

How Military Forces Show or Target Traffickers During War

Union of Saints

During wartime, military forces have historically used a combination of **direct action, intelligence targeting, and operational interdiction** to confront traffickers, especially when they are linked to armed conflict.

1. Direct military action against traffickers

In some cases, militaries have launched **airstrikes, naval operations, or ground raids** to destroy trafficking infrastructure or capture individuals involved in illicit activities. For example, in 2025–2026, the U.S. military conducted **Operation Southern Spear**, a series of airstrikes in the Caribbean and Eastern Pacific targeting vessels allegedly crewed by or linked to drug traffickers such as Tren de Aragua and the National Liberation Army [Wikipedia](#). These strikes killed hundreds, captured some, and disrupted trafficking routes, though they were controversial due to allegations of extrajudicial killings and lack of public evidence [Wikipedia](#).

2. Intelligence targeting

Military and intelligence agencies often **identify traffickers through human intelligence (HUMINT), signals intelligence (SIGINT), and surveillance**. In conflict zones, traffickers may be embedded within armed groups, so military operations often coincide with counterinsurgency or counterterrorism efforts. This allows forces to **interdict trafficking networks alongside other criminal or insurgent activities** [openDemocracy](#).

3. Interdiction of trafficking routes

Navies and coast guards have **patrolled and blockaded ports, rivers, and sea lanes** to intercept trafficking vessels. In some conflicts, military forces have seized ships, detained crews, and destroyed cargo, especially when trafficking is tied to smuggling weapons, drugs, or people across borders [Wikipedia](#).

4. Collaboration with law enforcement and NGOs

In war zones, militaries sometimes **work with local police, UN peacekeeping forces, and anti-trafficking NGOs** to identify and prosecute traffickers. This is especially important when traffickers operate in post-conflict or fragile states where state institutions are weak [thelaw.institute+1](#).

5. Use of military bases and detention facilities

Military bases can serve as **safe havens for detaining trafficked persons** or as hubs for intelligence gathering. In some cases, bases have been used to process and hold individuals for prosecution, though misuse has also occurred, as in documented cases of UN staff and contractors being implicated in trafficking [openDemocracy](#).

6. Legal and political framing

Militaries often **frame trafficking as a security threat**—either as part of insurgency,

terrorism, or organized crime—so that it can be addressed under military law or as a matter of national security. This can justify targeted operations without the same legal scrutiny as civilian law enforcement actions [openDemocracy](#).

Key takeaway:

During war, military forces show traffickers by **directly attacking their operations, using intelligence to locate them, interdicting their routes, and sometimes detaining or prosecuting them**. These actions are often integrated into broader security operations, and while they can disrupt trafficking, they also carry risks of overreach, civilian harm, and legal challenges.

(AI Assisted)