieve their primary objectives. Empirical data reinforce the existence of this convergence, indicating that considerable numbers of perpetrators of ISIS-linked attacks in Europe possessed prior criminal experience. Such findings highlight the extent to which terrorism and organised crime increasingly draw from overlapping social and operational environments (Europol, 2016; Mullins, 2016, pp. 26–30; Vidino et al., 2017; Europol, 2023, p. 22).

One significant factor to consider is the rising number of foreign terrorists and returnees from Syria and Iraq, many of whom have established ties with criminal organisations and possess in-depth knowledge of transnational smuggling routes. The participation of foreign individuals in civil conflicts has been a recurring characteristic of numerous armed confrontations throughout history. However, the conflicts in Iraq and Syria, particularly since the early 2000s, have drawn an unprecedented influx of foreign terrorists. The surge of foreigners, particularly from Europe, the Middle East and North Africa, and the potential return of these individuals to their countries of origin, have raised significant security concerns regarding their involvement in terrorist activities.

Initially, attention from scholars and law enforcement agencies centred on the direct threat posed by returnees, such as their potential to carry out attacks, plan and coordinate operations, establish new terrorist cells or recruit additional members. However, a parallel concern has emerged, emphasising the risk that returnees may leverage the advanced skills gained during their engagement in terrorist activities to participate in organised crime. This criminalisation of returnees poses a distinct threat, as it may further entrench the intersection between terrorism and transnational crime (Gallagher, 2016, p. 51).

The past two decades of instability in the MENA region have profoundly disrupted not only the region itself but also its broader periphery. The collapse of governance structures in Levantine states since the early 2000s has created fertile ground for terrorist organisations to expand their capabilities in generating, transferring and laundering illicit funds, and engaging in transnational smuggling and trafficking activities. Notably, these illicit financial flows and the involvement of terrorist groups in such activities saw a significant escalation following the outbreak of the Syrian conflict in 2011. Addressing these threats necessitates robust, institutionalised collaboration among neighbouring states, encompassing intelligence and financial information exchange, harmonised legal instruments and multilateral operational mechanisms such as joint task forces or regional security frameworks designed to counter the hybrid dynamics of terrorism and organised crime. However, a significant barrier to such cooperation lies in the absence of effective public order within the Levant, particularly in Syria, Iraq and Lebanon. The near collapse of state structures in these nations not only creates a conducive environment for the proliferation of terrorism and organised crime but also hinders the execution of coordinated international efforts to combat these challenges effectively.

Within this period, ISIS, as a prime example, has become notorious for its engagement in organised criminal activities, including kidnapping, smuggling antiquities and weapons, human trafficking and other illicit operations. According to van der Veer (2019), involvement in ISIS often parallels participation in organised crime, blurring the distinctions between terrorist and criminal behaviour. Numerous reports highlight ISIS's extensive ties with criminal networks in Europe, facilitating activities such as human trafficking, the illicit trade of historical artefacts and the production of forged documents (Reitano et al., 2017). Additionally, ISIS and Al-Qaeda-affiliated groups have reportedly generated significant revenue by exploiting the movement of migrants from the MENA region to Europe (Reitano et al., 2017). Gallagher (2016, p. 54) further documented instances where ISIS operatives engaged in criminal enterprises, such as extorting forced donations, international drug trafficking and document forgery. His findings also emphasise a notable shift within such groups, where ideological commitment often gives way to personal financial motives over time. Numerous studies emphasise the significant overlap between individuals involved in terrorist attacks, particularly those who have returned from conflict zones in Iraq and Syria, and members of organised criminal groups (Bakker, 2006; Simcox, 2015; Mullins, 2016).

