
Blurring the Lines: The Crime-Terror Nexus and the Case of ISIS

Introduction

The activities of terrorist organizations (TOs) continue to present obstacles to policymakers and the international community as a whole. The 9/11 attacks in 2001 put transnational and especially Islamist terrorism at the forefront of discourses on international (in)security and the growing competence and reach of non-State actors seeking to reshape global, regional and local political orders. As a phenomenon, however, terrorism as such is hardly linear: rather, terrorist strategies, motivations and financing mechanisms have changed over time and vary in different conflict environments. While the Cold War resulted in both Moscow and Washington lending support to groups and factions that opposed the other superpower, the fall of the USSR and the subsequent era of seeming American unipolarity, in combination with the global crackdown on Islamist terrorism after 9/11, has meant that TOs can no longer rely on State support as much as they did before.

The decrease in volume and frequency of State support has given rise to the so-called crime-terror nexus, referring to the intersection between TOs and criminal organizations (COs) (van der Veer, 2019). The overlap, not just between the activities but also behavior of TOs and COs, creates novel and conceptual issues in terms of how TOs and COs should be approached: when does a TO become more of a CO than a TO (and vice versa)? Moreover, given the increasingly global and transnational nature of organized crime, what can States and other international actors do to contain the influence of the crime-terror nexus?

This article provides a brief introduction into the crime-terror nexus by providing an overview on how the nexus has been compounded and how the nexus can be conceptualized. The activities of the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant, commonly known as ISIS, will then be examined as a case study to illustrate how a TO can engage in criminal behavior to sustain itself financially.

The terror-crime nexus in international relations

Securing and maintaining financial funding has always been a primary concern for non-State actors, including TOs and insurgent organizations all over the world. For militant non-State actors such as TOs, stable inflows allow such groups to provide for their fighters, purchase arms and equipment, secure safe houses and provide bribes to local officials. In short, sustainable inflows are key for a TO to maintain its organizational capacity and pursue its political goals. The kind of funding and the source of funding TOs have access to may heavily depend on the larger regional and global environment the TO operates in. As mentioned above, the bipolar Cold War confrontation between the United States and the USSR resulted

in both sides viewing local and regional conflicts through the geopolitical lens of the Cold War. This strategic perspective, alongside the underlying ideological motivations, motivated support for groups that were seen as opposing the respective other party. For non-State actors, including TOs and insurgency groups, this meant that predominantly local or regional conflicts had to be somewhat internationalized in order to secure funding from either Washington or Moscow. As such, the financial sustainability of non-State actors often remained inextricably tied to various forms of State support, thus having a decisive influence on the long-term prospects of the non-State actor as conflicts partially developed to be proxy wars between the US and USSR. For example, while the ties between the USSR and North Vietnam often remained complicated in practice, the Soviets lent significant intelligence support to the Viet Cong during the Vietnam War (Pribbenow II, 2014). Similarly, structural support by the United States for the Mujahideen came to be a major factor in the Soviet defeat in the Soviet-Afghan War (Parenti, 2001). The dynamics of the Cold War thus meant that the success of non-State actors was not always but often tied to the overarching conflict between the US and the USSR.

The end of the Cold War broke this strategic paradigm and depleted funding sources for TOs while accelerating trade liberalization created new and deepened existing supply chains that could be exploited for the purposes of transnational organized crime (TOC). The end of the Cold War and the assumed victory of capitalism, embodied in Francis Fukuyama's (1992) *"End of history"* thesis, had reined in growing economic liberalization, embodied by free trade agreements such as the 1994 North Atlantic Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and the EU's passing of the Maastricht Treaty in 1992. The increasing global integration of global supply chains, while stimulating legal trade, also had an intensifying effect on illicit trade. Drug trafficking to the United States from Mexico, for instance, rose following the implementation of NAFTA as free-market reforms facilitated more intense and more frequent cross-border economic exchange (McKibben & Escibano, 2015). Trade liberalization and the rapid development of global communication and transportation technologies has helped to enable the internationalization and transnationalization of organized crime, allowing for the increasingly global trade in illicit goods, ranging from drugs, arms, natural resources and wildlife to the illicit trafficking of people (Shelley, 2020). The end of the Cold War subsequently resulted in the creation of an economic environment that was conducive for the illicit activities of transnational criminal organizations.

