
The Crime-Terror Nexus

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Summary

The crime–terror nexus is the convergence of two types of disruptive nonstate group activities, crime and terrorism. The phrase can also be used to refer to cooperation between criminal and terrorist groups. When conceptualizing the crime–terror nexus, it’s helpful to categorize relationships in three ways. To achieve nexus status, groups either collaborate, combine, or convert. The most common presentation of nexus (or hybrid) groups is terrorist “conversion,” when a purely terrorist organization transitions into a more diversified model, rather than criminal groups moving toward political violence (though there are some notable exceptions) or two groups of different types “joining forces.”

Responses to the crime–terror nexus have been uneven. Organized crime and terrorism research have traditionally been siloed from each other, with academics, policymakers, and law enforcement specializing in one or the other—an artificial divide that has become particularly problematic given the modern interconnectedness of political and economic systems wrought by globalization. Traditional security thinking is biased against crime–terror convergence because it emphasizes the difference in motivation between criminal and terrorist groups. Adherents have argued that any such relationships would be transactional and short-lived because criminal groups are interested in remaining out of the public eye, while terrorist groups are explicitly interested in drawing attention to themselves.

However, this perspective misses both the potential benefits of diversified activities for violent nonstate groups, and the idea that groups can pursue a range of goals simultaneously across different levels of the organization. Notable exceptions to this institutional siloing include “deep web” and “dark networks” research, which have identified criminal–extremist relationships as relying on similar infrastructure and thus persisting over a longer time span. Both law enforcement and researchers should take their cue from this wholistic orientation. Siloing crime and terrorism from one another presents operational problems: while these groups and their activities may move easily between criminal and political violence, states often separate their law enforcement from their military and domestic security agencies, creating bureaucratic hurdles for effective disruption of hybrid groups.

A small cadre of researchers, however, have begun to rectify these artificial disciplinary boundaries. Recent literature on the crime–terror nexus can be broadly categorized into four major buckets: the causes and enabling conditions that allow for such interactions, the spectrum of possible relationships, the ways that groups change as they move into the other’s area of operation, and the policy implications for melded groups. Drawing on

work across criminology, sociology, political economy, history, and organizational behavior, in addition to political science, we can more effectively map and understand the contours of the crime–terror nexus.

Criminally diversified terrorist groups are a distinct security threat because they are more adaptable, resilient, and entrenched than their traditionally resourced counterparts. Further, criminal activity may alter a group’s long-term political goals, making negotiated settlements and demobilization agreements more challenging. By including the crime–terror nexus in assessments, both academics and policymakers can make more accurate assessments of the contours of low-intensity and asymmetric warfare, leading to better policy outcomes, durable institution building, and increased protections for populations impacted by violent nonstate actors.

Keywords: crime, terrorism, conflict economy, black market, nonstate violence, transnational crime, organized crime

Introduction

The crime–terror nexus can refer to several types of interactions between two parties: groups that contravene domestic or international law (criminals) and violent nonstate political groups that attack civilian targets (terrorists). At face value, these two types of groups appear similar. Both criminal organizations and terrorist groups kill civilians; break laws; administer governance; recruit, train, and manage members; and have adversarial relationships with the governments in the areas of their operation (Sanderson, 2004). They also sometimes share a similar tactical profile, a willingness to use violence, complex organizational structures, and often complicated relationships with unaffiliated “host” communities. The conditions and motivations that allow terrorist groups to develop are often the same ones that allow significant criminal networks to emerge and entrench—specifically, weak or corrupt government institutions, substantial natural resources, or a recent history of political violence (Sanderson, 2004). At a fundamental level, both criminal and terrorist groups are rational actors engaged in governance-disrupting activities (Wang, 2010). However, despite their similarities, in their purest form criminal and terrorist groups are distinct from one another (Barnes, 2017; Lessing, 2018).¹ When groups begin to balance politics and profit, they may lose that distinction. Academics and policymakers often refer to those crossover actors as “nexus” or “hybrid” actors.

Historically, “crime–terror nexus” groups generally begin as terrorist organizations and then diversify based on operational necessity, rather than beginning as criminal groups that adopt political platforms and aspirations (Ligeti & Lassalle, 2018).² At its most extreme, the crime–terror nexus is the total hybridization of activities within a single group. Generally speaking, a “nexus” requires that organized crime be integrated into the operational considerations of a terrorist group, rather than petty crime carried out by group members outside the terrorist leadership command and control.³ This makes crime a strategic choice for the organization, not simply an incidental correlation.

That terrorist groups would be interested in allying with criminal networks is logically unsurprising. Criminal organizations are resilient, adaptive, and adept at subverting existing systems, and correspondingly, terrorist groups are rational actors interested in increasing their organization's likelihood of success (Hoffman, 1998). Further, governing territory and conducting attacks are expensive pastimes—leveraging criminal or gray-area economic activities as a source of revenue for warring parties is hardly a new concept. But the financial bottom line is only part of the picture: the increasing numbers of reported criminal machinations by terrorist groups, as well as a geographically broader battlefield, seem to indicate that the nexus in the 21st century extends beyond traditional fundraising into strategy.

