

The Impact of Transnational Crime on Insecurity in The Sahel Region of Africa

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Abstract

Transnational crime has become a defining feature of insecurity in the Sahel, where porous borders, fragile institutions, and persistent insurgencies converge. Criminal activities such as drug trafficking, arms smuggling, human trafficking, and terrorism financing sustain extremist groups while eroding governance and stability. The problem lies in the crime–terror nexus, where illicit economies provide both financial lifelines and logistical infrastructure for insurgent movements, creating self-reinforcing cycles of violence and displacement. The aim of this study is to examine the relationship between transnational crime and insecurity in the Sahel. Its objectives are to identify major forms of crime, analyze their impact on violence and governance, and assess regional variations and responses. The study is significant as it contributes to global security scholarship and offers policy-relevant insights for actors such as the African Union (AU), ECOWAS, and the United Nations. The scope covers Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso, Chad, Mauritania, Senegal, and Northern Nigeria. Guided by the Crime–Terror Nexus Theory, the study employs a qualitative–descriptive methodology based on secondary data from UNODC, ISS Africa, OECD, and peer-reviewed sources. Findings reveal that crime hotspots overlap with insecurity zones, with illicit gold trade, drug trafficking, and migrant smuggling sustaining armed groups while weakening state institutions. Recommendations emphasize strengthening border governance, tackling corruption, disrupting extremist financing, providing socio-economic alternatives, enhancing regional cooperation, and promoting community engagement. The study concludes that dismantling the crime–terror nexus requires integrated strategies combining security, governance, and development to achieve sustainable peace and resilience in the Sahel.

Keywords: Transnational Crime, Sahel Insecurity, Crime–Terror Nexus, Governance Fragility, Border Management.

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1. Introduction

Transnational crime constitutes a significant threat to security and stability within modern international systems, especially in areas marked by weak governance,

porous borders, and fragile institutions. The Sahel region of Africa, encompassing Senegal, Mauritania, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Chad, and extending into Northern Nigeria, as well as parts of Cameroon, Sudan, and Eritrea, is characterized by cross-border criminal

activities. These include drug trafficking, arms smuggling, human trafficking, and terrorism financing, which thrive in areas with minimal governance and limited state capacity. Illicit economies are intricately linked and mutually supportive, providing sustenance to insurgent and terrorist organizations like Boko Haram and the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) via the exchange of weapons, financial resources, and smuggling networks (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime [UNODC], 2024). Northern Nigeria has become a significant element in the Sahelian security framework, functioning as both a source and a pathway for criminal and extremist activities that connect West Africa to the central Sahel. The Sahel region's geopolitical significance, connecting North Africa and Sub-Saharan Africa while spanning from the Atlantic Ocean to the Red Sea, establishes it as a crucial pathway for transnational criminal networks and a continuous source of regional instability (Okoli, 2024).

Drug trafficking has become a highly profitable and destabilizing criminal activity in the Sahel region. The region serves as a significant transit corridor for cocaine shipments from Latin America to European markets. Criminal organizations take advantage of the inadequate border control capabilities of countries like Mali, Niger, and Mauritania to enable these movements (UNODC, 2024). Arms smuggling has increased, with weapons from conflict zones in Libya and other regions of North Africa entering the Sahel and equipping insurgent and militia groups (Okoli, 2024). Human trafficking and migrant smuggling exacerbate insecurity, as vulnerable populations from West Africa are routed through transit points like Niger and Libya, frequently facing exploitation and violence from organized criminal syndicates (Abdullahi & Garba, 2025). Illicit economies are closely linked to terrorism financing, with extremist groups like Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and Boko Haram generating revenue through smuggling, kidnapping-for-ransom, and illicit trade (UNODC, 2024).

The cumulative impact of transnational crime not only enhances the power of non-state armed groups but also weakens governance and diminishes the legitimacy of state institutions.

