



Threat Convergence: New Pathways to Proliferation? Expert Series

Growing Together: Ideological and Operational Linkages Between Terrorist and Criminal Networks

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The operational linkages between criminals and terrorists are much stronger than their ideological links, making it hard in many parts of the world to distinguish between these two types of networks. A local warlord in Afghanistan who maintains his power through drug smuggling may shelter a drug trafficker one day and a terrorist the next. The relationship becomes murkier in conflict regions or weak states, including separatist regions of the Caucasus where serious smuggling of highly enriched uranium has been detected.

Criminals who form alliances with terrorists or consider themselves sympathizers are fundamentally different from the popular images of organized crime cultivated in mafia or yakuza movies. They have no long-term interests in developing their businesses and maintaining a particular way of life and code of behavior. Rather, these smugglers come out of environments with little stability and limited prospects for the future. For such individuals, nuclear terrorism remains a distant reality because an attack in their immediate environment is unlikely and the resulting harm will occur in a distant place.

The smuggling of nuclear materials follows patterns of contemporary smuggling, in which specialization in a particular commodity is less likely. Criminal organizations are diversified and will move different commodities on demand. High-value items can be moved along the same path as those of lesser value, especially when border crossing officials complicit in smuggling allow any commodity across. Moreover, nuclear smuggling occurs in regions already prone to the illicit movement of goods and trafficking in cigarettes, drugs, and conventional arms; in uncontrolled regions once part of the former Soviet Union, every form of illicit relationship flourishes. These areas include Transdniester, Abkhazia, Ossetia and Nagorno-Karabagh and formerly the Pankisi Gorge area of Georgia. Criminals and terrorists have been documented to interact in the Pankisi Gorge area¹. They also work together in other separatist areas.

¹ The man arrested in the planned ricin attack in London had been arrested in Pankisi where he interacted with criminals and terrorists. Glen Segell, "The London Ricin Cell: Implications for the Future" presented at Terrorism, Transnational Networks and WMD Proliferation: Indications and Warning in an Era of Globalization, July 25-27 2006, Naval Postgraduate School, Monterey, CA.

In the special case of nuclear smuggling, criminal groups gather intelligence allowing them to circumvent or bypass radiation detectors and related controls², or they may simply choose to move through passes developed by smugglers where they can cross without detection. The typical case involves nuclear materials emitting low levels of radiation, in quantity and quality insufficient to make a dirty bomb, much less an improvised nuclear device. Of much greater concern is that a shipment of shielded highly enriched uranium (HEU) will slip past existing detectors³.

The Criminal Actors

A range of actors moves nuclear materials. Individual smugglers may be rogue actors hired by and working for criminal networks, or they can be employed by states that seek to harm others through the dissemination of nuclear materials. Alternatively, current and former members of the security apparatus may employ smugglers; these couriers are deemed disposable, and will not talk if detained.

Some of those who move nuclear materials do so consciously, even at risk to themselves, because they believe that something this dangerous must have worth⁴. Individual smugglers may unknowingly carry shielded HEU as cargo, despite physical evidence such as burns and more severe radiological illnesses. In drug trafficking organizations, for example, the transporter is isolated from the larger organization and lacks knowledge of the full operations of its network. If arrested, the courier can disclose little of those who hired him or the intended destination of his cargo.

Whereas law enforcement officers and their counterparts in the intelligence community often work in fragmented systems, criminals and terrorists sometimes manage to establish trust across ethnic groups and borders. This trust relationship was exemplified in a recent case of nuclear smuggling across the Russian-Georgian border, in which citizens in both countries collaborated in the movement of material⁵.

Smugglers can easily exploit mistrust and poor information-sharing among government ministries within countries and among different countries. The intense classification of nuclear information exacerbates the information-sharing problem, compounded by the desire of policing or intelligence agencies to maintain a critical advantage in the information arena. Consequently, information on detected nuclear materials or potential attacks with a radioactive dispersal device (RDD or dirty bomb) is not shared, which in turn reduces the effectiveness of detection strategies such as provision and placement of detection equipment and nuclear safeguards training.

