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## **Gangsters, Criminal Armed Groups, and Jihadists: Assessing the Crime-Terror Nexus**

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## **Gangsters, Criminal Armed Groups, and Jihadists: Assessing the Crime-Terror Nexus**

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### **1. Introduction**

The crime-terror nexus has been receiving significant attention in the past few years and has been acknowledged as a rising concern in a number of United Nations issued documents and resolutions.<sup>1</sup> This nexus has embraced over time different forms ranging from “mere coexistence between these illicit groups, to cooperation and even convergence.”<sup>2</sup> The recent revamping of the scholarly debate on the topic is rooted in the operational experience of counterterrorism investigators who discovered the various links between terrorists and criminal activity. As Sullivan noted in 2002, “The nature of crime and conflict is rapidly evolving. Postmodern war is increasingly influenced by non-traditional and irregular combatants: non-state soldiers. These actors are exploiting technology and networked doctrine to spread their influence across traditional geographic boundaries.”<sup>3</sup> The confluence of transnational organized crime and terrorism is also seeded with urban street gangs, and when taken individually, terrorism and transnational crime threaten global political, economic, environmental, and social systems. In fragile cities and states these threats further erode state legitimacy and solvency.<sup>4</sup>

Transnational crime includes not only the global drugs trade, which is destabilizing portions of the state from Mexico to Africa, but also fraud, corruption, and manipulation of political and financial systems. Extreme violence is one of the mechanisms of weakening the state and setting the stage to empower the various existing criminal networks. Gang- and other organized crime-related violence weaken state institutions, normalize said violence, legitimize corruption, instill impunity, distort market mechanisms and degrade the environment.<sup>5</sup> In tandem with these ills associated with organized crime, perceptions of inequity, chronic unemployment and disconnection from mainstream society often become powerful drivers for the alienation of young men (and increasingly young women) in global inner cities and in Europe’s disconnected suburbs (such as the *banlieues* in France).<sup>6</sup> Giles Keppel observes that the radicalization of Muslim youth in Europe (especially in France) is the result of failed government policy to address these societal disconnects and an attraction to global Islamist thought as a salve for alienation where radicalization promises empowerment.<sup>7</sup>

This latent criminal-*cum*-jihadi potential is increasingly seen as building on the foundation of petty criminality. Street gangsters sell drugs, engage in street robberies, vehicle thefts, and conduct enforcement operations (street taxation or extortion) for organized criminal groups. The links between street crime, organized crime, and terrorism rely upon subtle interactions among the various actors. These occur on the street and in prisons and jails. Indeed, ‘prisoner radicalization’ is a key factor in the so-called “new crime-terror nexus”<sup>8</sup> that has swiped across Western European

countries in recent years.

The crime-terror nexus remains a contested concept still in search for a precise definition. For example, while not fully rejecting nexus, Vanda Felbab-Brown rightly argues that it is controversial and has been overstated and overplayed. She argues that the traditional views overlook the benefits belligerents can accrue from the illicit economy, and the broader contours of the illicit economy, including the overall state of the economy, the political benefits for participating in the illicit economy, and government responses to the illicit economy. She also notes that there is a potential to over-conflate the relationship between organized crime and terrorists while understating the complexity of their interactions, especially in the realm of criminal funding. Felbab-Brown points out that it is wrong to assume that terrorists and insurgents solely occupy illegal economies.<sup>9</sup> (And, of course, her observation is reinforced when you consider the role played by criminal cartels and transnational gangs.) She also reminds the reader that criminal enterprises and states often have synergistic relationships (i.e., corrupt networks and political dimensions). Finally, she rightly argues that it is inaccurate to view organized crime and terrorism as monoliths while exploiting the seams and tensions between criminals and terrorists in the global networks that sustain the global criminal economy.<sup>10</sup>

Phil Williams shares these concerns, argues that the “crime-terrorism nexus” is overstated. He is critical of the formulation as articulated by Makareno and Mesquita asserting that the nexus is influenced by confirmation bias. For Williams, a range of varied relationships can exist between terrorists and criminals, and not all involve cooperation. Williams also acknowledges that both criminal and terrorists may rely upon the same ‘criminal service providers.’<sup>11</sup>

Nevertheless, in its most current incarnation it indicates that both terrorists and criminals recruit from a common pool of socioeconomically disenfranchised and alienated youth in Western societies. Reports regarding Australian and European foreign fighters in the Middle East show an increasing prevalence among the recruits and perpetrators of terrorist attacks, of individuals who were socioeconomically marginalized,<sup>12</sup> and resorted to petty crime or illicit activities to make a living. The socioeconomic conditions that have in the first place pushed these individuals into committing economic crimes are likely to influence and “color” the lenses of their subsequent radicalization. Stanislav Matejka remarks that in the process of radicalization “petty criminals are increasingly bypassing more classic forms of Islam (and indeed fundamentalism) and moving toward more nihilistic forms of religion and protest.”<sup>13</sup>

A January 2015 report issued by the Norwegian Defense Research Establishment (FFI) noted that most of the jihadi inspired terrorist attacks conducted in Western Europe were self-funded, with approximately 75% of the attacks costing less than \$10,000 and with a marked decrease being recorded in international financial support for such terrorist cells.<sup>14</sup> Contrary to the prevailing belief that Islamic charities and informal money transfer systems such as the hawala system are being used to finance terrorist attacks, the report found that none of these financing means had been used by jihadis to sponsor attacks in Western countries.<sup>15</sup> Most of the attacks were funded either using legitimate income sources such as personal savings and small loans, or through petty crime.<sup>16</sup>