The motivating rationale behind how and why a terrorist group adopts criminal tactics is key for predicting how the group will evolve and gives insight into the organization's long-term trajectory. To this end, Rollins and Sun Wyler (2013) argue that there are three primary interaction patterns between terrorist groups and their criminal counterparts: collaboration as a force multiplier or capacity enhancer, tactical appropriation, and organizational transformation. In the first case, terrorist groups seek out criminal expertise or networks to enhance their operational capabilities, particularly those pertaining to specialized skills (passport forgery and firearms expertise are two commonly cited examples). This relationship pattern is unlikely to significantly alter a terrorist group and appears frequently in group interactions. Tactical appropriation is simply a case of organizational learning, in which violent nonstate groups look around and discern what methods allow similar (if not politically motivated) groups to effectively subvert the state. Depending on the type of crime or crimes that terrorist groups appropriate, terrorist groups may begin to balance profit motives with ideology. Finally, organizational transformation occurs when a group is assimilated into the "category" of the other—that is, when terrorist groups begin to prioritize profit over political change or, in an opposite case, when criminal organizations adopt political goals (Rollins & Sun Wyler, 2013). This interaction pattern means that traditional means of disrupting or demobilizing that group type will be ineffective and likely counterproductive. It also means, however, that the "transformed" group could be vulnerable to disruption measures traditionally applied to a group of the opposite type, that is, that a "transformed" terrorist group will be susceptible to anti-money laundering tactics. This cross-domain investigation and enforcement serves to reduce the likelihood of terrorist-criminal relationships of convenience, because it can bring greatly increased and unwanted attention to criminal organizations (Rollins & Sun Wyler, 2013). When analyzing 21st-century networks and groups, it's helpful to build on Rollins and Sun Wyler's framework to create a broad typology of crime-terror nexus groups: they can be categorized as collaborators, combiners, or converters. This model is expanded in more detail later in the article.

Diversified activities increase a terrorist group's capacity to resist countering measures in three ways—providing independent revenue, reducing the dependency on state and other external sponsors; building relationships with a wide network of other illicit actors; and creating the means to provide wider employment to the populace (Vittori, 2008). Crime gives extremist groups relatively "easy" ways to pay operational costs, recruitment and retention bonuses (in both cash and physical goods), and to fund training. Diversification can also tie the "host" community's livelihood to the continued success of a group, solidifying key sympathetic populations and territory, and highlights the inability of the existing government to provide equal opportunities and services to its people (Piazza & Piazza, 2017). This is

particularly true in the case of narcotics, where significant manpower is needed to grow, process, guard, and transport the goods, and the profits exceed anything that could be made through legitimate agriculture (Stepanova, 2012). Finally, combining criminal enterprises with political activity furthers the politicization of law enforcement, further alienating populations from legitimate government. The additional risk created by this diversification remains low for “transformed” groups because of the operational disconnect between most countries’ law enforcement and counterterrorism agencies.

Evolution of the Concept: From Discrete Entities to a Spectrum

Historically, crime and terrorism have been addressed as separate entities because they are perceived to have opposing motivations: greed vs grievance (Collier & Hoeffler, 2000; Hutchinson & O’Malley, 2007). This creates an artificial divide between the highly interrelated networks and entirely disregards hybrid groups, resulting in a lack of specialized expertise on the emergence, operational priorities, and effective countermeasures for addressing groups that are engaged in both criminal and terrorist activities. The opposing view, which has gained particular traction among legislatures and pundits, argues for the complete melding of organized crime and terrorist groups into a single entity (Makarenko, 2004; Matfess & Miklaucic, 2016; Miklaucic & Brewer, 2013; Kovalova & Pearl, 2014; Shelley, 2014; Shelley & Picarelli, 2002; Smoot, 2014; Wang, 2010).

One of the earliest understandings of “nexus” actors emerged from the diversification into drug cultivation and trafficking by Marxist rebel groups in Latin America during the 1970s and 1980s (Ochoa, 2018). This relationship was generally referred to as “narco-terrorism” and did not capture criminal activities beyond drug production and trafficking. The collective understanding of crime–terror relationships changed significantly at two primary inflection points: the end of the Cold War and the September 11, 2001, attacks in the United States (Smith, 2018). Between the late 1940s and the early 1990s, both the Soviet Union and the United States were in the business of financially supporting violent nonstate groups in the name of “great power competition.” With the collapse of the Soviet Union, both countries scaled back their bankrolling of violent government transition. Grabosky and Stohl (2010) therefore argue that the collective turn to criminal activity by terrorist groups was a functional response to the decline of state sponsorship following the Cold War. During this post-Cold War period, the limited academic literature on the subject seemed to agree that crime–terror relationships were instrumental, but that there was little “mixing” of group types. An exception to this dynamic may be the Provisional Irish Republican Army, which seems to have been an “early adopter” of criminal enterprise as an organizational funding strategy during the 1990s (Horgan & Taylor, 2003).

The relationship gained new traction following 9/11. As a result of the 2001 attacks in the United States, the international community increased restrictions and oversight of licit sources of money such as state sponsorship and private donations. With these “traditional” methods of terrorist financing disrupted or eliminated, terrorist groups turned to existing black markets to fund their operations. Two authors emerged in the early 2000s as the founding voices of the “nexus” understanding: Tamara Makarenko and Christopher Dishman. Tragically prescient on the 9/11 attacks, Dishman (2001) makes the case that while terrorist groups were being pushed into criminal diversification, it was logically unlikely that criminal

groups would ally with terrorist organizations, and any terrorist-criminal activity would be transitory at best. He sketches out a “spectrum” that ranges between purely criminal and totally terrorist and suggests groups might move toward the other end, but he strongly refuted the idea that the two types would ever cooperate (Dishman, 2001). Makarenko (2004) expands this understanding of the relationship in her chapter “The Crime-Terror Continuum,” arguing that rather than binary categories of “criminal” and “terrorist,” groups should be understood as ranging along a continuum between absolute values (Makarenko, 2004).

