Terrorism, Crime, and Conflict: Exploiting the Differences Among Transnational Threats?

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Introduction

Despite their diverging strategic objectives, terrorists, criminals, and insurgents appear increasingly to collaborate. The deep connections among terrorism, drug production, and insurgency in Afghanistan and Colombia are well known. In the Sahel, Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) is funded at least in part through the paid protection of trafficking routes and through criminal kidnapping campaigns. In southern Nigeria, the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) long has mixed oil bunkering, kidnapping, and ethnic rebellion, and it recently may have added terrorism to its repertoire.¹ In Somalia, there is increasing concern about the possibility of Islamist militants taxing, controlling, or even investing in the piracy industry.² In Sri Lanka, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) made millions of dollars from sophisticated cybercrime, including extensive credit card fraud, and for years used its resulting military might to exercise de facto control over a large territory.³

Fragile states, with their ready pools of unemployed labor and populations inured to and traumatized by violence, frequently represent sites of competitive advantage for terrorist organizations, criminal networks, and violent political leaders alike. Collaboration among them may benefit all three—financing terrorism, protecting crime, and securing political control. The UN Security Council has gone so far as to suggest that such conjoined transnational threats may represent a threat to international peace and security.⁴

Yet, policymakers appear unclear about how to handle the confluence of these threats. This policy brief offers eight targeted policy recommendations for combating the convergence of terrorism, crime, and politics. Rather than simply warning about the potential for interaction and synergy among terrorist, criminal, and political actors, this policy brief aims to explore possibilities for exploiting their divergences. In particular, it emphasizes the need to grapple with the economic, political, and combat power that some terrorist groups enjoy through their involvement in crime and conflict. This requires an approach to counterterrorism that incorporates policy proscriptions from the criminological, conflict transformation, peacebuilding, development, and sociological arenas, while developing a coordinated interagency strategy for deploying common tools, such as macroeconomic reform; disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) efforts; security sector reform (SSR); improved border control; financial sector reform; and legal-institution capacity building. Above all, this approach requires taking the social power of violent organizations more seriously.

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1. Identify the Differences Among Terrorist, Criminal, and Political Actors

Although international and national institutions are becoming better equipped to monitor illegal activities associated with the individual elements of terrorism, crime, and conflict, they must refine their understanding and better integrate their analysis of each if they wish to confront the nexus among these different transnational threats more effectively.

Existing analysis for policymakers frequently oversimplifies the complex and fluid relationships among the military, or coercive, strategy; the political, or social, strategy; and the financial strategy of organized armed groups and the networks in which they operate.5 Assessment of specific transnational threats must examine an organization’s collective goals,6 organizational structure,7 local financing opportunities, global market access, and leadership and political opportunities. Depending on how these underlying factors are configured, terrorist and criminal organizations may share members, operate in the same areas, trade specialized services, or merge strategies. Close collaboration between trafficking groups and militants, such as the Kosovo Liberation Army and Albanian mafia heroin smugglers, or in Afghanistan and Pakistan between the Quetta Shura and the Haqqani network, in fact may make some militants vulnerable to cooptation by criminal organizers. At the same time, the power that such actors develop within local political economies may insulate them from outside intervention efforts. In the Sahel, for example, AQIM elements enjoy protection from external disruption in part because of their collaboration with local smugglers and powerbrokers.

Such nodes of interaction may be pernicious in themselves, especially in the context of weak and failed states, but they should be recognized as the products of the underlying convergence in social and structural factors. Changing those underlying factors may undermine the convenience of the marriage between these groups.

2. Concentrate Interventions on the Nodes Where Terrorism, Crime, and Politics Overlap

Existing international policy regimes tackle terrorism, organized crime, and political instability separately. Largely distinct norms, institutions, actors, and budgets are brought to bear on each. This approach may hinder the activity of groups temporarily but risks leaving in place the underlying structures that allow terrorist, criminal, and militant groups to collocate and even collaborate. Worse, these policy regimes may work at cross-purposes. In Afghanistan, for example, the international policy regimes governing narcotics control and counterterrorism may prevent states from negotiating with and co-opting powerful political actors engaged in criminal or terrorist activity, whose cooperation may be necessary to bring peace.