In this light, the current paper provides an overview of the most recent manifestations of the crime-terror nexus in the 21<sup>st</sup> century Western European countries, and of the major security and political implications of the current trend. In addition, the paper argues that with the passage of time the crime-terror nexus concept has not become clearer,<sup>17</sup> but – on the contrary – it got murkier with new links between terror and crime being added to it. In the absence of a clear and parsimonious definition of what constitutes the crime-terror nexus, there is no wonder that security agencies often find it difficult to come up with adequate responses. In this vein, this paper also aims to contribute

to a more refined conceptualization of the term. Beyond this point, the paper proceeds as following: in section two, we outline the background in which the so-called “new crime-terror nexus” takes place. In section three, we show that the overlap between crime and terror is not actually a new phenomenon, while in section four we debate whether this overlap represents a genuine nexus or only a tactical appropriation of criminal activities by jihadi organizations. In section five we discuss the group and individual level motivations behind the intersection of terror and crime in Europe in recent years, and in section six we present our recommendations in favor of intelligence-led responses to this ‘new crime-terror nexus.’

## **2. The Intersection of Crime and Terror in 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

From 2012 to 2016, the number of terrorist attacks in Western countries has increased as a result of the civil war in Syria and the rise of the Islamic State. Renske van der Veer views the Syrian Conflict as a ‘game changer’ in the crime-terror nexus. Specifically, she views the Syrian situation as a large-scale problem with at least 5,000 foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs) from Europe engaged in jihadi activities in Syria and Iraq. This situation yields the on-going potential for returning jihadis to form the terrorist networks of the future, including networks with potential (likely) links to criminal networks.<sup>18</sup> Since criminal activities beyond terrorist attacks (including suicide bombings) are core ISIS activities:

“[T]he practical day to day activities of ISIS closely resemble activities that are commonly associated with organized crime. ISIS is known to have, amongst other things, kidnapped people, traded in artifacts, smuggled weapons, committed hostile takeovers on banks, factories and other structures on the ground, committed extortion, committed serious intimidation, be involved in large scale prostitution, committed human trafficking and raids.”<sup>19</sup>

Key issues, in this context, include the interaction between criminal and terrorist networks in prisons, the attractive nature of jihadi narratives as justification for criminal activities, the utility of jihadi skill-sets to criminal enterprises (this is a reciprocal factor), and stigma of past jihadi activity inhibiting societal reintegration thus making criminal activity attractive.<sup>20</sup>

According to research conducted by Sam Mullins, of 47 jihadi-inspired attacks, over half of them took place in the United States (10) and France (17). The rest of the attacks were carried out in other Western countries such as Germany, Denmark, Austria, Canada, United Kingdom and Belgium. Most of these terrorist-attacks involved individuals with a criminal past.<sup>21</sup> Additional terrorist attacks perpetrated in France since 2016 until the present have also unveiled this new aspect of the crime-terror nexus: the recruitment of individuals with a criminal past who have honed their violent and criminal skills in the streets of major European cities, and who bring their knowhow to the service of violent jihad. In their attempt to find spiritual redemption, these new terrorist recruits do not leave behind them the life of crime in favor of practicing a puritanical form of Islam. On the contrary, they continue to further engage into criminal activities such as shoplifting and pickpocketing of tourists,<sup>22</sup> in this way putting their criminal activities and skills into the service of advancing and financing the Islamic fundamentalist cause. For Colin Clark, Terrorist financing is a central aspect of the crime-terror nexus. It is largely a marriage of convenience driven by survival imperative as terrorist groups employ criminal activities to replace state sponsorship. Transnational interaction between terrorist and criminal enterprises can sometimes become a force multiplier. As a consequence, there is a need to track financial flows and monitor terrorist financing.<sup>23</sup>

According to national police reports issued in Germany, Netherlands, France, and the United Kingdom, between 47 to 66% of individuals who traveled to Syria and Iraq as foreign fighters had

criminal convictions or a criminal dossier with the local authorities.<sup>24</sup> These findings are consistent with those of established scholars of terrorism such as Marc Sageman, Edwin Bakker, and Olivier Roy. Roy showed that nearly 50 percent of French jihadis between 1994 and 2016 had criminal histories.<sup>25</sup> The “competitive advantage” that such recruits bring to the table is their familiarity with violence as well as potential access to weapons and forged documents needed to carry out terrorist activities.<sup>26</sup> In this light, for Basra and Neumann the crime-terror nexus is more than a mere marriage of convenience, but it has become an integral component of jihadi extremism with terrorist organizations such as the Islamic State embracing crime as a means of jihad.<sup>27</sup>

In the early stages of this ‘new nexus’ between crime and terror, Western intelligence services had trouble connecting the dots due to the fact that they relied on the underlying assumption that jihad is likely to be conducted by individuals who embrace a puritanical form of Islam, and that there is an inherent incompatibility between Islamic fundamentalism and individual engagement in criminal activities. These operating assumptions made the radicalization of individuals involved in criminality harder to spot.<sup>28</sup> However, in practice, for individuals such as Said Kouachi – one of the perpetrators of the Charlie Hebdo attack – his commitment to jihad did not preclude his engagement in selling counterfeit trainers and forging documents to evade government surveillance.<sup>29</sup> On the contrary, he used the proceeds of crime to buy the weapons with which the Charlie Hebdo attack was carried out.