Working from this “spectrum” understanding, Dishman (2005) argues that post-9/11 counterterrorism measures also increased crime-terror collusion by forcing groups to “flatten” their organizational hierarchies and therefore created opportunities for low- and mid-level members to diversify their activities and alliances in ways that higher leadership might have eschewed. This was certainly the case in 2004, when radicalized former gang members became a key part of the network responsible for the Madrid train bombings, using their criminal abilities and illicit network to fund the acquisition of key materials (Reinares, 2009). Louise Shelley and John Picarelli (2002) support and advance this spectrum model, arguing that these groups cooperate based on “methods” (cost-benefit rational action) rather than “motives” (ideological affiliation). Shelley and Picarelli (2002) also outline an analytical model for assessing in which operational and physical areas crime-terror cooperation may occur, which (unsurprisingly) finds that these activities could be common in areas with weak governance and high levels of corruption and which have recently experienced violent conflict. This is unsurprising, given what we know about the prevalence and high rate of conflict reoccurrence in geographically inaccessible contexts (Fearon, 2004; Matloff, 2017).

By 2005, the concept of the “nexus” was well established in the academic and policy literature. Complicating the conversation are the divides between political science, policy, criminology, and political economy scholarship. The exact nature of the relationship, however, remains hotly contested. Each field approaches the relationship from a distinct but complementary perspective, but disciplinary silos inhibit a robust dialog. Beyond the academy, there are limited exchanges of information between law enforcement, national security, and counterterrorism agencies, creating strategic blind spots that are then exploited by groups that transcend these categories.⁴ The tendency among those who deal with these groups is to specialize in either crime or terrorism and then pick up knowledge in an ad hoc fashion as it pertains to their specific caseload or project. There is also significant tension between these perspectives: in counterterrorism and defense literature, crime-terror cooperation is framed as needing proactive and kinetic responses—there is a bias toward “shooting your way out of the problem.” In contrast, law enforcement and legal actors see crime-terror relationships reactively—investigating, arresting, and prosecuting are all activities that must occur *after* an offense. There is a clear imperative for more research just to scope out the problem, let alone typologize and analyze the different ways it presents and evolves.

The existing literature on the crime-terror nexus can be organized into four major schools of thought: the causes and enabling conditions that allow for such interactions, the spectrum of possible relationships, the ways that groups change as they move into the other’s area of operation, and the policy implications for melded groups. Unfortunately, because both criminals and terrorist groups actively seek to hide their activities from observers, good-quality data is exceptionally difficult to obtain (von Maravic, 2012). This creates a preponderance of qualitative research based on historical case studies, or quantitative research based on flawed numerical data, leaving our understanding of the nexus constrained.

These four schools transcend disciplinary boundaries and stray into related fields such as rebel governance, illicit political economy, and organizational behavior, creating a fragmented conversation that hides the true scope and trajectory of the crime-terror nexus across numerous different literatures that do not always engage each other.

Just a Headline or a Real Phenomenon?

The relationship between various types of illicit actors has received significantly more scrutiny since the September 11, 2001, attacks on the United States, particularly as evidence was discovered that Al Qaeda utilized illegal commodity smuggling to protect their resources from a retaliatory U.S. government (Farah, 2004; Smoot, 2014; Vittori, 2008). While many are deeply concerned about the implications of crime-terror hybridization, not all observers are convinced that the nexus exists at significant levels or that its impacts are sufficiently distinct from other types of terrorist activities to warrant specific attention. Often, this opposition is due to the “sensational” nature of such connections, the paucity of “hard” data, or because the objector argues that crime is the same as any other conflict economy (Cheng, 2018). One of the reasons why the crime-terror literature remains underdeveloped is because many scholars argue its existence is a “sexy headline” driven by journalists, not a true phenomenon supported by empirical data. In large part, these objections arise from logistical and methodical challenges of studying the relationship, as well as its nonintuitive nature. These tensions can be seen throughout the literature.

Audrey Kurth Cronin (2009) mounts one of the more commonly cited arguments against prioritizing terrorist-driven crime from a terrorism studies perspective, arguing that criminal activity indicates a reorientation of group aims and is thus a harbinger of the end. Most terrorist groups undertake illicit schemes as a funding mechanism, “but their core mission continues to be the pursuit of a political cause, served by symbolic violence” (Cronin, 2009). Dishman (2001) finds that the balance tips when terrorist group financial needs outstrip their political motivations and continuing a political struggle would be impossible without illicit funds. Thus, groups transitioning away from political aims “revert” (or reorient) to crime as their political motivations are eclipsed by greed. Cronin (2009, p. 149) suggests this shift represents both a lower level of overall violence and a lower level of threat to the political system because criminal groups are status quo actors, writing that “criminal behavior is by no means good news, but it may be more easily confronted than terrorism through existing legal frameworks.” An effective counterterrorism response therefore depends on the capabilities of local and state-level law enforcement, rather than on an international military effort. This is perhaps an outdated perspective on the scope and capabilities of criminal groups, particularly regarding those organizations that have used terror tactics to gain political leverage over local communities or judicial or legislative processes. It may also reflect an outdated view of the respective roles of the military and law enforcement in counterterrorism, and the distinctions between the two in dealing with transnational threats that have both domestic and international components.

