

20 March 2015

# A New Enemy - How Conflict in the Islamic World Is Driving International Organized Crime

Why have so many Muslim states become hotbeds of organized crime? Neil Thompson's answer looks beyond depressed economies, faltering dictatorships and human rights abuses. Indeed, he sees too many individuals that have become corrupted by the countless opportunities that conflict provides.

By Neil Thompson for ISN

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Whenever a state collapses into civil war or economic anarchy, its organized crime groups find plenty of opportunities to grow in influence. This was the case in Albania in 1996-1997 when a series of pyramid schemes collapsed the economy. In the ensuing riots the government collapsed, the army and police disbanded and the mounting unrest allowed protesters to storm government arms depots. One crowd [looted](#) up to 500,000 rifles and other pieces of military equipment from the southern city of Lushnje. The stolen arms were promptly sold on the black market and the availability of plentiful supplies of cheap weapons and ammunition was a major spark for the start of war in neighboring Kosovo the following year. By 1999 transnational organized criminal gangs had helped change the supposedly sacrosanct lines of European borders. It was a seminal moment for a still under-appreciated non-state actor - globalized transnational criminal networks. The next might be provided by the Islamic world.

## On Western Doorsteps

Westerners living in developed countries are often insulated from the reality of modern organized crime's strength because the hubs of transnational criminal operations tend to be located in countries with weak economies and fragile state institutions. Consequently, too many Western analysts continue to see transnational criminal groups as a second tier threat, and focus instead on more obvious dangers such as militant Islamist networks or state-backed rebels fighting '[proxy wars](#)'. Yet, wherever state structures are unable to contain them, criminal groups have found spaces to expand and to diversify. This is as true in the globalized offline world as it is in the virtual spaces of the internet.

From the emergence of Eurasian mafias as '[mid-wives of capitalism](#)' in the post-Soviet space to the rise of Somalia's pirate bands, organized criminal networks have an insidious ability to surprise the West with their arrival, the forms they assume and the unique challenges they pose to democracy

and peace. Take the case of Mexico, a democratic middle-income country on the border of the world's strongest military power. The US-backed war against its drug cartels has raged for almost a decade now and [claimed the lives](#) of over one hundred thousand people.

Currently the depressed economies and faltering dictatorships of the greater Middle East are primarily seen as a serious threat to international and regional security because they have created self-funding networks of violent religious extremists such as the so-called Islamic State. Another familiar consideration is the gross human rights abuses carried out by the security services of many regional governments. Yet, this analysis misses a potential third source of destabilization - networks of mafia-like groups whose roots lie inside state security services *and/or* the Islamist groups opposing them.

Many already-powerful Middle Eastern state agents have become [thoroughly criminalized](#) by the opportunities the chaos of war affords, in a region notorious for impunity. For instance, Egypt's ex-President Hosni Mubarak and his sons were [released](#) from prison in January 2015, four years after their convictions on a variety of serious criminal charges, including conspiracy to murder, while in office. Meanwhile much of the revenue for Islamist groups like Islamic State is generated by proceeds from criminal activities or from taxing criminal groups. Consequently, the consolidation of war economies mean that criminal networks currently created or sponsored by the state or Islamist groups might well outgrow their origins and original purposes. The danger here is that these groups will not disappear when a conflict ends. Indeed, historical experience from conflicts in places like Colombia suggests that they adapt and persist in new forms.

## **Further Fallout**

In a globalizing world, the networking impulses that have created transnational supply chains stretching thousands of miles for contraband goods are sure to blur the distinctions between state and non-state actor, law enforcer, rebel and criminal. Moreover, the unsettled end periods of military conflicts are often marked with a crime wave as individuals turn skills learned during war to private use. With poor economic prospects, a large black market economy and large numbers of guerrillas, paramilitaries, soldiers and secret policemen looking for new opportunities, the chances of an explosion in organized crime across the Middle East are high, to say the least. The overall failure of the Arab Spring will also play its part. So will the region's youthful population, persistent high unemployment and geographical proximity to the European market. And let's not forget about pre-establishment of human-trafficking involving countries like Libya, as well as high levels of corruption and impunity in the region's state structures.

Conflicts also lead to the development of lawless zones that shelter criminal networks - as well as insurgent groups - from law enforcement activities. According to the Fund for Peace's (FFP) [Fragile States Index 2014](#), Syria, Libya, Yemen and several other countries with significant Muslim populations fall into the worst categories, indicating that the state no longer controls all its territory. In others, such as Egypt and Algeria, central authority is either [compromised](#) or very [weak](#). A good example of this is Lebanon's Bekaa Valley, long a source of marijuana to European markets. There are nearly 40,000 outstanding warrants hanging over the heads of Bekaa residents. Yet, by retreating to the northern reaches of the valley local clans involved in drug farming have managed to defy Lebanon's ineffective central authorities. In addition, the Hezbollah leadership has distanced itself from direct leadership of the clans but continues to demand a political, rather than legal, solution to the problem.

