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Shadow Networks: The Growing Nexus of Terrorism and Organised Crime

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Keypoints

- There are growing links between terrorist and organised crime groups who are sharing expertise and are cooperating in kidnapping, arms, drugs and human trafficking, as well as drug production, cigarette smuggling, extortion and fraud.
- The growing nexus of shared tactics and methods of terror and crime groups is due to four major developments: globalization, the communication revolution through the Internet, the end of the Cold War, and the global “war on terror”.
- Both terrorist and organised crime groups are leveraging the Internet for recruitment, planning, psychological operations, logistics, and fundraising. The Internet has become the platform for both organised crime and terrorists to conduct cybercrimes ranging from video piracy, credit card fraud, selling drugs, extortion, money laundering and pornography.
- The growing nexus has facilitated terrorists to access automatic weapons, including stand-off weapons and explosive devices, empowering them to challenge police, land and naval forces with the latest sophisticated weaponry and intelligence.
- The growing nexus of terrorism and organised crime is exacerbating efforts in war-fighting and peace-making in Iraq and Afghanistan. Also, West Africa in general and the Sahel in particular have become a dangerous new trafficking hub uniting both terrorists and organised crime cartels across a wide and mostly ungoverned land mass.
- The growing nexus of terrorism and organised crime groups is challenging international and national security by weakening democratic institutions, compromising government institutions, damaging the credibility of financial institutions and by infiltrating the formal economy, leading to increased crime and human security challenges.

The Geneva Centre for Security Policy (GCSP) is an international foundation with over 40 member states that promotes the building and maintenance of peace, security and stability through training, research and dialogue. The GCSP trains government officials, diplomats, military officers, international civil servants, NGO staff and business executives in all fields of international and national security policy.

Terrorism and transnational organised crime can no longer be studied in isolation. Both criminal and terrorist groups are increasingly cooperating. Some groups are transforming into new crime-terror groups displaying the characteristics of both. A decade ago terrorism and organised crime were perceived to be driven by different motivations: terrorists were perceived to have political, ideological, religious or ethnic goals and organised criminals mostly economic goals. Terrorism was viewed not as a criminal activity but as a form of political violence. Today, most terrorists are engaged in some form of organised crime and a growing number of organised crime cartels are engaging in political violence. Trafficking drugs is the most common criminal act that is uniting organised criminals with terrorists. These groups are being labelled by law enforcement officials in such new terms as narcoterror, narcoguerrillas and narcofundamentalism.¹ Narcoterrorism, for example, could be defined as the use of drug trafficking to finance and advance the political and ideological objectives of non-state actors, criminal groups and terrorists in such a way that they threaten the rule of law, the state and the region.

The growing symbiosis of crime and terror is making them both more powerful: terrorists are benefiting from the revenue of criminal activities and organised criminals are using terrorist tactics to gain political power. In some cases, criminal groups have adopted the ideology of terrorist groups or are highly supportive of their motives, especially in regions with sharpening ethnic and religious tensions.² Terrorists are becoming more willing to cooperate directly with organised crime groups. Admiral James Stavridis, Commander of the US European Command (USEUCOM) and NATO's Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR), has maintained that the nexus between illicit drug trafficking, "including routes, profits, and corruptive influence" and "Islamic radical terrorism", is a growing security threat.³ Both groups are displaying similar operational and organizational modus operandi, and are sharing expertise.

Already in the 1980s, terrorist organizations in Latin America turned to narcotics trafficking to fund their activities, most famously the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Columbia (FARC), whose narcotic operations today have largely surpassed its terrorist ambitions in importance and scope.⁴ In 1985, the Medellin cartel joined forces with the 19th of April Movement (M19) terrorists to help them in bomb-making techniques. Similarly, in 1993, the Sicilian mafia responded to a wave of criminal convictions of its top leaders by placing a bomb in the Uffizi Museum in Florence as a new strategy to intimidate the government and demonstrate its power.⁵ However, most scholars maintain that the 1990s was the decade in which the nexus between organised crime and terrorist groups was consolidated.⁶

The nexus between crime and terror is due to four major developments: globalization, the communication revolution through the Internet, the end of the Cold War, and the "global war on terror". Globalization has meant that due to free trade flows and the reduction of trade barriers, as well as the facility of global travel, crime and terror can be conducted in all corners of the earth around the clock. The end of the Cold War reduced the availability of state financing for terrorist and insurgent movements which forced terrorists to adopt criminal activities to increase their revenues.

