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Criminal Entrepreneurs and the Security Crisis in African Sahel

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Enoch Ndem Okon
Department of Political Science
University of Calabar, Nigeria
E-mail: enochokon@gmail.com

Victor Ojakorotu
Department of Political Studies and International Relations
North West University, Mafikeng
South Africa

Iwara Eno Iwara
Department of Political Science
University of Calabar, Nigeria

Abstract

Criminal entrepreneurs have been ignored as sources of insecurity in Sahelian states. This study is designed to fill the gap in knowledge and literature by explaining how the activities of criminal entrepreneurs are fueling insecurity in Sahel. It is grounded in Routine Activity Theory (RAT). The documentary research design, which relies on a thorough search and review of existing secondary data, is adopted in this study. These data were qualitatively presented and analysed thematically. The study revealed that criminal entrepreneurs who coordinate and benefit from criminal activities, as manifested in banditry, cattle rustling, crude oil theft, bunkering, kidnapping, money laundering, cybercrime, and drug trafficking, are central to the insecurity in the Sahel region. The study concludes that strong political will is required to contain these crimes since their perpetrators have strong links with politically exposed persons. It is therefore important for stakeholders to pay more attention to the elimination of criminal entrepreneurs. The study therefore recommends that the criminal justice system in the Sahel should be strengthened in a manner that deters potential criminal entrepreneurs. Moreso, there should be an aggressive drive for job creation across the region for the teeming population.

Keywords: *Criminal entrepreneurs, Africa Sahel, Banditry, Crude oil theft, Security.*

Introduction

Criminal entrepreneurs have been fueling insecurity in African and Sahelian states since the dawn of the new millennium. This is attributable to several factors, such as the end of the Cold War, which hitherto froze issues in peripheral states; and the ascendancy of global interdependency, orchestrated by globalisation and the revolution in information and communication technology (ICT). The later development has increased the sophistication and capacity of criminal entrepreneurs in their trade across Mauritania, Mali, Burkina Faso, the Niger Republic, Somalia, and Nigeria, among others. Their activities have manifested in several forms of organized crime across the Sahel. These include mass killings, cattle rustling, bombing, mass abduction, kidnapping for ransom, banditry, piracy, cybercrime, money laundering, crude oil theft, and bunkering, as well as illegal mining of mineral resources.

These crimes, coordinated by criminal entrepreneurs, have an enormous impact on the security of the Sahelian states. Firstly, most of these crimes require the deployment of kinetic measures to contain and prevent them from harming the citizenry. Secondly, most of these crimes sabotage the economic wellbeing of individual citizens in particular and the region in general. Thirdly, the general sense of fear and insecurity created by the activities of these elements discourages socio-economic activities, such as tourism, farming, and investment from both local and foreign investors. Fourthly, the security apparatuses are not only under pressure to contain these crimes; they have also lost valuable assets and manpower. Fifthly, national governments have been forced to increase defense spending through the renewal of existing security infrastructure and the construction of a new national security architecture through the acquisition of both military software and hardware.

Despite the central role of these criminal elements in fueling and sustaining insecurity across the region, very little attention is given to them in the analysis of conflicts and security discourses in the region (Lacher, 2012; Malakoti, 2020). For instance, scholars hardly ask questions such as who organises, trains, coordinates, and negotiates on behalf of bandits and kidnappers; and who profits from these heinous crimes? This gap in scholarship and literature on the nexus between criminal entrepreneurs and security in the Sahelian region necessitated this study. The central objective of this discourse is to explain how the activities of criminal entrepreneurs are linked to the security challenges in African Sahel. It is designed to answer the question: how do criminal entrepreneurs fuel the insecurity in African Sahel? This paper is divided into six sections: introduction, review of related literature, theoretical framework, methodology of study, discussion of findings, and conclusion.

Literature Review

Criminal entrepreneurs are founders, leaders, and coordinators of groups that make a profit from criminal activities through blatant subversion of existing laws or organised network of like-minded individual with the capacity to undermine the security apparatuses of the state (Gottschalk, 2008; Gottschalk, 2013). The vocation has a long history and refers to the large-scale deployment of criminal tactics and methods in material acquisition and accumulation, as well as wealth-making. It involves the use of unauthorised violent and defiant behaviors as spelled out by the constituted authority of a polity in pursuit of material and financial profits by individuals and groups (Gottschalk, 2011; Gottschalk & Smith, 2011). Zaitch (2002:49) observed that:

Except for the readiness to use personal violence and the ability to shield oneself from it, other social or individual constrictions and qualities do not seem to differ that much from those encountered in successful legal businessmen: sex, age, personal or family contacts, entrepreneurial skills of all sorts, personal attributes such as creativity, alertness or charisma, skills to both exercise power and deal with existing power pressures, and luck

These realities sometimes make it difficult to differentiate legal entrepreneurs from criminal entrepreneurs, since they share common attributes as highlighted above but differ slightly in their mode of operations as well as the nature of risk both genres are ready to initiate and undertake. Besides, both subgroups of entrepreneurs share another common denominator, namely: engaging in wealth creation and profit making from their chosen ventures. However, Gottschalk (2010), highlighted the distinction between them by asserting that criminal entrepreneurship is found in organised crime, where criminal entrepreneurs choose to organise criminal business enterprises in order to exploit illegal market opportunities, while legal entrepreneurs avoid criminal activities by all means. Hence, criminal entrepreneurs may also include leaders and coordinators of groups that engage in organised crime in a society. Such crimes include white-collar crime, kidnapping, fraud, money laundering, drugs, human and wildlife trafficking, piracy, heritage and cultural property theft, banditry, smuggling in illicit drinks, cigarettes, and other contraband goods (Gottschalk, 2013; Kerr, 2023).

In clarifying the nexus between informal criminal entrepreneurs and white-collar crime, Gottschalk and Smith (2011:300) observed that the criminal entrepreneurs' task is to discover and exploit opportunities, defined as situations in which there are a profit to be made in criminal activity. Hence, anytime a legal entrepreneur either slides into criminal behaviour or makes a conscious choice to engage in criminality, it is often in the form of white-collar crime. To this end, criminal entrepreneurs cover every actor that engages in illicit trade and underworld activities for the purpose of making money and accumulating material goods (Gottschalk, 2010). In application, the concept must be understood as context-specific; the prevailing legal instrument within a polity determines what is legal and illicit. For instance, if there is no law prohibiting piracy as it was in some cultures some centuries ago, then the leaders of Vikings and other pirate entities were not criminal entrepreneurs but law-abiding citizens who made a livelihood through their ingenuity and bravery. Similarly, mining of diamonds, gold, and other solid minerals by unlicensed entities was not part of criminal entrepreneurship until such activities were prohibited by national laws and international conventions (Amosu& Adeosun, 2021; Berlusconi, 2014).

It is also important to differentiate terrorists from criminal entrepreneurs; even when both subgroups employ violence in their operations. While terrorists and their sponsors are ideological extremists who use the instruments of violence as a means to compel constituted authorities to heed their demand or highlight their plight, the sole purpose of deploying violence by criminal entrepreneurs and their foot soldiers is to make wealth, ensure their safe escape, and protect themselves from harm or arrest (Thurston, 2020; Zaitch, 2002). However, when a leader of an extremist group engages in criminality to raise funds for operational exigencies and beyond, they may be classified as a criminal entrepreneur. In reality, there is a blurred line between a criminal entrepreneur and a terrorist in the deployment of violence; besides, terrorism is a crime against nation-states (Okon, 2022).

Theoretically, several models have attempted to capture the root of organised crime. These include: the cultural defiance theory, which blames organised crime on the subculture of slums; the theory of monopoly, with emphasis on 'pay off' as motivation for organised crime; the alien conspiracy theory, with a focus on foreign mafia as sources of organised crime; and the rational choice theory, which sees the decision to participate in organised crime as a balance between the risk and reward of organised crime (Gottschalke, 2010:65-67).

Historically, wealth creation and accumulation are sometimes prompted by violently daring the odds, even when such initiatives may not be sanctioned by the ruling elements within the political system that make laws, and oversee the running of the system. For instance, maritime or sea piracy, defined as acts of forceful boarding or attempt at boarding a ship with the intention of stealing, robbing, or causing harm to cargo or sailors, is one of the oldest criminal entrepreneurships (Berlusconi, 2014). It started with seafaring. It dates back to the first century B.C.E. It has remained a menace through the ages at the Mediterranean Sea, Black Sea, Adriatic Sea, Cape of Good Hope, and other locations across the globe until today, although some were sponsored by European states against one another in economic and commercial competitions (Coruh, 2018; Neethling, 2010).