Wars also strengthen indigenous criminal organizations and weaken the state institutions charged with combating them, as resources are diverted into fighting insurgencies. Criminal growth can be partly be tracked by the increase of corruption, an inevitable side-effect of an increase in black

market opportunities. Out of 174 nations, Transparency International's 2014 corruption ratings rank Yemen at 161, Iraq at 170, Libya at 166 and Syria at 159. Scores in all four countries have fallen since 2012 and all four are still the scene of armed conflict and political instability.

Indeed, the effects of corruption and insecurity do not remain limited cleanly by borders but spill into neighboring states. NATO member Turkey has had a long history of oil-fuelled corruption dating back to the 1990s 'Oil for Food' UN program. [Today Islamic State middlemen](#) sell oil to smugglers, who bribe their way past Turkish gendarmes at the border and sell it to Turkish businessmen. The black market fuel is then sold onto the Turkish consumer at a fraction of its true worth. These transactions fuel attacks like the one [that killed](#) Saudi General Oudah al-Belawi, commander of border operations in Saudi Arabia's northern zone in January. Organized crime in Turkey has therefore facilitated Islamist terrorism on the Saudi border, while Islamic State has helped corrupt Turkey's nascent democracy.

### **From East to West**

Yet, unlike their European and Latin American, Italian counterparts, Islamic criminal enterprises have so far attracted little Western [attention](#) as an issue separate from terrorism. Nonetheless organized crime is an entrenched part of the political economy of many Muslim states. For example, an Afghan narcotics boom has already occurred according to the BBC as last year's opium harvest reached a record high. The UN valued the 2013 crop at nearly \$3bn (£1.86bn), up 50% from 2012. Indeed, cultivation has been rising since 2010, a reflection of the fact that Afghanistan currently produces more than 80% of the world's opium.

At the opposite end of the Islamic world are West Africa's cigarette and cocaine smuggling operations - a very lucrative trade that is [dominated](#) by criminalized Islamist networks. These have grown out of the defeated remnants of Algerian jihadist groups, much as leftist insurgent groups have come to play an important role in the drugs trade in Latin America. Interestingly, the jihadist considered to be at the forefront of these activities, Mokhtar Belmokhtar, was once considered a minor threat and a pragmatist because his criminal business interests seemed more pressing to him. However, these same interests gave him the means to launch a devastating attack on the In Amenas gas plant in 2013.

It could also be claimed that the persistence of tribal or clan-based identities in parts of the Islamic world can geographically limit some present criminal operations. For example, as mentioned above, the farming families involved in the marijuana trade in Lebanon's Bekaa Valley rarely leave it due to many active warrants for their arrest outside the valley. Yet, just as the Middle East has already produced several multinational global terrorist networks there might also come a time when its criminal elements are clearly capable of reaching the same level of development. Meanwhile, the wars affecting the area have ironically given Middle Eastern criminal groups a larger global diaspora to blend in with and recruit from, facilitating a growth of operations outside their home countries.

This does not just include Western states, some of whom have been criticized for accepting few regional refugees, but also neighboring Muslim nations. Displaced Syrians [now](#) make up a quarter of Lebanon's population for example. As far back as 2013, a [UNHCR report](#) found organized crime networks operating easily in the biggest Syrian refugee camp, Za'atari in Jordan. [From Slow Boil to Breaking Point](#) also described how Syrian refugees were paying up to \$500 to middlemen to be 'sponsored' by Jordanian citizens. This entitled them to live outside of the lawless and overcrowded sites they found themselves in - it also represented another revenue stream for criminal groups. Criminal networks have also begun exploiting Syrian refugees by using them as drug mules. There has been a large spike in seizures of narcotics in neighboring countries [according](#) to the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organised Crime network.

## **A Grim Outlook**

Four years after the start (and apparent collapse) of the Arab Spring, Western headlines still focus on the security threat of revolutionary Islamist militant groups. But there is no reason to suppose the emergence of factors favorable to the growth of mafia-type groups in the Islamic world will not also impact upon the West (and the rest) in the future. The toxic combination of broken economic and political systems, geographical proximity to lucrative European black markets, and a youthful and often traumatized population is an open invitation to criminal groups already operating in a vacuum of state authority. Similar circumstances produced generational crime waves of extraordinary virulence in the former Soviet Union and Latin America, which those areas are still coping with today. It's entirely possible the Middle East is poised to follow in their footsteps.

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## **Publisher**

[International Relations and Security Network \(ISN\)](#)

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