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United Nations
Interregional Crime and Justice
Research Institute

Primeiro atentado terrorista do
CC completa 20 anos; vítima

Libanês é apontado pelos EUA como
coordenador do Hezbollah no Brasil

AMIA: ordenaron nuevas
capturas para cuatro
libaneses del Hezbollah
por el atentado a la
mutual judía

The Nexus between Transnational Organized Crime and Terrorism in Latin America

Norte América, a través del Darién
Terroristas intentan llegar a

HOW THE DRUG TRADE
FUNDS TERRORISM

França apreende 4,6 toneladas
de cocaína em navio brasileiro
no Golfo da Guiné

Primeiro atentado
completa 20 anos

The Nexus between Transnational Organized Crime and Terrorism in Latin America

We extend our sincere gratitude to the dedicated professionals in their different capacities and contributors to this report. Their commitment to advancing knowledge and promoting security in the region is commendable.

This report seeks to foster dialogue, cooperation, and evidence-based decision-making. With the hope that it will contribute to our shared goal of building a safer and more secure future for the people of the region, and serve as a vital resource for policymakers, law enforcement agencies, and the international community in addressing the multifaceted challenges posed by the crime-terrorism nexus in Latin America and beyond.

About UNICRI

The United Nations Interregional Crime and Justice Research Institute (UNICRI) was established in 1968 pursuant to Economic and Social Council Resolution 1086 B (XXXIX) of 1965, which urged an expansion of the United Nations' activities in crime prevention and criminal justice.

Working within the broad scope of its mandate to design and implement improved policies and actions in the field of crime prevention and control, the mission of UNICRI is to advance justice, crime prevention, security and the rule of law in support of peace, human rights and sustainable development.

UNICRI's work focuses on Goal 16 of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which is centred on promoting peaceful, just and inclusive societies, free from crime and violence. Justice, crime prevention and the rule of law are the basis for fighting poverty and reducing inequalities while enhancing economic growth and stability and protecting the environment. UNICRI supports governments and the international community at large in tackling criminal threats to social peace, development and political stability.

UNICRI's programmes aim to promote national self-reliance and the development of institutional capabilities. To this end, UNICRI provides a one-stop facility offering high-level expertise in crime prevention and criminal justice problems. Technical cooperation is enhanced by the use of action-oriented research to assist in the formulation of improved policies and concrete intervention programmes. Institutional and on-the-job training of specialized personnel forms an integral part of UNICRI activities.

UNICRI was among the first United Nations (UN) entities to work on the nexus between transnational organized crime and terrorism, starting its work in 2015, following the first UN Security Council resolution on this topic, 2195 (2014). In 2018, UNICRI, under the aegis of the Global Counterterrorism Forum (GCTF), developed the *GCTF The Hague Good Practices on the Nexus between Transnational Organized Crime and Terrorism*, a non-binding list of 25 recommendations in the categories of local engagement, research and information sharing, local engagement, and capacity-building and law enforcement,

following regional meetings covering the Sahel and West Africa, the Balkans, South and Southeast Asia, and East Africa and the Horn of Africa regions, respectively.

In 2019, UNICRI published the *Policy Toolkit on the Hague Good Practices on the Nexus Between Transnational Organized Crime and Terrorism* which has been translated into Albanian, Arabic, French, Portuguese and Spanish, and has been used for capacity-building of policy-makers and practitioners in the Balkans, East Africa, West Africa, the Sahel region and more recently in Latin America.

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Disclaimer

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List of Acronyms

- * **AMIA** - Asociación Mutual Israelita Argentina
- * **AQIM** - Al-Qaeda in Islamic Maghreb
- * **CBP** - US Customs and Border Protection
- * **CJNG** - Cartel Jalisco Nueva Generacion/ Jalisco New Generation Cartel
- * **CTED** - Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate
- * **CV** - Comando Vermelho
- * **DEA** - Drug Enforcement Administration
- * **FIU** - Financial Intelligence Unit
- * **FARC** - Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia
- * **FPMR** - Frente Patriotico Manuel Rodriguez
- * **GCTF** - Global Counterterrorism Forum
- * **ICE** - Immigration and Customs Enforcement of the United States
- * **IED** - Improvised Explosive Devices
- * **INTERPOL** - International Criminal Police Organization
- * **ISIL** - Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant
- * **ISWAP** - Islamic State West African Province
- * **KST** - Known or Suspected Terrorist
- * **LCB** - Lebanese Canadian Bank
- * **MANPADS** - Man-Portable Air-Defence Systems
- * **OFAC** - U.S. Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control
- * **PCC** - Primeiro Comando da Capital
- * **REPET** - Public Registry of Persons and Entities Tied to Terrorism Acts or its Financing
- * **TBA** - Tri-Border Area (in this report it refers to the Argentina, Brazil and Paraguay border)
- * **TSDS** - Terrorist Screening Dataset
- * **UNICRI** - United Nations Interregional Crime and Justice Research Institute
- * **UNODC** - United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime

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Introduction

The background of the slide is a dark, textured surface with a subtle world map. A large, white, semi-transparent shape resembling a cross or a stylized 'I' is centered on the map, with its vertical bar extending from the bottom edge. The shape has a soft, glowing effect, particularly in the center where it overlaps the map's landmasses. The overall color palette is dark with warm, golden-yellow highlights emanating from the center of the white shape.

1.1 Definitions

Definitions used in this report will be aligned with the language of the United Nations Security Council resolutions, particularly those relevant to the topic of the links between transnational organized crime and terrorism.

Transnational organized crime:

The definition of organized crime used in this report is taken from the United Nations Convention on Transnational Organized Crime (Palermo Convention) of 2000, and adopted in the same year by the General Assembly (resolution 55/25): *a group of three or more persons that was not randomly formed; existing for a period of time; acting in concert with the aim of committing at least one serious crime or offence established in accordance to the convention (55/25); in order to obtain, directly or indirectly, a financial or other material benefit.*

Terrorism/terrorist/terror:

The terminology for these within the report are in line with the broad UN definitions within resolutions. Taken as an example from a section of resolution 1566 (2004), which aimed to assist States in meeting their obligations under Security Council Resolution 1373 (2001) to take domestic legislative action. It refers to “terrorism” as:

“... criminal acts, including against civilians, committed with intent to cause death or serious bodily injury, or taking of hostages, with the purpose to provoke a state of terror in the general public or in a group of persons or particular persons, intimidate a population or compel a government or an international organization to do or to abstain from doing any act, which constitute offences within the scope of and as defined in the international conventions and protocols relating to terrorism, are under no circumstances justifiable by considerations of a political, philosophical, ideological, racial, ethnic, religious or other similar nature, and calls upon all States to prevent such acts and, if not prevented, to ensure that such acts are punished by penalties consistent with their grave nature (Para. 3)”.

In some jurisdictions different groups are designated as terrorist, whilst in others, the same groups are not considered as such. To ensure that this is taken into account, this report does not seek to enter the debate of which organizations are listed as terrorist or not internationally. The scope is to bring to the forefront where terror and terrorist-like tactics, *modus operandi* and other means are used. This will be shown as an example of terror/terrorist for the scope of this report. Taking into account the different terrorism designations of the Member States relevant for this report.

Certain groups mentioned within this report are not listed by the United Nations as terrorist organizations, however, their use of terrorist tactics and their designation by some Member States warrants mention in this report. Several states throughout the world have designated Hezbollah as a terrorist organization. In the Americas, as of the date of publication, the following countries have designated Hezbollah as a terrorist organization: Argentina, Canada, Colombia, Guatemala, Honduras, Paraguay and the United States of America. The S/2021/972, UN Global Survey of the implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 1373/2001, mentions the more recent designations adopted in Latin America by Argentina, Colombia, Honduras, and Paraguay, which involve Hezbollah. As for the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), the group was delisted in Colombia in 2020 and in the USA in 2021; however, the USA has designated as terrorists some FARC dissident organizations and individuals, such as FARC - EP (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia - People's Army) and Segunda Marquetalia and the respective leaders of these organizations.

1.2 Executive Summary

The nexus that can exist between transnational organized crime and terrorism is an accepted phenomenon impacting different global regions. At the international level, this has been highlighted in several Security Council resolutions, including 1373 (2001), 2915 (2014), and, more recently, in resolution 2482 (2019), in which Member States expressed concern that terrorists could benefit from organized crime – including through the trafficking of arms, persons, drugs, artefacts and cultural property – to finance their activities. These resolutions called on states to consider establishing laws and mechanisms, as appropriate, to allow for the broadest possible international cooperation. Resolution 1373 (2001), adopted under Chapter VII of the Charter, operative Paragraph 4 *“notes with concern the close connection between international terrorism and transnational organized crime, illicit drugs, money-laundering, illegal arms trafficking, and illegal movement of nuclear, chemical, biological and other potentially deadly materials, and in this regard emphasizes the need to enhance coordination of efforts on national, subregional, regional and international levels in order to strengthen a global response to this serious challenge and threat to international security.”* Although global advances have been made since 2014 in this regard, there has been limited focus on Latin America. It is timely, then, that this report examines the evolving interactions between crime and terrorism in Latin America, particularly over the past three decades.

The report highlights the growing proficiency of both terrorist and criminal organizations to develop in-house capabilities and forge alliances to advance their goals. Criminal organizations increasingly adopt terrorist tactics to pursue their economic objectives. At the same time, terrorist organizations in Latin America have transformed into hybrid entities driven by both ideological beliefs and economic gains. Similarly, the theoretical and analytical discussion surrounding the nexus between organized crime and terrorism has evolved. It has transitioned from the approaches developed at the turn of the 21st century to the new and revisited concepts that emerged in 2019 as part of the UNICRI/GCTF partnership known as the Nexus Initiative.¹ This initiative supported the international community in addressing the growing concern of UN Member States regarding the nexus between organized crime and terrorism through the development of related policies and subsequent capacity-building tailored to specific national and regional contexts.

The theoretical and analytical discussions surrounding the crime-terror nexus have evolved since the 1990s, shifting from examining criminal funding by terrorists to exploring the broader interplay between crime and terrorism. This report delves into the changing motivations of terrorists engaged in lucrative criminal enterprises, as globalization and the intertwining of terror and criminal networks blur the lines between the two.

This report also addresses how the lure of financial gain from criminal activities can shift the motivations of the terrorists involved in profit-making criminal activities. As terrorist networks become increasingly globalized and interconnected with criminal networks, the motivations of terrorists might change (from ideology to pursuing financial interests) depending on the tasks they are entrusted to perform, the operating environment and local socio-economic factors. There are numerous cases in Latin America where terrorists, driven by criminal motives to maximise their profits and power, hide behind the façade of ideology to justify their activities. As a result, government agencies with a mandate to combat crime and/or terrorism are often puzzled by these ‘grey zones’ and face challenges in finding appropriate responses to this phenomenon.

Understanding the concept of the “terrorist activity cycle” is crucial for addressing the crime-terror nexus strategically. The cycle, which encompasses recruitment, radicalization, training, funding, logistics, attack, evasion, and media exploitation, among other core steps, offers multiple instances where crime and terrorism can intersect. The report demonstrates that terrorist organizations operating in Latin America have enhanced their capabilities in the criminal world, innovating at each step of the terrorist activity cycle. Similarly, criminal organizations that adopt terrorist tactics have increased their capacity to instil fear and terror, thereby weakening states and driving off competitors.

As terrorist groups globalize and become more adept at each step of the terrorist activity cycle, they broaden relations with a vast network of transnational criminal organizations that are constantly improving, thereby maximising their criminal enterprises and potential terrorist reach. Similarly, criminal organizations that turned to terrorist tactics to maximise their profits have also increased their capabilities as their illicit markets expand to other regions globally. The exposure to different cultures and criminal settings improves the organizations’ capability to operate in diverse regions and the global arena.

A globalized world has revealed that as the crime-terrorism nexus transcends physical barriers and extends to cyberspace, crime and terror have become more intimately related, proficient and widespread. The constant evolution of society and technology enables new forms of business opportunities and novel and creative forms of crime and terror interactions. On the other hand, if government agencies and states do not develop better mechanisms for effective collaboration, these terrorist and criminal organizations will continue to surpass the capabilities of states to provide a unified response.

The new categorizations of the theoretical concepts related to the crime-terror nexus, as presented in the [“Policy Toolkit on the Hague Good Practices on the Nexus Between Transnational Organized Crime and Terrorism”](#) devised by UNICRI and GCTF, have been refined to align with the latest developments in the field. They consider that since the attacks of 9/11, both terror and criminal organizations have demonstrated their ability to adapt to the constantly evolving global environment, particularly in response to the changing strategies and tactics employed by counter-terrorism and law enforcement agencies worldwide. Notwithstanding, national and regional characteristics still play a decisive role in understanding the expansion of the nexus in a given geographical and sociopolitical area. Therefore, it is essential to acknowledge how the nexus impacts an area, region or country, by examining its influence at each step of the terrorist activity cycle.

1.3 Scope of the Report

The objective of this report is to explore and explain the various connections between organized crime and terrorism in Latin America, recognizing the multifaceted nature of these relationships. This study presents case examples that illustrate the diverse manifestations of the nexus involving different terror and criminal organizations across the continent. Ongoing studies and assessments conducted by UNICRI on the nexus, on organized crime and terrorism, have identified critical issues and links to the other regions UNICRI has worked in, such as Africa, the Middle East, and Europe that require further in-depth analysis.

The report examines two main categories: terrorist organizations leveraging criminal activities to pursue their ideological goals and criminal organizations adopting terrorist tactics to achieve profit-driven objectives. While the report covers a wide range of

criminal activities, it primarily focuses on drug trafficking, migrant smuggling, and money laundering. The discussion on terrorism tactics encompasses a range of activities such as murder, kidnapping, threats, extortion, robbery, and attacks on civilians, government workers and infrastructure. While the cases presented are not exhaustive, they serve as illustrative examples of the diverse manifestations of the crime-terror nexus.

The objective of the report is relevant because it directly impacts policies and actions in the fight against terrorism and transnational organized crime. Therefore, it is necessary to delve deeply into the topic and explore ways to develop a more effective state response. This entails adopting a more comprehensive approach to countering the threats posed by the crime-terror nexus.

1.4 Note on the Methodology

The initial phase of this research involved examining the subject from a historical perspective, highlighting events, processes, and institutions that contribute to understanding the evolution of the nexus. A thorough review of primary and secondary sources, such as books, articles, reports, narratives, and media, was then conducted to explore the existing literature on the relationship between crime and terrorism.

In addition to accessing existing academic research, the data collection methodology consisted of analyzing various primary sources. These sources include first-person reports, official reports that shed light on the criminal activities carried out by criminal and terrorist groups (when declassified and available for research), declassified material, and interviews with key stakeholders. These include law enforcement officers, judges, prosecutors, military personnel, intelligence officers, experts, representatives from non-governmental organizations (NGOs), think tanks and other professionals. Whenever possible, individuals directly involved with terrorist and criminal groups were also interviewed. The identities of some of the interviewees had to be anonymized due to confidentiality and security concerns. The interviews conducted for this research employed semi-structured or unstructured formats to encourage open and uninhibited discussions.

These interviews illustrate specific arguments and/or complement other research methods used in this report. They served as supplementary material, particularly for the cases described in the cases explained section. Interviews helped validate certain points and enrich the study. Questions posed to interviewees were tailored to the cases, issues, or events they had participated in or witnessed.

1.5 Background on the Nexus

Until the 1990s, crime and terrorism were commonly perceived as distinct and separate phenomena. However, a closer examination of the nexus between crime and terrorism reveals an evolving relationship between terrorism, organized crime, and the state, with increasing intersections and frequent overlaps. The discussion about the convergence between organized crime and terrorism, a relatively new phenomenon, started at the end of the Cold War. This period also marked a significant decline in state financing of terrorism, which paved the way for terrorist organizations to search for alternative forms of financing, many of them criminal, such as drug trafficking, smuggling, extortion, and other various illicit enterprises.² Consequently, countries and international organizations turned their attention to this nascent threat from non-state actors. In the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, the debates on this issue have intensified. The heightened awareness of the interconnectedness between crime and terrorism prompted states to seek effective alternatives to tackle the crime/terrorism nexus.³

In the wake of the 1990s, most terrorist groups had already begun developing the capacity to engage in criminal activities, creating an additional operational focus aimed at funding. The post-Cold War era, coupled with the rise of intra-state tensions, regional wars, and advances in globalization, exacerbated conditions that boosted the increasing convergence of terrorist and criminal groups.⁴ Consequently, modern-day terrorists have long realized the need to diversify their funding sources to avoid dependence on a single source of income.

