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Subject: Understanding and Addressing Organized Underground Operations

Definition Organized underground operations are coordinated, often clandestine networks that carry out illegal, illicit, or covert activities to achieve economic, political, or strategic goals. These operations operate outside formal legal and regulatory systems, use secrecy, compartmentalization, violence, corruption, or manipulation to protect themselves, and adapt rapidly to enforcement countermeasures.

Core Categories and Examples - Criminal enterprise: organized theft, robbery rings, narcotics trafficking, smuggling of people and goods, money laundering, extortion, protection rackets. - Paramilitary or insurgent networks: militias, foreign proxy forces, guerrilla groups using clandestine command structures. - State-linked covert operations: shadow intelligence activities, deniable influence campaigns, sabotage, targeted harassment by foreign actors. - Transnational networks: cross-border trafficking in humans, weapons, antiquities, or illicit goods using global financial and transport systems. - Cyber underground: ransomware gangs, darknet markets, coordinated doxxing, harassment, and information laundering. - Illicit economies exploiting vulnerable populations: labor trafficking, sex trafficking, forced labor, recruitment of veterans into criminal or paramilitary roles.

Typical Structure and Tactics - Cell-based structure to limit exposure and enable plausible deniability. - Layered command with intermediaries and cutouts separating leaders from direct actions. - Legitimate fronts like shell companies, charities, real estate, or small businesses to launder proceeds. - Corruption and coercion, bribing or intimidating officials. - Sophisticated finance techniques, including cryptocurrency and informal value transfer systems. - Information operations: propaganda, disinformation, recruitment narratives, social engineering. - Operational security: encrypted communications, burner phones, code words, and in-person meetups. - Weaponization of migration or humanitarian crises to hide operatives or exploit vulnerable people. - Hybrid tactics blending criminal profit with political aims.

Recruitment and Exploitation Techniques - Targeting vulnerable populations: those with housing insecurity, trauma, addiction, or economic desperation. - Grooming and coercion via promises of money, belonging, protection, or ideology. - Romance scams and fake job offers. - Targeted recruitment of veterans, exploiting combat skills, trauma, or financial need. - Online grooming via closed groups, encrypted messaging, and social media manipulation.

Indicators and Warning Signs - Sudden unexplained wealth or inconsistent purchases. - High turnover of individuals in small homes or businesses, odd hours, and outside visitors. - Reports of coercion, missing persons, or sudden social disappearance. - Localized spikes in violent incidents following patterns. - Coordinated narratives or harassment across digital platforms. - Multiple shell companies or rapid creation and abandonment of entities. - Transactional veteran outreach or paramilitary style training with little transparency.

Harms and Impacts - Physical harm: trafficking, forced labor, sexual exploitation, injury, death. - Psychological harm: retraumatization and recruitment of vulnerable veterans. - Erosion of civic trust, corruption, weakened rule of law. - Economic harm: local market distortion, lost tax revenue, predatory extraction. - Security harms: escalation of violence, destabilization, use of asymmetric tactics. - Public health harms: disease spread via trafficking or exploitation during crises.

Practical Countermeasures and Interventions - Prevention and Resilience: strengthen social safety nets, housing, mental health care, economic opportunity; community education; partnerships between veteran

services, mental health providers, and law enforcement; safe reporting channels. - Disruption and Enforcement: target financial flows, focus on facilitators and enablers, cross-border cooperation, cyber interventions. - Survivor-Centered Response: victim relocation, legal assistance, mental health care, vocational training, trauma-informed interviewing, alternatives to criminal prosecution where appropriate. - Policy Recommendations and Accountability: transparency in public contracts and charities, tougher penalties for enablers, invest in community-based prevention, platform procedures to detect recruitment networks.

Relation to Warfare and Geopolitics Organized underground operations can be instruments of state competition and hybrid warfare, providing plausible deniability. Mass migration can be manipulated to create instability, overwhelm services, and conceal hostile actors. Civilian protection requires humanitarian response capacity alongside security screening that respects rights.

Quick Checklist for Community Responders - Look for sudden wealth, irregular employment, and frequent unexplained visitors. - Document and date suspicious interactions, preserve digital evidence. - Connect vulnerable individuals to safe housing, benefits, and trauma-informed mental health care. - Report suspected trafficking or exploitation to authorities and trusted NGOs. - Prioritize outreach to veterans through peer support and veteran services; avoid punitive responses absent clear criminal actions.