Similarly, banditry, violent raiding and pilfering of human settlements, caravans, and traders by armed men with the objective of stealing from, robbing, abducting, kidnapping, and killing their victims (Okon 2022:1), is a replica of maritime piracy on land trade routes and communities. It involves the ransacking of communities and the ambushing of traders by a group of violent men in order to deprive victims of their valuables and destroy their homes and means of transport. It is also one of the oldest organised crimes around the world, since it emerged with the growth of trade between cities and regions in the world. The Silk Road, which linked China and Europe, was a major target of bandit attacks from Eurasian elements. Even within Eurasia, various wars such as the Sino-Japanese Wars as well as other internally generated contradictions increased poverty, landlessness, and other factors that encouraged individuals to resort to gangsterism with the objective of attacking the wealthy settlements and merchants on trade routes as a source of livelihood. Similar attacks were also recorded on the trans-Sahara trade routes between sub-Saharan Africa and North Africa (DuBios, 2020; Robinson, 2001; Robinson, 2000; Jafaar, 2018:2).

The foregoing historical facts illustrate that organised crime under criminal entrepreneurs is not new but has metamorphosed into different forms due to modernisation, especially the revolution in education, transport, science and technology, and the ever-permeating Information and Communication Technology (ICT). These realities have enhanced communication between criminal entrepreneurs and their foot soldiers and improved their capacity to coordinate operations, even beyond national boundaries (Lacher, 2012). For instance, white-collar crime, money laundering, and cybercrime are facilitated by sound and technical education and the manipulation of variables within a financial, economic, and political system in a non-violent manner, but with enormous successes and impacts on the security of states (Gottschalk, 2008).

Criminal entrepreneurship is induced by greed and ambition in an environment where there are many socio-economic and political loopholes to exploit the system for criminal gains. Weak or failing states, as well as poverty and unemployment, provide criminal entrepreneurs with opportunities and foot soldiers to work with (Hope, 2017). Moreso, the availability of illicit small arms and light weapons (SALW) does not only boost the capacity of criminal entrepreneurs to deploy violence in furtherance of their interests but also enables them to defend themselves in violent duels with state security operatives. Furthermore, poor security infrastructure reduces the capacity of the state to detect and check crime in a manner that instills deterrence in the minds of potential criminal entrepreneurs (Ehiane&Uwizeyimana, 2018; UNODC, 2023)).

Security, which focuses on the safety and preservation of referent objects and the values of individuals and groups, has been variously defined and conceptualized. To the realists, security is state-centric and focuses on the possession of enough military, political, diplomatic, economic, technological, and industrial capacities above other states, in order to deter violent attacks from adversaries and retain the second-strike capability to defend valued national assets and values (Morgenthau, 1967). This is a typical understanding of the security of a state in the anarchical international system of the Westphalian state system, where 'power' and 'interest' determine the security of state sovereignty against external aggression (Waltz, 1979). However, the growth in interdependency between states in the post-Cold War and the ascendancy of regional security complexes, as experienced from the domino effects of the Mano River conflicts in West Africa and elsewhere in the 1990s, forced scholars and statesmen to accept regional security as an integral part of the internal security of states in the international system (Tavares, 2010, Olawale, 2015; Okon &Ojakorotu, 2022).

Besides, the expansion of security studies to include non-violent threats, as captured by the 1994 United Nations Development Program Report, placed human security above every other paradigm in security studies. This is because new threats to state security emerge from anthropogenic factors and manipulations within the states (UNDP, 1994). Human security emphasises the safety of individuals and groups from anthropogenic and non-anthropogenic threats and freedom from fear of such attacks. With its seven components, namely: economic, political, environmental, community, health, food, and personal security, the human security paradigm as a comprehensive national security framework sought to check the totalitarianism of a state against its citizens. It also ensures that human entities within states are the referent object of security (Akpotari, 2007; Thakur, 2006; UNDP, 1994). To capture the comprehensive conceptualisation of national security, Nnoli (2006:16) summarises the concept as follows:

National security is a cherished value associated with the physical safety of individuals, groups, or nation-states, together with a similar safety of their other most cherished values. It denotes freedom from threats, anxiety and danger. Therefore, in an objective sense can be measured by the absence of threats, anxiety or danger. However, and more importantly, security has a subjective sense, which can be measured by the absence of fear that threat, anxiety and danger will materialize. In other words, it is a value associated with confidence in physical safety and other most cherished values. No matter how much safety there is in objective terms, unless there is confidence that such safety exists or will exist, there is no security.