Corruption and collusion among government officials and criminal networks undermine public trust, while the increase in arms intensifies communal conflicts, especially between pastoralist and farming communities

(Abdullahi & Garba, 2025). Poverty, unemployment, and social exclusion are exacerbated by the emergence of illegal economies, which take resources away from legitimate development and feed cycles of instability and violence. Transnational crime serves as both a cause and a consequence of insecurity in the Sahel, establishing a self-reinforcing dynamic that obstructs peacebuilding and governance reform. Regional and international entities have attempted to address these challenges via various security and policy initiatives. The African Union (AU) has initiated frameworks like the Nouakchott Process to enhance regional security cooperation and intelligence-sharing. Concurrently, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) has advocated for joint border management mechanisms (UNODC, 2024; Abdullahi & Garba, 2025). The United Nations, via the UNODC's Transnational Organized Crime Threat Assessment (TOCTA), has delivered data-driven insights to support evidence-based policymaking. International partners, such as France and the United States, have participated in military and counterterrorism interventions, particularly exemplified by France's Operation Barkhane. These efforts have been criticized for their excessive focus on security, neglecting the socio-economic and criminal aspects of insecurity (Okoli, 2024).

Despite substantial research on the Sahel's instability, much of the available literature has concentrated solely on terrorism and insurgency, generally dismissing transnational crime as a minor concern. This oversight conceals the ways in which criminal economies support insurgent movements both financially and operationally (Lacher, 2020; Thurston, 2020). Furthermore, although weak governance, corruption, and porous borders are recognized as facilitating factors (Abdullahi & Garba, 2025; International Crisis Group, 2021), there is a scarcity of studies that systematically examine the interaction between these structural weaknesses and illicit networks in perpetuating insecurity. The lack of integration between governance and criminal dynamics within a cohesive analytical framework results in considerable deficiencies in comprehending the intricate nature of the Sahel's security crisis (Bøås & Torheim, 2013; Walther, 2017).

Additionally, assessments of regional and international responses indicate a lack of effectiveness in addressing transnational crime. Initiatives like the AU's Nouakchott Process and ECOWAS's border security measures have achieved incremental progress; however, they frequently

suffer from issues related to coordination, funding, and sustained political commitment. Military operations conducted by France and other international entities have successfully disrupted terrorist networks; however, they have not tackled the underlying economic and governance issues contributing to criminality (Charbonneau, 2017; Cold-Ravnkilde & Albrecht, 2018). As a result, policy approaches continue to be excessively militarized, neglecting the interconnected socio-economic factors that perpetuate insecurity.

This study aims to address these gaps by analyzing the complex relationships between transnational crime and insecurity in the Sahel region. The objective is to analyze patterns and trends in illicit activities through secondary data sourced from the UNODC, the African Union, and regional security reports, while evaluating the effectiveness of current responses. This study examines three interrelated questions: Which forms of transnational crime are most prevalent in the Sahel? In what ways do these crimes contribute to insecurity? What regional and international mechanisms are in place to address these issues? This study enhances global security studies by providing an integrated understanding of the ways in which criminal economies contribute to instability and weaken governance. The findings hold substantial policy implications for African and international entities, including the AU, ECOWAS, and the United Nations, that aim to foster sustainable peace and security in the Sahel.

2. Theoretical Review: The Crime–Terror Nexus Theory

The Crime–Terror Nexus Theory provides a robust framework for examining the relationship between transnational crime and insecurity in fragile states, particularly in the Sahel region. Historically, criminal organizations are characterized by their profit-driven motives, whereas terrorist groups are primarily focused on ideological or political aims. Over time, the distinctions between organized crime and terrorism have blurred, resulting in hybrid actors that incorporate elements of both. The convergence is notably apparent in the Sahel, where illicit economies serve as both enablers and sustainers of extremist violence (Okoli, 2024; UNODC, 2024).

The crime-terror nexus, which emerged after the 9/11 attacks, emphasizes the operational and financial overlaps between criminal and terrorist organizations.

Researchers define this relationship as a continuum that spans from tactical alliances to complete convergence, wherein groups simultaneously employ both criminal and terrorist tactics (UNICRI, 2025). Criminal networks engage with terrorists by providing logistical support, smuggling routes, or access to illicit markets in return for protection or profit. Terrorist groups increasingly function as hybrid actors, actively participating in drug trafficking, arms trading, and human smuggling to support their operations (UNODC, 2024).