As State-support has depleted following the end of the Cold War and the global crackdown on State-backed terrorism financing after 9/11, TOs have increasingly become involved in criminal activities as a means of generating revenue. A TO may, for instance, seek to engage in an alliance with a CO in which the TO performs specific tasks for the CO, such as trafficking illicit goods. The alliance with a CO and the subsequently produced revenues may prove attractive as it helps to further destabilize the target State while enhancing the TO's financial self-sustainability and providing significant profit margins that exist precisely because the activity is illegal. As borders have frequently become easier to penetrate due to the eradication of trade barriers, TOs have become increasingly involved in alliance with COs.

This nexus between terrorist and criminal activities has resulted in the conceptual distinctions between COs and TOs becoming increasingly blurred. While COs are inherently motivated by material/financial gain, the defining characteristic of TOs is the pursuit of a specific political objective, most prominently the change in a given political status quo (Grabovsky & Stohl, 2010). As such, the respective objectives of COs and TOs may not necessarily overlap: COs, for instance, do not necessarily favor unstable environments, especially if the given environment is conducive to their economic benefit. Contrastingly, TOs almost inherently aspire to reshape the sociopolitical environment they operate in. That said, COs and TOs share overlaps in their practical operations: both use violence and coercion, both are mostly opposed to the State(s) they operate in and both are (almost always) operating in opposition to national law enforcement agencies. While their specific motivations differ by definition, then, the underlying operational logic(s) of COs and TOs leave significant room for cooperation.

The dynamics of the crime-terror nexus are particularly visible in the modern history of Colombia. Colombia emerged as the main exporter of cocaine in the 1970s. The cultivation and export of cocaine was organized by different cartels that competed with one another for larger market shares and profit margins. The perhaps most infamous cartel was the Medellín cartel, which was run by Pablo Escobar until his death in 1993. While initially focused on generating profits, the Medellín cartel began blurring the lines between a CO and TO as it became richer and thus more influential politically. Despite being a CO, the extent of economic influence and its willingness to use violence in the pursuit of economic objectives meant that the cartel, a CO by definition, obtained political leverage. Over time, the cartel leveraged this influence to exert political power through terrorist actions: targeting the presidential candidate César Gaviria, who was running on an anti-cartel platform, the Medellín cartel downed a Colombian passenger flight, Avianca 203, killing all 107 passengers (McFadden, 1994). In practical terms, a CO had operated like a TO. Four years earlier, Escobar had collaborated with the communist M19 group in the M19's storming of the Supreme Court in Bogotá, resulting in numerous dead hostages (Woody, 2018). The activities of the Medellín cartel did not just have a monumental impact on Colombia but also reflect the duality of the crime terror-nexus: TOs can adopt operational choices that make them more akin to a CO. The same applies vice versa. Alternatively, COs and TOs can cooperate on either a momentary or a more permanent basis.

The factors incentivizing various forms of cooperation or engagement between COs and TOs are embodied in Cornell's (2007) crime-rebellion continuum. On a structural level, COs and TOs can benefit from the political-economic conditions produced by the other group: COs can economically capitalize on the increased lawlessness produced by political instability while TOs can capitalize on the COs' opposition to legal activities in the pursuit of their political goals. Cooperation between COs and TOs may thus produce environmental conditions that are conducive for the interests of both parties, allowing them to pursue their respective economic and political objectives (Makarenko, 2004). This has been visualized in the crime-rebellion continuum of Cornell (2007), see Figure 1 below. As operational orientations and practical aims overlap, cooperation between COs and TOs is incentivized.

Figure 1: Cornell’s crime-rebellion continuum

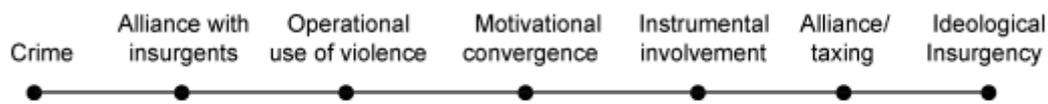


Figure 1. The crime–rebellion continuum.