The African Sahel is the large regional belt that separates North Africa and, indeed, the Maghreb region from sub-Saharan Africa. It consists of about thirteen states, including Eritrea, Ethiopia, Cameroun, Sudan, Chad, Mauritania, Mali, Somalia, Burkina Faso, Libya, the Niger Republic, and Nigeria. This region is shared by three subregional organisations: the Economic Community of West Africa States (ECOWAS); the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS); and the Inter-Governmental Authority on Development (IGAD). It is bounded by the

Atlantic Ocean in the west, and the Indian Ocean in the east (Sour, 2015). Besides, they are knit together by environmental insecurity, orchestrated by climate change. The bareness of the desert land, with low rainfall, leads to drought and crop failure, as well as food insecurity in parts of these states. Incessant crop failure in peripheral states with heavy dependence on agriculture facilitates poverty, unemployment, and irregular migration within and across the region (Tesfaye, 2022).

Other common denominators of these states include their geostrategic location as the ancient trans-Saharan trade routes linking the forest belt of Africa to North Africa, the Middle East, and Europe. They have also become the second leg of the triangular illicit drug trade between South America and Europe, as well as the major sources and routes for irregular migration and human trafficking through North Africa to Europe (Lacher, 2012). The Sahara Desert in these states and poor state penetration have produced several ungoverned spaces and inhabitable territories across national boundaries (Ojo, 2020). A good mix of the population are Muslims of different denominations. Political tyranny and economic marginalisation have also created several bunches of disgruntled citizens who are alienated from their nation-states (Igwe, 2011; Reitano & Shaw, 2015). These may as well account for its status as recruitment and training grounds for extremist groups and criminal entrepreneurs. The activities of these elements create security challenges such as terrorism, kidnapping, banditry, oil theft/bunkering, cattle rustling, money laundering, smuggling, human, drug, and arms trafficking, and white-collar crime. Regrettably, most of these threats are anchored and orchestrated by criminal entrepreneurs (Okoli &Okpaleke, 2019; Okon, 2022; Onwuzurigbo, 2021).

Considering the geostrategic, political, economic, and social characteristics of Africa Sahel vis-à-vis the national security definition as postulated by Nnoli (2006) earlier, it is clear that the former has enormous security challenges arising from the activities of criminal entrepreneurs in the new millennium (Sour, 2015; Tesfaye, 2022).

Theoretical framework

The chosen framework for this study is the Routine Activity Theory (RAT). Proponents of this theory include Cohen and Felson (1979), Clarke and Felson (1993), and Miro (2014). RAT is a modern framework in criminology that goes beyond the traditional criminal's biological, psychological, and social motivating factors and looks at crime as an event made possible by the convergence of certain factors. These factors are: the availability of a capable offender with the capacity to commit a crime or an offence; the existence of a suitable target for the crime so contemplated; and the absence of hindrances or guardians with the capacity to protect the identified targets or victims from the criminal. With the paradigm shift from the hitherto biological and psychological analysis, and by focusing on the ecology of crime; RAT has provided a framework that places more demand on society and individuals on crime prevention and protection of valuable assets against potential criminals (Clarke & Felson 1993). The framework sees an offender as anybody with the motive and capacity to commit crime, irrespective of age, gender, or race; suitable targets are concealable, removable, available, valuable, enjoyable, and disposable (CRAVED) entities and resources; and capable guardians against crimes denote the availability of both tangible and non-tangible, human and non-human instruments capable of protecting the targets and preventing the commission of a crime (Miro, 2014). This framework is gaining currency in political science due to rising numbers of politically related and white-collar crime in the world.

The relevance of RAT to this study lies in its capacity to explore the nexus between criminal entrepreneurs and the security of the Sahelian states. Undermining security of any state is a very serious political and economic crime against the state; hence, RAT gives insight into the role of the criminal entrepreneurs (as the offenders with the motive of making profit), vulnerable and weak Sahelian institutions (as the targets), and the paucity of political will and effective security infrastructure and architecture (as the absence of guardians necessary to check the commission of the crimes) in the various insecurity tornadoes blowing through the region. It also provides the leeway for understanding the menace and justify the drastic actions required to contain the threats emanating from the activities of criminal entrepreneurs in the region.