Second, one of the earliest and most prominent examples of the crime–terrorism nexus in practice is the PKK, which has been designated as a terrorist organisation by Türkiye, the United States and the EU for decades. Since the 1980s, the PKK has actively engaged in drug trafficking, facilitating the transport of narcotics from eastern Türkiye to Europe (Europol and European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction, 2019, p. 36; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Türkiye, n.d.). According to Reitano et al. (2017, pp. 17–18), in an EU-funded study, the PKK 'has been known to toe the line between terrorism and organised crime, engaging in a number of illegal economic operations such as humans, drugs and cigarettes smuggling and other forms of organised crime, including extortion and money laundering, among its profit generating activities' and 'over the span of three decades, the PKK has funded its operations through various means including state sponsorship, criminal activities and legal business enterprises'. Additionally, the PKK is known to be involved in the illegal transnational trade of fuel and tobacco products (Kupatadze and Argomaniz, 2019, p. 267). It has also been reported that the PKK not only profits from the illicit drug trade between Iraq, Iran and Türkiye but also receives financial support from heroin traffickers operating within Europe (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2010, p. 46; Basra, 2019, p. 46). Media and law enforcement reports suggest that the PKK's drug trafficking activities are particularly concentrated in Belgium and the Netherlands (Esen, 2017). The PKK's involvement in human smuggling further underscores its integration into transnational organised crime. The group has facilitated the movement of foreign terrorists into conflict zones (Tınas and Demirden, 2020, pp. 18–27) and returnees often possess detailed knowledge of illicit smuggling routes. During their recruitment and travel to and from conflict zones, particularly in European countries, PKK operatives acquire expertise in using safe houses, falsifying documents, navigating border crossings and liaising with traffickers. These skills and networks are subsequently leveraged to support broader transnational organised criminal activities, amplifying the PKK's influence within the crime–terrorism nexus.

In general, foreign terrorists play a multifaceted role in fostering organised crime in Europe and in its near neighbourhood, acting as catalysts and participants in transnational criminal networks. Their skills, experience and connections significantly enhance the operational capacity of organised crime groups, creating a dangerous synergy between terrorism and organised crime in the last decade. First, foreign terrorists often serve as intermediaries linking terrorist organisations and organised criminal groups, leveraging their expertise in smuggling, forgery and trafficking to facilitate the movement of goods, people and illicit funds. This collaboration blurs the lines between the two entities, resulting in a symbiotic relationship that undermines security efforts and poses significant challenges to law enforcement agencies. Second, foreign terrorists exploit transnational smuggling routes, trafficking arms, drugs and humans, with reports linking returnees from Syria and Iraq to the transport of contraband across European borders. Third, the ability of foreign terrorists to produce or acquire forged travel documents has been instrumental in facilitating the clandestine movement of individuals across borders. This expertise, honed during their involvement in terrorist networks, is often repurposed to support organised crime activities, including human trafficking and illegal migration. Forged documents also enable the evasion of law enforcement and enhance the operational security of both terrorist and criminal groups. Beyond logistical capabilities, another important role that foreign terrorists and returnees have is that they can serve as conduits for radicalisation and recruitment for terrorist organisations from their criminal networks. Last but not the least, financial crimes, including money laundering, further illustrate their role in hybrid threats, as they utilise knowledge from managing terrorist finances to obscure proceeds from drug trafficking and other illicit activities. Evidence from case studies, such as those concerning ISIS-linked networks and the Paris and Brussels attacks, underscores the seamless transition of foreign terrorists between criminal and terrorist roles, destabilising social and security systems. Addressing this convergence requires coordinated international efforts, enhanced border controls and comprehensive de-radicalisation programmes to mitigate long-term risks.