A better approach involves not treating terrorism, organized crime, and politics as entirely distinct phenomena but instead targeting interventions at the geographic, financial, social, and ideological nodes where terrorism, crime, and politics overlap. Although these nodes represent compatibilities between groups, strategic interventions can use nodes as key points of vulnerability.8 In particular, interventions should amplify the risks for one group of interacting with external groups, harnessing the incompatibilities between groups that make sustaining the nexus costly and dangerous.

Divergent goals, organizational structures, and tactics can create tension between aligned
groups because the characteristics of one group jeopardizes the internal security of the other; and overlapping local financing opportunities, global market access, and political opportunities can create tension through competition. As Phil Williams has demonstrated, exploitation of such tensions was critical to the disaggregation of the Sunni tribes from Al-Qaida in Iraq, resulting in the Anbar Awakening in 2006. When competition for control over local criminal activities inflamed tribal hostilities, the United States exploited these differences to drive a wedge between Al-Qaida and tribal elders. In a similar fashion, North African states now seek to exploit the differences between terrorists and smugglers in the Sahel by announcing a policy of information gathering through smuggling networks, undermining trust between terrorists and traffickers. With such maneuvers, policymakers can drive wedges between their adversaries, whether their enemies’ goals are criminal or terrorist.

3. Integrate Intelligence, Law Enforcement, and Diplomatic Approaches

Instead of implementing a strictly intelligence-based approach associated with fighting terrorism, a strictly law enforcement approach associated with combating crime, or a strictly diplomatic approach associated with resolving political disputes, the convergence of crime, terrorism, and may necessitate a holistic approach that integrates all three. Yet, few states, let alone international organizations, have acknowledged and developed the necessary capacity.

Through its experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan, the United States has begun to develop an awareness of the utility of deeper interagency integration in the complex environments in which terrorist, criminal, and insurgent leaders operate, but that awareness has not managed to transcend existing institutional divides within the interagency process. Where interventions adopt whole-of-government approaches, they typically aim at integrating development, diplomacy, and defense – but fail to incorporate policing and intelligence. This partial integration threatens to overlook critical information and set institutions, even within the same governmental apparatus, unwittingly working at cross-purposes.

Information sharing, joint operational planning, and, above all, joint strategy are essential to such interagency efforts. Understanding the cooperation among terrorist, criminal, and militant groups requires synthesizing information from numerous sources. Failure to synthesize that information may lead to a partial understanding of the problem and deliver an ineffective response strategy. For instance, black market routes around the besieged city of Sarajevo in the early 1990s simultaneously supplied arms flows to Serbian paramilitaries, fueled smuggling and protection rackets by criminal Bosnian army gangs, and entrenched corruption in the nascent Bosnian political institutions. Had it better understood these connections at the time, the international community might have been able to undermine all three, but its strategy of focusing on weakening Serbian paramilitaries arguably left loopholes that allowed the seeds of Bosnia’s ongoing institutional weakness to emerge. Similarly, in Afghanistan, poor integration of counternarcotics policy into the larger military and diplomatic effort has led to numerous unintended consequences, most notably endemic corruption within the Karzai government, which undermines public support and plays into the hands of the Taliban.

To address such concerns, policymakers may need to take steps to ensure adequate information exchange and joint analytical reviews by analysts focused on criminal
markets and activities, political actors, and military affairs. Few governments and international organizations to date have achieved success with such integration.

4. Harness the Credibility of Local Structures in Building of New Institutions of Governance

Conflict zones are politicized regions of insecurity and impunity that support a range of opportunity structures beneficial to terrorist groups and criminal organizations. A conflict transformation approach can help undermine such opportunities by drawing on existing local structures and emboldening those that can contribute to a sustainable peace, incorporating those that can be transformed from unaccountable to accountable institutions, and weakening those that fuel violent activity.

Current analyses often portray conflict zones and weak and fragile states as regions of near-total anarchy and anomie; conversely, they overlook the unofficial military, political, and economic responses that have emerged to structure interactions in these regions of “state collapse.” Rather than building entirely new institutions, interventions should harness these social institutions that are critical to the mediation between international process and local implementation. In particular, interventions should seek to reconstitute existing systems within an institutionalized infrastructure, encouraging a renewed relationship between the state and society that restores the social contract, empowering civil society networks that underpin the success of new institutions.