Methodology

The documentary research design, which focuses on the search and extraction of data from extant literature, is the chosen research design for this study. Data are therefore sourced from secondary sources, such as scholarly journals, textbooks, and reports from relevant governmental and non-governmental organisations. Choosing the design and source of data is prompted by the wealth of knowledge contained in already published studies on criminal entrepreneurs and the myriads of security challenges in Sahelian states. The choices also save time, money, and energy one would have expended on hazardous field work, as the existing data are valid, reliable, and relevant to the study (Kothari, 2004; Mogalakwe, 2006). The data are qualitatively presented and thematically analysed

Discussion

This section thematically discusses the linkages between the activities of criminal entrepreneurs and the insecurity in the Sahelian States as follows:

1 Recruitment, training, and militarisation of civil spaces

Much is being said of the menace of banditry, piracy, and oil theft, amongst others, but very little is revealed of the 'bosses' who recruited these young men and women into criminal activities. Criminal entrepreneurs organise the recruitment of the manpower needed for their nefarious activities. Sometimes, the recruitment process is done clandestinely; at other times, it is done on the internet. For instance, many victims of human trafficking were recruited by offers of juicy job opportunities outside their location and across national boundaries. Some were introduced to the prospect of making such journeys by friends and colleagues (Malakoti, 2020). Those making these contacts and introducing the deals are the foot soldiers of a 'boss', leading the cartel. Similarly, becoming a bandit or an oil thief does not happen overnight; it is done through a deliberate recruitment process whereby a potential operative is approached and attracted to the business. This is followed by the training processes in weapon handling, endurance hiking, and understanding and accepting the chain of command, as done in the military and paramilitary outfits. Besides, these operatives are trained in self-defense, adaptation to the terrain of operations, and intelligence gathering in a manner that increases their efficiency in their assigned tasks (International Crisis Group, 2020; Olaniyan & Yahaya, 2016).

These trainings depend on the likely terrain of the operations. Those operating in the oil theft, bunkering, and maritime piracy sectors are trained swimmers who are exposed to basic knowledge of marine warfare, weapon handling, and maintenance in the challenging wetland. Some are also trained in the operations and maintenance of maritime vessels. While the bandits and cattle rustlers are trained in the savannah and highlands, as well as in rural and urban warfare (Okonkwo, Okpara, & Onyinyechi, 2014;

Okoli & Okpaleke, 2019). Apart from military training, criminal entrepreneurs also indoctrinate their recruits and operatives to see the state and the targeted locations and entities as enemies to be dealt with. On the extreme, the operatives are brainwashed and radicalised to reject vital conventional norms and values in Sahelian states in order to delegitimise the states and their structures. A typical example is the radicalisation of Islamic terrorists by their sponsors against western civilisation in the region, as well as several references to the Nigerian state as a strange entity imposed on oil theft and militants in the Niger Delta. This is done to harden the operatives, and provide the basis for attacking the identified entities and locations without remorse (Aderonke, 2015; Ering, Bassey, &Odike, 2013).

The import of the foregoing narratives is that by providing military training to their foot soldiers, criminal entrepreneurs have successfully militarised civil spaces across the region. Since these operatives do not have the discipline and adequate self-control, they become terrors in their respective communities and may account for spontaneous violent outbursts between individuals and groups in the least provocative interaction (Thurston, 2020). Besides, the desire to put the acquired military skills into practice led to clashes between gang groups, which are sometimes disguised as Cult clashes. Again, the provision of informal military training to bandits, cattle rustlers, militants, and terrorists by criminal entrepreneurs has created parallel armies across the Sahel that continuously question and threaten these states' sole entitlements to coercive instruments, as enshrined in national constitutions. These may as well explain why the Sahel is a region with so many armies pledging allegiance to different commanders but opposing the Commander-in- Chiefs (C-in-C) of the Armed Forces in their respective states. The existence and deployment of these informal armies created by criminal entrepreneurs is a major source of fear and a dearth of safety in the region (Adegoke, 2020; Alumona, Azom, & Iloh, 2019).

2. Proliferation of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALWs)

Violent crimes such as terrorism, banditry, kidnapping, cattle rustling, drugs, and human trafficking, as well as piracy and crude oil bunkering, require SALW for their operations. These are easily portable weapons such as rifles, pistols, machine guns, and sub-machine guns. The weapons are used to neutralise, instill fear, and coerce victims into submission by criminals. Besides, the weapons do not only boost the confidence of foot soldiers of criminal entrepreneurs during operations; they also provide them with the needed instrument to protect themselves and facilitate their escape from the scenes of the crime. Above all, these weapons are the main instrument of destruction in the hands of criminals across the globe and the major drivers of violent outbursts in the region (UNODC, 2022).