Source: Cornell (2007)

As the ties between the CO and the TO deepen, their practical operations are likely to become more and more alike as time goes on. Cornell (2007) and Makarenko (2004) describe this process of surging interaction as convergence. In practice, convergence means that a CO becomes more political over time while a TO comes to mirror a CO, making it harder to distinguish whether the organization is driven by economic or political motivations. As such, organizations that were initially (or potentially still are) politically motivated may in fact be motivated by economic considerations. The left-wing Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), for instance, which has been operating a guerilla war against the Colombian State since 1964, has long operated as a key component of the global drug trade (Otis, 2014). TOs may thus choose to substitute their primarily political goals for economic ones, using political rhetoric as a facade (Grabovsky & Stohl, 2010). Convergence can thus also occur when one organization (such as FARC of the Medellín cartel) simply adopts the strategies commonly used by a CO/TO. In this context, convergence can occur when COs/TOs seek to reduce their dependency on the CO/TO they previously collaborated with by increasingly performing the partner’s tasks themselves, resulting in the organization being capable of operating as both COs and TOs at the same time (Makarenko, 2004). This has further blurred the lines between COs and TOs.

The growing prevalence of the crime-terror nexus has important policy implications. The shift from State-backing to criminal activities as a means of sustaining operations means that diplomatic pressure on other States is often no longer an efficient way of halting the financing of a TO or reshaping the TO’s behavior. The fact that TOs become actively involved in TOC, for instance by exploiting the eradication of trade barriers and preexisting supply chains, also means that the criminal activity as such is not easy to challenge as illicit economies have become deeply embedded in licit economies (Shelley, 2020). Lastly, the destabilizing political impact of criminal and terrorist activity sustains what is called the “black hole thesis”, referring to a situation in which weak or ‘failed’ States present a safe haven for the CO/TO, further undermining stability in this strategic space (Makarenko, 2004, p. 138). Strategically weakened spaces include failed States such as Somalia but also countries in which the government’s reach is heavily impaired. As shown below, the activities of ISIS in Syria and Iraq were decisively enabled by the structural fragility of both countries.

ISIS as a TO and CO

The Islamic State or Iraq and the Levant, commonly known as ISIS or ISIL, is a terrorist organization primarily active in Iraq and Syria. A radical Islamist Sunni organization, ISIS gained global notoriety for its terror attacks in Europe, its systemic human rights abuses in Iraq and Syria and the declaration of a Caliphate in 2014. ISIS was initially founded as an Al-Qaeda offshoot in Iraq following the American invasion of Iraq in 2003. Its first leader was Musab al-Zarqawi, who had developed ties with Osama bin Laden while fighting the Soviets in Afghanistan. Known at the time as Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), the organization was severely hit by the early years of the US occupation, with al-Zarqawi dying in an airstrike in 2006. Under one of al-Zarqawi's predecessors, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, AQI expanded into Syria following the outbreak of the civil war in 2011. Cutting ties with Al-Qaeda, AQI was renamed ISIS in 2013.

ISIS was/is a TO par excellence. Following significant successes in the field that saw ISIS control large swaths of rural Iraq and Syria alongside major urban centers such as Mosul and Tikrit, ISIS became infamous for its human rights abuses and the tech-savvy publication of these abuses (Zelin, 2014). Deriving its core group from the Sunni regime of Saddam Hussein, ISIS deliberately targeted religious and ethnic minorities in the areas it occupied. As Byman suggested in 2015, ISIS *"uses mass executions, public beheadings, rape, and symbolic crucifixion displays to terrorize the population into submission and "purify" the community [in the territories it controls], and at the same time provides basic (if minimal) services: the mix earns them some support, or at least acquiescence due to fear, from the population"*. ISIS made targeted use of modern communication technologies to inform the outside the world about the developments in the region, for instance by publicizing videos of beheadings and other executions (Cottee, 2015). Within its pseudo-State, then, ISIS made concerted use of terrorist tactics to intimidate and control the population.

