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The Crime-Terrorism Nexus

The connection between organized crime and terrorism may seem obvious but the nexus remains blurred, both conceptually and in reality. Therefore, if we want peace operations and stabilization missions to perform more anti-crime and terrorism functions in the future, argues Wibke Hansen, then establishing greater clarity about the nexus is critical.

By Wibke Hansen for ISN

Organized crime (OC) is associated with a range of security threats, including kidnapping, human trafficking, organ trafficking, and outright violence. By facilitating the circulation of weapons, drugs, counterfeit pharmaceuticals and other smuggled goods, organized crime also poses indirect but more widespread threats to security.

In some cases, organized crime can also undermine states themselves. While Europol's 2007 Organised Crime Threat Assessment stressed that such groups do not pose a direct threat to Europol member states, this is not the case for less resilient, fragile or post-conflict states. Here, OC can erode state structures, undermine the rule of law, reduce the legitimacy of governments and widen the gap between citizens and state institutions.

The threat from organized crime, however, takes on another dimension when linked with groups that violently oppose the state, be they guerillas, rebels or terrorist groups. Among Western policy-makers, the assessment of organized crime as a security threat changes dramatically when linked to transnational terrorism.

Conceptualizing the Nexus

Intersections between terrorism and OC can be divided into three broad categories: co-existence, cooperation and confluence. The organized crime-terrorism nexus may consist of interactions between separate entities – where each is engaged in essentially different activities – as well as occur within one entity involved in different types of criminal behavior.

Coexistence

Coexistence refers to situations where organized criminals and terrorist groups operate in the same theatre but explicitly remain separate entities. And while there is no cooperation between the groups, their combined presence can generate cumulative effects. A RAND study on terrorism in ungoverned territories suggests that factors including infrastructure, operational access, favorable social

characteristics and the presence of sources of income contribute to a territory's attractiveness to terrorist groups. And while business opportunities tend to be the overriding consideration for organized crime groups, an adequate infrastructure, market access and reduced risk of detection are also important.

Although fragile states do not attract organized crime and terrorist activities per se, both groups benefit from weak state structures, particularly in areas such as border control and law enforcement. Both also require certain types of infrastructure and services for their operations. Ultimately, both OC and terrorists benefit from populations accustomed to seeking goods and services from non-state suppliers and which have developed a degree of tolerance for illicit business activities.

Accordingly, some of the features that make an environment conducive to organized crime also make it attractive to terrorist groups. Where terrorist groups and organized crime are both present, they will share an interest in maintaining the most appealing social, economic and political features of that environment. As a result, their combined presence can heighten the threat to state structures even if they do not explicitly act together.

Cooperation

For cooperation between terrorist and criminal groups to occur, the gains for both partners have to overcome inherent obstacles and outweigh the risks. There are a number of reasons why organized crime and terrorist groups do *not* to cooperate with each other. Most important of these are [differences in motives](). Terrorist groups pursue political agendas whereas organized criminals tend to seek changes to the political status quo only when it threatens their activities. And while the profit to be made from illicit activities are the primary motivation for organized criminals, terrorists regard profit making ventures as a means rather than an end.

Consequently, as both groups seek to protect their operations, collaboration with outside actors – with different motives, ideologies or cultural dispositions – is inherently risky. It can also result in increased attention from law-enforcement agencies. However, the benefits of cooperation can outweigh these risks where certain goods or services - or specific types of operational support - can be acquired in a cost-effective manner from the other type of group. In some cases, *customer-service provider relationships* have developed, as both criminals and terrorist groups often require similar expertise, support structures and services – including false papers, IT and communications specialists, and counter-surveillance technology.

A different type of customer-service provider relationship can occur where one group controls territory which is of strategic value for the operational goals of the other. This could include the *taxing* of illicit revenue streams or the provision of protection or transport for a share of the profits. However, despite opportunities for cooperation, most analysts agree that long-term *alliances* between OC and terrorist groups are unlikely. Where it does occur, cooperation is more likely to be ad-hoc, short-term and focused upon specific operational requirements. While the *pooling of resources and assets* between the two types of groups is conceivable, it requires very long-term arrangements to be reliable.

Confluence

A nexus between organized crime and terrorism, however, does not require separate organizations. In fact, its most common form might be the confluence of both types of activity within one entity.

Organized criminal networks have long used terror tactics to safeguard business interests and protect their working environments. Indeed, the term "narco-terrorism" was originally coined to refer to precisely this phenomenon. More significant, however, is the recent cultivation of *in-house criminal expertise* by terrorist groups to help meet operational requirements. For terrorist groups, the incentive to develop such capabilities is obvious as proceeds from illicit streams can provide a sizeable and reliable source of funding.

Indeed, the attraction of such funding has prompted analysts to suggest that lucrative illicit activities may eventually transform politically-motivated groups into bona fide criminal organizations. As terrorists become increasingly involved in commercial enterprises, their interest in making a profit gradually overrides political aspirations. Frequently cited in this regard is the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), although the evidence is [disputed](). In the end, it becomes difficult to judge a group's motivation for engaging in organized crime, especially as motivations can vary among the group's members.

The Strongest Link?

Frustratingly, empirical evidence for the organized crime-terror nexus is notoriously scarce. This, in turn, makes it difficult to determine precisely which aspects of the nexus are the most significant. The handful of examples that are frequently cited suggest that terrorist groups engaging in organized crime for fundraising purposes represent the strongest link – with the drugs trade playing a particularly prominent role. But this pattern is hardly a recent phenomenon. Rebels, guerillas and insurgents have long used organized crime and illicit revenue streams to finance their political agendas. Indeed, further historical analysis of the relationship between organized crime and rebel activities –in places like Colombia, Sierra Leone and Kosovo – may provide further useful insights.

Organized crime is also just one form of terrorist financing among many– including donations, legal businesses and common crime – and brings with it some obvious risks to terrorist groups. Involvement in organized crime can compromise legitimacy and popular support, distract from political goals, and invite the full force of domestic (and on occasions international) law enforcement activities. Moreover, building an effective organized crime-terror nexus requires additional skills and infrastructure ([Freeman]() 2011). While individual terrorist cells can engage in sporadic crime, organized crime requires more permanent structures, transnational networks and logistics. Whether a terrorist group engages in organized crime is thus not only contingent on the cost of its operations, but also on its operational capabilities ([Hutchinson, O'Malley]() 2007).

Implications for Policy

The potential for cooperation between organized crime and terrorist groups should lead to governments and law enforcement agencies developing assertive and coordinated counter-strategies. Preventing OC and terrorism from working together - or from generating a cumulative impact that further weakens vulnerable states - will be difficult if efforts to fight organized crime and terrorism remain in separate portfolios. Understanding the factors that contribute to the emergence of OC and terrorist groups – not to mention the possibilities of cooperation between them – will not only make states more resilient, but also more effective in ensuring that the crime-terrorism nexus becomes more risky and less profitable. Counter-strategies must not be limited to making police more effective and borders tighter. Improving public services, generating employment in the licit economy and establishing a reliable legal environment can be just as important for the overall resilience of states.

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