² Lee, Rensselaer, "Nuclear Smuggling, Rogue States and Terrorists," The China and Eurasia Forum Quarterly, Vol. 4, no.2, May 2006, Pg.30.

³ Lee, 2006.

⁴ Based on interviews by the TraCCC team in Georgia concerning individuals who have been caught transporting low level radiation sources.

⁵ Michael Crowley, "The Stuff Sam Nunn's Nightmares Are Made of," New York Times magazine, Feb. 25, 2007.

Places of Interaction

Many immigrant communities in Western Europe are outside the control of law enforcement and intelligence authorities. In these urban neighborhoods of major and secondary European cities, relationships can be established between terrorists and criminals in restaurants, cafes, businesses and religious institutions. Local police officials may be tolerating petty crime because of pay-offs; this petty crime may cement the relationships of criminals and terrorists, fostering the development of illicit networks. These urban crime-terror networks can be the potential conduits or recipients of potentially deadly nuclear materials.

Prisons provide another major area of interaction. No longer merely schools of crime, prisons have become corporate headquarters of crime groups where relationships are formed and orders are entered for supplies of all varieties of illicit commodities including weapons and nuclear materials⁶. A clear example of this crime-terror interaction is evident in Spanish prisons prior to the Madrid bombings, where terrorists recruited ordinary criminals to carry out the plot. Recognizing the role of the prison as an incubator of criminal-terrorist interactions, Spanish authorities developed recommendations to identify and limit the possibilities of terrorist recruitment among prisoners⁷. Unfortunately, the Spanish experience is not an isolated case but rather an incident in a pattern observed in many penal institutions in western Europe, Russia as well as elsewhere⁸.

As the great American criminologist Edwin Sutherland explained in his theory of “differential association”, the extent of involvement in crime is explained by the intensity and duration of the relationship⁹. Moderate penal systems typical of many Western European states allow prisoner interaction within cellblocks, creating space for criminals and terrorists to interact over a long time with limited other activity to serve as a distraction.

Successful interactions often rely on the terrorists’ subterfuge. Terrorists commit criminal acts to survive, and are imprisoned for non-terrorist criminal offenses. These criminal acts are not merely financial in nature but consist of a wide range of supporting activities including document fraud, illegal cross-border transport of people and money laundering. It is not surprising, therefore, that terrorists are often imprisoned under false names, their identities constructed either by their skillful operatives or as a result of their involvement in criminal enterprises.

⁶ Ian Cuthbertson, “Prisons and the Education of Terrorists” *World Policy Journal* Vol. 21, Fall 2004, 15-22. and presentation of Alon Daniel at TraCCC NATO conference, May 4-6, American University, Washington, D.C.

⁷ “Conclusiones de la Comision,” pp.248-250

<http://www.elmundo.es/documentos/2004/03/espana/atentados11m/documentos.html>, accessed August 13, 2006.

⁸ For Russian discussion of the rise of Islam in prison see Islam na zone, Beseda s aktivistom dav’ata v mestakh zakliucheniia www.islam.ru/pressclub/gost/zona/ accessed August 14, 2006.

⁹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Differential_association, accessed August 12, 2006.

Prison authorities, lacking firm knowledge of who they have confined in their prisons, cannot isolate criminals from terrorists because they do not know that they have arrested terrorists¹⁰. Unless they engage in undercover work in prisons—introducing informants, monitoring conversations and visitors, they may be entirely ignorant as to the actual identity of those they have in their custody. The criminals targeted for recruitment to transport cargo, move people or provide false documents are likely unaware of the true affiliations and motives of their new-found partners.

“New” Criminal Networks

Traditional organized crime syndicates need the state and the global economic system¹¹. They thrive on obtaining government contracts and depend on the international financial system to retain its value and thereby retain their wealth. These organized crime groups have little in common with the newer transnational crime groups that often originate from post-conflict situations and thrive on chaos. Some criminal groups of the Soviet successor states fit the model of the newer transnational criminals who possess neither large resources nor loyalty to the state. Their services are merely available to the highest bidder. These newer crime groups have a different risk calculus compared to networks operating in established societies where law enforcement functions better and association with terrorists enhances risk of disrupting profitable and influence-enhancing operations.