Another component that contributes to the equation is the phenomenon of globalization. Since the mid-1990s, the global environment has experienced rapid and extensive development, where everything is amplified, accelerated, expanded and disseminated at a lightning-speed.⁵ Criminals and terrorists benefit from the advances of globalization

and exploit the numerous gaps in legislation, law enforcement capabilities, and international cooperation to carry on with their illicit activities; in other words, criminals and terrorists naturally surf the same wave of mainstream globalization and also perform market-driven activities and benefit from the growing integration of the communication, transportation and financial systems.⁶

Organized criminals and terrorist networks can successfully destabilize a state internally and generate disruption across borders; this has been recognized in different Security Council resolutions where the nexus is seen as a threat to the peace, security, stability and development of Member States. Nonetheless, these groups need a set of conditions that enable them to thrive. One of the primary conditions underlying the advancement of crime and terrorism in any given state is corruption, which is pervasive in nearly every relationship between crime and terrorism nowadays. The advance of corruption encourages criminal as well as terrorist enterprises, ultimately strengthening the connection between crime and terrorism.⁷

Both organized criminal and terrorist groups exploit any available space for their nefarious ends when the state is confronted with multiple governance challenges and leaves a power vacuum. This is particularly the case when the state fails to exert control over an area, as criminals, insurgents, or terrorists inevitably seek to seize the opportunity to occupy that area, seeking to empower themselves and establish, and/or expand and consolidate their illegal activities.⁸

State borders and boundaries have become increasingly permeable as a consequence of a more interconnected world. Recent efforts to promote trade and facilitate the movement of goods across international borders have contributed to relaxed border controls.⁹ This has eased and sped up the movement of money, arms and people across countries. Consequently, border areas may become more vulnerable and therefore increase insecurity amongst neighbouring states.¹⁰

Therefore, organized crime and terrorist groups thrive when they set up their base of operations in transitional states, (post) conflict regions or poorly policed border areas, where there is a thriving shadow economy.¹¹ The crime-terrorism nexus also endangers politically stable states. The manifestations of this nexus are usually less transparent and more adaptive in environments with stronger government control. Consequently, the sophisticated nature of criminal and terrorist activities/interactions poses a potentially

greater danger to the politically stable state than elsewhere, considering that law enforcement agencies usually face challenges in differentiating between petty crimes (high volume, low cost) that facilitate or enable a terrorist enterprise and local petty crimes that are a community problem. The same applies to money laundering operations conducted by terrorists and criminals, which are adeptly disguised in politically stable states.

It is important to note that, despite the benefits of globalization, current terrorist and transnational criminal actors cannot simply be seen as globalized versions of their predecessors. Their enterprises are not merely conventional criminal structures on a larger scale. Instead, they have evolved to mirror the complex architecture and organizational structures of modern global legitimate businesses. Their mindset, operations, financial frameworks, and objectives are significantly more advanced compared to those of their predecessors. They excel at establishing networks, rapidly outsourcing, skillfully developing local leadership and human resources, enabling individual cells to operate autonomously and resourcefully, and minimizing interaction and contact with top leadership. As a result, they play a major role in distorting global markets and undermining state stability, while posing considerable challenges for law enforcement and intelligence agencies due to their multifaced and elusive nature.¹²

At the dawn of the 21st century, scholars in the field of terrorism have classified the crossovers between crime and terrorism into three distinct elements:¹³ cooperation, transformation and convergence.¹⁴ The following section provides a brief description of the key characteristics of each of these elements, based on insights from prominent academics in this field.

As previously mentioned, the intersection between crime and terrorism extends beyond financing. It also encompasses the preparatory actions leading up to a terrorist attack and the subsequent processes, usually facilitated by criminal activities. This is commonly referred to as the "terrorist activity cycle". The interactions (between the elements of organized crime and terrorism) concerning each step of the cycle can vary depending on whether the nexus entails a specific organization or transactions between different groups.

1.6 Core Concepts

The three elements of cooperation, convergence and transformation served as the foundational pillars for initiating discussions on the crime-terror nexus. These elements enabled both scholars and practitioners to better understand the developments of the nexus in the last decades. The three elements are not necessarily consequential and may occur on their own, or concurrently.

Cooperation refers to a situation in which criminal and terrorist organizations develop alliances. These alliances can be informal, short-lived and limited to a single transaction or more complex, involving parties becoming more permanent partners. Alliances may occur for several reasons, e.g., the need for expert knowledge (money laundering, counterfeiting, document fraud, among others) and operational support (e.g., access to trafficking routes, for example).¹⁵

Convergence, on the other hand, refers to a situation in which a terrorist group recognizes the distinct advantages and opportunities of operating as a hybrid organization, where both terror and crime play a central role.¹⁶ Some authors argue that when a terrorist entity converges with criminal activities, the primary focus shifts towards criminal endeavours, with the political agenda becoming secondary. The political facet becomes nothing more than rhetoric or a façade to advance the group's criminal activities aimed at maximizing profit. As a result, the group's motivation changes, although disguised for several purposes. Firstly, to puzzle law enforcement agencies, and divert the government's attention towards ideological or political issues, thereby deflecting focus from criminal investigations. Secondly, to maintain the widespread use of terror tactics as a tool to combat adversaries and expand the "criminal market share", thereby increasing profitability. And thirdly, to continue capitalizing on political or ideological grievances to attract recruits. These are the main reasons underlying the "disguised behavior".¹⁷

Finally, *transformation* comprises a situation in which a terror group undergoes a shift in its objectives, where economic motivation gradually eclipses the political one. Then comes the next step, which occurs when profit becomes the only goal. At this point, the group abandons its political agenda and becomes a criminal organization. Or the other way around, in which the criminal organization adopts terror tactics to advance its profit-making objectives. In extreme cases, the criminal organization undergoes a fundamental change in ethos, adopting more terrorist-like characteristics.¹⁸

In recent years, an increasing number of case studies revealing the impact of the nexus worldwide have prompted authors to revisit the relationships between crime and terror and thus formulate, in our view, a more suitable and straightforward framework for categorizing it. These new suggested concepts and categorizations were introduced in 2019 through the previously mentioned “Nexus Policy Toolkit” published and researched by UNICRI and the GCTF, in the framework of the “Nexus Initiative”¹⁹ to better analyze the interactions between crime and terror. The two main categories identified are the transactional nexus and the organizational nexus, which will be discussed in the following paragraphs.

The transactional nexus typically involves the collaboration of a criminal organization and a terrorist group to execute specific operational needs. This ‘collaboration’ can take two forms: an alliance or an appropriation of tactics through organizational learning. Alliances between criminal and terrorist groups are often short-term in nature, as they come with inherent vulnerabilities. On the other hand, the appropriation of tactics entails the ability of either the crime or terror group to learn how to integrate the tactics of the other more effectively.²⁰

As for the organizational nexus, it occurs when criminal and terrorist activities coexist in the same space and time. Within the organizational nexus, the degree of overlap between these activities can vary. Theoretically, this can be classified into four categories: integration, hybrid, transformation and black hole.²¹

Integration can be divided into two distinct situations; the first results from an alliance that evolves to the extent that the criminal organization is integrated into a terrorist one, or vice versa. The second one occurs when there is targeted recruitment into a terrorist group. This type of integration is to obtain tactical capability within a potentially short time frame. It should be noted that this form of integration does not involve mobilizing individuals with criminal backgrounds, but rather integrating a radicalized group of experienced criminals who are typically already active within the local community.²²

The hybrid type of nexus occurs when there is a shift in the core purpose of a group. A hybrid group will simultaneously pursue ideological and economic motivations by conducting terror attacks and engaging in profitable criminal enterprises. The group in question can be classified as both criminal and terrorist. This type of group is the has the greatest potential of being overlooked by both anti-crime and counter-terrorism agencies.²³

Transformation instead represents an evolutionary instance of the nexus. It occurs when a terrorist group evolves both organizationally and operationally into a criminal network or vice versa. The transformation is corroborated when the group's essential aims and motivations undergo a significant shift to the extent that its original *raison d'être* ceases to exist. In other words, a terrorist group becomes a criminal one, or vice versa.²⁴

There is another concept, which is not a manifestation of the nexus, but rather an expression that can be described as an extreme environment that serves as a fertile breeding ground for the nexus in its many forms: the "Black Hole Syndrome". This is generally associated with a geographically defined area characterized by a lack of governance and security, where territorial control is normally taken by the groups that dominate the illicit economy and the population. The "Black Hole" represents the most severe scenario for the nexus manifestation, where the convergence of crime and terror contributes to perpetuating the extremely insecure conditions of a region, as groups compete for control over economic and/or political power through the use of violence and a range of criminal activities.²⁵

Moreover, as mentioned in the previous section, one aspect closely intertwined with the crime and terror nexus theories is the concept of the terrorist activity cycle. This concept is crucial when examining terrorist activity in Latin America. Understanding the role of this cycle is essential for grasping the interplay between crime and terrorism. While terrorist attacks are often sensationalized by media outlets, leading to increased attention on terrorist organizations and triggering counter-terrorism measures, it is important to understand that terrorism extends beyond the attack itself. The attack represents only a small fraction of the comprehensive terrorist activity cycle. Each attack is preceded by a series of interconnected activities that form the foundation of any terrorist operation, including recruitment, radicalization, funding, training, logistics, and planning, to name a few essential steps. Indeed, the terrorist attack is not the final action; terrorists engage in other activities post-attack, such as evasion, escape, and exploitation of the attack through media dissemination.²⁶ On the whole, it is important to understand that terrorist attacks are a product of a lengthy chain of actions and meticulous planning. Throughout this process, the nexus between crime and terrorism can occur at various stages.²⁷



► Figure 1: The terrorist activity cycle

As mentioned in the definitions, for this report, we consider the word “terrorism” as well as the “terror act” as defined in the Security Council resolution 1566 (2004). This resolution also encompasses the acts of supporting, facilitating, participating, financing, planning, preparing, commissioning and providing safe havens; which are essentially the acts within the terrorist activity cycle. In a broad sense, it encompasses two main meanings: first, the terrorist attack *per se*; and second, the terrorist activity cycle.

Regarding the terrorist activity cycle, we adopt the following concept introduced by Lasmar²⁸ and Don *et al.*²⁹ and further developed by Azevedo.³⁰ The terrorist activity cycle encompasses a range of interconnected actions that precede and succeed the terrorist attack. These actions include, but are not limited to proselytism, radicalization, propaganda, recruitment, financing, training, logistics, resource management, surveillance, attack, evasion and media exploitation.

These interactions have been noted by the United Nations Security Council beginning in 2014 with resolution 2195 and most recently through resolution 2482 (2019) on the links between international terrorism and transnational organized crime. Through the adoption of resolution 2482, the Council expressed concern that terrorists can benefit

from organized crime as a source of financing or logistical support through the trafficking of arms, persons, drugs, artefacts, cultural property and other means. The resolution calls on States to consider establishing appropriate laws and mechanisms that allow for the broadest possible international cooperation. Further, in an earlier resolution, 1373 (2001), adopted under Chapter VII of the Charter, operative Paragraph 4 “Notes with concern the close connection between international terrorism and transnational organized crime, illicit drugs, money-laundering, illegal arms trafficking, and illegal movement of nuclear, chemical, biological and other potentially deadly materials, and in this regard emphasizes the need to enhance coordination of efforts on national, subregional, regional and international levels in order to strengthen a global response to this serious challenge and threat to international security.”

Although the UN has not listed all the groups exemplified in this report as terrorist entities, apart from ISIL and Al-Qaida, the tactics and strategies that they adopt undoubtedly have terrorist characteristics. Consequently, after analyzing several groups and organizations operating in the region, we have selected case studies involving terrorist groups and criminal organizations due to both their regional representation of the crime-terror nexus and their global significance and influence. Some of these groups have developed deep roots and have far-reaching networks across several countries. Furthermore, some of these groups operate or have operated all the steps of the terrorist activity cycle in Latin America.

These core concepts and definitions outlined in the previous paragraphs serve as valuable tools for contextualizing and identifying the range of interactions between crime and terror. These interactions will be illustrated by examining specific cases in Latin America, which will be discussed in a later section of this report.

Context of the Nexus in Latin America



2.1

A Brief History of the Nexus in Latin America

At the beginning of the 1990s, terrorist groups were influenced by the large narco-trafficking cartels that emerged in Latin America in the 1980s, and they quickly entered the business of drug trafficking because it offered them a source of funding. That is why the first documented cases of interaction between crime and terrorism surfaced in Colombia and Peru. The terrorist and guerrilla groups in these countries ushered in the era of using the proceeds of crime to finance terrorist activities.³¹ After all, insurgents with standing armies of thousands of soldiers needed money to buy weapons, supplies, food, and pay salaries; meanwhile, smaller terrorist groups needed funding to acquire counterfeit documents, move people across regions, pay smugglers, and buy firearms and bombs, among other expenses.³²

The 1990s saw an expansion in relations between drug cartels based in Colombia, Mexico and other parts of Latin America and insurgent/terrorist organizations on the continent. They developed a criminal partnership through activities such as drug trafficking, weapons trafficking, cigarette smuggling, money laundering, and more. Simultaneously, Islamist-inspired terrorist organizations were deepening their ties in the continent. The attacks on the Israeli embassy in the capital of Argentina, Buenos Aires, in 1992 followed by the Asociación Mutual Israelita Argentina (AMIA) terrorist attack in 1994, brought Lebanese Hezbollah to the centre of the debate, as Argentinian investigators identified that all the steps of the terrorist activity cycle leading to the AMIA attack were at least partly structured and conducted from the tri-border area (TBA) between Argentina, Brazil and Paraguay. Soon afterwards prominent figures from the then newly formed Al-Qaeda visited the area to recruit members from the local Muslim community and explore fundraising opportunities, starting with Osama Bin Laden in 1995, followed by Khalid Sheik Mohammed in 1995 and 1998, respectively. However, they were not alone; members of Al-Qaeda, Hamas, Hezbollah, Islamic Jihad and various other terrorist organizations have since been present in the TBA and the countries that share the TBA. Their activities have ranged from drug trafficking, arms trafficking, and smuggling of migrants, to money laundering and other illicit practices.³³ Lebanese

Hezbollah, in particular, has steadily increased its presence in the region. Additionally, Islamist extremists have been identified in Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Panama, Peru, Venezuela and in other nations, establishing connections with criminal organizations.

The 1990s also represented the growth of robust criminal organizations in both Brazil and Mexico. The Primeiro Comando da Capital (PCC), which was born inside Brazil's prison system in 1993, is now one of the largest criminal organizations in Latin America and has a presence on four other continents. Brazilian Comando Vermelho (CV) also grew much stronger during the 1990s. Led by the notorious 'Fernandinho Beira Mar', CV expanded its reach, especially in the latter part of the 1990s, at the height of its alliances with the Colombian FARC.³⁴ FARC and CV not only led a business of "arms for drugs exchange" but also learned tactics from one another. The same happened with the Brazilian PCC, which learned to use terrorist tactics (targeted assassinations, attacks against government facilities/employees and bombings against civilians, among others). Since 2000, PCC has conducted a myriad of terror-like attacks across Brazil.

Mexican cartels have also benefited from partnerships with terrorist organizations (FARC, Hezbollah, ISIL)³⁵ mimicking their public executions and money laundering operations, among other techniques and tactics. In Venezuela, the advancing Cartel of the Suns does not hide its enduring partnership with Colombian guerrillas such as FARC - and currently, its dissident groups - and other terrorist organizations like Hezbollah, - leveraging their regional reach and foreign logistic hubs for learning and mutual benefits. Conversely, these terrorist organizations take advantage of the Cartel of the Suns' power within Venezuela, where it also exerts influence over sectors of the government. In Ecuador, authorities have noted that organized criminal groups are increasingly using methods, equipment, and violent tactics commonly used by terrorist groups, increasing the risk of attacks on critical infrastructure, affecting and disrupting the economy and perpetuating the sense of fear and insecurity among the people. It was reported that in some parts of the country, organized criminal groups are also forcing business owners to pay a fee (a "vaccine") to be able to operate their businesses. It is evident that Latin America's regional dynamics and socio-political disparity have created a landscape conducive to the convergence of criminal and terrorist organizations or non-state armed groups designated as terrorist organizations.³⁶

2.2

Current Nexus Status Throughout Latin America

In a globalized world, it is evident that criminal and terrorist organizations operate with fewer limitations in both physical and cyber spaces. As a result, these organizations continue to expand across borders to enhance their efficiency and extend their reach. Particularly, some Islamist-inspired terror networks have expanded their influence in the Latin American continent by increasingly cooperating and interacting with local and regional criminal organizations. This collaboration contributes to the threat of global jihadism and the deterioration of law and order across the continent. Likewise, transnational criminal organizations originating in Latin America continue to derive benefits from their connections with terror groups, particularly within prison systems. These settings provide an opportunity for initial introductions and the formation of first alliances, facilitating intergroup learning. The prisons in Latin America have proved to be a conducive environment for the development of the crime-terror nexus, as will be shown later through examples.

The literature, government reports and intelligence findings provide evidence of criminal syndicates such as PCC, CV, Mexican cartels, and Colombian drug trafficking rings aligning themselves with terrorist organizations within the continent and globally. Somali Al Shabaab collaborates with migrant smugglers in South and North America, while Latin American criminal and terror-based organizations form partnerships with Al-Qaeda in Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and Islamic State West African Province (ISWAP) to traffic cocaine across the Atlantic Ocean and through the Sahel region towards Europe and the Middle East. Simultaneously, in the opposite direction, firearms come from North Africa through the Sahel and West Africa, into Latin America³⁷. Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) has developed strong recruiting capabilities, leveraging its cyber efficiency to extend its reach throughout Latin America. Al-Qaeda and ISIL have established robust procurement channels for obtaining counterfeit travel documents through the dark web, documents that are doctored by Latin American-based forgers. ISIL has been able to move funds from Latin America to Syria and Iraq using a sophisticated

hawala system (informal value transfer and remittance system based on the honour and performance of a large network of money brokers), similar to the one employed by Hezbollah to transfer profits to Lebanon derived from a myriad of criminal activities, including cocaine trafficking, weapons trafficking, and money laundering. Additionally, certain criminal groups like Brazilian CV have progressively assimilated insurgency and guerrilla tactics and strategies from the Colombian FARC, evident in their current actions in Rio de Janeiro and the Amazon jungle. The same tactics are also adopted by the Sinaloa Cartel and CJNG in Mexico. Similarly, PCC has learned from terrorists how to instill terror within the State to seek political advantages.