With the increased involvement in criminal activities of terrorism perpetrators, many experts have started talking about a ‘new crime-terror nexus’ paradigm being present at the heart of the jihadi attacks conducted in the West. This debate begs two questions: is this phenomenon indeed new, and is it indeed a ‘nexus’ or a mere tactical appropriation of criminal activities by terrorist actors?

### **3. Old Ideological Wine in New Caliphate Bottles**

The merger of criminal activities and terrorist operations motivated on ideological grounds is not something new. The interaction between organized crime and terrorism has been used to fund terrorist activities, such as in the case of rebels trafficking narcotics to fund insurgencies.<sup>30</sup> The activities used to fund terrorism have included robbery, smuggling, identity theft, trafficking and sales of counterfeit goods (*e.g.*, cigarettes), illicit technology transfer, resource extraction (gems, petroleum), fraud, human trafficking, and most importantly money laundering (arguably the most critical area of common interest). Terrorist bank robberies, for example, have a long pedigree dating at least to the 1970s when groups such as the Red Army Faction (RAF or Baader-Meinhof Group) employed bank robberies and armored car heists to fund their activities.<sup>31</sup>

Furthermore, the Colombian Marxist insurgency FARC (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia) – although initially shunning the trafficking in drugs – ended up not only turning to it after 1982, but relying heavily on it to finance its activities. In a similar vein, the Taliban’s strict adherence to Islamic law or Sharia has not prevented them from engaging in antiques smuggling and drug trafficking, including the trafficking of synthetic drugs.<sup>32</sup> After their 2002 defeat and retreat to the mountains, Taliban commanders and fighters are known to have relied on heroin trafficking to fund their insurgency.<sup>33</sup>

Along similar lines, other ideologically motivated terrorist and insurgent organizations that suffered losses on the battle field or at the hands of the state are known to have fallen back onto the drug trade and to have engaged in illicit activities as a means of last resort to remain afloat and finance their cause. For instance “in Somalia, after Ethiopian-led forces overthrew the Islamic Courts Union government in 2007, al-Shabab extremists tapped the illicit charcoal and smuggling industries to fund its campaign against the African Union. In Mali, after losing control over the northern Azawad

region in 2012, al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) cashed in on its ties to the lucrative West African cocaine trafficking networks to pay for its war against French-led U.N. peacekeeping forces.”<sup>34</sup>

Even fundamentalist organizations with a millenarian agenda such as al-Qaeda<sup>35</sup> have not been spared the involvement of their members in criminal activities. Al-Qaeda member Mokhtar Belmokhtar was also known as “Mr. Marlboro, a reference to his previous career as a tobacco smuggler.”<sup>36</sup> In their work, Sageman and Roy described a Magreb cluster of Arabs affiliated with al-Qaeda (AQ) as being involved in theft, false documents, and credit card fraud during the 1990s and early 2000s. The March 2004 synchronized bombings on Madrid’s commuter railway that left over 191 dead and 1,800 wounded had been conducted by individuals who had previously been involved in criminal activities<sup>37</sup> and who relied on criminal activities to finance the attack.<sup>38</sup>

Recent research on the networks involved in the Madrid attacks by Fernando Reimages shows that the bombings involved more than just a group of disaffected gangsters in a “pick up game of terror,” but rather complex criminal-terrorist network formation dynamics.<sup>39</sup> Al-Qaeda’s ideological influence played important roles in the development of the network that conducted the attacks with three distinct threads coming together to carry out the bombings. These overlapping threads were the remnants of a historic Spanish AQ cell (Abu Dahdah’s cell); the Moroccan Islamist Combat Group (MICG) with links to jihadists in Egypt (including Mohammed al-Masri), Spain, and Italy; and criminal delinquents turned jihadists. The hybrid cell that conducted the attack engaged in their mission planning in Karachi and Mollenbeck, and had links to Amer Azizi and the AQ cell in Hamburg.

As these examples illustrate and as Sullivan previously noted, criminal-terrorist overlap and interaction are not novel:

“Similar dynamics have been described in Karachi, Pakistan, where drug lords and co-opted government functionaries reportedly fuel gang wars, insurgency and terrorism. The Memon family syndicate and Dawood Ibrahim syndicate have been linked with transnational terrorism attacks (for example, the 1993 Mumbai serial bomb blasts), finance operations for terrorists (through hawala and money laundering enterprises), a range of logistical support enterprises for Al Qaeda, Harkat-ul-Ansar, Jaish-I-Muhammad and other Al Qaeda-affiliated actors.”<sup>40</sup>

In terms of the most recent crop of jihadis recruited in Western European countries, not only that over half of ISIS fighters already had criminal records, but also most of their offenses were drug-related.<sup>41</sup> In addition, most of the recruits continued to engage in smoking, drinking, or other unislamic activities between the time of their recruitment and their joining of the Islamic State in the Middle East.<sup>42</sup> For instance, Salah, the brother of Brahim Abdeslam – one of the November 2015 Paris attackers – “reportedly visited gay bars and was more likely to be seen rolling a joint than a prayer mat.”<sup>43</sup>

As these examples show, irrespective of their ideological bent, a wide range of terrorist and insurgent organizations are likely to delve into criminal activities to sponsor their operations, and the religious fundamentalist motivation of an organization does not preclude the involvement of its members into behaviors or activities typically condemned by the overall ideological principles of the group. But what is the extent of this simultaneous overlap between religious beliefs and criminal behavior or of the nexus between Islamic fundamentalism inspired terrorism and crime?