Paradoxically, these weapons are not readily produced in the Sahel but are readily available everywhere in the region. In other words, SALW are imported into the West African Sahel through lands and seaports and circulated by cartels. Such importation is not a regular leisure activity for ordinary citizens, since SALW are not only contraband goods but highly classified, with each item assigned a unique number for ease of identification and tracking to its manufacturer, production details, and capacity (Adegoke, 2020). The import of these, among others, is that illicit importation of SALW is initiated and controlled by cartels of criminal entrepreneurs with the capacity to evade or compromise security institutions saddled with the responsibility to check and contain such illicit activities. Evading security in arms smuggling may be traced to poor detective equipment, and inadequate intelligence at the disposal of national Customs Services, and several unmanned routes into the region; these are beyond the power of the security operatives. However, to compromise, security institutions in this context require a link with the leadership of such institution(s), through politically exposed persons (PEPs), or by financial inducement by the perpetrators of the heinous crime. Thus, smuggling of SALW into the region by criminal entrepreneurs is facilitated by the weakness or inadequacy of the security infrastructures and institutions established to check the menace (Hope, 2017; Ogbonnaya, 2020).

The smuggling of SALW into the Sahel is a lesser crime when compared with the impacts created by the distribution of SALW on the security of the region. When criminal entrepreneurs in the terrorism, banditry, kidnapping, cattle rustling, and armed robbery sectors, among others, acquire these arms from the smugglers, they distribute them to their field operators for effective operations. It is the activities of these operatives that really expose the dangers associated with SALW proliferation in the Sahel, as demonstrated by numerous attacks by terrorists, kidnappers, bandits, piracy, cattle rustlers, and armed robbers in the region (Ojo, 2020). These numerous armed attacks present the greatest sources of security challenges in the region, whereby individuals and groups do not have a sense of safety in their respective locations, and are complicated by the perpetual fear of the unknown in the daily lives of the citizenry. Threats emanating from the proliferation of SALW in the Sahel by criminal entrepreneurs are the major security concerns of the Sahelian countries (UNODC, 2022).

Containing the threats emanating from the circulation and deployment of SALWin criminal operations is very challenging. These require the deployment of kinetic resources at the disposal of the Sahelian states. The deployment of troops for counterterrorism and other similar operations in the region has demonstrated the high cost of human, time, and material resources needed in such operations. Such missions require specialist platforms and equipment, as well as accurate intelligence and data gathering on the enemies. Besides, platforms, equipment, and weapons, as well as their maintenance, are costly, as such transactions are done in foreign currencies. The implications of these, among others, are the annual increase in defense spending of Sahelian states and the reduction in funding of the real sector of the economy (Abiodun, Asaolu, & Ndubuisi, 2020). Moreso, the manpower lost during these operations is a great loss to the state, given the resources and time spent on their training. Although they may be easily replaced by other colleagues in the security forces, they are irreplaceable in the lives of their family members and friends. This sad reality creates constant fear among the relatives of those serving in security services and promotes uncertainty in their lives in relation to the safety of their breadwinners in security services (International Crisis Group, 2020). This fear of the unknown further increases personal insecurity in the region.

3. Economic Sabotage

Economic crimes committed by criminal entrepreneurs are enormous and contribute to retarding the economic growth and development of the Sahelian States. One of the foremost issues is the loss of national revenue arising from the illegal mining of solid mineral resources. These resources include gold, diamonds, bauxite, uranium, and lithium. Illegal mining in Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso, and elsewhere ensures that the proceeds from the sale of these minerals go into private pockets, and such earnings are not captured in the national economic statistics of the nations. Similarly, crude oil theft and oil bunkering in Nigeria, Niger, and the Chad Republic also deprive these countries of the revenue they ought to earn from the sale of the product, as well as the royalty from oil companies. These factors, combined with insurgency, have reduced regional crude oil output within the last two decades (Anyio, 2015; Holodny, 2016; Ogbonnaya, 2020).

The impact of revenue lost to the government is better understood against the continued downward review of annual budgets in the countries as well as the tendency to borrow in order to fund national budgets. Constant borrowing has led to a heavy debt burden on Sahelian states, and attempts to service these debts have further reduced the capacity of national governments to fund national budgets. Thus, loss of revenue leads to excessive borrowing, which metamorphoses into a debt trap, and further reductions in the available funding for infrastructure and other capital items on national budgets, with the capacity to positively transform the real sector of national economies (AfDB, 2023). These dynamics inhibit governments' capacity to provide basic services to the citizenry and promote good governance. Perceived lapses in governance are part of the root causes of agitation and protest, which metamorphosed into widespread violent outbursts in the region (Ering, Bassey, &Odike, 2013).