Cases Explained



The objective of this section is to illustrate the nexus in Latin America through a series of cases. These cases will be categorized into two groups: first, the terrorists (groups and/or individuals) that develop criminal expertise and/or ally with criminal organizations; and second, criminal organizations that use terrorist tactics. We have selected three primary manifestations of the nexus for the first group: drug trafficking and the nexus, money laundering and the nexus, and migrant smuggling and the nexus. For the second group, our focus will primarily be on the Brazilian transnational criminal organizations PCC, CV and the Mexican Sinaloa Cartel and CJNG.

These examples are not an exhaustive list of nexus cases in the region. However, they provide valuable insights into the phenomenon and highlight the interconnected and interdependent nature of criminal actions that facilitate its growth and prevalence.

3.1 Terrorist Organizations and the Nexus

3.1.1 Drug Trafficking and the Nexus

Financial and material resources are widely recognized as the lifeblood of terrorist organizations, as they provide the necessary infrastructure that allows them to carry out their operations. In the first case, we will focus on the funding of terrorism through drug trafficking. Funding is a key element of the terrorist activity cycle as it provides the financial means to support all the other phases. Notably, certain terrorist groups like Hezbollah and FARC³⁸ have transformed through their involvement in transnational drug trafficking. By expanding into global drug markets, these groups have restructured themselves to negotiate drug shipments abroad and establish a presence in other countries, particularly those used as transit points for transnational drug shipments.

In the following paragraphs, we will examine several specific cases in the continent showing how terror groups engage in transnational drug trafficking in Latin America. These cases shed light on how their networks have managed to diversify, conceal and advance their businesses within the region.

One such case involves the Omairi clan, which is linked to Hezbollah and is based in the TBA. The clan, led by Farouk Abdel Omairi and his two sons, Khaled Omairi and Ahmad Omairi, came under investigation during “Operation Camel” conducted by the Brazilian Federal Police in 2006. At that time, Farouk Omairi and Khaled Omairi were arrested, and Ahmad Omairi escaped. The charges brought against them included involvement in transnational drug trafficking. Following their trials, Farouk Omairi and Khaled Omairi were sentenced to prison terms of 11 years and eight months, while Ahmad Omairi received a sentence of nine years and seven months. Their businesses revolved around the procurement of cocaine from Bolivia and Peru, which was then exported by dozens of human drug couriers or ‘mules’ who travelled from São Paulo International Airport to European countries and the Middle East, particularly Jordan.³⁹ Considering that the Omairi clan owned a travel and exchange agency in the TBA, they could purchase tickets, produce travel documentation, rent hotel rooms, wire and receive money, and perform other necessary actions to support the individuals acting as ‘mules’ for their illicit operations abroad. During the investigation, law enforcement authorities discovered that their involvement extended beyond the transnational drug trafficking scheme to smuggling cocaine to the Middle East and Europe. Investigations found that the clan was deeply engaged in document forgery, money laundering and other criminal activities. The Omairi family was involved in many different businesses in Brazil, specifically in Foz do Iguaçu and Curitiba, as well as in Paraguay’s Ciudad del Este. Over the past three decades, their ‘legal’ businesses have encompassed sectors such as textiles, electronics shops and travel/exchange agencies. By the turn of the 21st century, Farouk Omairi emerged as a key intermediary between Hezbollah and the drug traffickers operating in the region. In 2006, Farouk Omairi was designated by the U.S. Department of the Treasury Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) as being part of a Hezbollah fundraising network in the TBA.⁴⁰

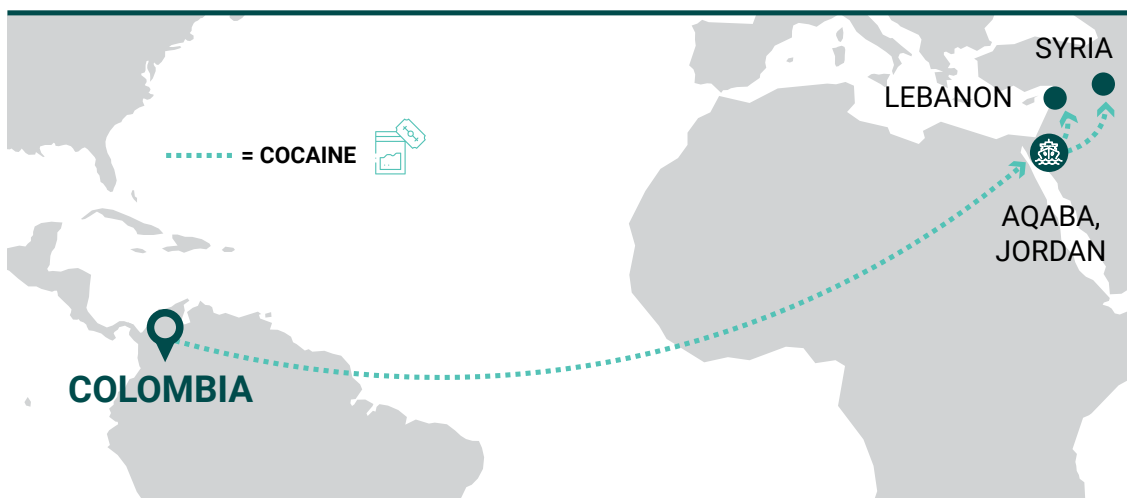
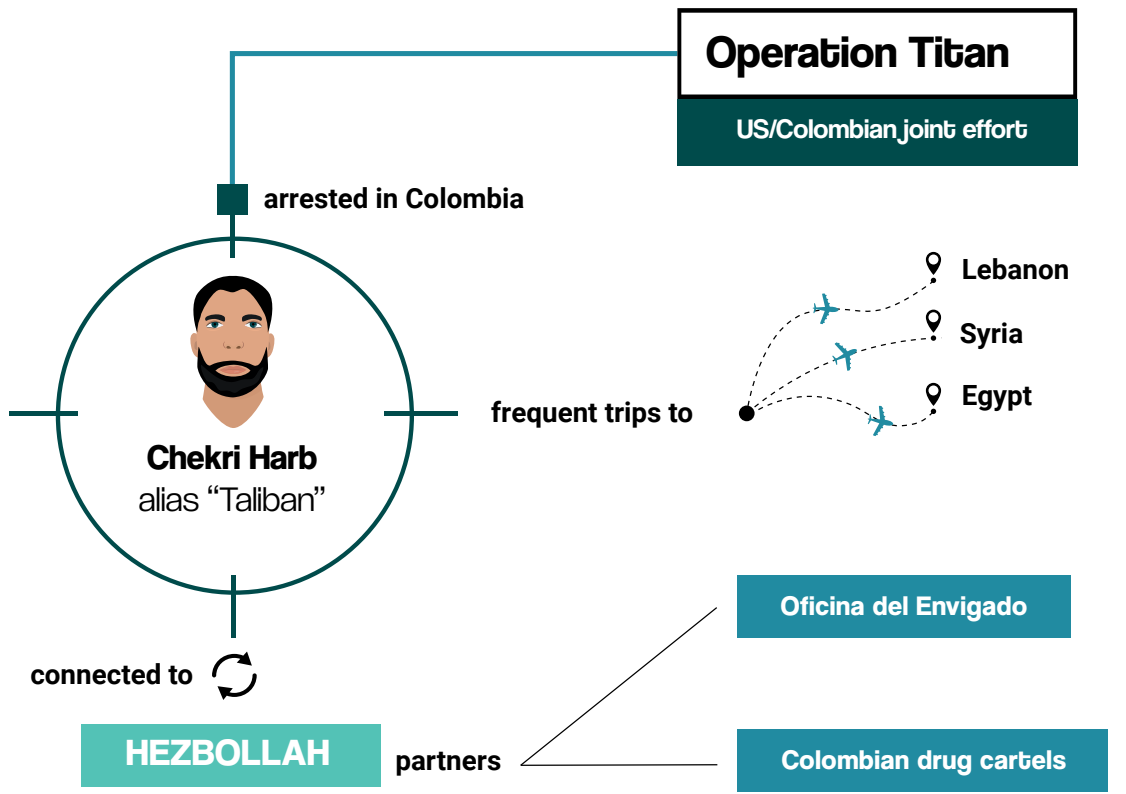
Omairi’s history as Hezbollah’s key figure within the TBA began nearly 20 years before 2006, when he, as a Hezbollah member, established his first professional contacts in the South Cone of the continent. According to the prosecutors of the AMIA⁴¹ case, Farouk Omairi took part in the logistics of the AMIA bombing in Argentina in 1994. He acted under Hezbollah’s orders with his counterpart in Buenos Aires, Mohsen Rabbani, who acted on behalf of Iran.⁴² Omairi was in close contact with Rabbani from the late 1980s and used to travel frequently to Buenos Aires to meet him at the Iranian embassy.⁴³ Rabbani⁴⁴ was involved in the AMIA bombing plot, and Argentine prosecutors accused him of participating in the terrorist attack.⁴⁵ In June 2023, an Argentine Federal Judge

granted a prosecutor's request and issued an international arrest warrant (which became an International Criminal Police Organization INTERPOL Red Notice) against Farouk Omaili and three other Lebanese nationals (Abdallah Salman, aka Jose El Reda, Ali Hussein Abdallah and Hussein Mounir Mouzannar) linked to Hezbollah over their suspected involvement in the 1994 AMIA terrorist attack. Additionally, on the following day, the four suspects were added to Argentina's Public Registry of Persons and Entities Tied to Terrorism Acts or its Financing (REPET).

In late 2008, a Lebanese man named Chekri Harb, *alias* 'Taliban,' was arrested in Colombia after a long investigation named "Operation Titan," conducted by a combined team of U.S.A. and Colombian law enforcement agents and prosecutors.⁴⁶ Hezbollah's connections with Colombian drug cartels surfaced when Colombian wiretaps - intended to monitor the drug cartel known as Oficina del Envigado - revealed Hezbollah as its partner in crime. This investigation uncovered a large cocaine smuggling enterprise and a sophisticated money-laundering scheme that spanned the Americas, Africa and the Middle East involving hundreds of operatives and a dozen front companies.⁴⁷

During the investigation, law enforcement agents arrested more than 130 people, seized US\$ 23 million,⁴⁸ deployed 370 wiretaps and listened to 700,000 conversations.⁴⁹ As the investigators connected the dots, they learned the details of Chekri Harb's cocaine trafficking routes. One of the most important routes involved smuggling cocaine to the Jordanian port of Aqaba (usually through Africa) and then transporting it overland to Syria or Lebanon.⁵⁰ The Lebanese kingpin's criminal organization was capable of shipping large quantities of cocaine to Lebanon and distributing it quickly. It was later discovered that Harb had strong connections with Hezbollah, which allowed him to operate freely within Lebanon. According to the investigators, Harb had made many trips to Egypt, Lebanon and Syria and he maintained constant telephone communication with Hezbollah's leaders.⁵¹ According to police and prosecutors, Hezbollah charged Harb a 12 per cent tax from his drug income for permission to operate in Lebanon.⁵² Evidence collected during the operation indicated a link between the drug profits and the financing of Hezbollah which serves as a clear example of the crime-terror nexus.

Another case of the crime-terror nexus in cocaine trafficking emerged initially on the Colombian-Venezuelan border and involved at least three distinct organizations: the Cartel of the Suns, FARC and Hezbollah. Hezbollah's crime and terror network in Venezuela was uncovered in 2011 after a two-year investigation. This investigation exposed an intricate and multi-million dollar drug trafficking and money-laundering scheme operated



Operation Titan in numbers

130
PEOPLE
ARRESTED

\$23
MILLION
SEIZED

370
WIRETAPS

700,000
CONVERSATIONS
LISTENED TO

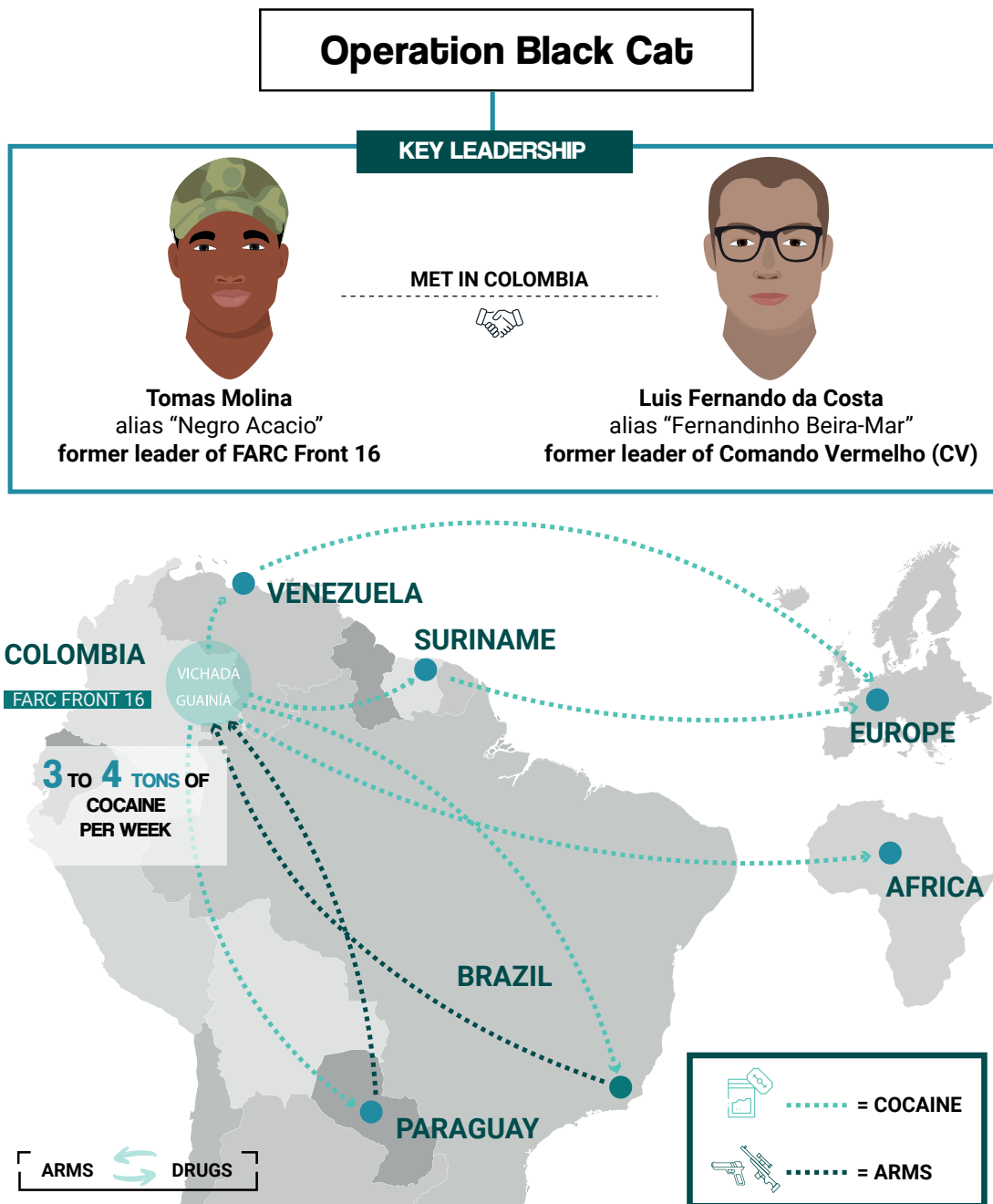
► Figure 2: Operation Titan

by Hezbollah in Colombia and Venezuela with the participation of FARC and the Cartel of the Suns. At the helm of this criminal enterprise was Ayman Joumaa, a Lebanese-Colombian drug kingpin who worked in tandem with a prominent Shia businessman in Venezuela and a Hezbollah-linked drug trafficker named Ali Mohamad Saleh.⁵³ For several years, the Saleh clan controlled the illegal market of drugs, weapons, money laundering and smuggling in Maicao, Colombia. Following the indictment that resulted from this investigation, Ali Mohamad Saleh fled Colombia to Venezuela and sought refuge under the protection of the Cartel of the Suns.⁵⁴

Ghazi Nassereddine⁵⁵ is another important figure in these triangled drug trafficking operations. He is a Hezbollah facilitator⁵⁶ who holds Lebanese and Venezuelan citizenship. The Nassereddine family gained political influence when Hugo Chávez became president. Ghazi Nassereddine was appointed by Hugo Chávez as the Venezuela's ambassador to Damascus, Syria in 2008. While in Damascus, Nassereddine maintained frequent contact with high-ranking Hezbollah operatives. Hezbollah, aiming to expand its funding and logistics operations in Venezuela, relied on Nassereddine's connections. As a result, he arranged a meeting between Tareck El Aissami,⁵⁷ who was serving as Venezuela's Interior Minister at that time, and Hezbollah's leadership in Lebanon. This meeting led to the arrangement of a 'cocaine for weapons' deal between FARC and Hezbollah. Subsequently, from 2014 onwards, irregular flights between Lebanon and Caracas were reported and large quantities of weapons - ranging from assault rifles to man-portable air-defense systems (MANPADS)⁵⁸ - were transported to Caracas. Once the weapons arrived at the airport, they were transferred to a military base in Guárico, Venezuela, before being transported to FARC in Colombia. They were transported either by air, using illegal airstrips to land in Colombia, or by land through the porous Venezuelan-Colombian border. These weapons were part of the payment for the cocaine supplied by FARC through the Cartel of the Suns.