#### **4. The Evolving Definition of the Crime-Terror Nexus**

Alex Schmid assessed the hybrid potentials of criminal and terrorist enterprises in his 2018, reassessment of his 1996 paper *The Links between Transnational Organized Crime and Terrorist Crimes*.<sup>44</sup> His reassessment included reviewing the definitions of the Palermo Convention, organized crime, and illicit enterprises, a review of the definitions of terrorist groups and the status of transnational organized crime (TOC) and terrorism. He also explored the differences and similarities between organized crime and terrorists. As a result, the types of links (4 Types/Levels) between terrorists and organized crime are identified:

- Type/Level 1: **Weak nexus** or *ad hoc*, opportunistic collaboration,
- Type/Level 2: **Regular association** or tactical collaboration based on common interests.
- Type/Level 3: **Alliance formation** or strategic, mutually advantageous symbiosis,
- Type/Level 4: **Convergence** where crime-terrorist enterprises merge personnel, resources, logistical, or operational activities.<sup>45</sup>

Schmid also identified two types of **violent hybrid organizations**:

- Type 5: Organized Crime groups engage in terrorist tactics as violent hybrid organizations (VHO-1); where these capabilities and tactics are internally developed and sustained, and
- Type 6: Terrorist groups use organized crime methods as violent hybrid organizations (VHO-2); where these capabilities and tactics are internally developed and sustained (e.g., developing these in-house to generate funds for their political struggle, without linking up with an external criminal enterprise).

And discussed these types of hybrid enterprises:

These two types of violent hybrid organisations (VHO), mix elements of typical organised crime group methods (e.g. drug trafficking, smuggling of migrants, extortion, kidnapping for ransom) with terrorist tactics (e.g. bombings, beheadings, hostage taking) – without one type of group linking up with the other type. While borrowing methods and tactics from each other, the ultimate motives of OCGs and TGs as well as VHO-1 and VHO-2 - primarily the search for material wealth in one case, gaining or maintaining political power in the other - remain different.<sup>63</sup> However, to the extent that material wealth can be translated into political power (e.g. by financing election campaigns of politicians sympathetic to the interests or objectives of the sponsor) the line between the two types of organisations can also become blurred.<sup>46</sup>

For Javier Argomaniz and Rut Bermejo, the interaction between terrorists and jihadis can be viewed through Felson's 'offender convergence settings theory.' They explored this in Spain, with special emphasis on the 11-M Madrid Train Bombing and the 2017 Barcelona van attacks on pedestrians on La Rambla and in Cambrils.<sup>47</sup> They argue that the links between crime and jihadism in the country take a variety of forms that can be articulated through the three elements in the convergence settings theory (functional, financial and ideological confluence). Evidence from Spain shows how jihadist cells have previously established contacts with criminal groups in order to obtain access to skills and material (explosives, fake passports, etc.) necessary for their operations. Such collaboration was essential for the 2004 Madrid attacks that killed 192 people and injured around 2000 when, on the morning of 11 March 2004, terrorists placed explosives in four commuter trains.<sup>48</sup>

As previously mentioned, the concept of a crime-terror nexus has long been a contested one. Part

of the problem comes from the fact that the concept is based on definitions of terrorism, organized crime, and petty crime, which – in turn – are also contested and lack a universally accepted definition.<sup>49</sup> RAND political scientist Colin P. Clarke notes that the intersection of crime and terrorism can exist on a variable continuum ranging from temporary alliances, a single action, through lasting partnerships. In this practical view, groups can “move back and forth over time, ebbing and flowing between ideological and profit motives.”<sup>50</sup> Clarke notes that in Europe terrorists and criminal now recruit from the same milieu with the so-called Islamic State or ISIS exploiting criminals to bolster their operational capabilities. As Clarke observed: “Many terrorists have been involved in various forms of criminality before becoming jihadists, including Abdelhamid Abaaoud, leader of the fall 2015 Paris attacks, and Ahmed Coulibaly, a key figure in the Charlie Hebdo attacks in Paris earlier that same year. Mohamed Lahouaiej Bouhlel, the terrorist who killed 84 people in July by driving a truck through a crowd on Bastille Day in Nice, France, also had a history of petty crime.”<sup>51</sup>

Terrorist attacks such as those enumerated above, have led some experts to note that in light of the criminal background of the perpetrators, we are currently witnessing a new version of the crime-terror nexus. Under this “new paradigm,” both terrorist and criminal organizations recruit from the same pool of disenfranchised individuals.<sup>52</sup> However, Clarke makes a very perceptive observation regarding the situation on the ground and he argues that we are not actually witnessing a true nexus between terror and crime along the lines of previous cooperative arrangements between terrorist groups (e.g. ETA, IRA) and criminal organizations or traffickers. On the contrary, he argues that what we have witnessed in recent years in Western European countries is the “terrorist appropriation of criminal activities.”<sup>53</sup>