A second pillar of the argument deemphasizing crime-terror collusion is the idea that criminal organizations necessarily thrive on a governance status quo where they can escape widespread scrutiny. Associations with terrorism would inevitably bring unwanted attention (Makarenko, 2012). The traditional aphorism expressing this conventional belief is “if we’ve

already bought the judge, we don't want a new one." Shelley (2005) argues that well-established, mature crime groups are much less likely to ally or cooperate with terrorist groups because they have evolved in relationship to their "home" state structures and are thus dependent on the continuation of the existing institutional state of affairs. The exception may be in postconflict areas or desperately weak states that have little in the way of functioning structures; because such areas are dominated by an informal shadow economy, criminal groups have little to fear from politically sensitive associations, and politically violent groups can seize illicit funding opportunities with less risk to their legitimacy (Shelley, 2005). However, this argument against crime-terror linkages clashes with the idea that criminal groups are entirely profit motivated and assumes that criminal endeavors would not benefit from a displacement in law enforcement attention. It may also miss the idea that it is possible to maintain the governance status quo while also causing a huge amount of damage and violence (Gilman, 2014). Further, it does not account for terrorist groups that internally recruit or develop criminal capabilities in a bid to support their political resistance (Mullins & Wither, 2016).

However, dismissing crime-terror linkages is rejecting very real evidence to the contrary—these relationships are far more than a headline. Those arguing in favor of the existence of the crime-terror relationship see the story of the complex relationship between crime and terrorism as one of alliance rather than opposition. In contrast to traditional thinking, which positioned crime-terror relationships as opportunistic, transitory, and potentially harmful to the terrorist group, there is a growing appreciation of the important role illicit activities play for violent nonstate actors and the deep relationships between such groups and black markets. According to the U.S. National Intelligence Council, in 2010 there were at least 40 confirmed terrorist-criminal linkages, and the United Nations finds that these relationships only continued to grow during the 2010s (Bull, 2018; Government of the United States, 2011). In truth, crime-terror relationships are best represented as a spectrum or "continuum," shaped by political, economic, and geographic situational idiosyncrasies, and of which a true "nexus" between crime and terrorism is only one of a series of possible relationships (Makarenko, 2004; Sanderson, 2004).

True nexus groups have entwined criminal and political aims so tightly that a strategic evolution has occurred, blending an extensive, permanent criminal enterprise with ideological and political goals, and represents only a small number of the universe of cases. But even if criminalized terrorist groups only account for a portion of all politically motivated nonstate actors, understanding and accounting for them is critical to global security. Ochoa (2018) argues that crime-terror groups pose a threat to both developed and developing states. As evidence, a large-N study conducted by Stanford University found that while only about 13% of conflict actors relied on illicit funding, they lasted five times longer than their legitimately financed counterparts (Fearon, 2004). This is particularly crucial for would-be counterterrorist policymakers because Asal and Rethemeyer (2008) find that group age (in addition to network connections) is the strongest predictor of organizational lethality. Further, quantitative studies in the Middle East and Eastern Europe show that groups that engage in political violence are also more likely to engage in criminal behavior (Asal et al., 2015). In the worst-case scenario, Makarenko (2004) argues that convergence can result in "black hole syndrome," where the state is plunged into endemic violence that is primarily aimed at profit and destruction, not governmental transition.

However, while supported by empirical evidence, these findings have not resulted in more thorough academic scholarship. Instead, the clear majority of scholarship and writing on crime–terror convergence continues to come from sources outside academia: government agencies, journalists, businesses, and independent organizations. In part this is because of methodological challenges and the difficulty in studying such relationships in an open way. Neither criminals nor terrorists publish quarterly reports on their funding structures; indeed, they actively seek to conceal profits, expenditures, liabilities, and growth strategies. Most often, estimates of how much illicit trafficking is occurring is based on seizures or arrests at borders or ports of entry—a deeply inaccurate way to judge the scale of the illicit market (Kilmer & Hoorens, 2010; Nicolaou-Manias & Wu, 2016). Franke et al. (2019, p. 8) argues the case study approach is necessary because “the dynamics of organized crime are specific to each conflict affected state and defy generic or template approaches.” One notable exception that attempts a comprehensive overview is *The World Atlas of Illicit Flows*, which pooled researchers from INTERPOL, RHIPTO, and the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime into a single project tracking over 1,000 trafficking routes (Nellemann et al., 2018).

Terrorism studies suffer from a similar lack of primary source data, that is, “information based on the direct observation of, or participation in, a certain subject” (Schuurman, 2018, p. 5). Schuurman (2018) found that of 2,552 articles on terrorism published between 2007 and 2016, only 53.8% contained primary source data. What academic work there is on the nexus tends to be deeply qualitative and case study oriented, which limits generalizability and wider acceptance into the academic canon. This represents a major area of opportunity for scholars and deserves robust academic inquiry but will require innovative thinking about data collection.

Types of Crime–Terror Relationships

When conceptualizing the crime–terror nexus, it’s helpful to deepen Rollins and Sun Wyler’s (2013) framework and categorize the relationship in three ways. To achieve nexus status, groups either collaborate, combine, or convert.