Nassereddine, who is no longer serving as the Venezuelan ambassador to Syria, and Tareck El Aissami, who has held various government positions in Venezuela, have been acting as facilitators for Hezbollah and are suspected of involvement in the group's criminal funding activities in Venezuela. However, it is important to note that they are not part of Hezbollah's hierarchical chain of command.⁵⁹

In early 2001, an operation led by the Colombian military known as "Black Cat" disrupted one of the FARC's largest cocaine trade businesses in the eastern part of the country. This operation targeted FARC's Front 16, which dominated the border region between



Operation Black Cat in numbers

 **20**-DAY OPERATION

55 COCAINE LABORATORIES DESTROYED 

 **16** FARC CAMPS DESTROYED

 **18** TONS OF COCAINE SEIZED

29 KEY INDIVIDUALS ARRESTED 
7 BRAZILIANS
22 COLOMBIANS

► Figure 3: Operation Black Cat

the states of Guainía and Vichada. At that time, the area was considered the central hub for FARC's financial and logistical operations, primarily derived from the profits of cocaine trafficking. The cocaine trade in this area accounted for a considerable amount of FARC's annual income. Additionally, this area was part of the "Orinoco Axis", which was the main weapons smuggling route for the FARC.

The military forces conducted operations for 20 consecutive days, during which they destroyed 55 cocaine processing laboratories and 16 FARC camps. They also seized over 18 tons of cocaine and arrested numerous FARC fighters and drug dealers, including 29 key individuals comprising seven Brazilians and 22 Colombians. The government forces gathered substantial evidence that unequivocally confirmed FARC's deep involvement in the drug trade. However, the leader of Front 16, Tomas Molina, also known as 'Negro Acacio,' managed to escape from the area moments before the Army arrived. Despite this, the Colombian forces were successful in capturing their second most important target: the Brazilian national Luis Fernando da Costa, also known as 'Fernandinho Beira-Mar.' The interrogation following his capture provided investigators with crucial information regarding the partnership between one of the most powerful Brazilian drug dealers and FARC's most prominent commander.

By the time Beira Mar was arrested in Colombia in 2001, he was one of the most wanted individuals in Brazil as the leader of CV. He had escaped from jail in the State of Minas Gerais in 1997 and soon afterwards was introduced to 'Negro Acácio.' Beira Mar began dealing with the FARC in the mid-1990s but worked through middlemen based in Colombia. After he escaped from jail in 1997, he cut out the middlemen to establish direct contact with the FARC and moved with his family to Bogotá. By late 1999, however, he realized that INTERPOL had detected his location in Bogotá, so he relocated to the FARC-controlled jungle area of Guaviare to run his business directly from the jungle.

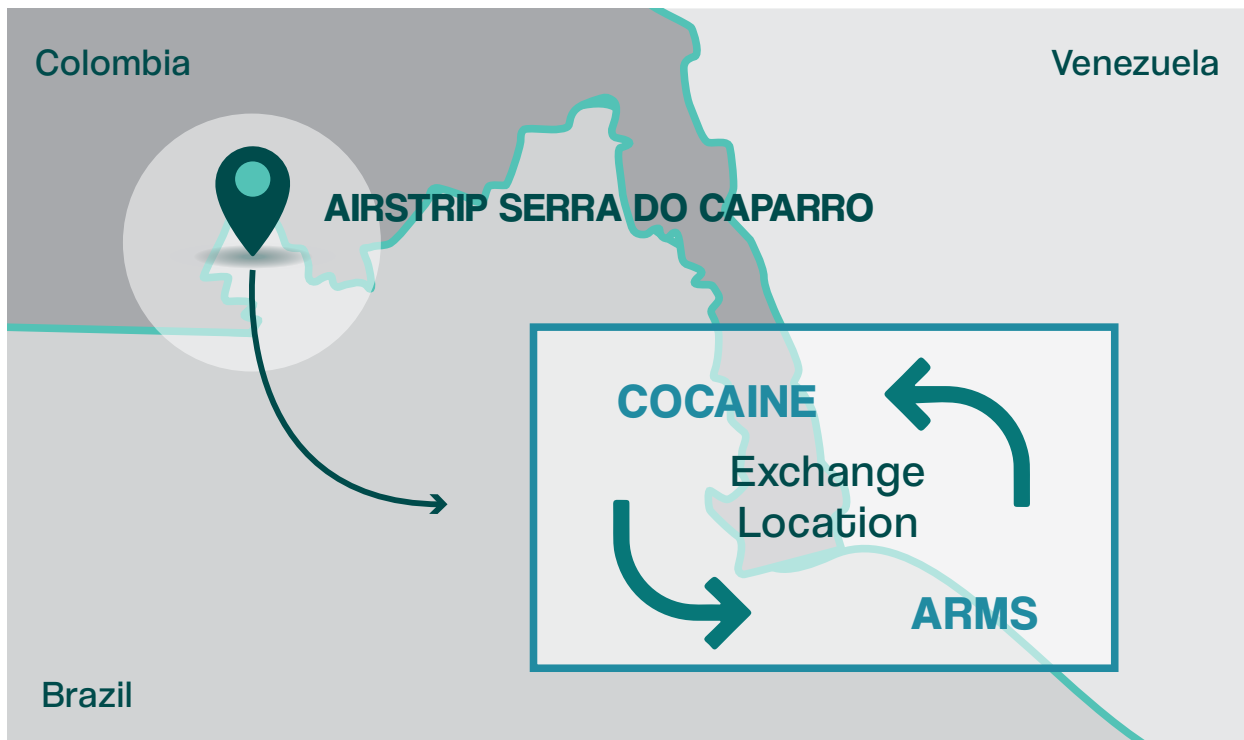
The FARC was interested in Beira Mar due to his successful arms smuggling operations that fueled his drug trafficking organization in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. Not long after they met, Beira Mar began sending thousands of pistols, explosives and automatic rifles to the FARC through his connections in Front 16. He then used illegal airstrips in northern Brazil and Colombia to deliver arms and import cocaine. Beira Mar was able to establish a powerful business where he was delivering cocaine not only to Brazilian drug traffickers but also to Paraguay, Venezuela and Suriname, before further exporting to five continents, particularly Europe (The Netherlands and Spain) and Africa (mostly

Ghana). At that time, approximately half of the cocaine produced in the Departments of Vichada, Guainía and Guaviare was traded for weapons brought by Beira Mar, an amount almost equivalent to three to four tons of drugs per week. The partnership between FARC fighters, Beira Mar and CV continues to this day.⁶⁰

Finally, there is a growing nexus between Latin American cocaine traffickers and terrorist organizations in Africa, including Boko Haram, AQIM and ISWAP, among others. This connection has puzzled law enforcement agencies across continents. Although reports of their activities and modus operandi exist, there is insufficient information about the routes, strategies and actors on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean due to coordination and cooperation challenges between Latin American and African authorities.⁶¹



► Figure 4: Operation "Black Cat" deployment area



► Figure 5: Drugs for arms exchange in the TBA

UNICRI has been actively providing capacity-building assistance to practitioners and policy-makers (law enforcement, prosecutors, judicial system, civil society, politicians) to strengthen their capacities to understand, identify and address this growing threat of terrorism and organized crime in Africa and its connection to other regions globally, particularly South America. Substantial work has been conducted in North Africa, the wider Sahel and West Africa (Algeria, Benin, Chad, Libya, Mali, Mauritania, Niger and Togo) in cooperation with other UN agencies.

Statistics on drug seizures collected by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) suggest that North and West Africa have consolidated their strategic position as transit zones for cocaine destined for Europe, with numbers on a steady increase since 2019. The strategic geographical location of both North and West Africa makes the continent a convenient stopover point for cocaine *en route* to Europe, especially for cargo ships departing from Brazil and other South American countries.⁶² The routes to Europe via Africa have become more popular due to the regular seizures of cocaine shipped directly from South America to Europe. Therefore, rerouting shipments through African countries makes it more difficult for law enforcement agencies to detect and track both the cargo and actors. Besides, with the participation of terrorist facilitators in the business, the whole criminal enterprise becomes even more elusive and poses a significant challenge for counter-crime agencies.

3.1.2 Money Laundering and the Nexus

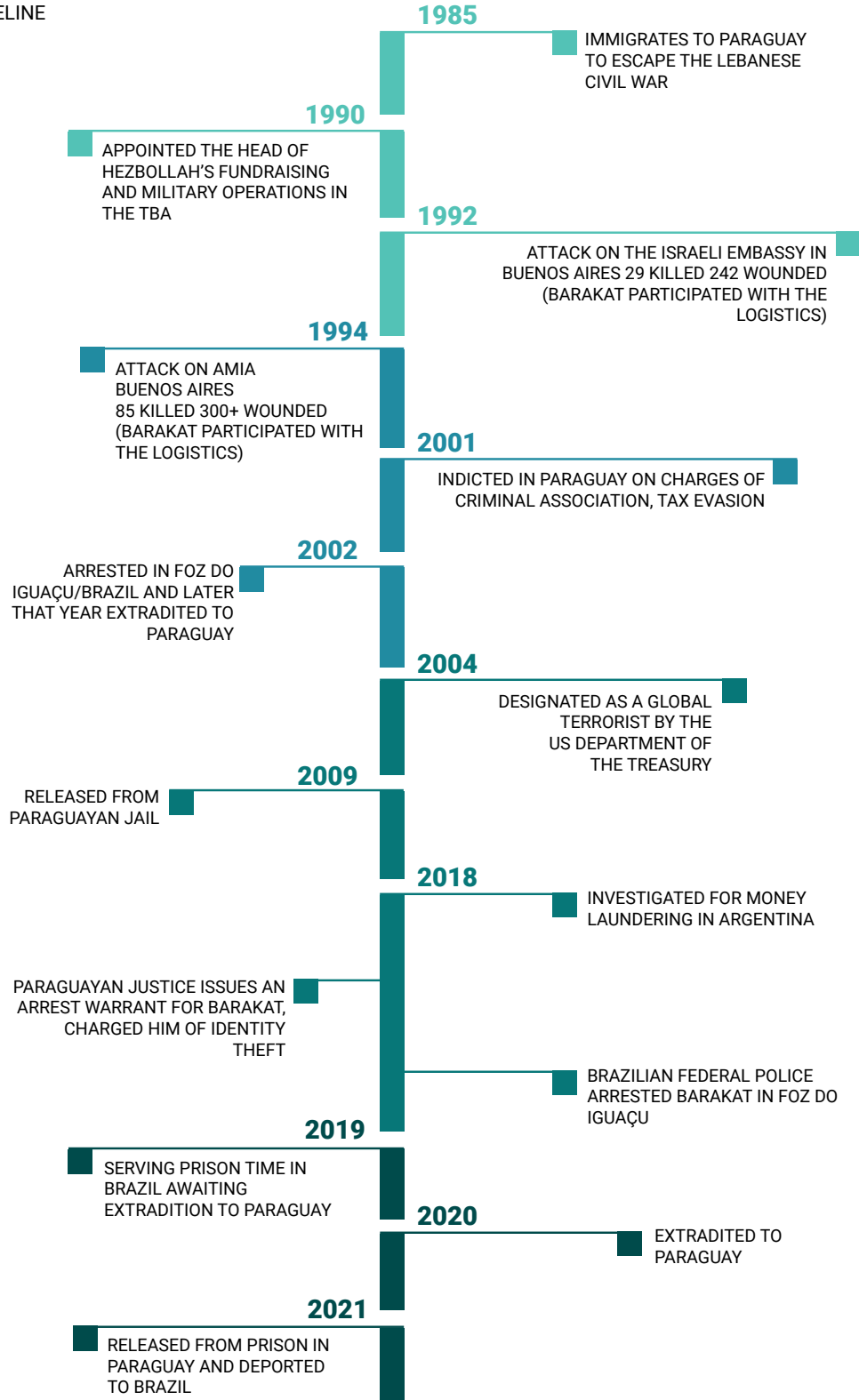
Assad Ahmad Barakat, the leading figure behind the Barakat clan, is allegedly the most well-known Hezbollah member in the TBA, according to the US Department of the Treasury, which sanctioned and designated him in 2004 as a key Hezbollah financier in the area, together with his brothers Hatem Barakat and Hamze Barakat.⁶³ He was the group's head of military operations and fundraising in the TBA in the 1990s. He allegedly continues to operate a financial network for Hezbollah in the region and has owned several businesses that conduct money laundering operations to generate funds for the group. The US Department of the Treasury claims that he has been involved in a wide range of criminal activities in support of the organization. Barakat was arrested in Brazil in 2002 and 2018 for crimes committed in Paraguay, where he was prosecuted and convicted for tax evasion in 2002 and identity theft in 2018, when Paraguayan authorities discovered that he had used fake documentation to obtain citizenship and a passport in Paraguay.⁶⁴ He served prison sentences in both Brazil and Paraguay. The clan is currently being prosecuted in a pending case in Paraguay for fraud and forgery.

By the time he was arrested in Brazil in late 2018, an Argentine court was already investigating the Barakat clan for money laundering involving a casino in Puerto Iguazu located in the province of Misiones, Argentina, within the TBA. The Argentine Federal Court in Eldorado municipality⁶⁵ continues to investigate the Barakat clan and 16 other Lebanese businessmen who live in Ciudad del Este, Paraguay and Foz do Iguaçu, Brazil, of whom 11 live in Brazil and five in Paraguay. In mid-2019 the judge overseeing the case ordered the freezing of assets belonging to 14 of them, as there was sufficient evidence to suggest that the clan was transferring money laundered through the casino from the TBA to Hezbollah's accounts in Lebanon. Additionally, the judge ordered the inclusion of 14 of Barakat's closest clan members⁶⁶ in Argentina's terror watch list, known as the *Public Registry of Persons and Entities Tied to Terrorism Acts or its Financing*.⁶⁷

Information obtained from the lawsuit filed at the court in Eldorado, Argentina, demonstrates that the 14 Barakat clan members under investigation have entered Argentina multiple times from Brazil. The investigation revealed that they injected about of \$ 21.8 million into the casino in Iguazu between 2010 and 2018. Furthermore, according to court files, they subsequently retrieved over \$ 20.3 million between 2012 and 2018. Investigators established that a portion of this money was invested in front companies in Brazil (Rio Paraná Incorporadora LTDA) and Chile (Saleh Trading Limited and Importadora y Exportadora Barakat Limitada). Moreover, between January 2017 and

Assad Ahmad Barakat

TIMELINE

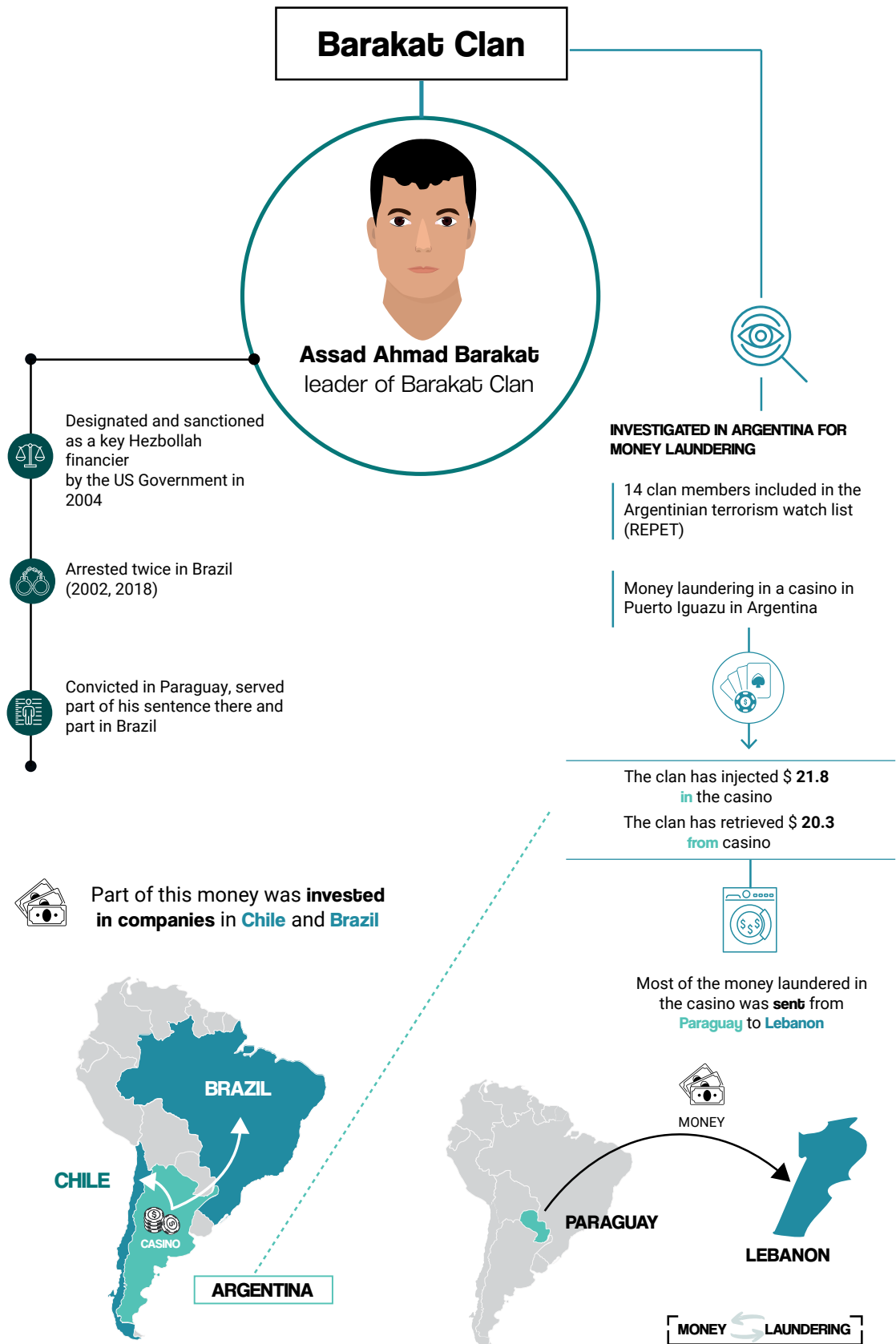


► Figure 6: Timeline of Assad Ahmad Barakat

August 2018, the investigation found that most of the money laundered in the casino was sent from Paraguay to Lebanon (specifically to Hezbollah-held territory in Lebanon) to finance terrorism, according to the Eldorado Argentine Court.