As counterterrorism operations against ISIS ramped up from 2014/2015 onwards, ISIS began committing terrorist attacks outside of Iraq and Syria. Attacks were predominantly focused on Europe, for instance in Brussels, Manchester, and Paris. ISIS' use of Western-born individuals that were radicalized through online propaganda rather than having actively travelled to Iraq or Syria helped to further stifle anti-Muslim sentiment in Europe (Chandak, 2017). ISIS' multifaceted usage of assault rifles, knife attacks, IEDs (improvised explosive devices) and VIEDs (vehicle improvised explosive devices) also contributed to the notion that the security threat posed by ISIS was omnipresent. Besides the psychological impact of this perceived omnipresence, the reliance on relatively unsophisticated weaponry also meant that attacks could be executed without sophisticated prior planning (Amarasingam & Desai, 2020). Pursuing terrorist attacks was consequently a key part of ISIS' activities in both the Middle East and Europe.

Both at the peak of its territorial reach and since its decline, ISIS systematically engaged in criminal activities. Territorial control and practical political autonomy in parts of Iraq and Syria allowed ISIS to capitalize on the oil revenues produced in the areas controlled by the group. Beyond the ideological appeal of controlling territory that could be incorporated into the self-declared Caliphate, territorial gains thus also translated into control gained over oil and gas

extraction sites. Once access over such sites was won, oil and gas could be extracted and sold on illicit markets. At its peak, ISIS raised \$1.2 million in funds from oil sales on a daily basis (Sanger & Davis, 2014). The control over territory, coupled with the ability to tax this territory and control regional resource production and extraction, meant that ISIS was financially self-sustainable and independent from external revenue sources. Yet, the efficacy of his extraction-based model also allowed counterterrorist actors to decisively target ISIS' revenue: as ISIS started losing territory, its revenue flows began drying up. The extent of engagement in criminal resource extraction was hence volatile over time, indicating that external developments are key in influencing how financially sustainable a particular criminal activity is.

While ISIS had made use of more petty criminal activity prior to its territorial gains, the decline in territorial control meant that more 'regular' criminal activity emerged as a means of financing the organization once again. Following the fall of Mosul, ISIS had stolen more than \$400 million from a local bank (Daragahi, 2014). ISIS had also routinely engaged in other conventional organized criminal activities, including kidnapping for ransom, extortion, smuggling, robbery and theft (Clarke, 2016). What is important to note here is that TOs engaging in criminal activities are capable of sustaining such low-scale activities without a significant power base or significant territorial control over longer periods of time. Moreover, the turn towards more conventional criminal activity has meant that ISIS will remain reliant on illicit trade networks, the response to which is notoriously difficult to coordinate on a transnational level.

The rise, fall and ultimate survival of ISIS embodies the crime-terror nexus and the difficulties associated with challenging this nexus. Prior to its peak, at its peak and following its decline, ISIS embodies the convergence often observable in the crime-terror nexus. While undoubtedly motivated by primarily political and ideological objectives, much of the practical behavior of ISIS was and is akin to that of a CO. The extent of ideological conviction makes it seem unlikely that ISIS will transform into a full-fledged CO anytime soon. Indeed, the ideological element may mean that ISIS would be unwilling to engage in some criminal activities. One such example would be the participation in international drug cultivation and trade. Yet, ideological militant groups have shown flexibility in their engagement with specific criminal activities: prior to the American invasion of Afghanistan, for instance, the Taliban had outlawed the cultivation of poppies, which is key for the production of heroin (Landay, 2021). During the American occupation of the country however, US authorities believed heroin and the transnational drug trade to be one of the main sources of income for the Taliban (Goodhand & Mansfield, 2010). This would indicate that the Taliban's policy position changed depending on environmental circumstances, with pragmatic considerations partially overriding ideological convictions. The criminal activities of both ISIS and the Taliban indicate that the extent to which TOs engage in criminal behavior may be fluid over time and is highly dependent on external circumstances.

Conclusion

The crime-terror nexus presents a significant challenge for policymakers and the international community as a whole. The eradication of trade barriers, alongside technological changes and a growing dependency of TOs on criminal activities for financing purposes, has meant that the conceptual and practical lines between COs and TOs have become increasingly blurred. Case-to-case differentiations need to be made here: the extent and motivation of criminal engagement is likely to differ in any cases and is likely to be shaped by various external and ideological conditions. In the case of ISIS, the ideological component is likely to be too significant to engage in certain forms of criminal behavior. Yet, the fact that criminal behavior is engaged in, and the fact that political responses thereto are difficult to develop, indicates that the crime-terror nexus produces security challenges that are distinct to the 21st century.

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