Without addressing local structures, policy interventions will remain limited in their overall impact, credibility, and sustainability.

Ahistoricism, imposition of policy, and insensitivity to local contexts will breed local resentment and resistance. An example of the benefits that may flow from such rapprochement is demonstrated by the success of the Provisional IRA in securing itself a seat in the postconflict institutions. The organization began its political mobilization through informal community policing as well as activism against discrimination in housing and education and for equitable resource allocation to the Catholic community. These informal services fostered an established system of Catholic community development organizations and a strong electoral base for Sinn Féin. The peaceful and voluntary reintegration of that social base into the political fabric of Northern Ireland eventually became the prize of rapprochement.

5. Coordinate Measures to Engage With Potential Spoilers of Peace

The challenge of local engagement is that it may require treating terrorists and criminals as partners for peace and candidates for rehabilitation rather than as targets for law enforcement. Such a paradigm requires a reexamination of the (in) compatibility between current approaches to dealing with organized crime and terrorism, DDR efforts, and SSR. DDR and SSR are critical to prevent former combatants from relapsing into informal modes of security provision; they are necessary, too, to constitute the state as the sole and responsible provider of human, national, and international security.

DDR and postconflict reconstruction efforts in Liberia have been particularly instructive in this respect, using a range of carrots and sticks to alter the incentive structures of former combatants. The Liberian program delineated specific goals for social reintegration and alternative employment for former combatants, but few political and economic
objectives were set. DDR efforts initially floundered on account of the inability to overcome commitment problems between the political representatives of Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy and the Movement for Democracy in Liberia in the new consensus government as well as between the operational-level leaders of those militias. These problems may have resulted in part from the incentive to continue participation in illicit economies resulting from leaders’ military control, regardless of their political representatives’ formal commitment to DDR efforts. The failure significantly to engage the military leadership created committed spoilers against the DDR initiatives.24

The stakes are even higher in an approach that blends DDR efforts with SSR. Such reintegration efforts harness former combatants as valuable personnel for new security. In the instance of the Kosovo Protection Corps (KPC), the organization developed in the aftermath of the war as a mechanism to absorb members of the recently demilitarized Kosovo Liberation Army. Nonetheless, the KPC failed to disrupt legacy military structures and incentives for criminality, offering an opportunity for former combatants to maintain their arms and a platform for continued influence in the community.25 Without effective measures of rehabilitation and accountability, such measures simply reward bad behavior and entrench cronyism, corruption, and stand-over tactics.

Yet, at present such coordinated efforts to reintegrate those labeled as criminals and terrorists frequently are constrained by inflexible control mechanisms. For example, in Afghanistan, efforts to foster political reconciliation among warring factions have been complicated by a preference to treat such targets for law enforcement or blacklisting. Policymakers may need to find ways to ensure that the formulation and management of terrorist blacklists and the enforcement of international control regimes, such as those governing the production and distribution of narcotics, are made responsive to political and strategic considerations. Otherwise, they risk ostracizing potential partners for peace to the point of alienation, compelling them to become spoilers committed to crime, violence, and terrorism.

6. Restructure Economic Systems to Generate Incentives for Peace and Stability

In conditions of enduring conflict, informal and often subversive economic systems develop to cope with, circumvent, and exploit violence, which has become a normalized factor of production.26 These systems frequently are dictated by and susceptible to predation by criminal and terrorist enterprises, which exploit the demand for otherwise illicit goods and services by fostering black or grey markets. These financing strategies often determine the capacities and longevity of violent groups, even as they may contribute simultaneously to the survival of civilian populations.27 Weak and failed states thus may represent not merely a haven for such criminal and terrorist groups, but also on occasion the economic base for their activities. Such symbiosis between licit and illicit, violence and economic activity, criminality and vulnerable communities fosters local legitimacy for such groups, which in turn promotes the endurance of conflict economies and presents significant obstacles to peace.28