In contexts characterized by fragility and weak governance, the differentiation between criminality and terrorism becomes less clear, leading to the emergence of “convergent threat networks.” These networks leverage governance deficiencies, corruption, and socio-economic discontent to establish a strong presence within local communities. The Sahel illustrates this phenomenon. Criminal organizations in Mali, Niger, and Chad frequently collaborate with or are integrated into extremist groups like Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS), exchanging resources, intelligence, and financial networks (Okoli, 2024; UNICRI, 2025).

The nexus is evident through various interconnected phenomena. Cocaine and cannabis resin transit through Mali, Niger, and Mauritania on their way to Europe, making drug trafficking an important financial conduit between international criminal organizations and insurgency movements. Local jihadist factions impose taxes and provide protection for these routes, thereby integrating themselves into illicit economies (UNODC, 2024). The collapse of Libya in 2011 has facilitated arms smuggling, which has bolstered militant groups by supplying advanced weaponry that exacerbates conflicts in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Nigeria (Okoli, 2024). Human trafficking and migrant smuggling are interconnected with extremist networks that exploit migrant flows through Niger’s Agadez corridor, generating revenue from vulnerable populations (UNICRI, 2025).

The interconnections demonstrate the hybrid nature of insecurity in the Sahel, where terrorism and organized crime are not distinct challenges but rather overlapping phenomena. Organizations like Boko Haram and ISWAP in Northern Nigeria illustrate this convergence, maintaining insurgencies via kidnapping-for-ransom, cattle rustling, and illicit trade in fuel and agricultural goods (Okoli, 2024). The Sahel serves as a transit and

profit zone for global criminal networks, illustrating the integration of ideological and economic motivations that are fundamental to the crime-terror nexus.

The theory holds considerable implications for comprehending state fragility. Traditional counterterrorism approaches, which primarily emphasise military responses, are inadequate when terrorist groups gain resilience from established criminal economies. The convergence is prevalent in environments characterized by criminalized governance, wherein state actors are complicit in illicit networks. Corruption, inadequate border control, and insufficient institutional capacity facilitate criminal activities and foster environments where extremist organizations can operate as alternative authorities, offering protection or economic opportunities to marginalized groups (Okoli, 2024; UNODC, 2024).

This perspective redirects the analytical emphasis from perceiving terrorism solely as an ideological threat to recognizing it as an element within a wider political economy of insecurity. The connection highlights the relationship between governance shortcomings and illicit trade, demonstrating how criminal economies undermine state legitimacy, distort local economies, and sustain cycles of violence. Addressing insecurity in the Sahel necessitates strategies that tackle both the manifestations of terrorism and the underlying structural issues of criminal collaboration and state fragility (UNICRI, 2025).

The crime-terror nexus serves as a solid framework; however, critiques warn against the risks of overgeneralization. Collaboration among criminals and terrorists tends to be situational rather than structural, with ideological differences or conflicting interests potentially constraining enduring alliances. In the Sahel's dynamic and decentralized context, characterized by limited state presence and scarce economic opportunities, the conditions favour sustained collaboration. The theory's adaptability enables it to effectively address the dynamic and interconnected aspects of modern insecurity, positioning it as a highly relevant framework for the analysis of transnational threats in the region (Okoli, 2024; UNODC, 2024).

3. Methodology

The study adopts a qualitative-descriptive and analytical research design, relying exclusively on secondary data to explore the relationship between transnational crime and

insecurity in the Sahel. This approach is appropriate given the complexity of the subject matter and the need to synthesize insights from diverse sources. Data will be drawn from peer-reviewed academic journals, official reports by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), communiqués from regional organizations such as the African Union (AU) and ECOWAS, as well as publications from global financial institutions like the World Bank and IMF. In addition, policy briefs and analyses from reputable think tanks, including the Institute for Security Studies (ISS Africa) and Chatham House, will provide contemporary perspectives on crime-terror linkages and governance challenges. The data collection process involves a systematic review of literature and official reports published within the last 10–15 years, ensuring that the study captures both historical trends and recent developments in the Sahel's security landscape.

The study utilizes thematic and comparative techniques for data analysis. The results will be organized using themes that relate to specific security outcomes like terrorism, insurgency, and intercommunal conflict, as well as the main types of transnational crime like drug trafficking, arms smuggling, people trafficking, and terrorism financing. A comparative analysis will be conducted across a wider range of Sahelian countries, including Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso, Chad, Mauritania, and Nigeria, to identify similarities, differences, and cross-border dynamics in patterns of crime and insecurity. The study recognizes specific limitations: dependence on secondary data may limit the detail of findings, and official reports may reflect biases influenced by political or institutional agendas.