The assets freeze was the culmination of a lengthy investigation. Argentine investigators targeted a scheme that took advantage of two situations: firstly, a cash-intensive business (the casino in Puerto Iguazu, Argentina); and secondly, lax controls at a border post with high trafficking incidents between the three countries, particularly the land border between Argentina and Brazil. Members of the Barakat clan exploited these circumstances. Moreover, as the investigation has proved, they crossed the borders numerous times, transporting large quantities of cash, to launder it in the casino, located about 100 metres from the Argentine Customs office. Personnel employed by the Barakat clan would then convert the cash into chips and back to cash, occasionally adding gambling wins in the process.⁶⁸ These 14 members took turns making these cross-border trips to the casino, using forged identification documents in an attempt to conceal their identities and camouflage their frequent trips. The investigation found that they utilized 296 different identification documents for crossing the border between Argentina and Brazil.

Argentine migration authorities revealed that Hassan Ali Barakat, a first cousin of Assad Barakat, crossed the border from Brazil to Argentina 1,547 times between 1997 and 2018. Specifically, he made 620 crossings between January 2015 and October 2017, averaging three entries per day on the days he visited the country. According to information provided by Argentine, Brazilian and Paraguayan migration services to the Argentine Federal Court, he used 23 different fake identification documents to cross the border. His brother, Hussein Ali Barakat, crossed the border 257 times during the same period, often accompanied by Hassan. Both brothers brought significant sums of money into the casino, although the Argentine Financial Intelligence Unit (FIU) authority found no business interests associated with them in Argentina. Also, according to court documents, Mousa Hatem Barakat crossed the same border 1,390 times, often accompanied by another clan member, driving the same car and during the same period of the day, heading towards the casino (typically after midnight). Ahmad Ali Barakat exhibited similar behaviour with 417 registered border crossings from Brazil to Argentina, also in the company of other clan members in the same car and at the same time. The investigation discovered that 99 per cent of these border crossings occurred at the Presidente Tancredo Neves International Bridge - after midnight - using cars registered



► Figure 7: Barakat Clan Money Laundering Operations

in either Paraguay or Brazil. Once at the casino, they would bring in an average of \$ 15,000 to \$ 20,000 per trip. All 14 clan members used the cash brought to the casino in Argentina for money laundering purposes. During the investigation, personnel employed by the Barakat clan were identified by Argentine police and customs officials who noticed their comfort in the routine of crossing borders and their lack of unease while travelling back and forth to the casino. Additionally, in their multiple border crossings, Barakat clan members never declared to customs that they were carrying \$ 10,000 or more, as required by both Argentine and Brazilian laws. It is suspected that they crossed the border hundreds of times, often in pairs or groups, possibly carrying amounts below the threshold of \$ 10,000 to avoid complications with customs officials.⁶⁹

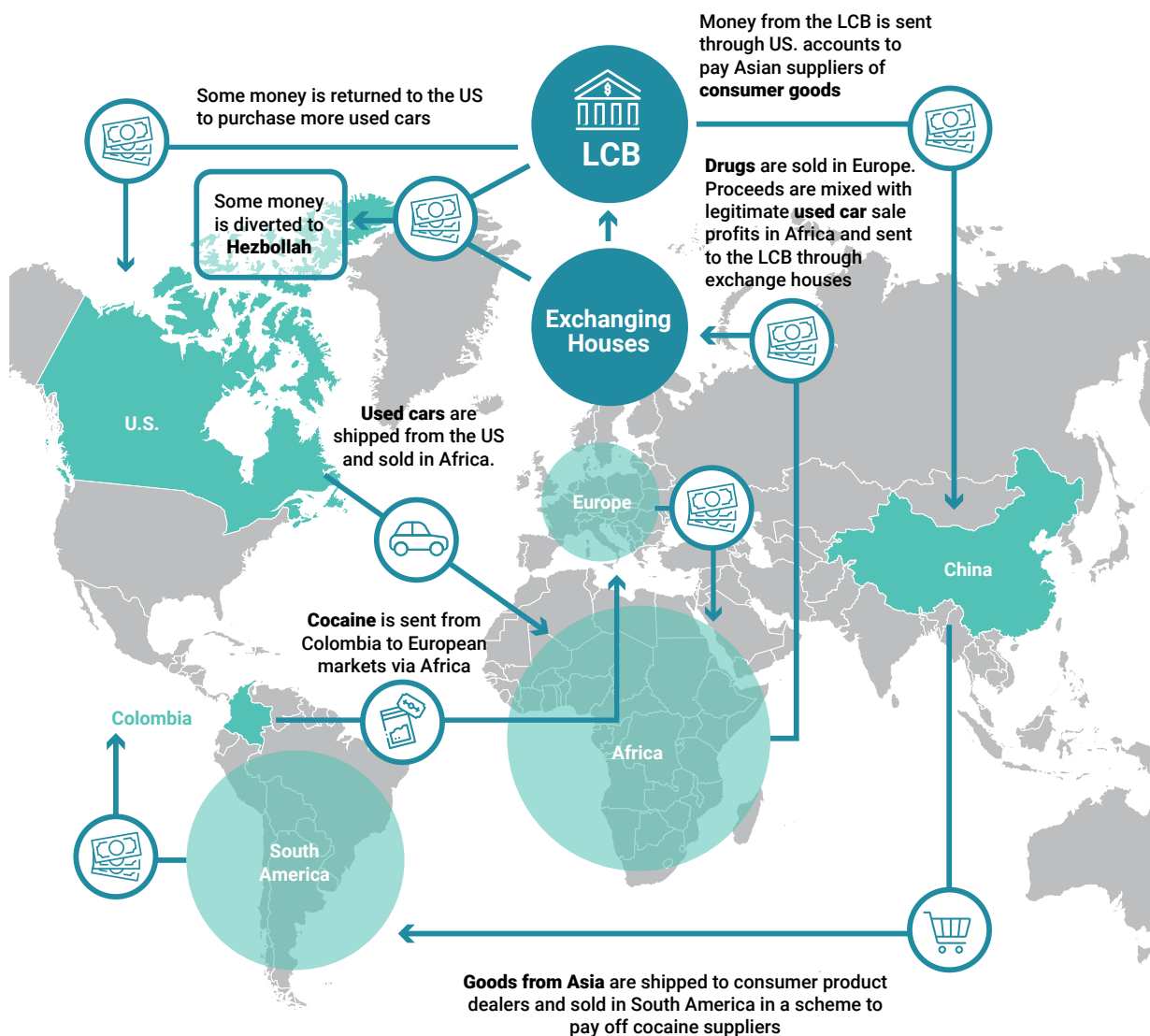
Ultimately, in the abovementioned case, Ali Hassan Barakat and Ahmad Ali Barakat have been identified as key pillars within Hezbollah's funding structure in the TBA, as they are responsible for transferring cash to the group's leadership in Lebanon, under the umbrella of the "Clan Barakat" led by its senior member Ahmad Assad Barakat.

Another case involves the Lebanese-Colombian citizen Ayman Joumaa and the Lebanese Canadian Bank (LCB). Following a Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) investigation in 2011, a US court (Federal Grand Jury in Alexandria, Virginia) indicted a Lebanese-Colombian national named Ayman Joumaa for providing support for transnational drug trafficking and money laundering operations. Meanwhile, the US Department of the Treasury's OFAC labelled Ayman Joumaa as a Specially Designated Narcotics Trafficker, along with his associates and a few companies related to the criminal enterprise.⁷⁰ Additionally, the US Treasury froze his assets while highlighting his ties to Hezbollah.⁷¹ According to the DEA, Joumaa's criminal activities involved coordinating the transportation and distribution of multi-ton shipments of cocaine, mostly from South America to the USA, Africa and Europe.⁷² Simultaneously, he ran a complex money laundering scheme by moving hundreds of millions of US dollars of illicit proceeds operated by him and his partners in crime through many Hezbollah networks across the globe.⁷³ He worked with front companies in Latin America, West Africa and Lebanon, laundering money for Colombian and Mexican cartels (Los Zetas). He charged fees that ranged from eight to 14 per cent to launder the proceeds all over the globe, ensuring they could not be traced back to Colombia or Mexico.⁷⁴

Money Laundering at Lebanese Canadian Bank

The chart below shows the intricate money-laundering system the LCB used to divert money to the Shiite militant group Hezbollah, according to United States officials.

According to American officials, the **LCB was the hub of an international drug money laundering operation with ties to Hezbollah**. Used cars and other consumer goods sales revenues had been used to mask the proceeds of illegal drug trade.

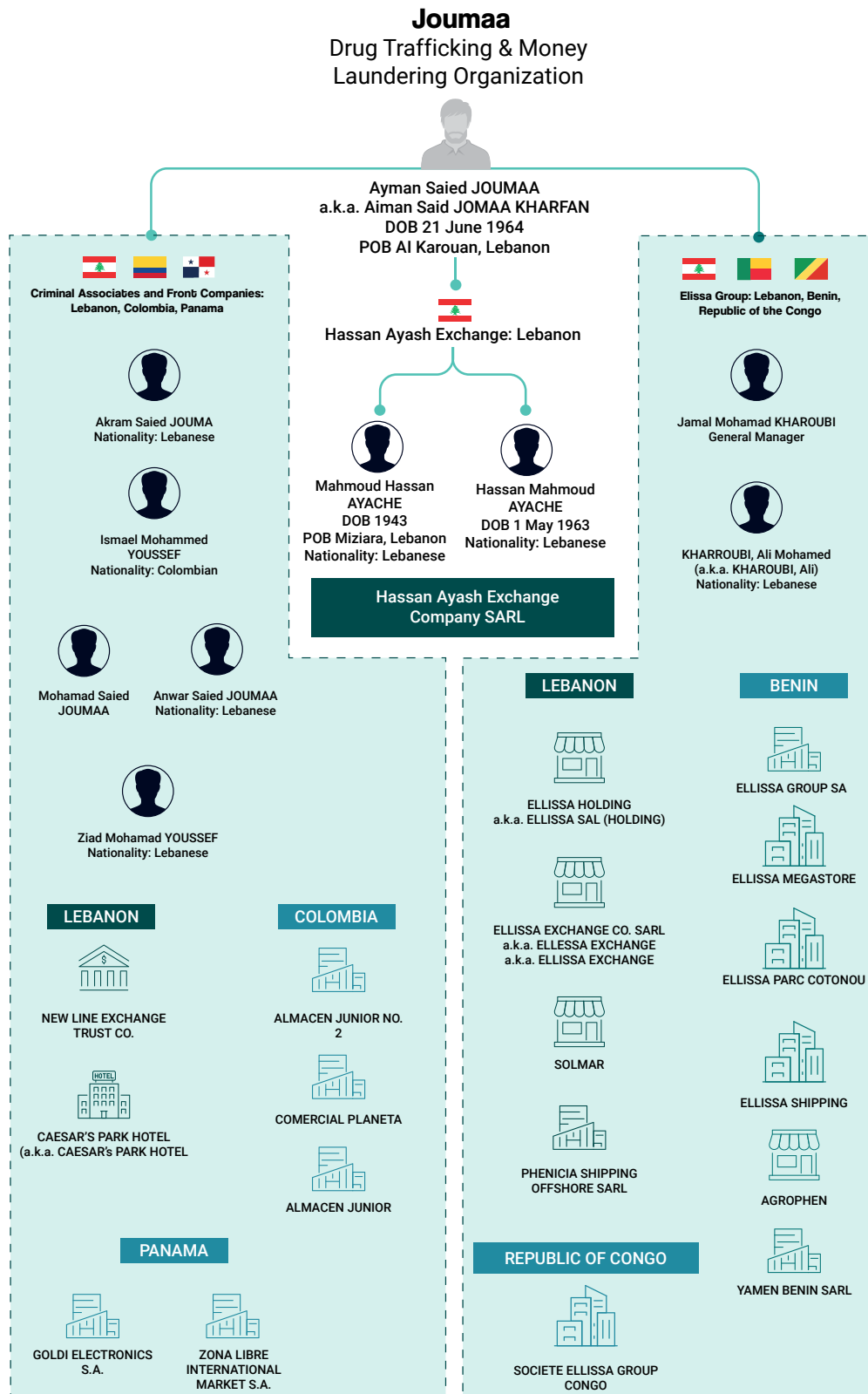


► Figure 9: Money laundering scheme involving the Lebanese Canadian Bank.
Source: The New York Times

The money laundering scheme uncovered by this investigation benefited from the US financial system and the 'used car' market, along with banks and companies located in West Africa and the Middle East. As part of the criminal enterprise, funds were transferred from Lebanon to the USA to purchase used cars, which were then shipped to West Africa and sold for cash. The cash revenue from these car sales and the proceeds from cocaine trafficking were then transferred to Lebanon. The cash was often moved through bulk cash smuggling. Hezbollah members and facilitators were involved in several steps of this scheme. A considerable portion of the cash income from the car sales was transported to Lebanon by Hezbollah's money couriers, cash smugglers, hawaladars and similar individuals. Cash carried from West Africa was usually received at the Beirut Airport, where Hezbollah security apparatus ensured its safe passage to the final destination. In addition, Hezbollah facilitators were also involved in the purchase of used cars in the USA.⁷⁵

The investigation revealed that some Lebanese financial institutions and exchange houses were key in this money laundering operation. Following these findings, the US Treasury designated Ayman Joumaa and both Hassan Hayash and the Elissa exchange companies (two Lebanese exchange houses) for their role in laundering Joumaa's drug proceeds. Additionally, other companies within the Elissa group, which were involved in the used car trade based in Benin, Africa, were also designated (at the time of the designation, approximately 350 vehicles consigned to Elissa were identified). The list of designations continued to expand, encompassing more companies and individuals linked to Joumaa and his illegal enterprise.

This was subsequently followed by the designation of the Lebanese Canadian Bank (LCB) due to its routine use not only by drug traffickers and money launderers operating in Latin America, Europe, Africa and the Middle East but also by Hezbollah's facilitators. During the investigation, transfers totalling \$ 329 million between 2007 and 2011 were uncovered, originating from Lebanon and West Africa and destined for the USA to purchase used cars for shipment to Africa. Most of these funds were wired through accounts held in Lebanon at the LCB, with the remaining amount originating from other banks in Lebanon and West Africa. Notably, nearly two-thirds of the aforementioned amount was transferred from Hassan Hayash Exchange and Elissa currency exchange accounts at the LCB. The investigation also found close ties between Hassan Hayash and Elissa Exchange, and Hezbollah in Lebanon.⁷⁶



► Figure 8: Joumaa's Drug Trafficking and Money Laundering Structure.
Source: US Department of the Treasury

3.1.3 Migrant Smuggling and the Nexus

The nexus between terrorism and migrant smuggling is not new. There are reports and articles on terrorist groups like ISIL and Al-Qaeda using migrant smuggling networks to move their fighters,⁷⁷ facilitators and families across the globe, occasionally disguising them as economic migrants, tourists or regular travellers, providing them with forged passports and visas whenever needed and arranging all cross-border travel requirements with criminals who specialize in smuggling people. Some migrant smuggling networks follow traditional smuggling routes either by land, sea, air or a combination of some or all three. In each continent, the already well-established routes serve as standards from where the smugglers adapt to new ones and incorporate new actors as well. Migrant smugglers can adapt to the dynamics and particularities of any continent and region.

The particularity of Latin American routes is that the migrants are generally headed to North America, with Canada or the USA as their final destination. There are two flows of migrants to Canada and the USA, one that originates within Latin America, and another that comes from other continents. Most of the migrants that come from other continents do not go directly to Canada or the USA, but instead, find the most convenient landing place in Latin America from where they start their journey up north, taking advantage of the existing migrant routes and smuggling businesses to facilitate and conceal their cross-continental journeys.

The majority of migrants arriving in Latin America come from Africa, the Middle East and Asia. But even before they land on the continent, they would have already been assisted by migrant smugglers whose networks span several regions across the globe. The leadership of the migrant smuggling network is usually based in Latin America, where the criminal strategy is planned, but they have tentacles to execute all the steps of the migration plan in different countries. Still in their countries of departure, one of the first steps the migrants take, after paying a portion of the smuggling fee to the criminals, is to obtain their forged travel documents (fake passports, visas and/or a Seaman Service Book). Hence, the criminal network sends them the documents via regular mail so they can board the flights to Latin America. The quality of the forged documents is usually very high, as illegal migrants are often able to pass through passport control systems undetected. Once the migrants arrive on the continent, they are met by the smugglers and taken to safe houses controlled by the criminals. At this point, the smugglers usually collect the migrants' fake passports/visas for reuse by future clients overseas.

Thus, the migrants are either provided with fake identity documents, or they travel onwards undocumented, going overland since they would need identification documents to board an aircraft. Nearly all communications within the criminal organization and with the service providers they hire are done through messaging apps such as WhatsApp, Telegram, and imo, among others). The migrants receive a vague briefing about their long and excruciating overland itinerary to the north, usually passing through Brazil, Peru, Ecuador, Colombia, Panama, Costa Rica, Nicaragua, Honduras, Guatemala, Mexico and the USA. During the journey, there are two specific places that the migrants consider to be the most difficult and dangerous: the first is the Darién Gap between Colombia and Panama, where the jungle is dense and the hike through this treacherous area takes between five to 10 days. They face dangers from the wild environment, as well as drug dealers and criminal organizations that constantly harass them. Some migrants lose their lives while crossing the Darién Gap. The second most dangerous place is in Mexico, near the border with the USA, where kidnappings for ransom are common as Mexican cartels view the thousands of migrants who arrive weekly as a lucrative source of income. Finally, most of the migrants who manage to reach the US/Mexico border are arrested for crimes related to illegal migration.