In response, interventions should adopt a policy of spoiler management that restructures the existing systems to undermine incentives for violence.29 The subversive nature of black market profiteering necessitates interventions to disrupt the supply of illicit goods and services.30 Sanctions and eradication
campaigns, however, often generate unintended consequences, incentivizing sustained criminality by increasing the price of illicit commodities, and reinforcing bonds between political rulers and black marketeers. They also frequently threaten coping mechanisms and legitimate enterprises. U.S. counternarcotics policy in Afghanistan, for example, has demonstrated some of the consequences of inadequate understanding of the intermingling of crime, terrorism, and conflict. Only recently has the U.S. begun to recognize the importance of targeting key traffickers and political opponents rather than imposing eradication and alternative crop schemes on rural farmers. Moreover, such interventions disrupt illicit development and employment opportunities that bolster the political capital of associated terrorist and criminal groups.\textsuperscript{11}

Market interventions need to be designed to differentiate between actors and activities on the basis of their social role. One way to do this is to differentiate between black and grey markets.\textsuperscript{32} Grey markets that provide legitimate goods and services may offer greater potential for formalization of conflict economies, consolidating decentralized and privatized structures under the state as the primary and legitimate supplier or regulator, turning the grey into white.\textsuperscript{33} Black markets, in contrast, may reward violence.

Whether the strategy adopted is one of formalizing the informal or repressing violence, the transformation of conflict economies requires a process of state-sponsored socialization and norm building to prevent terrorist and criminal entrepreneurs and corrupt politicians from capitalizing on the rewards of violence during conflict by occupying the commanding heights of the postviolence economy.\textsuperscript{34} This must involve anticorruption efforts, banking and financial reform, and legal reform.\textsuperscript{35} Yet, such reforms often reinforce social divisions and labor segmentation.\textsuperscript{36} Large-scale privatization, for example, may risk entrenching the economic and political power of violent enterprises that flourish under the cover of conflict. For that reason, the macroeconomic objectives of privatization must be married carefully to socially sensitive implementation strategies such as detailed vetting and lustration. Integration of social and macroeconomic policy is critical to balancing interests of key stakeholders and potential spoilers.\textsuperscript{37} Likewise, macroeconomic goals such as stimulating free trade and labor market flexibility may need to be balanced against short-term social interests such as integrating combatants and priming local economies through labor-intensive infrastructure rehabilitation efforts.\textsuperscript{38}

7. Address Cross-Boarder Asymmetries That Stimulate Violent Economies

Globalization has yielded a system in which demand, supply, and the transactions intermediating between the two operate increasingly across borders and discreetly among official and criminal actors. Dirty money is transferred through legitimate channels, challenging the resilience of financial institutions and the reach of international law enforcement. The proliferation of access to such systems has empowered independent operators and local entrepreneurs who no longer need to rely on proximate elites as intermediaries\textsuperscript{39} and can exploit the competitive advantages they enjoy from easy, cheap, and normalized access to violence.\textsuperscript{40} One unexpected consequence is the increasing integration of poorly regulated borderlands into global criminal markets, as markets frequently reach where states cannot. The only effective antidote is cross-border cooperation.

Where conflict has eroded the capacity and
will of security institutions or has created autonomous regions and devolved states, borders can remain porous due to ambiguous authority and accountability. *De facto* military boundaries typically delineate partitions between ethnic groups or frontlines of opposing militant groups, replacing *de jure* political boundaries. Economic opportunities, however, incentivize transactions that disregard ethnic and political affiliations, and the continuation of violence facilitates illicit activity. The resulting interethnic networks of criminality have become a recurring feature of conflict zones, from West Africa to the Balkans, where the smuggling of drugs, arms, human cargo, and other illicit goods continues to fuel the conflict economy.45 Borders create opportunities for arbitrage due to disparities in product value, enforcement capacity, and legal mandates.42

The securitization of the U.S.-Mexican border exemplifies the vulnerability to these asymmetries. Illicit flows of cheap labor and drugs into the United States and of arms and consumer goods into Mexico demonstrate the complementary demand and supply across the border. Interdiction efforts are complicated by differences between public administration and enforcement regimes in different state and national jurisdictions.44 The difficult balance between security and economic exchange that results increasingly demands regional cooperation and capacity building to mitigate and manage resulting asymmetries. In particular, interventions should standardize border controls, including tariff and custom systems, and extend jurisdiction by enhancing cross-border law enforcement.44

### 8. Challenge Social Narratives That Fuel Violent Extremism

Although the construction of new institutions and the restructuring of economic incentives are critical to disentangling terrorism, crime, and conflict, the lasting and reliable engagement of violent entrepreneurs often is inhibited by socially stigmatizing narratives.