Findings

Forms of Transnational Crime in the Sahel

Drug Trafficking Routes

The Sahel has emerged as a critical transit corridor for narcotics, particularly cocaine from Latin America and cannabis resin from North Africa, destined for European markets. Countries such as Mali, Mauritania, and Senegal serve as key nodes in these flows, exploiting weak border controls, desert terrain, and vast ungoverned spaces that facilitate smuggling (UNODC, 2024). Research highlights that criminal organizations and jihadist factions collaborate to tax and protect trafficking routes, embedding themselves within these illicit economies and benefitting from the revenues they

generate (International Crisis Group, 2021). This criminal-terrorist collaboration represents a practical manifestation of the crime–terror nexus, where financial incentives and ideological objectives converge. The drug trade finances insurgent movements, strengthens logistical capacities, and sustains conflict economies that undermine governance through corruption and rent-seeking practices (Okoli, 2024). Furthermore, the steady influx of narcotics into transit zones distorts local markets, incentivizes smuggling among impoverished populations, and contributes to the erosion of state authority.

Arms Smuggling Networks

The proliferation of arms in the Sahel intensified after the collapse of Libya in 2011, which unleashed vast quantities of small arms and light weapons into the region. Smuggling routes linking Libya to Mali, Niger, and Chad have since become conduits for illegal weaponry, fueling insurgencies and militia formation. The spread of these weapons has empowered groups such as Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS), enabling them to sustain prolonged conflicts and expand territorial control (UNODC, 2024). Arms smuggling networks frequently overlap with militant organizations, producing hybrid structures that blur distinctions between organized crime and insurgency (Walther, 2017). The abundance of weapons also exacerbates inter-communal conflicts, particularly between pastoralist and farming communities, as local groups arm themselves for protection or retaliation (Benjaminsen & Ba, 2019). Scholars argue that the arms trade thus acts as a symptom and a catalyst of insecurity, reinforcing cycles of violence while eroding state capacity to maintain order.

Human Trafficking and Irregular Migration

The Sahel is also a major transit zone for human trafficking and irregular migration, particularly through Niger’s Agadez corridor, which connects West Africa to Libya and the Mediterranean. Smuggling networks exploit vulnerable migrants, offering passage through dangerous routes often under harsh and exploitative conditions (Abdullahi & Garba, 2025). Agadez has become a central hub for these operations, hosting criminal groups that profit from transporting migrants toward North Africa. Extremist groups have infiltrated this economy, imposing taxes on smugglers and extracting revenue from migration flows, thereby

transforming human mobility into a significant source of insurgent funding (UNICRI, 2025). This intersection of migration and organized crime illustrates how transnational criminality in the Sahel is both economic and humanitarian in nature. The destabilizing effects of trafficking are compounded by the social and political consequences of mass migration, as state institutions struggle to manage cross-border flows and protect migrants’ rights.

Terrorism Financing

Terrorism financing in the Sahel is sustained by a complex web of criminal economies, including smuggling, extortion, and kidnapping-for-ransom. Groups such as Boko Haram and Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) have institutionalized criminal activities, integrating them into their operational strategies. In Mali and Burkina Faso, kidnapping-for-ransom has become a lucrative enterprise, with victims ranging from foreign nationals to local elites (Okoli, 2024; Lacher, 2020). In Northern Nigeria, insurgent groups engage in cattle rustling, fuel smuggling, and black-market trade in agricultural commodities to sustain their operations (Okoli, 2024). This diversification of income streams reflects both the adaptability and opportunism of these actors, aligning with the crime–terror nexus that links economic survival to ideological warfare. Through these mechanisms, terrorist organizations have transformed into shadow economies, creating parallel systems of taxation, trade, and governance that challenge state authority and perpetuate instability.