Poor funding of infrastructure by government is complicated by endemic institutional corruption, whereby those entrusted with public funds connive with cronies to misappropriate these monies for personal use. Such money is laundered, sometimes through third-party agents or entities; and transferred to offshore accounts, among others. These sharp practices not only reduce the capacity of the state to fund infrastructural facilities required to support productive activities in the economy, but also reduce the liquidity inherently associated with the funding of such facilities in a country (Hope, 2017). These leakages and capital flight lead to the shrinking of the economy. Besides, poor infrastructural facilities facilitate disinvestment and hardly attract new investors to the region, given that such a state of infrastructural facilities increases the cost of producing goods and the price per unit of output, which may lead to ineffective demand for the products in a competitive market (Anyio, 2015; Newsom, 2011).

Also worth mentioning is the nexus between money laundering and terrorism finance, among others. Since laundered funds are illicit, secretive, and unaccounted for, such monies are sometimes used for illicit purposes such as terrorism finance, drug and human trafficking, and illicit importation of SALW into the region (Muminovic, 2024; Schott, 2006). This is done in most cases where criminal entrepreneurs or their cronies are actively involved in the prosecution of conflict, as suppliers of weapons, food, and other items to the dueling parties. Investing in those activities that could prolong such conflict becomes an objective. Given that prolonged violent conflict facilitates the patronage of these groups of criminal entrepreneurs in business and sustains profit-making. This invariably leads to a 'war economy' with lasting destruction on the security of individuals, groups, and nations in the region (Studdard, 2004).

The net impact of the economic and financial crimes of criminal entrepreneurs includes negative economic indexes such as poverty, underdevelopment, and unemployment, among others. Poverty leads to a lack of quality education, and a poor human development index; underdevelopment increases ignorance and low access to quality healthcare, as well as the basic amenities required for optimum human wellbeing in an environment; and unemployment provides idle hands for ease recruitment, radicalisation, and mobilisation as foot soldiers of bandit kingpins, extremist groups, drug barons, and other violent criminal entrepreneurs (AfDB, 2023). The activities of these foot soldiers are threatening the security of the region as manifested in banditry, terrorism, kidnapping, mass abduction, cattle rustling, maritime piracy, and oil bunkering, amongst others (Okonkwo, Okpara, & Onyinyechi, 2014; Olaniyan & Yahaya, 2016). These manifestations are the insecurity haunting the Sahelian States.

4. Environmental degradation

Mining of all genres involves excavation of the earth surface, which alters the ecosystem and destroys the physical environment. Authorised miners are guided by national rules and regulations. Such regulation includes environmental best practices in mining and ensuring the safety of humans and other environmental assets. Illegal miners in Ethiopian gold, platinum, and gemstones—opal, sapphire, and emerald among others employed by criminal entrepreneurs hardly abide by any regulation (Kelei, Elias, & Bekele, 2021; Yihdego, Salem, Ayongbaba, & Veljkovic, 2018). They are governed by greed and the desire to extract as much of the mineral resources as possible without regard to environmental protection, and safety of individuals, groups, or communities (Ogbonnaya, 2020). Similarly, smuggling, bursting of pipelines, and bunkering of crude oil in Nigeria, Libya, Chad, and elsewhere in the Sahel by criminal entrepreneurs pollute the environment and endanger many species of plants and animals (Duparc, Ferrer, & Harari, 2020; UNODC, 2022a). Unfortunately, streams and creeks affected by pollution from illegal mining and oil bunkering are sources of drinking water for nearby communities in the oil-bearing areas (Ering, Bassey, &Odike, 2013). These threaten the health and environmental security of the citizenry.

Other sources of pollution are the illegal refineries built in Nigeria and elsewhere in the region. The gas flaring and other poor environmental practices deployed by criminal entrepreneurs have devastated the surrounding environment (Yakubu, 2017). Besides, the release of carbon and other obnoxious gases into the atmosphere has contributed to global warming and thus reinforced climate change. Moreso, communities around the locations of illegal refineries are exposed to contaminated air, which leads to airborne diseases such as cancer, and cardiovascular diseases (Egobueze, 2018). Again, condemned oil, lubricants, and grease released from these illicit ventures leak into the soil and reduce soil fertility, leading to poor crop yield. This waste also destroys aquatic habitat and choice fauna and flora, as well as breeding grounds for fishes in the affected areas across the Sahel (Eaton, 2021; UNODC, 2020a).