The modern global security landscape faces persistent challenges from organised crime, driven by economic globalisation and rapid technological progress, facilitating the proliferation of criminal networks and broadening their illicit activities. Recent EU strategies highlight the necessity to disrupt high-risk criminal networks, recognising their multifaceted criminal enterprises that disrupt socioeconomic systems, infiltrate legal economies and subvert the rule of law. In this regard, the evolving relationship between terrorism and organised crime demands a re-evaluation of traditional threat assessment frameworks. Moreover, the threat posed by high-risk criminal networks in Europe has escalated in the past decade due to the inclusion of foreign terrorists and returnees in the subject. The longstanding assumption that these two phenomena are distinct fails to capture the hybrid and symbiotic nature of their relationship. Instead, future studies must focus on the operational and behavioural similarities between these groups and the shared environments that facilitate their convergence. By adopting a more integrated approach, policymakers and law enforcement agencies can better understand and counter the multifaceted threats posed by the crime–terrorism nexus.

4. Conclusion

The distinction between terrorism and organised crime has become increasingly ambiguous, posing significant challenges for policymakers and practitioners in security bureaucracies, particularly with the growing involvement of foreign terrorist fighters. Returnees not only invigorate criminal networks but also amplify the convergence between organised crime and terrorism. Prevailing scholarship often emphasises alliances between terrorists and criminal groups as tactical arrangements designed to achieve their distinct objectives. However, as this study highlights, such traditional perspectives may fall short, as they presume a clear separation of goals while overlooking the deeper relationship between these entities. Therefore, future research could build upon these findings through empirical case studies or comparative analyses that examine how foreign terrorists operationalise cooperation between terrorist and criminal organisations across different regions.

Foreign terrorists play a critical role in strengthening organised crime in Europe and its neighbouring regions by acting as intermediaries and participants in transnational criminal networks. They leverage their skills in smuggling, forgery and trafficking to facilitate the movement of goods, people and illicit funds, creating a dangerous synergy between terrorism and organised crime. Foreign terrorists and returnees also exploit smuggling routes, engage in arms and drug trafficking and produce forged documents, enabling clandestine operations and evasion of law enforcement. Furthermore, they contribute to radicalisation and recruitment for terrorist organisations while utilising financial crimes to obscure illicit proceeds, highlighting the urgent need for coordinated international efforts to address these hybrid threats.

From a law enforcement perspective, addressing the crime–terror symbiosis requires enhanced cross-border intelligence sharing, integration of financial and criminal databases, and preventive mechanisms targeting radicalisation within criminal milieus. Effective countermeasures demand multilevel coordination among national and international bodies alongside the establishment of specialised joint intelligence platforms for tracking foreign terrorists. Strengthening financial intelligence units is also critical to being able to detect, trace and disrupt illicit financial flows that sustain both criminal and terrorist networks. Beyond reactive operations, preventive strategies must include de-radicalisation programmes within correctional facilities, post-release monitoring mechanisms and community-based interventions designed to reduce recidivism among returnees. Furthermore, digital transformation and the use of advanced analytics, including artificial-intelligence-assisted threat mapping and cross-border data fusion centres, can enhance early detection capacities. Collectively, these measures highlight that an effective response to the hybrid threat posed by terrorism and organised crime must combine policing, intelligence and prevention-oriented approaches under a unified strategic framework.

To conclude, for more active counterstrategies, a more nuanced understanding is required, recognising that the relationship between terrorism and organised crime has evolved into a symbiotic and transformative dynamic, far beyond temporary or opportunistic collaborations. This relationship is marked by shared operational needs and overlapping structural characteristics, making their activities increasingly interdependent. Furthermore, counterterrorism strategies must account for the intersection between political agendas and profit-driven motives, which frequently reinforce one another within terrorist organisations. Addressing these complexities necessitates a paradigm shift in both the conceptualisation of the crime–terrorism nexus and the development of policies aimed at mitigating its multifaceted threats. In other words, addressing the crime–terrorism nexus as a transnational and evolving challenge remains essential. Given its dynamic and globalised nature, it requires sustained, adaptive and cooperative approaches at both regional and international levels, rather than one-time or isolated countermeasures. Long-term strategies should balance preventive, intelligence-based and institutional efforts, recognising that the boundaries between terrorism and organised crime will continue to shift as these networks evolve.

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