Illicit Gold Trade

The illicit gold trade has emerged as one of the most significant sources of insurgent financing in the Sahel. Artisanal and small-scale mining operations in Burkina Faso and Mali have proliferated amid poverty and limited state oversight, offering lucrative opportunities for militant taxation and smuggling. Extremist groups control access to mining sites, impose levies on miners and traders, and facilitate cross-border gold smuggling to international markets (OECD, 2021). These practices inject large sums of unregulated income into insurgent networks while simultaneously distorting local economies (Cold-Ravnkilde & Albrecht, 2018). The illicit gold trade deepens inequality, fuels local conflicts over land and resources, and creates a dependency on informal economies. Scholars argue that this dynamic

represents the commodification of conflict, where natural resources directly sustain violence and undermine formal governance structures.

Cattle Rustling and Agricultural Smuggling

Cattle rustling and agricultural smuggling have long been part of the Sahel's informal economy, but their transformation into organized criminal activities has intensified regional instability. In Northern Nigeria and parts of Chad, these practices now serve as major sources of funding for insurgent groups. Militants raid livestock herds, tax rural markets, and control smuggling routes to finance their operations (Okoli, 2024; Abdullahi & Garba, 2025). These activities disrupt rural economies, displace communities, and fuel inter-communal conflicts, particularly between herders and farmers competing over scarce resources. In some areas, insurgents exploit these tensions by presenting themselves as protectors or arbitrators, thereby consolidating their influence. The monetization of livestock and agricultural smuggling demonstrates how everyday economic practices can evolve into strategic instruments of insurgency.

Fuel Smuggling and Maritime Illicit Trade

The smuggling of subsidized fuel across Nigeria and Niger has created lucrative black markets that sustain criminal economies and insurgent financing. Cheap fuel from Nigeria is transported illegally across borders, where it commands higher prices. This trade not only deprives governments of revenue but also entrenches networks of corruption that connect smugglers, security personnel, and militant actors (UNODC, 2024). In coastal countries such as Senegal and Mauritania, maritime smuggling has expanded the Sahel's criminal geography beyond the desert, incorporating ports and shipping routes used to transport narcotics and contraband goods (Wing, 2016). These maritime networks link the Sahel to global trafficking systems, integrating local actors into a transnational web of illicit commerce that spans Latin America, Europe, and North Africa.

Mercenary Flows and Cross-Border Trafficking

The Sahel's porous borders facilitate the movement of mercenaries, arms, and fighters, linking local conflicts to broader regional instability. The Libyan crisis created a reservoir of armed groups and foreign fighters who now circulate between Libya, Chad, Sudan, and Mali

(Walther, 2017; Charbonneau, 2017). These mercenary flows reinforce the militarization of criminal economies, enabling insurgent groups to access weapons, training, and logistical support. Cross-border trafficking in arms, drugs, and humans operates in tandem with mercenary recruitment, illustrating the interconnectedness of criminal and political violence. The result is a regional system in which war economies, trafficking networks, and militant movements are mutually sustaining. This dynamic underscores that Sahelian insecurity is not confined to national boundaries but is part of a continental and global network of transnational crime.

Impact on Insecurity

Strengthening of Armed Groups

Transnational criminal economies have become a structural enabler of armed group consolidation across the Sahel. Illicit activities such as drug trafficking, arms smuggling, and the taxation of migration and gold routes provide insurgents with diversified revenue streams that sustain operations and territorial expansion (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), 2024). Through these networks, groups like Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM) and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) convert criminal proceeds into a steady supply of weapons, vehicles, and recruits, allowing them to outlast state offensives. By taxing smugglers and traders, jihadist factions institutionalize systems of hybrid governance, assuming quasi-state functions such as dispute arbitration, convoy protection, and regulation of illicit trade corridors (UNODC, 2024). This embedded financial resilience transforms transnational crime from a peripheral activity into a central mechanism of insurgent endurance and expansion (UNODC, 2024).