Collaboration

Collaborative interactions are the most tenuous type of crime–terror relationships. These dealings are generally transitory, task-based, and serve a functional purpose. A terrorist group may seek out an expert money launderer to wash funds for them or contract with a gang to move weapons into or out of a restricted area (Kovalova & Pearl, 2014). These associations do not fundamentally change the nature or aims of either type of group. Groups may even collaborate with partners who appear to be fundamentally antithetical to their ideological foundations, as al-Shabaab does by subcontracting Kenyan sex workers as intelligence collectors or as Hezbollah does by cooperating with Jewish gangs (Petrich & Donnelly, 2019; Warrick & Mekhennet, 2020).

Combination

Combination occurs when collaborative relationships become consistent, or when a criminal and a terror group identify a shared goal. Recently, it seems they also may occur when a terrorist group specifically targets petty criminals or incarcerated persons as recruits (Basra et al., 2016). Groups ranging from al-Shabaab in the Horn of Africa to the Islamic State in Syria to neo-Nazi cells in the United States have all targeted individuals with criminal backgrounds for recruitment, often as a way overcoming their historical ineptitude in criminal activities (Lakhani, 2020; Petrich, 2019). Like all business endeavors, criminal capabilities require a great deal of learning. Politically motivated individuals who have previously lived law-abiding lives before turning to violence in the effort to displace a government are often caught up by petty crime or because of unfamiliarity with law enforcement tactics (Petrich, 2019). For example, Jamal Ahmidan, one of the bombers responsible for the 2004 Madrid train bombings, was repeatedly stopped by Guardia Civil officers for driving a car with fake plates (which was also full of explosive material) and was eventually arrested after losing his temper with a law enforcement officer—a mistake a seasoned criminal would likely have avoided (Kenney, 2010).

Conversion

Finally, the most extreme version of crime–terror relationships is conversion: when one type completely incorporates the other’s goal types. For terrorist groups, this looks like prioritizing profit or illicit gains at the same level as political change (one of the ways Cronin [2009] argues terrorist groups end). Arguments in favor of terrorist conversion often approach the process in a straightforward, “intuitive” way: greed overtakes political aspirations, leading to corruption and leadership rot among a formerly political organization. Criminal group conversion, in contrast, is evidenced by noninstrumental activities aimed at disrupting the political system or providing governance. Mexico’s drug trafficking organizations are often held up as an example of criminal groups that have deeply incorporated political goals and aims beyond those needed to effectively manage their illicit activities.

However, conversion is not as simple as “flipping” from one type to the other. A commonly cited example of terrorist group conversion is the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia—Ejército del Pueblo (FARC-EP), which began as a Marxist revolutionary group in the 1960s before diversifying into crime (specifically cocaine) in the late 1980s. In many ways, FARC-EP has become the “poster child” for the revolutionary-to-gangster trajectory. Gutiérrez and Thomson (2020) argue that FARC-EP’s involvement with cocaine was actually a political maneuver—a practice of rebel governance. Other examples of this “conversion” model include the Taliban in Afghanistan, which has integrated powerful criminal actors into its governance model, balancing profit and politics without fully devolving into criminal behavior (Peters, 2010). This perspective—that administering an illicit economy is a way for an insurgent group to prove its bona fides to a local community—provides a critical alternative perspective to conversion. Perhaps adopting “other type” goals is actually a “nested game” rather than the abrogation of their political agenda.

Profit or Politics?

While scholars are beginning to discuss how crime may be more than an incidental or opportunistic activity undertaken by low-level operatives, the field remains undecided on the importance of investigating these activities as a distinctive operational feature. Often it is argued that criminal activity is no different than any other revenue-generating mechanism used by terrorist groups (Smith, 2018). For example, while not all are as well-known as the American mafia's domination of trash and waste disposal, all sorts of illicit groups engage in legal enterprises and use illegal means to edge out competition, launder money created by fully criminal activities, and provide services to their constituents. Under this logic, criminal activity is simply "portfolio diversification" and one of many tools that a resilient nonstate actor may use to remain viable, rather than a wholesale shift in operational priorities (Cockayne, 2016).

Crime-terror is a two-step dance where both sides are constantly changing and evolving depending on the actions of the other. Forest (2019) argues that there is some degree of inevitability regarding crime-terror interactions, given the geographic collocation of both types of groups and significant opportunities such a relationship would have for such opportunistic actors. Routes that move licit goods can be easily used to move illicit ones, sometimes in the same shipment (Makarenko, 2004). In fact, commingling goods is best practice for successfully smuggling. Further, as Wang (2010) notes, criminal and terrorist groups share operational methods and organizational similarities, as well as an oppositional view of existing legalities, making cooperation or integration "smoother" than the incorporation of other group types. Understanding both types of organizations as "networks" rather than hierarchies makes the nexus clearer (Dishman, 2005).

The role of ideology in predicting crime-terror interactions is fraught. There is a great deal of public commentary suggesting that ideologically motivated groups, particularly those based in religious strictures, are less likely to participate in criminal endeavors because to do so would be morally or ethically problematic. This view conflicts with the literature that argues that terrorist groups are rational actors. Asal et al. (2015) use a large-N quantitative analysis to find that criminal activity (specifically drug trafficking) is a tactical choice that can be predicted by how networked a terrorist group is to other terrorist organizations. They also find that ideology does play a role in whether or not a group will diversify into crime, but the relationship contradicts the intuitive inverse connection. Rather, groups that are explicitly ideological (in this case, ethno-politically so) are *more likely* to traffic drugs than their ideologically agnostic counterparts (Asal et al., 2015).