The "global war on terror" that was launched shortly after 11 September 2001 which resulted in global cooperation to crack down on terrorist financing caused a further decline in state spon-

sored terror and pushed terrorists toward closer cooperation with organised crime. While links between terrorists and organised crime cartels are not always clear and difficult to quantify, there is growing evidence that cooperation is growing mostly due to the use of cyberspace, global financial systems, and their more loosely knit network structures.⁷ The resiliency of these networks is also due to the fact that some groups are supported by both state sponsorship and criminal activities. While organised crime groups in the past were unwilling to cooperate with terrorists for many reasons – including an increased susceptibility to law enforcement or military action and a loss of public support – the more modern organised crime cartels appear more willing to do so. Possessing no real loyalties to any state, these groups cooperate transnationally and conduct their criminal activities in fluid network structures. They are able to offer their services to the highest bidder. In some cases younger, smaller and more loosely organised groups have become ideologically radicalized and actively pursue business in the interest of politics as well as to support the goals of terrorist groups.⁸

Shared Tactics and Methods

The Internet and cyberspace have become essential tools for organised crime and terrorist networks. Terrorists and organised criminals are harnessing Internet tools which they both employ for recruitment, propaganda, planning, logistics, fundraising, and money laundering. The Internet has also facilitated cybercrimes ranging from identity theft to video piracy to credit card fraud to phishing. The Internet is widely used to plan terrorist attacks, including casing targets and circulating tutorials on shooting, building bombs and surface-to-air missile operation. The Internet also serves as a platform to traffic women and children, smuggle illegal migrants, sell weapons, obtain assassination services, sell bomb-making equipment, illegal drugs, and bogus pharmaceutical drugs, and to deal with toxic waste.⁹

Both crime groups and terrorists have profited from the anonymity of the Internet to diffuse propaganda, extort victims and recruit new members. The Internet was formulated on a military system making it easy to circumvent interference and making it difficult to police and govern.¹⁰ Both crime and terrorist groups can activate its many encryption devices to circumvent detection, and to use widely available software tools to locate open ports and overcome password tools to facilitate hacking into banks and companies to steal identities, credit card information, money and copyrights, while extorting banks and companies for millions of dollars. Hacking attacks can grow exponentially since spam messages can be sent out by automation within a short amount of time, allowing for as many as 80 million hacking attacks a day.¹¹

Prisons are also important meeting grounds for both terrorists and organised criminals. It is difficult to isolate terrorists from organised criminals when unrecognized terrorists are arrested on criminal charges.¹² Prisons allow terrorists to recruit criminals, to help run their networks – especially in seeking specialists in fraudulent documents and in cooperating in the trafficking of arms, drugs and humans.¹³ The terrorists who executed the Madrid train bombings on 11 March 2004 were organised criminals that were recruited in prison by terrorists to carry out the plot.¹⁴

Financing is critical for any terrorist operation to succeed. Modern terrorists engage in mortgage fraud, social security fraud, insurance fraud, charitable fraud and identity fraud.¹⁵ According to Collins, almost all acts of terrorism enacted in the United States were facilitated by stolen identities.¹⁶ The 9/11 Commission Re-

port maintains that many terrorists committed identity fraud, stating that access to travel documents is as important as weapons.¹⁷ Ramzi Yousef, the perpetrator of the first World Trade Center attack in 1993 committed immigration fraud.

Mexican cartels are adopting the same fear tactics employed by narcoterrorists in Colombia in the 1980s and current insurgents and terrorists in Afghanistan and Iraq. Crime cartels in Mexico are deepening the cycle of violence by targeting civilians, carrying out emblematic assassinations of members of the military, police, government, and city mayors with grisly beheadings and public displays of their victims. These groups are also using improvised explosive devices (IEDs) and car bombs and are conducting terrorist training camps.

There are warning signs that Mexican drug cartels may be crossing over to international terrorism. The United States defines international terrorism as "activities that appear to be intended to intimidate or coerce a civilian population, to influence policy of a government by intimidation or coercion, or to affect the conduct of a government by assassination or kidnapping".¹⁸ The 2009 killing of US consulate employees in Ciudad Juarez by the Juarez cartel and the death threat made by the Los Zetas cartel to Guatemalan President Alvaro Colom could lead the United States to list Los Zetas on its list of foreign terrorist organizations (FTOs), especially if they attempt to assassinate a high-level official from a Central American neighbour. In December 2010, Mexican lawmakers passed legislation defining the punishment for acts of terrorism. According to this new law, the definition of terrorism could apply to cartel-related activities. Branding the Mexican cartels as terrorists could be an important step in undermining the public tolerance of organised crime. In the Spring of 2011, US legislation was proposed to designate seven Mexican cartels as FTOs.