Weakening of State Institutions

The entrenchment of transnational crime has simultaneously corroded the capacity and legitimacy of Sahelian states. Corruption within border security, customs agencies, and regional administrations has facilitated the infiltration of criminal networks into state structures, generating what scholars describe as "criminalized governance" (Abdullahi & Garba, 2025). As insurgent taxation and market control replace formal state functions, citizens increasingly engage with non-state actors for protection, trade facilitation, and conflict mediation. This parallel authority weakens institutional cohesion, fosters clientelism, and perpetuates a

governance vacuum that insurgent groups exploit to extend influence (Abdullahi & Garba, 2025). Moreover, state officials' complicity in smuggling and rent extraction reduces the credibility of anti-crime initiatives, entrenching impunity and deepening public distrust (Abdullahi & Garba, 2025)

Increased Violence and Displacement

The competition for lucrative illicit economies, including artisanal gold mining, cattle corridors, and migrant routes, has escalated violence and led to increased population displacement in the central Sahel. Armed factions and militias participate in territorial conflicts to seize control of revenue sources, leading to recurring attacks, retaliatory massacres, and extensive human rights violations (Africa Defence Forum, 2024). Funds generated from criminal activities support the acquisition of weapons and recruitment efforts, thereby increasing the scale and complexity of insurgent operations. The expansion of violence along trafficking corridors restricts humanitarian agencies' access to affected regions, thereby further isolating vulnerable communities (Africa Defence Forum, 2024). The convergence of criminal and militant economies creates a self-sustaining cycle of insecurity, wherein illicit profits drive conflict, conflict perpetuates smuggling, and both phenomena lead to mass displacement that undermines local resilience (Africa Defence Forum, 2024).

Regional Variations of Transnational Crime in the Sahel

Mali

Mali functions as a crucial conduit for transnational criminal activities in the Sahel, acting as a primary transit point for cocaine from Latin America and cannabis resin from North Africa destined for Europe. The northern regions, specifically Gao, Kidal, and Timbuktu, have emerged as focal points where insurgent groups associated with al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and its affiliates impose taxes on smugglers, safeguard convoys, and oversee illicit trade (International Crisis Group, 2021). The disintegration of state authority after the 2012 rebellion facilitated the integration of jihadist and criminal networks, intertwining smuggling with local governance and establishing hybrid political orders dependent on illicit economies for their sustenance (Bøås & Torheim, 2013). The interplay of these dynamics has established a crime-

terror nexus, wherein criminal proceeds support insurgent operations and undermine Mali's tenuous sovereignty.

Niger

Niger's Agadez corridor remains the linchpin of irregular migration flows toward Libya and onward to Europe, generating significant profits for smuggling networks that exploit vulnerable migrants from West and Central Africa. These criminal syndicates have transformed migration into a lucrative industry, often overlapping with extremist taxation and armed protection systems in the north (OECD, 2021). Simultaneously, Niger faces persistent destabilization from arms trafficking, particularly across its porous borders with Libya and Nigeria, where militant groups acquire weapons to sustain operations (Walther, 2017). The convergence of human smuggling and arms flows has entrenched Niger's position as a critical hub in the Sahel's criminal ecosystem, undermining already fragile state governance and regional security.

Burkina Faso

Burkina Faso illustrates the significant interconnection between the financing of terrorism and resource-driven criminal activities. Extremist organizations, such as affiliates of JNIM and ISGS, exert control over or impose taxes on artisanal gold mining operations in northern and eastern regions (Cold-Ravnkilde & Albrecht, 2018). Gold revenues, illicitly transported across porous borders into Togo, Benin, and Ghana, have emerged as a significant funding source for insurgent activities and the recruitment of local militias (Lacher, 2020). Furthermore, prevalent kidnapping-for-ransom operations produce significant revenue streams that perpetuate cycles of conflict. The outcome is a criminalized war economy in which the illicit gold trade and abductions obscure the differences between ideological insurgency and economic opportunism.

Chad

Chad's geopolitical location, adjacent to Libya, Sudan, and the Lake Chad Basin, serves as a pathway for transnational criminal activities that exacerbate regional instability. The increase in small arms and light weapons after Libya's collapse has provided insurgent and mercenary networks with resources along Chad's northern and eastern borders (Charbonneau, 2017). These networks enable the movement of fighters, arms,

and vehicles, thereby directly aiding insurgencies associated with Boko Haram and the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) (Walther, 2017). Cross-border flows exacerbate cycles of violence, destabilize rural peripheries, and weaken Chad's fragile governance by militarizing local economies and border communities.