Similar dynamics are seen with the evolving convergence of gangs and jihadis in Trinidad and Tobago. “Many of these gangs are Afro-Muslim spinoffs of groups like JAM [Jamaat al Muslimeen, an Afro-Trinidadian Muslim movement] dating back to the early 1990s. Most Trinidadian ISIS fighters were recruited from these groups, and returning foreign fighters benefiting from legacy group relationships can assimilate back into these organized criminal enterprises.”<sup>54</sup> The potential convergence of these hybrid potentials with Venezuelan instability and organized crime has the potential to accelerate this crime-terror nexus and incorporate potentials for piracy.

Along similar lines, we can also argue that in recent years the situation in Mexico and Central American countries represents the “cartel or gang appropriation of terrorist tactics,” and not necessarily a true nexus between crime and terror, as the core motivation of the groups has not shifted. In this light, once we take into account the lack of change in the core motivation of non-state armed groups – financial motivation for criminal organizations, and political/ideological for terrorist and insurgent ones – the overlap between terrorist and criminal activities is primarily tactical in nature. These tactical actions waged by criminal armed groups (or CAGs) are generally aimed at advancing the core interests of the criminal enterprise, and while they can be used to assert territorial control and secure political influence, they do not necessarily signal a change in strategic drivers.<sup>55</sup>

In the following section, we identify and present the main drivers behind this ‘new crime-terror nexus’ and show that in most of the recent cases of terrorism in Western countries

what actually took place has been a tactical appropriation of criminal activities and violent skills developed into the underworld to further the Islamic fundamentalist cause.

## **5. The Motivations Behind the Crime-Terror Nexus**

In our analysis of the reasons and circumstances that drive the overlap between terror and criminal activities, we focus on two levels: the group and the individual level. At group level, we identify the need for manpower – usually skilled in violence – and to finance terrorist attacks as being the most prevalent reasons why Islamist terrorist organizations recruit individuals who have a criminal background. In addition, we have identified different types of financial needs that the jihadi organizations have. In general, they use the proceeds of criminal activities to finance terrorist attacks in Western European countries, to sponsor the travel of foreign fighters to Syria and Iraq, and to fund the activities of fighters in the Middle East. At individual level, we identify economic disenfranchisement, social alienation, and the search/need for a personal redemption narrative as the three main factors that facilitate the engagement in criminal activities and the recruitment into terrorism. In many cases, economic disenfranchisement and social alienation act in tandem, but they are also present independently of each other.

### **5.1 Group Level – Financing of Terrorist Attacks in Western Europe**

When recruiting individuals who operate in the underworld, radical organizations seek to exploit the criminal connections and criminal financial expertise that the recruit developed while negotiating on the illicit or black market. These criminal connections are believed to have been instrumental in funding the aforementioned 11 March 2004, attack in Madrid, Mohammed Merah's marauding shooting rampage in Toulouse and MONTAUBAN in 2012, and a grenade attack on a kosher grocery in Sarecelles near Paris among others.<sup>56</sup>

Furthermore, according to the Swedish expert Magnus Ranstorp, ISIS recruits from European countries have used illicit proceeds from drug-trafficking to “micro-finance the Caliphate” or finance terrorist attacks in Western European countries.<sup>57</sup> For instance, Brahim Abdeslam, one of the November 2015 Paris attackers was a bar owner in Molenbeek, Brussels. In the week prior to the Paris attacks, his bar was shut down by police in relation to the illegal sale of drugs in the establishment.<sup>58</sup>

### **5.2 Group Level – Travel Sponsoring for Foreign Fighters**

Besides the interest in recruiting individuals who have the criminal knowhow to finance terrorist attacks in the West, jihadi organizations are equally interested in recruiting individuals who are ideologically inclined to support their cause and who have skills and willingness to engage in criminal activities that sponsor and facilitate the passage of recruits to the conflict areas. For instance, the Abdelhamid Abaaoud terror network in Paris recruited and funded the travel to the Middle East<sup>59</sup> of individuals willing to fight in Syria and other Islamist hotspots in the region.

In Paris, the “Santa Claus” or “Papa Noel” ring led by Khalid Zerkani also used the proceeds coming from the pickpocketing of tourists, shoplifting, and luggage stealing to finance the passage of foreign fighters from Europe to the Middle East.<sup>60</sup> While most of those involved in unislamic activities such as stealing justify their behavior as being carried out in the name of a higher cause and being acceptable under Islam as it mostly targetes “non-believers,” Zerkani's behavior was also judged to be self-serving. In Zerkani's case it is likely that we have an individual who essence is profit-driven rather than ideologically motivated, and who subverted the ideological cause for his own ends. In the words of ‘Mohamed Karim Haddad, whose brother was recruited to fight in

Syria (...) Zerkani was “a charlatan who manipulates young men or socially awkward men, for the wrong cause and probably for his own business.”<sup>61</sup>