Enabling Conditions

Crime-terror groups can develop in every part of the world and may present very differently in different contexts. Even the same group may interact differently with different "host" states. Further, interactions between profit-motivated illicit actors and politically motivated ones are also not new. However, there are three major enabling conditions in the 21st century that have allowed nexus groups to metastasize beyond their historical counterparts. These include corruption, small arms trafficking, and globalization.

Corruption

Criminal activity does not exist at scale without some corresponding degree of corruption (Klitgaard, 1991). Global free market economic dynamics make economic strength a necessary prerequisite for political power, an arrangement that builds on itself to perpetuate the economically powerful actor as well as the activities that contribute to that economic strength (Makarenko, 2004). In contexts without strong institutional safeguards and empowered independent watchdogs, such power can be diverted from the institution to the individual. Because terrorism often arises in contexts where it is perceived the government is failing to meet a critical need of a segment of the population, it also often occurs in contexts where corruption dictates access to resources or conflict resolution. As an underlying, or enabling, condition, it has historically been under-accounted for in the literature on nexus actors.

Small Arms Trafficking

A significant amount of violence would be impossible without access to modern firearms (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2020b). The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (2020a) found a high degree of correlation between firearm trafficking patterns and regional violence. This is particularly true for nonstate actors; firearms allow them to punch far above their “weight” compared with if they were limited to only bladed weapons or even explosives. In the wake of the Cold War, the global market was flooded with military-grade small arms. Like all consumer markets, the glut in supply cratered prices and made firearms significantly more accessible to the “average” illicit actor (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2020a). Because of regulating across jurisdictions, some aspects of firearm sales can even be legal before being diverted, making them all the harder to stop. Firearms trafficking and sales are often one of the key places that crime and terror intersect, creating an opportunity for collaboration (Bergema et al., 2020; Gartenstein-Ross & Trombly, 2012; Tessler et al., 2017).

Globalization

The free movement of people, goods, and ideas has been hugely beneficial to the overall economic wealth and political freedom of the world. However, the reduction of hard borders and the increased speed of the global economy has combined to create significant opportunities for illicit actors. Weak states, uneven legal regulations, and ungoverned spaces all represent “safe havens” for an array of actors interested in avoiding regulation. Further, the vast sums of money that flow across jurisdictions in a fraction of a second offer a myriad of opportunities for laundering illicit funds, making interdiction and disruption far more complex than in previous eras (Clarke, 2018). Other challenges wrought by globalization include the faster dissemination of ideas, which for terrorist and criminal groups means the propagation of illicit “best practices.”

Associated with globalization, the Internet represents a historically unique avenue for terrorist groups to make illicit connections, message audiences, raise and launder funds, and reach recruitment pools beyond their historical limitations. People can easily learn to build a

bomb, smuggle cash, or make meth from YouTube (Bloomberg Quicktake, 2014; Discovery Channel, 2011). The accessibility of knowledge and ease of communication are key enabling mechanisms for diversification of illicit groups.

Notable Cases

In addition to the cases referenced in this article, the following two mini case studies show how the nexus presents in the real world.

Islamic State

In 2011, Syria devolved into civil war between forces loyal to President Bashar al-Assad and an array of domestic opposition groups. Of these opposition groups, the terrorist organization the Islamic State (IS) is perhaps the most famous—and it is certainly the wealthiest. While putting an exact figure on IS revenues is impossible given the efforts of the group to avoid financial seizures, at its height in 2015 it was the wealthiest terrorist group in history with a financial worth of about \$6 billion (Clarke, 2018). The group's criminal activities are diversified among several types of illicit enterprise; two of the most notable are the trade in looted antiquities and oil smuggling (Basra & Neumann, 2017; Howard et al., 2015). IS also demonstrates a further area of convergence in its targeted recruitment of petty criminals (Faiola & Mekhennet, 2015; Gallagher, 2016). None of these activities challenge the fundamental ideological or political aims of IS, making this criminal activity “safer” from a group integrity perspective and situating the group somewhere between cooperation and combination on the spectrum of crime–terror nexus (Ligeti & Lassalle, 2018). Oil trafficking arose as a result of IS capture of Iraqi and Syrian oil fields and the significant demand for fuel domestically in Syria as well as across the border in Turkey (Kenner, 2019); though the group has largely lost physical control of the oil fields, extortion of oil supply lines leaves them with a lucrative revenue stream.

Diversifying into antiquities smuggling is perhaps less straightforward than the involvement of IS in oil. Iraq and Syria are some of the oldest continuously inhabited sites in human history and contain a wealth of relics and heritage items from previous inhabitants. Looting in the region is not new, but IS elevated it to an “industrial level” (Terrill, 2017). Doing so served two purposes: raising funds from collectors abroad and contributing to propaganda about the cultural and religious superiority of the radical Islamist political and cultural ideology. Because IS controlled sites important to early Christianity and Judaism, there is a significant market for antiquities in the Global North. The most famous case of a Western purchase of contraband antiquities is likely that of Hobby Lobby, which paid \$1.6 million in 2010 for over 5,000 artifacts intended for their sponsored “Museum of the Bible” (Green, 2017). Both oil smuggling as well as the destruction and sale of antiquities in the name of ideology offers support to the theory that criminal activity is in some cases a political act; this suggests that groups can exist indefinitely in “nexus” status, without ideological devolution or loss of integrity (Gutiérrez & Thomson, 2020).