From Convergence to Strategic Alliances

Shared tactics have resulted in strategic alliances between organised crime and terrorist groups, especially if they are operating in the same territory. Al Qaeda has cooperated with the Naples-based Camorra mafia for expertise in forging travel documents, and the Camorra has helped smuggle al Qaeda operatives to safe houses in Europe.¹⁹ Italy's Divisione Investigazioni Generali e Operazioni Speciali (DIGOS) crime unit claims that more than a thousand al Qaeda operatives may have been channelled into Europe in this manner.²⁰ Terrorists are smuggled into Europe via the same logistics that are employed to traffic drugs, cigarettes and other contraband into Europe.²¹ US law officials are increasingly concerned with Hezbollah which is increasingly relying on Mexican drug cartels to smuggle goods into the United States. Government officials fear that they will use these same routes to smuggle terrorists in the future.²²

While some terrorist organizations may only profit briefly or indirectly from organised crime, others converge and become a hybrid organization displaying both characteristics. The FARC is an example of a terrorist organization with an in-house criminal structure. A particular problem is the convergence of narcotics trafficking rings and terrorist groups. The US Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) reports that 60 percent of foreign terrorist organizations have links to the drugs trade.²³ The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) recently issued a report on drug trafficking as a means to finance terrorism, highlighting the case of heroin trafficking, terrorists and warlords in Afghanistan, as well as insurgents in Central Asia, the Russian Federation, and

along the trafficking routes of the former Soviet Union's southern rim all the way to the Balkans. These groups share a part of the estimated USD 30 billion world heroin market. Coca trafficking is dominated by Colombian groups; the National Liberation Army (ELN) and the FARC which controls 40 percent of Colombian territory, continue to benefit from the billion dollar coca industry. FARC has committed terrorist acts against Colombian government officials and civilians, while engaging in kidnapping with estimated annual profits of USD 400 million. The FARC reportedly maintains contacts with organised crime and armed groups in more than 14 countries to acquire weapons and communication equipment.²⁴ Likewise, hashish trafficking from Morocco is estimated at USD 12.5 billion. Hashish was the major source of funding for three major terrorist incidents: the aborted attack on a US Navy vessel in Gibraltar in 2002, the bombing of several sites in Casablanca in May 2003 and the March 2004 attack in Madrid.

Al Qaeda is a terrorist network that has decentralized cells, franchises and associates that conduct criminal activities across the globe. In 2003, the prosecutor for the Special Court on Sierra Leone said that former Liberian President Charles Taylor harboured al Qaeda members that had come to trade in diamonds from Sierra Leone.²⁵ Two known al Qaeda members bought diamonds and tried to buy surface-to-air missiles in Liberia.²⁶ Several al Qaeda affiliates conduct organised crime including: al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and al Shabaab in Somalia. Al Shabaab has moved from taxing Somali pirates' ransom revenues to dispatching its own fighters to attack ships in its own skiffs. American ships are the favoured target. Sheikh Mahad, a senior al Shabaab official, branded this new group's piracy as "sea jihad".²⁷ Al Shabaab claimed responsibility for its first known terrorist attack outside the country when it coordinated bombings in Kampala that killed 76 people. AQI has cooperated with criminal gangs in kidnapping, extortion and smuggling rings. Williams describes how Iraq suffered from transitional violence when state controls in key markets such as oil broke down, resulting in oil smuggling which helped drive the violence.²⁸ AQIM has enriched itself with kidnapping practices and cocaine and heroin smuggling in West Africa and the Sahara.²⁹ Mohamedou has recently argued that AQIM represents itself as acting in the name of ideological and religious ideals, but it appears mostly interested in obtaining ransom revenue and in engaging in criminal activities for profit.³⁰ According to recent reports, AQIM has gained access to weapon arsenals in Libya.³¹ This could lead to even greater instability in the region.

In December 2010, three men from Mali were prosecuted in the United States for conspiracy to commit acts of narcoterrorism and to provide material support to a foreign terrorist organization. It marked the first time that a US court charged associates of al Qaeda and its franchises with narcoterrorism. The men had agreed to transport cocaine through West and North Africa with the intent of supporting three terrorist organizations: al Qaeda, AQIM and the FARC. In court the men testified that AQIM had conspired to assist the FARC in transporting cocaine from West Africa through North Africa and ultimately into Spain, not only for the money but because both the FARC and AQIM "were committed to the same anti-American cause".³²