An investigation conducted by the Brazilian Federal Police in collaboration with the US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), revealed the increasing popularity of this route over the years. In 2016, after being tipped off by an informer, Brazilian Federal Police seized a package intended to be sent from a DHL office in São Paulo to Johannesburg, South Africa, containing five sheets of passport pages with fake Brazilian visas under the name of two Kenyans, two Somalis and one Eritrean national. The visas were supposedly granted and stamped by the Brazilian consulates in Ethiopia, Mozambique, Saudi Arabia, South Africa and Zimbabwe. The ensuing investigation found that the main smugglers were based in Brazil but were connected to a smuggling network operating in Africa. The smugglers' *modus operandi* involved handing these passports with fake visas to the migrants either in Kenya or Ethiopia and assisting them to board flights from Addis Ababa to São Paulo. This is currently the busiest commercial air route linking Brazil to Africa, with daily flights from São Paulo to Addis Ababa.

Following the seizure and subsequent investigation mentioned above, the police identified Abdifatah Hussein Ahmed, a Somali and South African citizen residing in Brazil, who had attempted to send passports with fake visas to South Africa. As the investigation progressed, the police discovered two additional partners in crime: Abdessalem Martani,

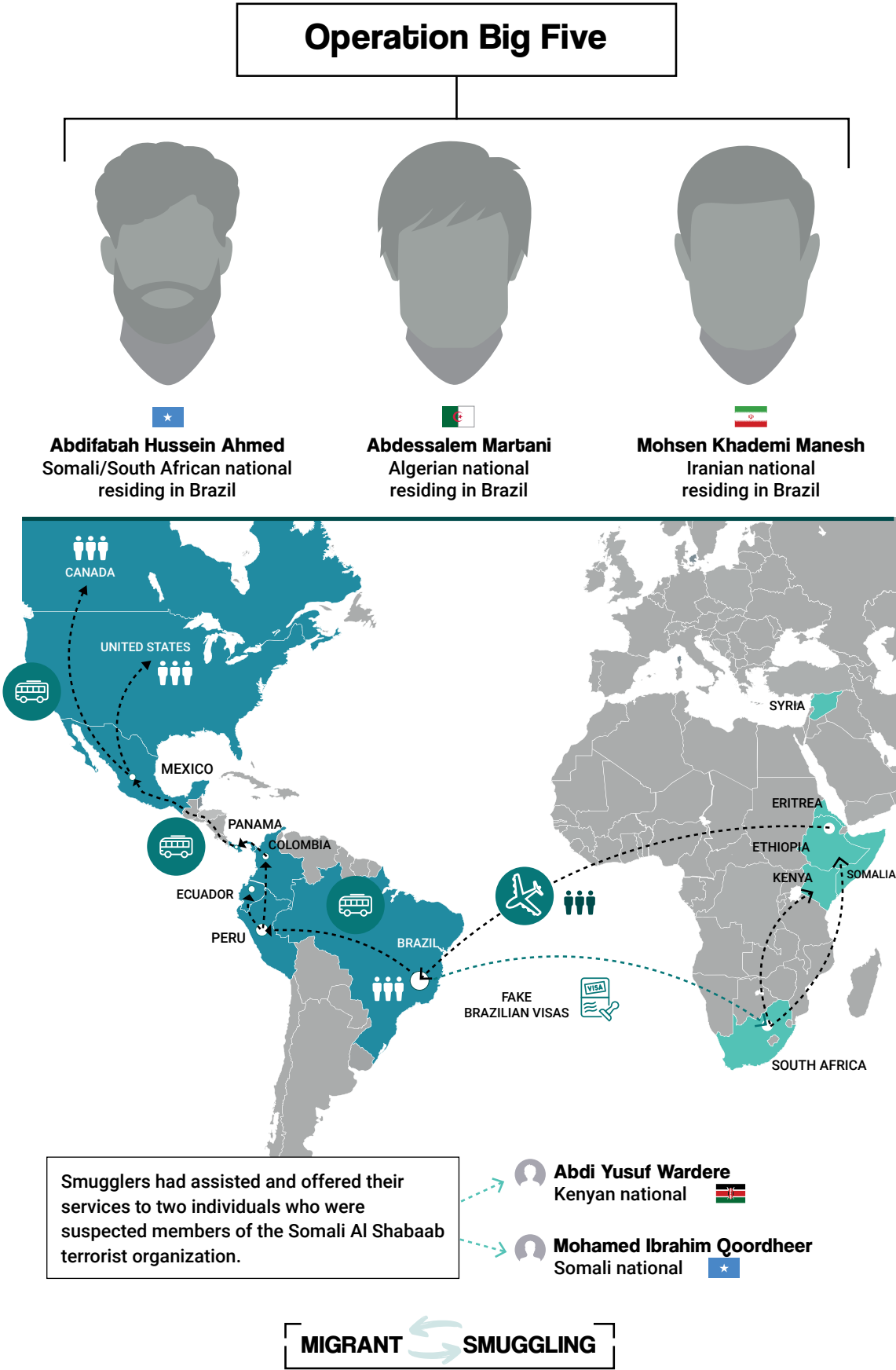
an Algerian national, and Mohsen Khademi Manesh, an Iranian national, both living in São Paulo, Brazil. The Brazilian Federal Police later determined that these three were indeed the leaders of a transnational criminal organization specialized in migrant smuggling. In August 2019, all three men were arrested in Brazil during an operation named “Big Five”.⁷⁸

The smugglers were known to supply illegal migrants from Africa and the Middle East with counterfeit documents for their travel to Brazil and subsequent overland journeys to Canada and the USA. During the investigation, it was discovered that the smugglers had assisted and offered their services to two suspected terrorists. The network facilitated the transportation of Abdi Yusuf Wardere (a Kenyan national) and Mohamed Ibrahim Qoordheer (a Somali national) from East Africa to South America. Both individuals were believed to be members of the Somali Al Shabaab terrorist organization. They were arrested in Central America before reaching the USA.⁷⁹

However, these two suspected terrorists are not the only ones to have used the services of migrant smugglers to enter Latin America to reach Canada and the USA. According to sources⁸⁰ in Panama and other Central American countries, there have been numerous instances over the years involving suspected terrorists affiliated with Al-Qaeda, ISIL and their affiliated Africa-based terrorist organizations exploiting migrant routes and smuggling networks to travel to South America *en route* to North America. In 2017, other migrant smuggling enterprises in Latin America came under scrutiny when Panamanian authorities identified and detained 26 Yemenis suspected of terrorism while attempting to cross overland the Darién Gap from Colombia.⁸¹

In 2018 the INTERPOL-led “Operation Andes” resulted in the arrest of 49 people smugglers. This coordinated action involved 11 countries in Latin America and 44,000 checks at air, land and sea borders to identify and disrupt migrant smuggling routes. Subsequent investigations revealed further details about the *modus operandi* of these criminal networks. As a result of the operation, additional arrests were made, including the detention of four individuals who were listed in INTERPOL’s red notices for crimes such as fraud, homicide and terrorism.⁸²

Evidence points to members of terrorist organizations having found their way to Canada and the USA through Latin America (see end note 88). Additionally, countless law enforcement investigations have uncovered Panama as a critical spot in the migrants’ journey from South America to North America. Due to its geographical features, as described in the paragraphs above, Panama became a point of attention for authorities.



Hence, the government of Panama has improved its migration control measures, and by furthering the United Nations Security Council Resolution 2396, terrorist suspects have been detected in Panama through enhanced border security screening and the use of biometric tools by migration authorities (fingerprints, retinal scans and other biometrics) as well as the sharing of information with regional partners.⁸³ The biometric and biographic data collected is checked against USA and international criminal databases, as part of a USA/Panama joint task force responsible for sharing information on known and suspected terrorists and cooperating on cases related to counter-terrorism.⁸⁴

In 2021, according to statistics provided by the Panamanian migration authorities, nearly 134,000 individuals illegally crossed the border between Colombia and Panama across the Darién Gap; in 2022 the number rose to around 248,000 and in the first two months of 2023 more than 48,000 irregular migrants were detected.⁸⁵ According to local sources, in 2021, 38 irregular migrants coming from the South American route were identified in Panama as terrorist suspects after their biometrics were collected, analyzed and checked against international watch lists. These suspects were allegedly from the following countries: Afghanistan, Jordan, Iraq, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Yemen. Another feature that stands out is the regular detection of Venezuelan passport holders who actually are from Syria, Lebanon, and other Middle Eastern countries; in this case, these Venezuelan passport holders have no ties to Venezuela, hence the suspicion of document fraud.⁸⁶

In recent years, due to the rapid deterioration of the security situation in Ecuador brought about by the activities of transnational organized crime groups, there has been a significant increase in the number of Ecuadorians attempting to migrate to North America. This has led to the growth of criminal organizations involved in the smuggling of migrants. The Security Council Counter-Terrorism Committee, in its assessment visit to Ecuador in October 2023, identified as a potential emerging threat the use of some locations in Ecuador with deteriorating rule of law conditions as a safe haven by terrorists from elsewhere. In May 2023, the Ecuadorian police detained, in an operation in Carchi, an individual with an international terrorist alert issued by the United States.

Open-source data from US Customs and Border Protection (CBP) provides statistics covering both USA south and north borders on encounters of suspected terrorists listed in the Terrorist Screening Dataset (TSDS) who have attempted to cross USA borders. According to CBP, this database houses information on known or suspected terrorists (KSTs). Consonant to the statistics, a significant number of terror suspects have

attempted to cross USA land borders in recent years.⁸⁷ One notable case involves a suspected Somali terrorist with links to ISIL who was arrested in Alberta, Canada, in 2017. The individual had conducted a vehicle ramming attack, displaying an ISIL flag, which resulted in injuries to five people, including a police officer. The terrorist, Abdulahi Sharif, departed Somalia around 2008 and subsequently travelled to various African countries. Eventually, he made his way to Angola, where he encountered a migrant smuggler who assisted him in reaching Brazil, where he arrived in 2011. Sharif stayed in Brazil for some time, working in a chicken processing factory before he decided to move on northwards. In July 2011, he arrived at the US-Mexico border - undocumented - where he was briefly detained on the US side. His biometrical information revealed no criminal or terrorism suspicion. After arriving in Canada in 2012, Abdulahi Sharif applied for refugee status. However, within three years of living in Canada, local police became suspicious of his 'genocidal ideology' and possible links to ISIL.⁸⁸

3.2 Criminal Organizations and the Nexus

3.2.1 Primeiro Comando da Capital (PCC)

In the first half of 2023, a PCC plot to murder a Brazilian Senator, a public prosecutor and a police commissioner was disrupted by the Brazilian Federal Police after a months-long investigation that resulted in the arrest of nine PCC members in Brazil. The plot also involved the kidnapping of the senator's family as a means to negotiate the release of Marcos Henrique Camacho, aka 'Marcola', who is the top leader of PCC. Marcola is currently serving consecutive prison sentences and is in custody in a federal penitentiary in Brazil.

PCC is the largest criminal organization in Brazil. It has approximately 40,000 members dispersed across Brazil's 27 states, neighbouring countries and three other continents: Africa, Europe and North America. PCC's main criminal activity is transnational cocaine trafficking. However, in recent years, the group has expanded its operations and become increasingly involved in cybercrimes, money laundering and weapons trafficking. The

group was born in the Brazilian prison system in 1993; it was then organized under a sort of a 'mutual-help' ideology in which PCC's members claimed to protect each other from alleged state violence, given that the group was initially formed to 'resist' the state. Under the banner of "peace, justice and freedom", PCC rapidly gained a numerous followers within the prison system who were willing to adhere to its harsh statutes and regulations. The criminal organization eventually expanded beyond the prisons, and its influence gradually spread throughout Brazil. In 2021, the US Department of the Treasury designated the PCC as a transnational criminal organization; enabling the identification and freezing of its assets in other countries.

In the early 2000s, the PCC had already established itself as a significant threat to Brazil, especially in the State of São Paulo. To gain advantages within the prison system and to exert influence over top government officials, the PCC embarked on a phase that prioritized violent acts. The organization planned and executed multiple attacks against government facilities and personnel, some of which were successful, while others were not. The primary objective behind these attacks was to spread fear among the population and use it as leverage in negotiations with the government, seeking the release of their imprisoned members or their transfer to prisons under their influence.

Curiously, this phase of the PCC's activities began after the arrest of Mauricio Hernandez Norambuena, a Chilean guerrilla who was a member of an insurgent organization called *Frente Patriótico Manuel Rodríguez* (FPMR). In 2002, Norambuena was apprehended in Brazil for being the mastermind behind the kidnapping for ransom of a well-known Brazilian businessman. Before his arrest in Brazil, he had been a fugitive from the Chilean Justice system since 1996. In Chile, he had been convicted and sentenced to serve two consecutive life sentences for charges including murder, kidnapping for ransom and coordinating terrorist attacks.

While incarcerated in the Brazilian prison system in 2002, Norambuena, an expert in insurgency techniques, shared the same space with Marcola for over a year and a half. During their time together, Norambuena imparted his knowledge of concepts such as asymmetric warfare, and urban guerrilla and terrorism tactics, to Marcola. This enabled Marcola to formulate a political objective that would fuel the growth of PCC throughout Brazil. Marcola's plan envisioned the involvement of PCC in politics, with the organization fielding its political candidates for office not only in the state of São Paulo but also in other parts of Brazil. Norambuena was granted the status of "brother" by

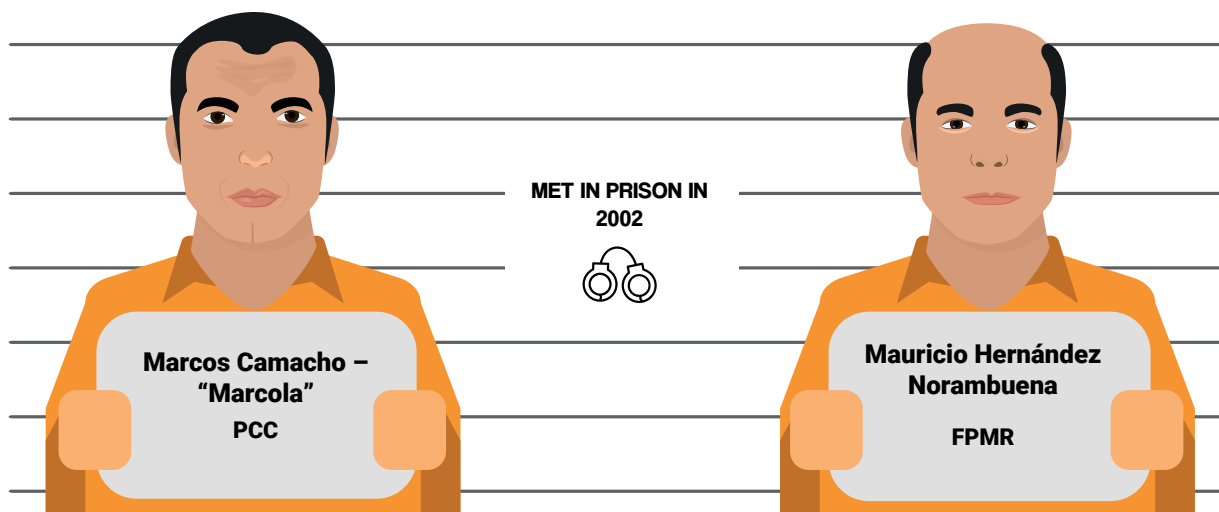
PCC, conferring on him an honorary leadership status and earning him high regard from the organization's leadership. PCC even paid the legal fees of Norambuena's defence lawyers for many years.



▶ Figure 11: PCC Core Elements

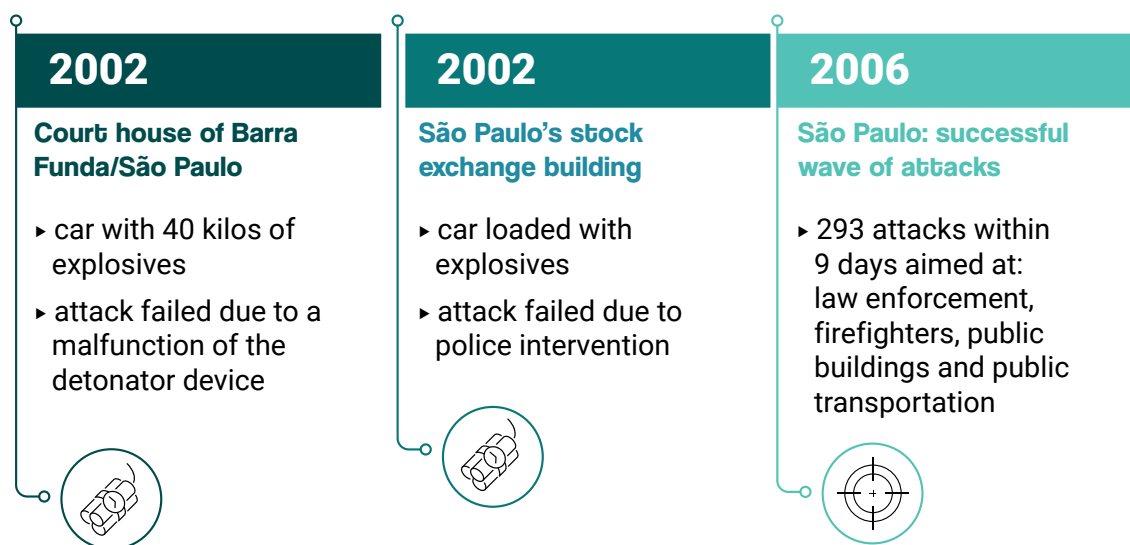
The collaboration between Norambuena and Marcola was a significant turning point for the PCC, marking the beginning of a new phase in 2002 with a plot to bomb the courthouse of Barra Funda, São Paulo. The courthouse employed 5,000 people daily. PCC's members parked a car filled with 40 kilos of explosives in front of the courthouse in an attempt to explode the building's facade. However, the attack failed due to a malfunction of the detonator device. PCC aimed to spread terror and destabilize the ongoing local electoral process. At the same time, law enforcement agencies were conducting an investigation, which involved surveillance and wiretapping of PCC members. The police concluded that the group intended to interfere in São Paulo's State governor elections to prevent the reelection of the leading candidate, who had a strong stance against PCC.