Hezbollah

Hezbollah, one of the longest lasting and durable terrorist organizations in human history, has a long record of criminal diversification. Criminal activities have ranged from the relatively banal (cigarette smuggling in North Carolina) to sophisticated arms smuggling (Leuprecht et al., 2017; Levitt, 2016). For years, the group has been highly successful in leveraging “collaboration” with criminal groups to facilitate money laundering, weapons procurement, and operational logistics in support of its political objectives in Lebanon (Belli et al., 2015; Realuyo, 2014). By 2004, the group was well into a mutually beneficial relationship with criminality, earning as much as \$10 million from a single region in Latin America and diversifying into a broad spectrum of criminal facilitation from cocaine trafficking to diamond smuggling (Meyer, 2017). Much of Hezbollah’s relationship to criminality in the 1990s and early 2000s seemed to be logistical—laundering money or moving goods like an illicit FedEd (Shaw, 2019).

In 2020, it appeared the group might be moving from a “combination” model to a “conversion” model, driven by financial pressures from increased sanctions and decreasing state support. For example, in 2016, agents from the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) arrested Hezbollah members who had been selling cocaine sourced from Colombian and Mexican drug trafficking organizations to dodge fundraising sanctions and to purchase arms for use in Syria (Fernandez, 2020). The group has also been linked to amphetamine trafficking from Syria into Europe—in July 2020, Italian police seized a shipment of pills worth \$1.1 billion (Warrick & Mekhennet, 2020). This shift may be a function of increasing familiarity with criminal networks, a devolving vertical hierarchy into a flatter, cell-based structure, or the loss of other funding streams such as state sponsorship from Iran. It also may be a response to Hezbollah’s involvement in the Syrian civil war, which may have opened up more direct access to criminal economies than the group had previously.

The Broader Context: Responding to Nexus Groups

Both policymakers and scholars must shift their understanding of the threat of criminal diversification by terrorist groups. It is not a footnote, a minor side hustle, or a transitory relationship—it is a strategic decision made by rational actors to strengthen their ability to contest for control of territory. Effective on-the-ground actions should be based on a law enforcement model rather than a military model so as to avoid radicalizing the population away from legitimate government. A heavy-handed, kinetic response to crime-terror groups, particularly those entrenched in the community via illicit activities such as drug cultivation, will likely drive community members away from the intervener and toward the violent nonstate actor and may even foment a shift in support from an economic alliance to an ideological one (Kilcullen, 2011). Any interference in the local-level economy, particularly when a strong informal economy has sprung up to compensate for ineffective governance, must be mitigated. Alternative livelihood programs have been shown to backfire time and again when they are implemented slowly or sloppily (Delgado, 2015; Felbab-Brown, 2009). Felbab-Brown (2009) argues that effective policies must be built around the recognition that responding to combatants may require overlooking illicit economies, especially those that are labor intensive.

Oliveira (2014) argues that international policy networks cultivated around counterterrorism financing and anti-money laundering regulations represent the light side echo of crime-terror groups and thus may be an effective forum for proactively disrupting such relationships. However, Johnson (2019) warns of an unintended consequence of these networks: the appropriation of counterinsurgency tactics by criminal organizations. He argues that the massive criminal violence in Mexico is a function of cartel recruitment of counterterrorism and counterinsurgency trained military forces. These soldiers brought their knowledge of terrorist tactics to their new organizations, developing a new “type” of nexus actor with no significant ties to existing terrorist groups (Johnson, 2019). States should be aware of the possibility of cooption and the associated long-term negative effectives on national security, particularly in states with limited institutional integrity and high rates of corruption.

Conflating crime and terrorism actually represents a benefit for counterterrorists; by reducing terrorism, and by extension terrorist organizations, to simple criminals, societal resilience may be significantly increased (Bassiouni, 2004). Terrorist-attack casualties are numerically insignificant, yet they create an outsize emotional societal reaction, in part because of their random nature. However, because these groups are so internationalized, resolving the problem of international or transnational jurisdiction becomes essential. An armed incursion or strike by one state into the territory of another is rarely met with appreciation by the targeted country, but in the case of striking terrorist training groups or headquarters there seems to be a degree of normative acceptance (Brooks, 2014). The same is not true for similar cross-border arrests of criminal actors or the disruption of illicit networks. The legality of activities varies across states. For example, marijuana is legal to grow, sell, and use in Canada, but it is illegal (at the federal level) in the United States. U.S. DEA agents conducting secret raids across the border to dismantle Canadian marijuana businesses, even if they were being used to launder money for white nationalist groups in Montana, would be met with severe approbation by both Canada and the international community. The model for transjurisdictional law enforcement has been one of coordination and cooperation between sovereign states, aided by intergovernmental organizations such as Interpol and guided by the United Nations Convention Against Transnational Organized Crime (International Criminal Police Organization, n.d.; United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2003).

Developing effective responses to nexus actors is neither easy nor cheap and will require great vision and political will across many related but distinct policy areas. Gaging the trajectory of recent history, however, globalization will continue to draw actors and areas together, transnational threats that stymie the bounds of Westphalian sovereignty will continue to grow, and both local and international communities must develop a better way to respond to them. Continuing to think about crime-terror relationships with traditional paradigms is a recipe for failure.

Future Research Directions

An important element in constructing effective crime-terror policy is to understand why groups do *not* diversify into crime when the opportunity presents itself. To date, no single body of literature has adequately addressed this question, so reaching out to related literatures such as terrorism studies, civil war studies, criminology, peace studies, and international development will be critical in developing robust theories. One key area that

needs a significant amount of study is the nexus at the individual level. This flow could look like criminals radicalizing and joining extremist movements as either an escape hatch from legal prosecution or from a desire for redemption (Petrich, 2019). It could also appear as demobilized foreign fighters return to their country of origin and have little way to reenter legitimate society in terms of skills, work history, or allegiance to state norms (Gallagher, 2016).