Mauritania

Mauritania's vast desert expanses and Atlantic coastline provide ideal conditions for trafficking networks that connect South American cocaine shipments with European destinations. Criminal groups exploit coastal entry points and maritime routes while simultaneously engaging in the smuggling of migrants, contraband, and fuel (UNODC, 2024). Despite relative political stability, Mauritania remains vulnerable to infiltration by transnational criminal actors who exploit weak maritime surveillance and limited institutional capacity (Wing, 2016). These overlapping networks blur distinctions between economic crime and security threats, embedding Mauritania within the broader Sahelian trafficking architecture.

Senegal

Senegal's maritime infrastructure, especially the Port of Dakar, establishes it as a logistical centre in West Africa's narcotics supply chain. Senegal exhibits relative stability; however, organized criminal groups exploit its maritime routes for the transportation of cocaine from Latin America to European markets (OECD, 2021). These flows occur concurrently with other forms of contraband trade; including fuel, counterfeit goods, and cash, which traverse coastal networks with limited oversight (UNODC, 2024). The incorporation of Senegal into global trafficking networks illustrates the involvement of relatively stable states in regional criminal economies that surpass national governance capabilities.

Nigeria (Northern)

Northern Nigeria epitomizes the operational depth of the crime-terror nexus. Insurgent groups such as Boko Haram and ISWAP have institutionalized criminal economies encompassing kidnapping-for-ransom, cattle rustling, arms trafficking, and fuel smuggling to finance insurgency and maintain territorial influence (Abdullahi & Garba, 2025). These illicit economies serve dual functions: sustaining militant logistics and embedding insurgents within local communities through parallel

governance and trade networks (Benjaminsen & Ba, 2019). Consequently, criminality and insurgency are mutually reinforcing, transforming Northern Nigeria into a persistent epicenter of instability within the wider Sahelian security complex.

Patterns Identified

Correlation between Crime Hotspots and Insecurity Zones

Illicit economies in the Sahel, including artisanal gold fields, trafficking corridors, and border transshipment nodes, consistently coincide with areas characterized by elevated violence and insurgent activity. Recent evaluations indicate that regions experiencing heightened illegal gold mining and arms trafficking also report increased extremist activity and fatal incidents, with the Sahel representing a significant proportion of global terrorism fatalities since 2019 (ISS Africa, 2024). The transnational organized crime threat assessment by UNODC correlates concentrations of cocaine transit, arms flows, and human smuggling with localized governance and stability breakdowns, highlighting corridor-centric patterns instead of widespread, country-wide trends (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime [UNODC], 2024). The findings indicate that insecurity is concentrated around revenue-generating nodes that armed groups may tax, protect, or contest (OECD, 2021).

Mechanisms That Tie Crime Nodes to Violence

Criminal hubs transform into sites of conflict and governance, where armed groups compete to seize economic resources, enforce alternative taxation systems, and control markets, thereby integrating into local economies. Insurgent factions transform illicit flows of gold, drugs, migrants, and fuel into reliable revenue streams that finance recruitment, logistics, and arms acquisition. This hybrid governance undermines state authority and intensifies coercion against civilians in proximity to routes and extraction sites (Cold Ravnkilde & Albrecht, 2018). Competition among armed groups and criminal brokers for control over critical chokepoints, including wells, depots, and crossings, initiates cycles of attack and reprisal. Concurrently, corruption within border and customs units facilitates the persistence of these economies, thereby further undermining formal institutions (International Crisis Group, 2021).

Spatial Patterns and Corridor Effects

Violence escalates in particular corridors: desert smuggling routes connecting northern Mali to Algeria, the Agadez–Sebha migration pathway through Niger, and gold belts in Burkina Faso and Mali. These areas operate as "convergent threat zones" where illicit trade, insurgent governance, and social grievances converge, resulting in persistent insecurity despite changes in military operations (Walther, 2017). When armed groups establish systems of taxation and protection in a conflict zone, adjacent communities face spillover effects such as road ambushes, market extortion, and displacement, resulting in zones of instability that are resistant to short-term security measures (Charbonneau, 2017).