A few months later, the PCC attempted another bombing attack; this time the target was São Paulo's stock exchange building. Again, PCC planned to park a car filled with explosives in front of the building. PCC's objective was not only to destroy the building and instil fear in the population but also to undermine Brazil's economy by targeting one of America's largest stock exchanges. Once again, the attack aimed to disrupt the ongoing election process and create chaos within the political system, ultimately benefiting the



2021: the US Department of the Treasury designated PCC as a transnational criminal organization

PCC plotted several **attacks** against government facilities and government employees



► Figure 12: PCC Appropriation of Terrorist Tactics

criminal organization. Later, PCC claimed that the 9/11 attacks inspired their choice of target for two reasons: firstly, they aimed to strike what they referred to as the 'symbol of Brazilian capitalism'; secondly, the location of São Paulo's stock exchange building in a densely populated area meant that the bombing would result in numerous casualties. PCC intended to inflict maximum destruction and loss of life. Nevertheless, once again, the attack failed due to quick police action. The ongoing surveillance of PCC's leadership

and the information obtained from wiretaps conducted a week before the planned car bombing enabled the police to locate and intercept the vehicle loaded with explosives.

Four years later, PCC would shake São Paulo state with a coordinated wave of violence consisting of 293 attacks carried out over nine days. Their strategy changed; instead of planning large-scale car bomb attacks similar to the ones that had previously failed, PCC launched a series of coordinated smaller attacks targeting several locations, with a particular focus on law enforcement, firefighters, public buildings and public transportation. Dozens of buses were set on fire, and buildings, housing, police and firefighters were targeted with explosions; civilian and government personnel were assassinated. Moreover, simultaneous riots erupted in 83 prisons where PCC members were serving sentences. The wave of violence led to the death of dozens of law enforcement officers, firefighters and prison guards. Additionally, a significant number of civilians were murdered. The wave of violence subsided when São Paulo's government allegedly negotiated with Marcola. As a result, within 48 hours of the mediation, the attacks came to a halt.

After that episode, PCC 'exported' this strategy to other Brazilian states where its local leadership has been randomly using terrorist tactics as a means of allegedly trying to negotiate with the government. However, the criminal organization has not executed another large-scale and coordinated attack, likely because its key leaders are currently incarcerated in high-security federal prisons with limited contact with the outside world.

3.2.2 Comando Vermelho (CV)

This criminal organization is mentioned in a previous section of this document, highlighting its connection with the Colombian FARC during a business deal involving 'weapons for drugs exchange' in the Amazon jungle in the late 1990s. These two organizations share some strategies, including reliance on narcotrafficking as their primary source of income and the insurgency strategies employed to control territorial areas. The FARC focuses on rural areas, while the CV operates predominantly in urban areas of Rio de Janeiro. Furthermore, both organizations employ terrorist tactics to exert control over the population and resist government intervention within their territories.

Similarly to PCC, the CV also originated within the prison system, specifically in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, in 1979. At that time, Brazil was under a military regime, and there was a

prison (Instituto Penal Cândido Mendes) that housed left-wing insurgents and guerrillas who were convicted under the national security law. In addition to housing left-wing insurgents and guerrillas, this prison also received inmates from Rio de Janeiro's *favelas* who were convicted of 'common crimes' such as murder, drug trafficking, theft, and bank robbery. The most dangerous ones - Rio de Janeiro's worst criminals and Brazil's most wanted guerrillas - had the opportunity to interact and learn from each other. In addition, the prison conditions at Cândido Mendes were harsh (e.g. overcrowding, violence and isolation). These difficult conditions provided a fertile ground for the development of an ideology centred around "mutual help" where – similar to PCC – members would protect and support each other against the State. This ideology became the foundation of the newly formed CV.

CV quickly expanded its influence outside the prison in Rio de Janeiro's *favelas* to become the most powerful criminal organization in the city. At one point, it controlled 90 per cent of the city's *favelas*. Its main business was drug trafficking and armed robbery, but its leadership learned from the guerrillas the importance of infiltrating state institutions. They began funding politicians, Rio de Janeiro's Samba Schools and even certain segments of the private sector. However, in the early 2000s, internal conflicts and power struggles within CV led to fractures and the emergence of splinter criminal organizations. As a result, CV lost some of its territorial control and influence. Nevertheless, CV expanded its operations into other Brazilian states and overseas to neighbouring countries. It is currently the second-largest criminal organization in Brazil.

In Rio de Janeiro, CV exerts control over several *favelas* through the use of force and coercion. The local population is subject to the organization's social rules, and disobedience often results in severe punishment, including the death penalty. CV's members are heavily armed and trained in guerrilla warfare tactics. Their arsenal consists of a wide range of weapons, including rifles, hand grenades, man-portable air-defense systems, .50 calibre anti-aircraft machine guns, and other heavy weaponry. CV employs brutal and violent methods to repel police forces entering their territories. They resort to horrific tactics, such as burning people alive, including captured police officers. CV has also its own 'crime tribunal' within the *favelas*, primarily for population control purposes. This internal court passes judgments on various crimes, including imposing the death penalty on police informants and defectors. Rapists are also sentenced to death, although CV members themselves engage in acts of sexual assault without consequences. Additionally, individuals who commit theft face punishment such as

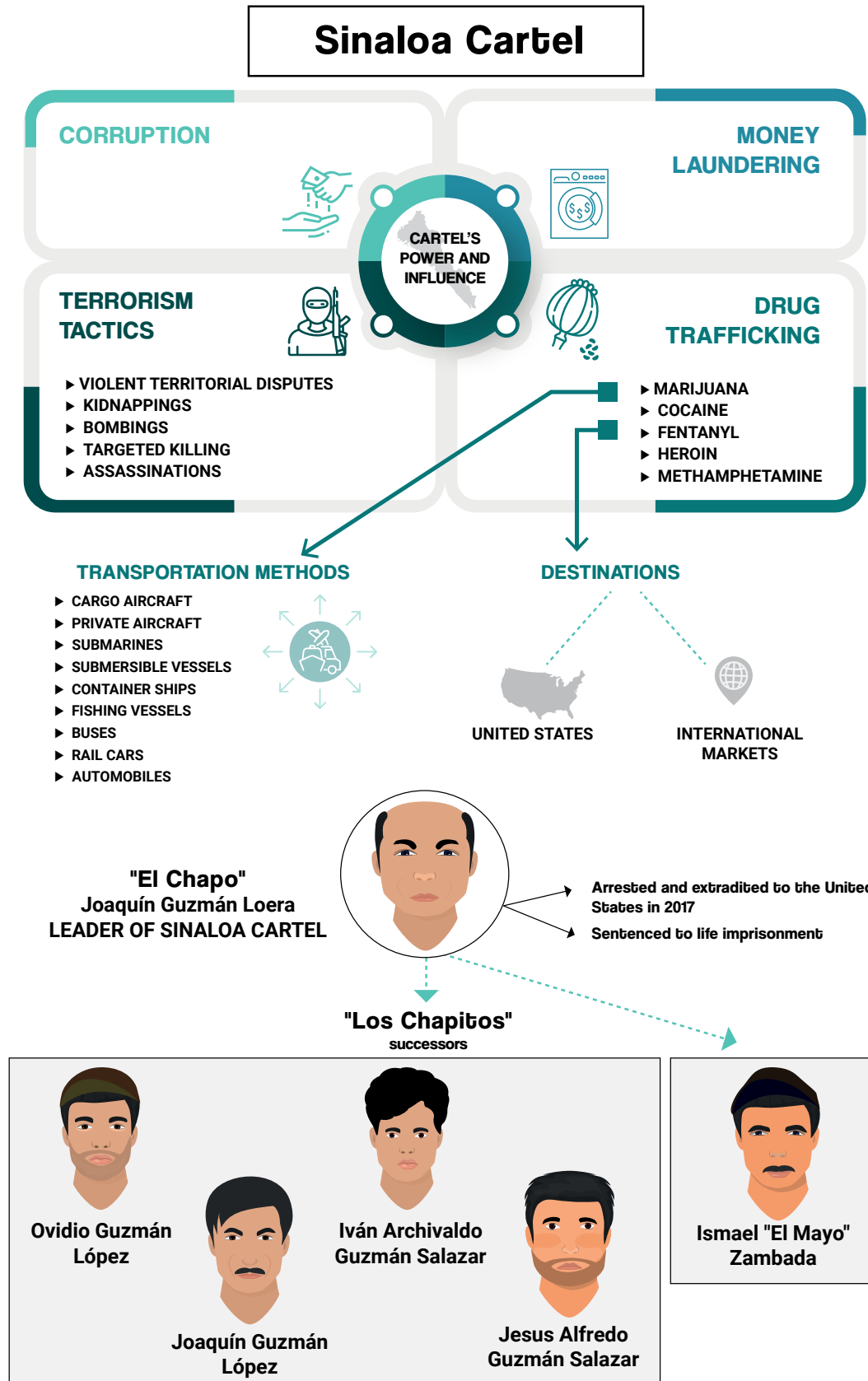
hand amputation. These are just a few examples of the range of punishments meted out by the CV's tribunal.

The failure of governance in Rio de Janeiro's *favelas* has resulted in a power vacuum that was filled by criminal actors like CV. This situation has imposed significant costs on local government authorities. CV's use of terrorist tactics has enabled them to establish control over urban territories and bolstered their power beyond Rio de Janeiro. As a result, the organization has gained notoriety as a capable, assertive, and ruthless criminal group. Their territories in Rio de Janeiro have become havens for wanted criminals from across Brazil and other countries. Recent police operations uncovered numerous fugitives and high-profile wanted criminals seeking refuge within CV's controlled areas. However, this sanctuary comes at a steep cost, CV imposes substantial fees on criminals and terrorists from outside Rio de Janeiro who seek shelter in their territories. In return CV offers protection from police raids, effectively shielding these criminals from the reach of law enforcement. Recent large-scale police operations in Rio de Janeiro - in CV-controlled areas – have been aimed at apprehending high-profile convicted criminals who sought refuge in the city's *favelas*. However, these police operations come at a significant cost for the State. They involve loss of lives in clashes with CV members, require substantial financial and logistical resources, and can diminish political capital for the government. Moreover, CV uses the narrative of 'oppression' whenever the police conduct raids in the *favelas*, effectively garnering sympathy and support from disgruntled segments of the society. By positioning itself as a victim of "state oppression", CV enhances its influence and strengthens its position among the population it controls. Furthermore, by projecting a narrative of victory in the face of police operations, CV effectively utilizes propaganda tools to recruit and retain specialized members, bolstering its criminal capabilities.

3.2.3 Sinaloa Cartel

The Sinaloa Cartel is widely regarded as one of the largest and most influential drug trafficking organizations in the Western Hemisphere. It originated in the Mexican state of Sinaloa and has expanded its operations globally. While it is referred to as a cartel, it is more accurately described as a federation or alliance of several drug trafficking groups led by prominent Mexican drug lords, since the cartel is not a hierarchical structure.

The state of Sinaloa in Mexico has historically been associated with contraband and drug cultivation, particularly marijuana and poppy plants. The region has been a significant



► Figure 13: Sinaloa Cartel Overview

hub for drug trafficking organizations, many of which trace their origins back to Sinaloa. The genesis of some of these organizations can be attributed to small farming families in rural parts of Sinaloa. In the 1960s and 1970s, some of these families transitioned from contraband to the drug trade, focusing primarily on marijuana. Pedro Aviles, one of the early figures in the marijuana trade, played a role in introducing Joaquín Guzmán Loera, commonly known as 'El Chapo' Guzmán to the business. Gradually, El Chapo rose to prominence in what would be the Sinaloa Cartel.⁸⁹

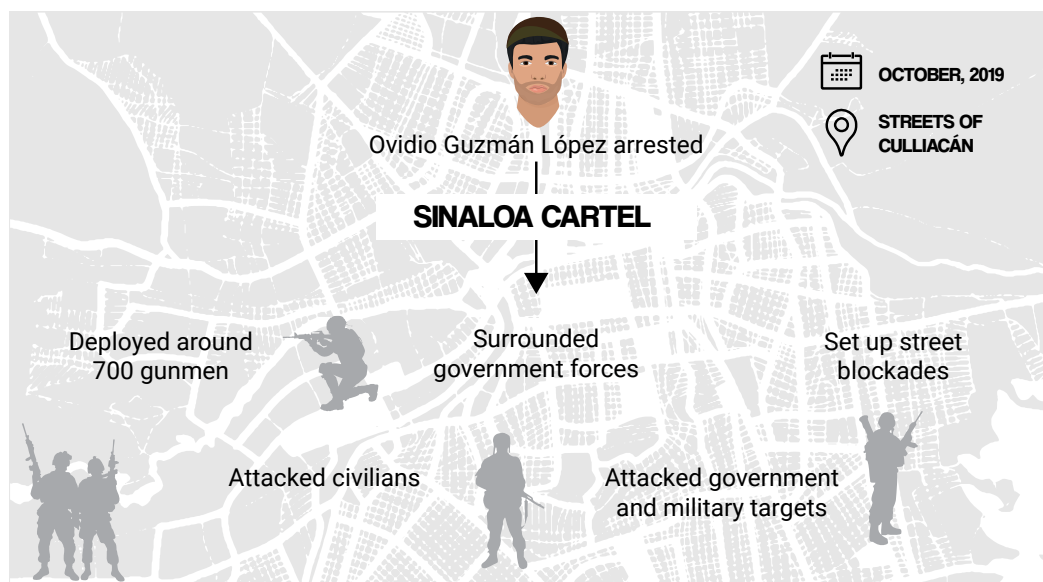
El Chapo's leadership and strategic alliances allowed the Sinaloa Cartel to dominate the illicit drug trade, particularly the smuggling of cocaine, heroin, methamphetamine, and marijuana into the United States and other international markets. Currently, the Sinaloa cartel is deeply involved in the manufacturing and export of fentanyl to the United States and beyond.

Sinaloa cartel has been known to utilize a wide range of transportation methods and networks to transport drugs and precursor chemicals for their drug trafficking operations. These transportation methods include cargo aircraft, private aircraft, submarines and submersible vessels, container ships, supply vessels, go-fast boats, fishing vessels, buses, rail cars, tractor trailers, automobiles, and both private and commercial interstate and foreign carriers. The cartel often adapts and uses different modes of transportation based on its resources, the type of drugs being transported, and the location of its operations. To facilitate their operations, Sinaloa Cartel establishes and maintains extensive networks of couriers, stash houses, and tunnels. These networks span across Mexico and sometimes extend into the United States of America.⁹⁰

The cartel's power and influence extend beyond drug trafficking, as it has been involved in various criminal activities such as money laundering, corruption, and acts of violence, including territorial disputes with rival cartels. The organization has a reputation for its ability to adapt to law enforcement efforts and maintain its operations despite the capture or death of its leaders.

Additionally, the cartel has proved very capable in the use of violent tactics to gain and maintain control over territories. It has engaged in conflicts with rival cartels and government forces, using violence as a means to secure its dominance and protect its operations. This has contributed to its status as one of the most feared criminal organizations in Mexico.⁹¹ An incident, known as "the battle of Culiacán", on 17 October

THE BATTLE OF CULLIACÁN



EQUIPMENT

used by the cartel commandos in the battle of Culiacán:



► Figure 14: Facts about the Battle of Culiacán

2019 demonstrated the Sinaloa cartel's capacity to employ terrorist tactics to advance its goals. On that day, one of El Chapo's sons, Ovidio Guzman Lopez, was arrested during a coordinated police and military operation. In response, Sinaloa Cartel deployed around 700 gunmen in the streets of Culiacán, who surrounded government forces, set up street blockades and attacked civilians, government and military targets throughout the city. The cartel commandos were equipped with armoured vehicles, .50 calibre machine guns, rocket launchers and grenades, among other heavy weapons and artillery. Ovidio Guzmán was released from custody later that day, after an impasse between the government forces and the cartel's gunmen.⁹²

Although El Chapo was arrested and extradited to the United States in 2017, and subsequently sentenced to life imprisonment, the Sinaloa Cartel continues to operate under the leadership of his successors, his sons known as “Los Chapitos” comprised of Ovidio Guzman Lopez, Ivan Guzman Salazar, Alfredo Guzman Salazar and Joaquin Guzman Lopez, and Ismael “El Mayo” Zambada, a long-standing figure within the organization, who is believed to play a significant role in its operations.⁹³

However, it’s important to note that the dynamics of drug cartels can change over time, and the power and influence of specific organizations may fluctuate. Other cartels, such as the Jalisco New Generation Cartel (CJNG), have also risen in prominence and pose significant challenges to the Sinaloa Cartel’s dominance.⁹⁴

3.2.4 Cartel Jalisco Nueva Generación (CJNG)

The Jalisco New Generation Cartel (CJNG) emerged in 2010 and has become a prominent and powerful criminal organization in Mexico. It has capitalized on the power vacuums created by the killings, captures, and internal conflicts within older cartels, such as the Sinaloa Cartel. The CJNG is known for its aggressive use of violence, including targeted assassinations, public displays of brutality, and confrontations with rival cartels. They have employed tactics aimed at instilling fear and terror, asserting their dominance in the territories they operate in. Additionally, the CJNG has been reported to engage in public relations campaigns, using social media and other channels to disseminate propaganda and project an image of power and control.