Fruitful areas of future inquiry may include terrorist group concerns over public perception, conflicts with ideological tenets, or how strong and patriotic feelings among criminal networks may influence an illicit group's decision to diversify (Sandberg, 2018). Certainly, more research based on primary sources would be welcome, as well as investigation outside the "traditional" cases of crime-terror cooperation. More work is also needed to understand why terrorist groups may eschew lucrative and longevity-boosting activities. There are several possible future case studies.

Afghanistan

Much has already been written about Afghanistan's struggles with crime and terrorism (Peters, 2010; Shanty, 2011; Stepanova, 2012). The American drawdown and conflict fatigue among the public means a continued U.S. presence in Afghanistan is unlikely, even though Afghan institutions remain desperately weak and opium cultivation remains high. Persistent drought and forcible repatriation have increased pressures on legitimate economic endeavors, making it less likely citizens will choose legal crops or licit profit making, allowing "easy" diversification for terrorist groups operating in the country.

Mali

The Malian government is unable to project power beyond a small fraction of the country, leaving much of Mali open to exploitation by terrorist groups and transnational organized criminals (United Nations, 2018). Given its strategic location along major illicit smuggling routes, it is unsurprising that the country suffers from "highly volatile and hostile conditions on the ground" (United Nations, 2018). Looking ahead, increasing pressures created by climate change will only worsen existing tensions and create space for challengers to legitimate governance, as it did in the wake of the droughts in the 1970s and 1980s (Raineri & Galletti, 2016). International law enforcement assistance would be deeply useful here: Malian law does not recognize organized crime as a distinct class of crime and has underdeveloped justice institutions (Raineri & Galletti, 2016).

The Golden Triangle of Thailand, Laos, and Myanmar

The area where Thailand, Laos, and Myanmar intersect has long been a criminal's paradise. Myanmar is the second largest producer of opium, after Afghanistan, and is a key supplier of heroin for Asian markets. Methamphetamine production and trafficking is also the source of significant profit, especially as the fentanyl markets expand. Taken in conjunction with the violent instability experienced by Myanmar since 2018, the situation is beginning to resemble

Mexico in 2005, before the narcoviolence explosion (Ghosh, 2018). Observers should watch for criminal groups adopting political platforms, conducting governance activities, and targeting noninvolved civilians with violence as a way of coercing the state.

Venezuela

That Venezuela is unstable comes as no surprise, but the 2019 pseudo coup by the head of the legislative branch, Juan Guaidó, against President Nicolás Maduro will only create further opportunity for violent nonstate actors to thrive. In fact, they may already be merging—in January 2019, Hezbollah issued a press release supporting Maduro, after years of reporting that the group has links with illicit actors within the country (Asmann, 2019). While Venezuela did not have significant domestic terrorist groups as of 2020, it does have major criminal networks, and the vacuum created by such weak institutions makes their continuation all but inevitable. As neighboring Colombia works to demobilize its own insurgent groups, some individuals, and possibly whole groups, will seek friendlier climes—namely, unstable Venezuela. Further, given the regional dynamics of the cocaine trade, the needs of political violence organizations, and the deeply damaged Venezuelan economy, it is all but assured any such groups will be heavily involved in criminal activity.

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Notes

1. Some observers note that technically all terrorists are criminals because violent overthrow of a state by a nonstate actor is generally outlawed in domestic law. Further, the United Nations has developed 19 counterterrorism legal instruments that most member states had ratified or acceded to as of 2016 (United Nations Office of Counterterrorism, 2017). Nevertheless, security studies scholars accept that terrorists and their organizations are distinct from other types of international and national law breakers. What they do not agree on, however, is the definition of terrorism

and terrorist groups. Terrorist groups are defined based on their use of a single class of tactic—terrorism, defined here as violent attack or the threat of violent attack against a noncombatant target in a way designed to cause fear among a wider population (Hutchinson, 1972).

2. This is not to say that criminal groups have not acquired political aims or have never inserted themselves into the political processes of their host state. It is simply to note that language about “nexus” actors has more commonly been used to refer to political conflict actors who have developed illicit abilities rather than criminal groups. Criminal actors who have pursued political demands include Pablo Escobar’s bombing of Avianca Flight 203 in 1990 in an attempt to kill the Colombian presidential candidate Cesar Gaviria Trujillo; the Italian mafia’s persistent interference with local elections in Naples, Sicily, Calabria, and Campania; and the La Familia Michoacana’s “*plata o plomo*” [silver or lead] bribery policy for Mexican politicians (Associated Press, 1995; Daniele, 2018; Finnegan, 2010).

3. Criminal statutes vary by country, but petty crime is generally understood to be unplanned or lightly coordinated activities such as small-scale theft, minor tax evasion, or simple assault where the monetary and human cost is limited. Organized crime is larger-scale, highly profitable illegal activities that involve a significant amount of coordination and planning to execute and cause significant monetary and human harm. They are not crimes of immediate opportunity.

4. One notable exception to this division is the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency’s tracking and analysis of the interactions between Colombian insurgent groups and cocaine trafficking organizations through the 1980s and 1990s. For an example, see U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (1987).

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