### **5.3 Group Level – Sponsoring Fighters in the Middle East**

As a result of the losses suffered on the battlefield and of the disruption of some of its illicit activities, ISIS witnessed in the years prior to its demise a worsening financial situation. In this light, some of the ISIS fighters who returned to Western countries engaged in criminal or illicit activities and sent back to the “front” the proceeds of said activities to help the Islamic State “replenish its depleted coffers.”<sup>62</sup> One such example is that of Ahmed Musto who in 2016 returned to Bulgaria from fighting in Syria with the Islamic State. Together with two other individuals, he set up an unlicensed tobacco processing business for hookah pipes, and subsequently sent the proceeds from the business to the Islamic State using the hawala system.<sup>63</sup>

### **5.4 Group Level – Need for Manpower Skilled in Violence**

On the part of the recruiting terrorist organizations, the need for skilled manpower is the most likely driver to recruit individuals with a criminal past, who need little to no training to carry out violent activities. If these individuals skilled in violence and with little psychological barriers to carry out violent acts can also raise funds to self-finance terror attacks through illicit activities,<sup>64</sup> then the recruiting organization gains simultaneously on several fronts.

For ISIS (Daesh) the links between crime and terrorism appear to go beyond mere financing of attacks. Florence Gaub and Julia Lisiecka at the European Union Institute for Security Studies (EUISS) have reported that “European criminals are one of Daesh’s main targets for recruitment. It is estimated that between 50-80% of Europeans in Daesh have a criminal record– substantially higher than al-Qaeda, where the same statistic stands at around 25%.”<sup>65</sup> This interaction between petty criminals and the Daesh/ISIS is a mutually beneficial arrangement. Criminal skills are leveraged for terrorist operation capability. Weapons handling experience, familiarity with violence, and knowledge of illicit flows and finance complement organizational commitment and ancient religious zeal.

### **5.5 Individual Level – Generational Disenfranchisement of Jihadis**

An individual level factor is what is called the “generational disenfranchisement of jihadis.” High rates of criminality, unemployment, and mental health problems have been noted among recent jihadi-inspired perpetrators of terrorist attacks in Western countries. One of the potential explanations advanced by Sam Mullins and in line with the findings of research conducted by Marc Sageman is that the “socioeconomic status of Western jihadis in general has declined in recent years.”<sup>66</sup> This “generational disenfranchisement of jihadis” would explain why the “the link between terrorism and crime is much more prevalent now than at any other time in the past”<sup>67</sup> with economically disenfranchised individuals resorting to crime to make-up for the lack of opportunities to earn a living in the legal economy.

The bitterness accumulated over time in relation to their low socioeconomic status, and the lack of future opportunities to improve their welfare, make these individuals more susceptible to the radical recruitment messages of ISIS and other jihadi groups. While today many ordinary citizens in Western societies have fallen pray to the extremist

rightwing and leftwing messages of legitimately established political parties and politicians as a result of the worsening economic conditions of the middle class, some individuals who have an inclination towards Islamic ideology and have engaged in petty crime to make a living, are more likely to drift into Islamic radicalism. According to Oliver Roy “radicalized European youth, disaffected from their own societies, are not seeking Islam, but ‘a cause, a label, a grand narrative to which they can add the bloody signature of their personal revolt.’”<sup>68</sup>

### **5.6 Individual Level – The Search for a Personal Redemption Narrative**

For some of the economically disenfranchised recruits, engaging in violent jihad does not only allow them to take revenge against the societies that they perceive to be at the source of their marginalization, but it also provides them with the moral justification for their criminal acts, or even provides them with a “redemption narrative” for their past sins.<sup>69</sup> In the words of Peter Neumann, “It gives criminals a moral justification for doing what they have always been doing – only now they will go to heaven.”<sup>70</sup> In this light, the Islamic State provides its recruits not only with forgiveness for their past crimes, but it also provides them with the opportunity to redeem themselves by carrying out violence in the name of Allah.<sup>71</sup>

### **5.7 Individual Level – Social Alienation**

An additional appeal for Muslim youth in the West to join the Islamic State or other jihadi organizations as foreign fighters comes from their need to belong to a “like-minded” community. Their search to belong is very similar in practice to the need of belonging that disenfranchised youth who join urban street gangs experience, and it is largely rooted in the social alienation that many of them experience on a daily basis in Western societies. Among those Muslim youth raised in Western countries, some feel “trapped by a double negative identity: neither French, nor Moroccan, neither English, nor Pakistanese,”<sup>72</sup> with their joining of an Islamist radical organization filling the same psychosocial needs as it does for members of street gangs: belonging, justification, and empowerment,<sup>73</sup> and filling up the identity gap that they experience.

The Washington Post story of Farid, a son of Moroccan immigrants to Belgium, is very telling in this regard, and it brings together the lack of socioeconomic opportunities in the long term, and the need of belonging satisfied by joining the Islamic State: “He described the life of young Muslims in the district [Molenbeek] as hopeless, with many feeling stateless and confronting unemployment rates well above the national average. Most of his friends, he said, had done jail time. He and other young men he knows, he said, want to go to Syria to join the Islamic State. The group appeals to them because it is establishing a place where Muslims like him can finally feel at home, he said.”<sup>74</sup>

Statements as Farid’s as well as additional research conducted on the Islamic State draw explicit parallels between its ability to adapt, its flexibility and resilience, and similar characteristics exhibited by street gangs. Similar to street gangs’ adaptation to law enforcement efforts to subdue them and their activities, the Islamic State embraced a wide plethora of illicit activities, switched across different types of illicit activities, while also engaging in “graphic displays on violence.”<sup>75</sup>