Security Implications of the Growing Nexus

While criminal activity and terrorism are security threats in their own right, the growing nexus of terrorism and organised crime is creating a dynamic which perpetuates conflict and war and emboldens and sustains insurgencies. A Stanford University study

maintains that “out of 128 conflicts studied, the 17 which relied on ‘contraband finances’ lasted five times longer”.³³ Terrorists and organised crime cartels have protracted the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and have acted as spoilers for peace.³⁴ Al Qaeda and Jaish-al-Mahdi in Iraq have spread rampant insecurity and crime with kidnapping, oil theft and extortion, perpetuating instability that has complicated efforts at state-building. In Afghanistan, the heroin business is helping to finance the Taliban and perpetuate the insurgency. Peters argues that the insurgency will not end unless the eco-system of opium and Taliban militancy can be severed. She estimates that more than 80 percent of Taliban commanders in the South of Afghanistan now fight for profit rather than religion or ideology.³⁵ NATO military intelligence estimates that as few as 5 percent of insurgent commanders now fight for ideological reasons.³⁶ They have no interest in bringing peace since they are all profiting from the state’s instability.

The convergence of criminals and terrorists is facilitated by the proliferation of lawless enclaves which Makarenko refers to as

“black holes”, where government is almost non-existent. Black hole syndrome occurs when the primary motivations of the group engaged in a civil war has evolved from focusing only on political aims to focusing primarily on criminal gains and when the state has been taken over by a crime-terror group.³⁷ Afghanistan and Iraq are two examples. The growing nexus of terrorism and organised crime has global, governmental and societal repercussions affecting security, health and development. As seen in Table 1, the growing nexus can have direct impact on global security. It weakens states and has created failed states. Governments susceptible to corruption are at risk, especially transit countries to the lucrative markets in Europe and the United States. Currently, Central Asian states are suffering from acute economic instability and large tracts of their territories have become virtually ungovernable. Ivanov, chairman of the State Antidrug Committee in Russia, maintains that the trafficking of opiates from Afghanistan creates instability and generates extremism, organised crime and terrorism at a considerable distance in the Caucasus, Kosovo, Fergana Valley and in Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous region.³⁸

Table 1: Impact of risks related to growing nexus of transnational organised crime and terrorism

Impact	Direct Impact	Indirect Impact
Global Security	Protracted wars Weakens fragile states Weakens licit trade Weakens access to resources Retrenchment of globalization	Human insecurity Global health Global migration Greater economic disparity Greater pressure on resources Lower global GDP Destruction of biosphere Failed peacekeeping/peacemaking
Government	Governance failure Failing and failed states Narco-states Kleptocracies Corrupt governments	Lost government revenues Trade imbalances Lost GDP Lost investments Reduction in tourism Shift of power to criminal gangs Prevents human development
Society/Human Security	Erosion of trust in government Exposure to crime/violence Illegal trade High risk environments (pollution, drugs, arms) Loss of legal business revenues Kidnapping/extortion/murder Illegal trafficking of men/women/children/organs/ natural resources/wildlife/arms	Rise of populist and criminal groups Reduction of resources (food, oil, water, land) Higher cost of living Higher drug addiction and increase in HIV/AIDS

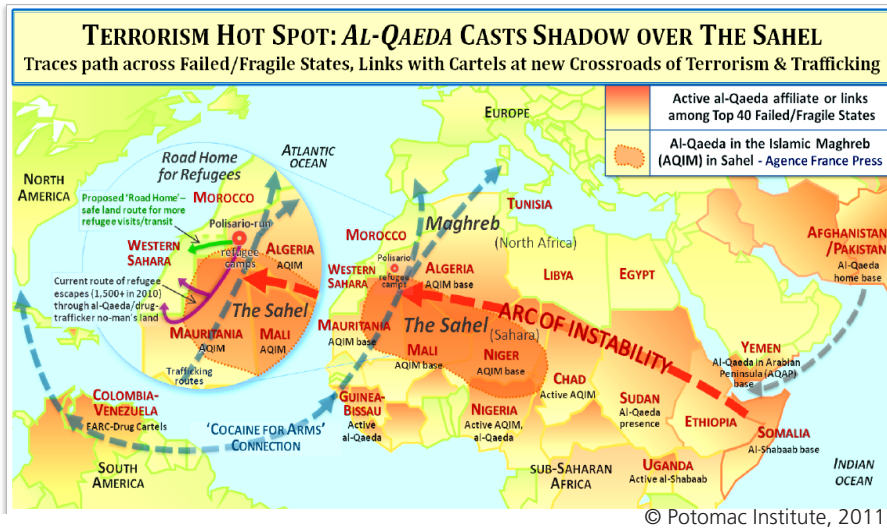
(C. Schori Liang, 2011)