Despite the capture of some of its top leaders, the CJNG has shown resilience and adaptability, allowing it to maintain its position as one of Mexico’s foremost criminal threats. The organization has demonstrated a willingness to expand its influence and operations into new territories, challenging the control of other cartels and engaging in violent confrontations. The CJNG is heavily involved in drug trafficking, particularly the production and distribution of illicit drugs such as methamphetamine, cocaine, heroin, and fentanyl. They control significant portions of drug trafficking routes and have expanded their influence across multiple Mexican states, including Jalisco, Michoacán, Colima, and Guanajuato. The CJNG is also involved in other criminal activities such as organized crime, extortion, kidnapping, and acts of violence.⁹⁵

Known for its extreme violence and brutal tactics, the CJNG engages in territorial battles and confrontations with rival cartels, that often result in high numbers of casualties. The CJNG has been involved in mass killings, public displays of violence, and the use of military-grade weaponry. They have also targeted law enforcement and government officials in their operations,⁹⁶ shot down military helicopters, ambushed high-level government employees and politicians, and also attempted to take control of the city of Tepalcatepec using infantry and terrorist tactics.⁹⁷ In May 2015, the CJNG launched a series of attacks in the State of Jalisco and its capital Guadalajara, one of Mexico's largest cities. During the wave of attacks, the cartel torched several businesses, hijacked and burnt dozens of buses, trucks and cars and used them to set up numerous roadblocks throughout the state; they also shot down an Army Cougar Helicopter, killing several soldiers and wounding many others.⁹⁸ CJNG has in its ranks armed commandos, deploys armoured vehicles and is among the first to use drones, land mines and various Improvised Explosive Devices (IED).⁹⁹

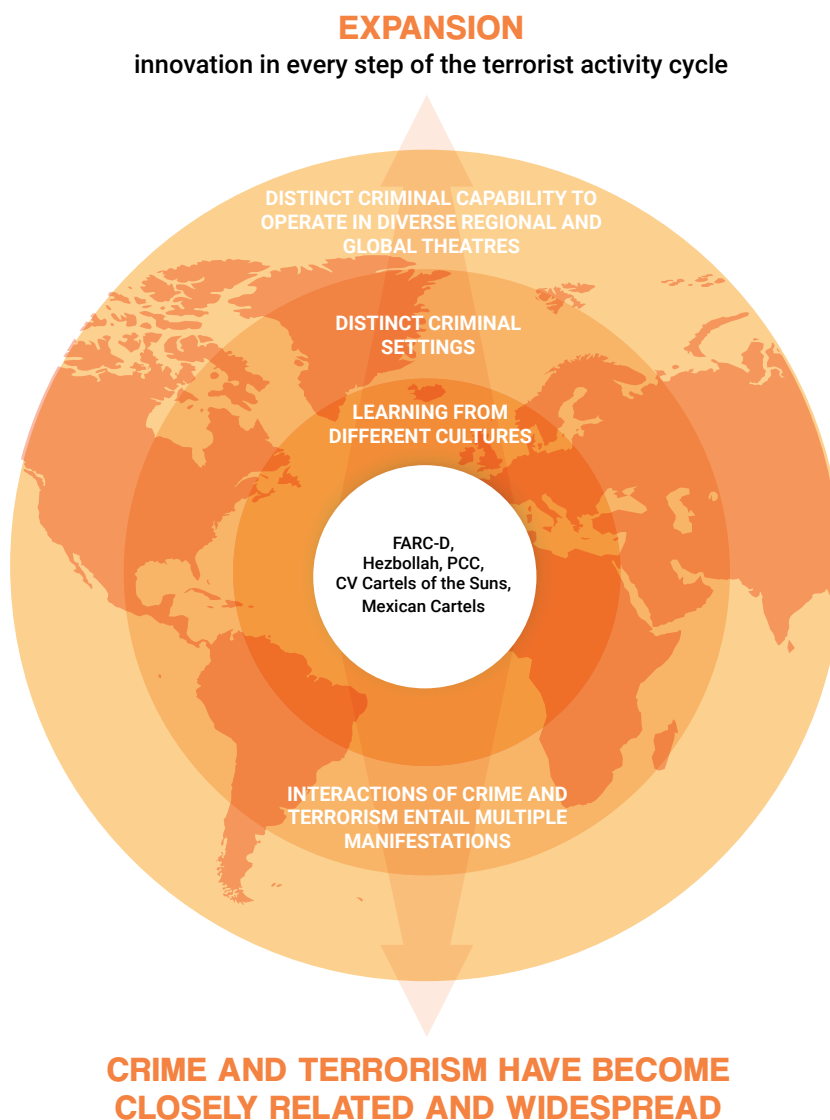
Moreover, the CJNG has expanded its influence beyond Mexico and has established connections and operations in other countries, including the United States, South America, and Europe. They have developed partnerships with international drug trafficking organizations, facilitating the global distribution of drugs. Consequently, the CJNG has grown in prominence and has become one of the most powerful and feared criminal organizations in Mexico. They have demonstrated their ability to challenge other established cartels, including the Sinaloa Cartel, in their quest for control over lucrative drug trafficking territories.

Conclusions & Recommendations



4.1 Conclusions

FARC (dissidents), Hezbollah, PCC, CV, Cartel of the Suns, and Mexican Cartels, among others that operate in Latin America, have undoubtedly enhanced their capabilities over time in both the criminal and the terrorist arenas. Groups have displayed a capacity for innovation at every stage of the terrorist activity cycle. As they continue to globalize, their proficiency in each step of the cycle is likely to improve, as their criminal enterprises and potential for terrorist activities expand through their growing connections with transnational criminal organizations worldwide. As this scenario unfolds, these organizations will continue to learn from different cultures, and distinct criminal environments and their ability to operate in diverse regional and global theatres will expand. The same applies to other criminal organizations operating in the continent.



► Figure 16: Crime-terror Nexus Expansion

Their interactions with terrorist organizations have heightened their danger and enhanced their ability to carry out more destructive actions and adopt strategies that further their profit-making objectives.

Recent events in the Latin American continent have demonstrated how the crime and terror nexus threat is indeed in constant evolution.

At the beginning of January 2024, Ecuador's gangs unleashed a wave of violence in retaliation for Government actions to counter criminality. In recent years the country has been facing increasing levels of gang violence. The prison system has been the fulcrum of the escalating violence and drug trafficking has been its driver. Gang members rioting in prisons, brutal attacks on security forces, and an invasion of a TV news broadcast have prompted the Government of Ecuador to declare a state of internal armed conflict followed by the designation of 22 criminal gangs as terrorist organizations. What we see unfolding in Ecuador is no different from what happens in other Latin American countries: an enduring crisis in the prison system, a criminal environment conducive to inter-group learning of terrorist tactics and the growing demand for cocaine in European countries as well as in other parts of the world.¹⁰⁰

In Brazil, a recent counter-terrorism operation carried out in November 2023 interrupted a Hezbollah preparatory terror act and its connected recruitment efforts. The recruiters lured Brazilian nationals to travel to Lebanon to meet Hezbollah members. The Brazilians were interviewed by Hezbollah to check if they were capable of conducting terrorist attacks in Brazil, including carrying out possible target assassinations. Hezbollah recruiters asked if they belonged to any criminal organization in Brazil, among other questions, seeking to recruit Brazilian nationals who had criminal experience. Foreign law enforcement agencies flagged a small group of Brazilians - possibly involved with criminal organizations, drug trafficking and terrorist activities - travelling to Lebanon in a suspicious manner. Some of the suspects were arrested in Brazil under the counter-terrorism law. However the main recruiter is still at large, with an international arrest warrant issued against him by INTERPOL. In February 2024 a Brazilian Federal Court accepted the complaint presented by the Federal Prosecutor's Office and made the suspects defendants for alleged connection with Hezbollah. In the same legal sentence, the judge authorized a parallel case to investigate the crimes of smuggling, document forgery, and terrorism financing allegedly perpetrated by the defendants in the course of their disrupted terrorist plots.¹⁰¹

Indeed, as demonstrated in this report, the interactions between crime and terrorism exhibit multiple manifestations. These can be observed within organizations themselves or through transactions between independent groups at distinct stages of the terrorist activity cycle, showcasing both similarities and differences. Therefore, the nexus between crime and terror has grown closer, displaying greater proficiency and wider reach. This phenomenon permeates every continent, albeit with regional variations. Furthermore, the continuous evolution of society and technology has created avenues for new business opportunities, while giving rise to innovative and diverse forms of interaction between crime and terrorism.

4.2 Recommendations

- * **Political commitment is crucial for strengthening strategic actions to combat organized crime and terrorist movements.** The political leadership of a state or region must have a comprehensive understanding of the threat posed by the crime and terror nexus and recognize that countering this threat requires concerted efforts and commitment from multiple political entities. Coordinated high-level policies in conjunction with ground-level actions, greatly enhance the chances of success in adopting a comprehensive whole-of-government approach.
- * **Promote the adoption of legislation against terrorism and transnational organized crime, in accordance with international standards according to United Nations international treaties and conventions, United Nations Security Council resolutions and the recommendations of the International Financial Action Task Force.** The criminalization of acts of terrorism and its financing, terrorist groups and organized criminal groups, as well as efficient legislation in the adoption of targeted financial sanctions and terrorist designation criteria in accordance with international obligations, will facilitate the work of judges, prosecutors and law enforcement officials to conduct effective investigations and prosecutions of cases involving terrorist groups or transnational organized crime groups.
- * **Governments and non-governmental organizations and academia should enhance awareness programmes to address conditions conducive to crime and terrorism within local communities.** The identification of the causes and the

conditions that are conducive to and enable the radicalization of individuals within a given population and/or their recruitment for criminal activities is paramount. Once the conditions are identified, government agencies and non-governmental organizations could come together to design, with the inclusion of academia, specific programmes that could minimize or eliminate the root causes that drive certain individuals to the arms of the criminals and/or terrorists.

- * **Collaboration with the private sector, civil society, multilateral organizations, and academia helps to broaden “threat knowledge” and provide strategic tools.** Government institutions and agencies cannot efficiently counter the crime and terror nexus on their own. Combating this complex problem requires a multidimensional approach that is more effective and targeted. Collaboration with the private sector, civil society, multilateral organizations, and academia can provide additional tools, approaches, and insights. Moreover, failure to involve local communities at the grassroots level in preventing and combating these threats hampers the effectiveness of any response.
- * **Disruption of finance and logistics is key in dismantling criminal, insurgent and terrorist organizations.** Recent law enforcement cases worldwide on the crime and terror nexus have demonstrated that the most effective strategy for weakening or dismantling criminal and terrorist organizations is targeting their financial flows and logistical networks. By disrupting these critical aspects, their ability to carry out harmful activities is significantly impeded, and their capacity to regroup and reorganize is compromised. These actions are generally more effective than techniques that focus on apprehending or neutralizing the organization’s leadership or seizing illicit commodities like drugs, weapons, and contraband.

Strengthening the measures in place and taking decisive actions to effectively identify and address the nexus between terrorism and organized crime, including to identify cases in which proceeds from human trafficking, illegal trade in weapons, drugs, metals or cultural property, etc., finance terrorism. In this regard, Member States should consider establishing a mechanism to prioritize investigations regarding potential terrorism financing and facilitation when investigating organized crime.

- * **Efficient inter-institutional cooperation and coordination at both national and international levels are critical for more effective actions.** Success stories in countering criminal and terrorist organizations highlight the necessity of converging institutions, agencies, and governments in a collaborative effort. This can only be accomplished through cooperation and coordination at every level among different institutions and governments. Cooperation starts with the effective exchange of information and intelligence between cooperating agencies, leading to the gradual development of trust through joint intelligence analysis.
- * **Ample recognition of the threat by government and private actors involved – directly or indirectly – in countering crime and terrorism is essential.** In a domestic or international cooperation and coordination environment, the full acknowledgement of the threat is crucial for the free flow of information and coordination of actions. Optimal outcomes in interagency work require a shared perception of objectives and the threat being countered. If a cooperating agency, whether governmental or private, fails to recognize or consider the risks posed by the threat being confronted, its contribution to a joint effort may be suboptimal, potentially impacting the overall success possibilities.
- * **Government agencies with different mandates (counter-crime vs. counter-terrorism) should be able to work in tandem when faced with a terrorist threat (any of the steps within the terrorist activity cycle).** Crime and terror interactions pose an additional challenge when the underlying motivations of a terrorist/criminal group or a cell are misunderstood. In Latin America, there are numerous cases where terrorist groups are primarily motivated by financial gains, using ideology as a cover to conceal their profit-making ethos. This situation creates a ‘grey zone’ where government agencies may incorrectly assess the actual threat: is it purely terrorist, purely criminal or a combination of both? In such cases, agencies working together are better equipped to overcome the challenges presented by this phenomenon.
- * **Creating fusion centres optimizes intelligence work, while multi-agency task forces enhance operational work.** When faced with a complex, dynamic, and transnational threat, fusion centres and task forces serve as valuable tools for effective counteraction and prevention. By bringing together collaboration partners in a shared physical space with common tools and objectives, these environments

enable quick and robust responses at both strategic and tactical levels. These collaborative environments foster trust-building through personal and professional relationships, shaping networks of individuals and agencies that share best practices and lessons learned.

- * **Intelligence collection and criminal proceeding evidence collection should be treated differently since intelligence information presented as evidence in criminal proceedings by law enforcement authorities is a controversial practice.**

Intelligence officers, law enforcement officers, and prosecutors occasionally struggle to work with the concepts of “intelligence” and “legal evidence.” In some cases, there is a grey line between them, and officers and prosecutors are challenged with the prospect of using or not using intelligence material in criminal prosecutions. Occasionally, police officers and prosecutors include intelligence reports in their criminal proceedings, which weakens their cases since intelligence reports are not considered a body of court evidence and may jeopardize an entire prosecution strategy.

- * **Expanding training opportunities to address the crime-terror nexus and raising awareness about the nexus across the region is essential.** Raising awareness about the nexus in the region and beyond is critical. Currently, there is a lack of solid knowledge on this issue among governments, the private sector, academia, NGOs, and others stakeholders. This results in a low level of nexus threat perception in Latin America. Moreover, this gap prevents government agencies from addressing the threat more consistently and consequently, the private sector, academia and NGOs are not fully engaged.

Enhancing capacity-building to effectively address the crime-terror nexus is fundamental. These training initiatives should cover various aspects, including threat assessment, intelligence analysis, investigative techniques, legal frameworks, and cooperation strategies. Additionally, specialized training modules focusing on emerging trends, evolving tactics, and case studies can help practitioners develop the necessary skills and knowledge to effectively combat the crime-terror nexus. By investing in such training opportunities, authorities can enhance their capacity to identify, investigate, and disrupt criminal and terrorist activities, ultimately contributing to the overall security and stability of their jurisdictions. Capacity-building should be extended to different groups, beyond law enforcement.

The above recommendations serve as general guidelines for Member States in Latin America and should be adapted to each country's specific circumstances and realities. These recommendations are not exhaustive and should be considered in conjunction with the more specific recommendations outlined in the GCTF *The Hague Good Practices on the Nexus between Transnational Organized Crime and Terrorism* and the related *Policy Toolkit* developed by UNICRI. These resources provide further guidance and practical tools to address the crime-terror nexus which can be valuable references for developing tailored strategies and approaches at the national and regional levels.

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66. These 14 names included in the Argentinian terror watch list are: Hassan Ali Barakat, Ahmad Ali Barakat, Hussein Ali Barakat, Mousa Hatem Barakat, Merhi Riad Hassan, Ibrahim Fadi Ibrahim, Hussein Mohamad Jomaa, Hussein Ahmad Youssef, Youssef Hassan Jaber, Mohamad Ibrahim Melhem, Rabah Diab Nour Edinne, Hamze Ali Hachem and Hassan Fawaz.
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68. The funds of criminal origin are laundered taking advantage of the process of buying/selling and the subsequent exchange of casino chips. Another technique that Barakat clan uses is the purchase of winning prize vouchers with the criminal funds. In this case, the terrorists collect the prize and thus justify the origin of the money.
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Paraguai e Estados Unidos capturam líder de rede internacional de lavagem de dinheiro

The first of these is the fact that the
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TERRORISTA AFGANO FUE DETENIDO EN EE.UU. TRAS CRUZAR ENTRE MIGRANTES POR MEXICO EN TIJUANA

Exclusivo: Contrabandista con con ISIS ayudó a migrantes a i Estados Unidos desde México generando alarma en el Gobie

Panama caught 52 Al Qaeda suspects headed to USA all-time high of 1.7M people flooded US border

PC C planejou explodir dois carros-bomba em São Paulo na Copa do Mundo de 2014

PCC planejou explodir dois carros-bomba em São Paulo na Copa do Mundo de 2014

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Panama caught 55 suspects headed high of 1.7M people border