Worth mentioning is the impact of armed operations initiated by these criminal entrepreneurs on the environment. The deployment of bandits, pirates, oil thieves, terrorists, and cattle rustlers, among others, requires vehicles and marine vessels. The locomotive used to convey their foot soldiers and equipment emits carbon and other obnoxious gases into the environment. They also lead to loss of vegetation and lasting scars on the environment (Westing, 1988; 1989). Experiences of environmental degradation generated by Boko Haram, bandits, cattle rustlers, and other criminal elements around the Lake Chad Basin, Sambisa Forest, and North Western Nigeria are illustrative of the negative impacts of criminal entrepreneurs' operations on the environment (Aju & Aju, 2018; Comolli, 2017).

5. Coordination of criminal activities and manipulation of governmental institutions

The basic functions of every entrepreneur include funding, coordination, and management of their business; these are the core activities of criminal entrepreneurs that threaten states and regional security (Zaitch, 2002). Criminal field operations require tact and skills similar to those of a typical military operation, given that the operators are required to achieve set objectives with minimum casualty. Therefore, criminal entrepreneurs provide the logistics, equipment, intelligence, and communication gadgets required for such operations. Besides, 'the boss' also provide funding for the feeding and housing of the foot soldiers throughout their operation. In case of an emergency such as injury to an operative, 'the boss' makes the necessary arrangements for medical evacuation and possible treatment of the affected personnel. Indeed, the welfare needs of criminal operators within a cartel are the responsibility of the criminal entrepreneur coordinating the operation (Ogbonnaya, 2020; Ojo, 2020). For instance, in the mass abduction of the Chibok school girls, Dapchi school girls, and Abuja-Kaduna train passengers in Nigeria in 2014, 2016, and 2022, there were criminal entrepreneurs who ordered and coordinated those operations. In the cases of the Dapchi Girls and those abducted in the Kaduna bound train, 'the bosses' had a final decision on the negotiation for their release, the conditions for their release, and the amount to be collected as ransom for their release. Therefore, these underworld entrepreneurs are the real source of security threats challenging the safety of the citizenry in the Sahel (Onwuzuruigbo, 2021; Zaitch, 2002).

On the other hand, experience has shown that some criminal entrepreneurs are either politically exposed persons (PEPs) or linked to PEPs. For instance, the mystery surrounding 'Air Cocaine' in Mali and the criminal convictions of some former governors, and other public officials in Nigeria confirm the involvement of PEPs in criminal entrepreneurship (Adegoke, 2020; Lacher, 2012; ICG, 2018). The import of these realities, among others, is that criminal entrepreneurs within or close to governments manipulate and weaken governmental institutions. This is done to protect their interests and promote the safety of their foot soldiers during and after operations (Gottschalk, 2013; Ogbonnaya, 2020). These may account for poor results in counterterrorism and other similar operations to contain banditry, cattle rustling, and human/drug trafficking in the region. When key national and security institutions are infiltrated and hijacked by criminal entrepreneurs, the national security architecture is bastardised and only serves as a symbolic entity for window dressing. In other words, the infiltration of security institutions and infrastructure by criminal entrepreneurs is one of the reasons for the weakness of these institutions and their inability to check and contain threats emanating from the activities of these criminal entrepreneurs (Hope, 2017; Ojo, 2020).

Conclusion

The security challenges facing Sahelian states are multidimensional and could be traced to several factors. However, very little scholarship attention is given to the role of criminal entrepreneurs in the security challenges of Sahelian states. This study was designed to fill this gap and answer the question: How do criminal entrepreneurs undermine the security of the African Sahel? The study revealed that criminal entrepreneurs, which include kingpins in kidnapping, piracy, banditry, terrorism, arms, human, and drug trafficking, as well as illegal miners, crude oil theft, and smuggling, are central to insecurity in the Sahel. The situation is complicated when they have access to PEPs, or PEPs are corrupted to become parts of criminal cartels and networks. The paper finds that by sponsoring the recruitment and training of criminal foot soldiers, engaging in the proliferation of SALW, sabotaging the economies of Sahelian states, facilitating the degradation of the environment, and coordinating the operations of their foot soldiers, criminal entrepreneurs are the backbones of insecurity in the Sahel. It is therefore important for stakeholders to pay more attention to the elimination of criminal entrepreneurs. The criminal justice system in the Sahel, and indeed, the continent, should be strengthened in a manner that deters these and potential criminal entrepreneurs. Moreso, stakeholders should demonstrate the political will to deal decisively with the subgroup of elites who constitute the criminal entrepreneurs. Again, there should be an aggressive drive for job creation across the Sahel for the teeming population. Innovation and application of technology, such as artificial intelligence, in crime detection and prevention should be adopted by Sahelian states. Above all, good governance and effective citizen education are required to build the bridge between responsible political leadership and followership across every level of governance in the region.

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