Media narratives frequently demonize combatants as inherently prone to destructive behavior rather than recognizing the structural causes that incite individuals to turn to violence. Such labeling can dissuade combatants from seeking alternative means of employment and nonviolent community engagement and deters institutions from employing them. Irrespective of other efforts at reintegration, acceptance of former combatants back into their communities is more difficult for those who have committed more egregious wartime abuses.45 Criminalization of combatants seeks to redefine normal and deviant conduct in a postconflict context, but the impact is often one of further social stigmatization.46 These forms of social and institutional branding reinforce a deviant self-identity in the individual and the organization, which threatens to frame the self-concept of future generations, fuelling violent extremism.47 Narratives of stigmatization also serve to insulate former combatants from their communities, creating further incentives to continue terrorist, criminal, and insurgent networks and narratives.48 Idealization of violence and collective nostalgia are central aspects of strategies for cohesion within these networks, strengthening violent ideologies. Such group narratives that romanticize violence are appealing to young people who resent having missed the opportunity to participate in the identity-defining era of conflict and consequently appropriate, adapt, and retool myths, narratives, and symbols used by former combatants, creating a cycle of violence.

Policy interventions should challenge these pernicious narratives through community sensitization and community-building projects, psychosocial support, and justice and reconciliation programs.49 Interventions should

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offer counternarratives that delegitimize violence as an acceptable pathway to individual or organizational objectives. Despite the repercussions for reintegration, criminalization may be an effective instrument to demonstrate this shift if it is applied strategically to prioritize peace over justice.\textsuperscript{49} Criminalization should target activities rather than individuals and prosecute only the most egregious cases to prevent a culture of impunity. Former combatants have a particularly important role to play in helping to dispel stigmatizing narratives by providing counterpoints to the romanticization of violence by young people. One such initiative is the CHARTER for Northern Ireland, established by members of the Ulster Defense Association as a support group for former paramilitaries. The organization maintains counseling and services for former combatants and has extended its activities to educational programming to inform young people about the costs of violence and to promote community leadership and cross-community understanding.\textsuperscript{51}

**Conclusion**

The convergence of terrorism, crime, and conflict is an increasingly self-evident and debated phenomenon. Yet, few ideas have been offered for tackling this convergence. Clearly, policymakers can turn to numerous tools to promote the rule of law and, in the process, immunize societies against the scourges of crime, conflict, and terrorism. Exactly how these tools should be deployed to deal with these different threats, especially when they converge, remains an understudied question. This policy brief has articulated a set of eight recommendations, focusing on turning the social power of violent organizations toward peace by analyzing and addressing the political and economic contexts from which such violent enterprises draw their strengths. At the heart of this strategy is the essential task of building trust among the state, participants in violence, and those affected by it.

Building such trust is not easy. It is an inherently political exercise that may require trade-offs between short- and long-term objectives. Without an improved understanding of how terrorist, criminal, and political actors’ interests converge and diverge, policymakers risk being unable to make these trade-offs in a reliable and effective manner.

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**Notes**

\textsuperscript{1} See Kingsley Igwe, “Eight killed by Nigeria Independence day bombs,” Reuters, 1 October 2010.


16 Mats Berdal, Building Peace After War (London: International Institute for Strategic Studies [IISS], 2009), p. 94.


30 Ballentine and Nitzschke, “Political Economy of Civil War and Conflict Transformation,” p. 3.


32 Goodhand, “From War Economy to Peace Economy?,” p. 166.

33 Mark Taylor and Anne Huser, “Security, Development, and Economies of Conflict: Problems and Responses,”


51 For more information, see http://www.charterni.com.