Indicators and Empirical Signatures

Observable signatures of the crime–insecurity correlation include simultaneous spikes in trafficking volumes and violent incidents, expanding areas of non-state taxation, and rising displacement near mining and transit nodes. UNODC (2024) documents that increased flows of contraband and arms correlate with deteriorating local governance and higher attack rates, while ISS Africa (2024) highlights the linkage between illegal gold economies and extremist expansion into rural communes. At the state level, complex threat syndrome manifests as overlapping crime–conflict maps: districts with entrenched illicit markets show persistent governance erosion, higher frequency of targeted killings, and greater barriers to humanitarian access (Okoli, 2024).

4. Recommendations

A first priority is to strengthen border governance and intelligence sharing. Sahelian states should implement coordinated border management under frameworks like the G5 Sahel Joint Force and ECOWAS, supported by modern surveillance technologies such as drones and biometric systems. Instead of relying on isolated checkpoints, governments must adopt corridor-level monitoring that targets entire trafficking routes, thereby dismantling transnational criminal networks more effectively.

Governments must also combat corruption and criminalized governance by instituting transparent auditing systems, independent oversight bodies, and merit-based recruitment in customs and law enforcement agencies. Judicial institutions should be empowered to prosecute collusion between officials and criminal syndicates, while international donors should tie

assistance to measurable governance reforms. This recommendation ensures that state institutions regain legitimacy and reduce the enabling environment for crime.

States should disrupt the financing of insurgent groups by regulating criminal economies. Formalizing artisanal gold mining, securing designated mining zones, and implementing licensing systems will mitigate the risk of militants imposing taxes on miners. Implementing community-based livestock protection schemes and enhancing rural policing can effectively mitigate cattle rustling. Additionally, financial intelligence units, with support from the IMF, World Bank, and FATF, should oversee ransom payments and monitor suspicious financial transfers. These measures directly weaken the financial resources of extremists.

Long-term stability requires governments and partners to provide socio-economic alternatives to illicit livelihoods. Investment in vocational training, small business grants, agricultural modernization, and infrastructure development in high-risk zones such as Niger's Agadez corridor and northern Mali will reduce communities' reliance on smuggling and trafficking. By offering tangible opportunities, states can weaken recruitment pipelines into criminal and extremist networks.

Regional and international actors must enhance cooperation through joint task forces and balanced interventions. The AU, ECOWAS, and G5 Sahel should intensify intelligence-sharing and coordinated operations, while partners such as France, the United States, and the EU must recalibrate strategies to combine counterterrorism with governance and economic support. This recommendation ensures a holistic security architecture that addresses both symptoms and root causes of insecurity.

Finally, governments should promote community engagement and local governance by empowering traditional authorities, civil society, and community associations to co-manage trade routes, markets, and resource sites. Community policing initiatives, backed by ECOWAS and AU frameworks, can rebuild trust between citizens and state security forces. Involving women, youth, and local leaders in early-warning systems and conflict resolution strengthens social cohesion and undermines extremist recruitment. This people-centered approach ensures that anti-crime policies are sustainable and locally legitimate.

5. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that transnational crime is a central driver of insecurity in the Sahel, closely linked to insurgency, terrorism, and weak governance. A qualitative analysis of secondary data reveals that illicit economies, including drug trafficking, arms smuggling, human trafficking, gold mining, and kidnapping-for-ransom, serve as both financial support and logistical infrastructure for extremist groups. Criminal networks exploit weak borders, unstable institutions, and socio-economic vulnerabilities, resulting in areas of heightened threat characterized by violence, displacement, and governance failure. The findings indicate that insecurity in the Sahel cannot be comprehensively understood through ideology or insurgency alone; it is instead perpetuated by a hybrid political economy involving crime and terror.

Addressing this challenge necessitates a shift from militarized responses to integrated strategies that encompass border governance, anti-corruption reforms, and disruption of criminal economies, socio-economic investment, and community engagement. Regional cooperation through frameworks like the AU, ECOWAS, and G5 Sahel, with support from international partners, is essential for addressing cross-border flows and financing networks. Empowering local communities to restore legitimacy and resilience against criminal infiltration is equally important. This study positions transnational crime as central to the insecurity in the Sahel, thereby contributing to global security literature and providing policy-relevant insights for the establishment of sustainable peace. The future direction involves dismantling the crime-terror nexus and concurrently enhancing governance and development, facilitating the Sahel's transition from a corridor of instability to a region characterized by resilience.

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