The Sahel has also become a new trafficking hub uniting both terrorists and organised crime cartels. This new threat is leading to greater instability in the Maghreb and Sahel regions, already weakened by the lingering 35 year-old Western Sahara conflict and the growing instability that was triggered by the Arab Spring events. The former head of UNODC warned that huge amounts of heroin and cocaine were being traded by “terrorists and anti-government forces” to fund their operations. He estimates that annually 50-60 tons of cocaine are trafficked across West Africa while 30-35 tons of Afghan heroin are being trafficked into East Africa. These drug streams crossing in the Sahel allow local terrorist groups to fund their operations. Alexander maintains that terrorist attacks have increased by 558 percent from 2004 to 2009 committed by AQIM and other extremist groups.³⁹ The nexus is contributing to widespread human suffering with dramatic increases in drug addiction in North Africa and Central Asia, Russia, Iran and Pakistan, which also contributes to the spread of HIV/AIDS. Many fear that AQIM could seek to expand its criminal

and terrorist reach into the large North African diaspora communities in Europe.

Addressing the Growing Nexus

As terrorist groups increasingly take on characteristics of organised crime and vice versa, national, regional and international responses will need to incorporate more of the tools used by law enforcement to combat organised crime and more counter-terrorism tools to respond to organised crime groups. Some institutions are already working in this manner. The London Metropolitan Police now routinely checks low-level criminal activity for ties to terrorism on the assumption that the more involved terrorists become in traditional criminal activity, the easier it will be to track them. Criminal informants might be tempted with shortened prison time than ideology-driven terrorists. Cooperation in transnational policing, such as building liaison networks, personnel exchanges, foreign training programmes, technical assistance programmes, joint operations, intelligence sharing operations and capacity



building programmes need to be strengthened in international cooperation efforts. Other important measures include improving legal systems by training members of the judiciary on international law and human rights standards, and professionalizing police training to include respect for human rights. However, “draining the swamp” as counterterrorism officials hope to do, is difficult when cracking down means reclaiming the “black holes”, the ungoverned areas in the world. Therefore, it is important to build global governance regimes which do not allow criminal states or kleptocracies to function with impunity. States harbouring ungoverned areas must win back full control of their territories. Since

most of these states are poor, international development cooperation must support such efforts.

In both developed and developing countries, awareness-raising efforts need to focus on the responsibility of individuals to dry up demand by stopping the purchase of illegal products or services since they could potentially fund terrorists. Safe havens in the financial world and in cyberspace must be tackled, and transparent financial responsibility and multilateral cyber security strategies need to be developed that can stop the growing nexus of cooperation on the web. Lastly, there is a need to strengthen financial intelligence to stop financial flows between cooperating terror and crime groups (see Table 2).⁴⁰

Table 2: Operational responses to the nexus of terrorism and organised crime

Domain	Possible response
Domestic	Increase operational capacity by strengthening: Internal expertise and access to technologies Cooperation with other domestic police and counter-terrorism agencies and financial regulatory agencies Cooperation with national foreign policy and international relations agencies Develop exceptional military and intelligence expertise Strengthen criminal codes and criminal justice
Existing international/inter-governmental networks	Strengthen current cooperative arrangements with foreign police, security organizations and UN agencies Strengthen links with aid programmes to build capacity in countries that are potential sources of organised crime and terrorism
New international/intergovernmental cooperation	New bilateral and multilateral agreements on operational cooperation, mutual assistance, extradition Create common databases and mutual access to intelligence Harmonize legislation on money laundering and counter-terrorist financing
New supranational structures	Create new structures for international exchange of best practice and training

Adapted from C. Casey, *Policing the World: The Practice of International and Transnational Policing*, Carolina Academic Press, 2010.

Conclusion

The nexus of terrorism and organised crime must be acknowledged in policy circles as a high level threat to international security. The nexus weakens states and creates more failed states, creating dangerous ungoverned spaces where criminals and terrorists can thrive. The financing of terrorism through organised crime makes it more difficult to defeat, as terrorists can gain access to more lethal weapons, allowing them to challenge and overwhelm police and military forces with the most sophisticated weaponry and intelligence equipment. Organised crime cartels’ ability to conduct smuggling and human trafficking allows terrorists to smuggle operatives into key target areas. Finally, organised crime cartels in most instances become more empowered when they cooperate with terrorists. International terrorism can only be won effectively if states’

counter-terrorism strategies take into account this growing symbiosis. To address the nexus more effectively, institutions dedicated to fighting terrorism and organised crime need to cooperate more closely and develop new multi-pronged responses to meet these new threats at the national, regional and global level.

NB: The views expressed in this paper are entirely and solely those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the GCSP.

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