The newer crime groups in ungovernable regions are now forging alliances with terrorist organizations. In such regions as the uncontrolled territories of Georgia, South Ossetia and Abkhazia, through which smuggled materials flow, neither the criminals nor the terrorists need fear state bodies of control¹². Corrupt and ineffective law enforcement in conflict regions makes attempts at control almost futile.

Newer transnational crime groups have proliferated in number and membership since the end of the Cold War. Many show a willingness to cooperate with terrorists. The years of war and conflict have destroyed and impoverished families and undermined community values. These groups thrive on the surrounding poverty and demoralized populations, their operations facilitated by the absence of an effective state. The newer crime groups may not share the ideological motivations of the terrorists but make common cause in exploiting weak states. In fact, the crime groups may promote grievances, because it is through the prolongation of conflict that they enhance their profits¹³. This milieu—in which transnational criminals, terrorists, and corruption merge—poses a threat to the international order.

¹⁰ For an indication of this problem, see the Swiss acknowledgement of their confinement of a major terrorist but his short term in prison indicates that he was confined as an ordinary criminal Craig Whitlock, “In Neutral Switzerland, A Rising Radicalism,” *Washington Post*, June 20, 2006, Pg. A 14-15.

¹¹ Louise Shelley, “Unravelling the New Criminal Nexus,” *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs*, Winter/Spring 2005, 5-13, Shelley, Louise, “The Unholy Trinity: Transnational Crime, Corruption and Terrorism,” *Brown Journal of International Affairs*, XI, issue 2, winter-spring 2005, 101-111.

¹² Kukhianidze, Alexandre et.al Smuggling Through Abkhazia and Tskinali Region of Georgia Tbilisi: Polygraph, 2004, p 5 and Baran.

¹³ Mats Berdal and David M. Malone, *Greed & Grievance: Economic Agendas in Civil Wars*. (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2000).

Smuggling networks are composed of different post-Soviet crime groups and those of neighboring regions. As previously discussed, nuclear materials are just one of many illicit commodities that the smugglers move both wittingly and unwittingly across the largely unpoliced and unmonitored borders of former Soviet territory.

The involvement of these diverse groups in nuclear smuggling has been shown by previous cases. In the mid-1990s, “60 Minutes” and *US News and World Report* exposed the involvement of the sports mafia, tied to high ranking officials in Ekaterinburg, in the movement to Lithuania of large quantities of beryllium, a restricted substance that was contaminated with .1 kilograms of highly enriched uranium¹⁴.

In the late 1990s, security officials discussed a case of nuclear smuggling with a Russian researcher known to the author. That case involved the unusual combination of Russian, Mongolian and Chinese criminals. This combination suggests that Russian groups will cooperate with outsiders to perpetrate a theft even in this high risk area.

The existence of a crime-terror link in nuclear smuggling enhances the threat posed by the dispersion of nuclear materials. Thankfully, it does not guarantee the effective utilization of these materials to create either a dirty bomb or an improvised nuclear device. Much more is needed in terms of human manpower, optimal working conditions and well trained scientists or engineers. Yet the threat increases with the continuing departure of the materials from the former Soviet Union and the enhanced motivation of terrorists to obtain these materials.

The existence of crime-terror networks requires much more attention and analysis by the international community. Only those who have ignored the role of prisons in the incubation of terrorism can deny that there is a link between criminals and terrorists. Technological solutions to safeguard against the diversion and transport of nuclear materials provide only part of the answer. Much more attention needs to be paid to the human component of the nuclear smuggling.

¹⁴ For technical information on this case see http://www.atomicarchive.com/Almanac/Smuggling_details.shtml accessed August 14, 2006; for media reports see <http://www.nti.org/db/nistraff/1995/19951960.htm>, accessed August 14, 2006.

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