Alongside the similarities between the adaptation mechanism exhibited by ISIS and street gangs, some analysts issue warnings regarding the premature demise of the organization and fear that “as the caliphate crumbles, the jihad is moving into the criminal underworld.”<sup>76</sup> The logic behind this warning is that as a result of the defeat by the government of Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi, ISIS has lost its ability to raise fund through direct taxation and control of smuggling routes, and the remnants of the group are likely to resort to underground illicit activities so as to survive financially.<sup>77</sup>

## 5.8 The Role of Prisons in Individual Radicalization

Some of individuals who end up imprisoned for petty crimes in which they engaged due to their economic marginalization, are also likely to become indoctrinated and ultimately radicalized while in prison.<sup>78</sup> According to Gaub and Lisieka, prisons can serve as a jihadist accelerator by facilitating the formation of hybrid networks. They illustrate their point as follows: “The Charlie Hebdo attacker Cherif Kouachi met Amedy Coulibaly in Europe’s largest prison, Fleury-Mérogis, and both were mentored there by Djamel Baghdal, an al-Qaeda recruiter. The group continued to meet after they were released from prison and were involved in a jailbreak of another jihadist prisoner. Coulibaly himself stated that ‘prison is the best fucking school of crime. In the same walk, you can meet Corsicans, Basques, Muslims, robbers, small-time drug dealers, big traffickers, murderers... you learn from years of experience.’”<sup>79</sup>

The convergence of criminal and terrorist activities—especially in Europe—appears to be well grounded and an important component in the radicalization of jihadis, the development of terrorist cells and alliances, and the evolution of jihadi strategy. These developments can be expected to persist and demand a comprehensive intelligence-led response to analyzing criminal-terrorist networks and prioritizing the targeting of their hybrid activities.

## 6. Intelligence-Led Responses

Responding to both crime and terrorism is fraught with bureaucratic competition, interagency rivalry, and political complications. As terrorism scholar Stephen Sloan noted in the 1990s “If there is a “fog of war,” there is probably a more dense ‘smog of terrorism’,” complicating assessment of terrorist motivations and goals.”<sup>80</sup>

Not only are terrorist motivations obscured and potentially distributed among globally connected nodes, the police and intelligence services tracking their activity face bureaucratic and jurisdictional obstacles. These obstacles are exacerbated when criminal enterprises are added to the mix. All police work involves a series of sub-specialties including patrol and street-level enforcement, detectives to follow up and investigate crimes, specialized major case detectives to investigate murder, serious crime, financial fraud, identity theft, gang activity, human trafficking, narcotics and drugs enforcement, intelligence (formerly special branch) and counterterrorism, etc. In a major city police department these are often distributed among several divisions with competing operational and budgetary priorities. In some jurisdictions there are several separate police agencies in a metropolitan area, in others there is a centralized national police service (that also faces internal seams between specialties). These are complicated by political competition within states and when criminal and terrorist activity crosses borders among many potential states. This distributed, networked challenge demands ‘multi-lateral’ counterterrorism and transnational

criminal intelligence and investigative capacity to support local enforcement efforts.

The need for these efforts isn't new or a uniquely post 9-11 challenge despite the prevailing political rhetoric. As Lindsay Clutterbuck – a retired Metropolitan Police counterterrorist specialist – has noted, the contemporary phase of terrorism is far from novel and coordinated, co-operative mechanisms to address terrorism have a long history going back to 19<sup>th</sup> century trans-Atlantic efforts to address Irish Republican terrorism and its international network of support to attempts to organize international mechanisms to address 'Anarchist' assassinations and bombings. These efforts would later culminate in the development of collaborative structures like the informal Police Working Group on Terrorism in the 1970s and the semi-formal TREVI group by 1975.<sup>81</sup>

These collaborative initiatives matured into multi-lateral organs including Europol (European Union Agency for Law Enforcement Cooperation), which co-ordinate enforcement-related intelligence among EU member agencies and Interpol (International Criminal Police Organization—formally known as ICPO-INTERPOL), which facilitates co-operative initiatives among the National Central Bureaus of member nations. These are examples of multilateral efforts to share information and develop criminal-terrorist intelligence.<sup>82</sup>

Effective efforts to address and combat multilateral networks require more than simple information-sharing as is often emphasized when discussing fusion centers; they demand what Sullivan calls 'co-production of intelligence'<sup>83</sup> distributed among a range of global actors including metropolitan police, national police and intelligence agencies, health authorities for biological events, and civil defense agencies such as emergency medical service and the fire service.<sup>84</sup> Such a framework was found in the Terrorism Early Warning (TEW) Groups that later transitioned to form the foundation of the fusion center network in the United States.<sup>85</sup> Of course sensitive investigative data must be segmented and targeted to appropriate agencies and disciplines depending upon the phase of operations and nature of specific threats faced at a given time and space. As Sullivan argues: "Contemporary nonstate threat including criminal cartels, gangs, mafias, insurgents, and terrorists operate on a global scope with distinct local characteristics. Local actors link with global actors to conduct operations through alliances and within a range of network configurations."<sup>86</sup>

Counterterrorism intelligence efforts need to be expanded to include efforts to address transnational organized crime and gangs in order to effectively address intelligence support for the crime-terror nexus. Even if the Islamic State has been defeated, the March 2018 attacks in Carcassone and Trebes, France, demonstrate the persistence of the jihadist threat both in France and in Europe,<sup>87</sup> justifying the focus on understanding the crime-terror nexus and its implications for the security of European countries and beyond.

## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> For details, please see The Convention Transnational Organized Crime, the fifth review of the Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy, and the Security Council resolutions 1373 (2001), 2195 (2014) and 2370 (2017), mentioned in "Examining the Nexus between Organised Crime and Terrorism and its implications for EU Programming," September 26, 2017, available at <http://globalinitiative.net/examining-the-nexus-between-organised-crime-and-terrorism-and-its-implications-for-eu-programming/>

<sup>2</sup> "Examining the Nexus between Organised Crime and Terrorism and its implications for EU Programming," September 26, 2017.

<sup>3</sup> John P. Sullivan, "Terrorism, Crime and Private Armies," *Low Intensity Conflict & Law Enforcement*, Vol. 11, No. 2/3 (Winter 2002), pp. 239.

<sup>4</sup> John P. Sullivan, "Chapter 9: How Illicit Networks Impact Sovereignty" in Michael Miklaucic and Jacqueline Brewer (Eds.), *Convergence: Illicit Networks and National Security in the Age of Globalization*. Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, 2013.

<sup>5</sup> See for example John P. Sullivan and Adam Elkus, "Global Cities – Global Gangs," *openDemocracy*, 2 December 2009, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/opensecurity/john-p-sullivan-adam-elkus/global-cities---global-gangs>.

<sup>6</sup> See Tanvi Misra, "The Othered Paris," *CityLab*, 14 November 2017, <https://www.citylab.com/equity/2017/11/the-othered-paris/543597/>.

<sup>7</sup> See Giles Kepel, *Terror in France: The Rise of Jihad in the West*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017.

<sup>8</sup> John Bigelow, "The Crime-Terror Nexus," *Security Solutions* online, January 16, 2017, available at <http://www.securitysolutionsmagazine.biz/2017/01/16/the-crime-terror-nexus/>.

<sup>9</sup> See Vanda Felbab-Brown, "The Crime-Terror Nexus and its Fallacies," Chapter 24 in Erica Chenoweth, Richard English, Andreas Gofas, Stathis N. Kalyvas, Eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Terrorism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019, pp. 366-391.

<sup>10</sup> On the global criminal economy, see Manuel Castells, Chapter 3; "The Perverse Connection: The Global Criminal Economy," in Manuel Castells, *End of Millenium, The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture, Vol. III*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2000.

<sup>11</sup> See Phil Williams, "The Organized Crime and Terrorist Nexus: Overhyped the Relationship." *Stratfor Worldview*. April 20 2018, <https://worldview.stratfor.com/horizons/fellows/phil-williams/20042018-organized-crime-and-terrorist-nexus-overhyped-relationship> regarding his critique of Makarenko and Mesquita. Tamara Makarenko and Michael Mesquita, "Categorising the crime-terror nexus in the European Union," *Global Crime*, Vol. 15, no. 3-4, pp. 259-274, DOI: 10.1080/17440572.2014.93122.

<sup>12</sup> Sam Mullins, "The Road to Orlando: Jihadist-Inspired Violence in the West, 2012-2016," *CTC Sentinel*, June 2016, Vol. 9, Issue 6, available online at <https://ctc.usma.edu/the-road-to-orlando-jihadist-inspired-violence-in-the-west-2012-2016/>.

<sup>13</sup> Stanislav Matejka, "Gangster Jihadists: The Crime-Terror Nexus," *Fair Observer*, November 29, 2017, available online at <https://www.fairobserver.com/region/europe/europe-jihad-crime-terrorism-security-world-news-today-00198/>.

<sup>14</sup> According to Peter Neumann, the November 2015 Paris attack was one of the most expensive attacks costing around 20,000 euros. For details, see Camilla Hodgson's "Europe Is Seeing the Rise of 'Small-Dollar Terrorism' Funded By 'Legitimate' Sources," *Business Insider*, September 28, 2017 available online at <http://www.businessinsider.com/terrorism-funding-legitimate-sources-petty-crime-2017-9>.

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<sup>16</sup> Hodgson, 2017.

<sup>17</sup> See the work of Tamara Makarenko on the topic: Tamara Makarenko, "Terrorism and Transnational Organised Crime: The Emerging Nexus," in *Transnational Violence and Seams of Lawlessness in the Asia-Pacific: Linkages to Global Terrorism*, ed. Paul Smith (Hawaii: Asia Pacific Centre for Security Studies, 2002); "The Crime-Terror Continuum: Tracing the Interplay between Transnational Organised Crime and Terrorism," *Global Crime*. Vol. 6, no. 1 (2004).

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Mullins, 2016.

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<sup>49</sup> "Examining the Organised Crime-Terror Nexus and its Implications," 2017.

<sup>50</sup> Clarke, 2016.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Bigelow, 2017.

<sup>53</sup> Clarke, 2016.

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> Basra and Neumann, 2017.

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<sup>72</sup> Farhad Khosrokhavar, "Pourquoi Le Djihadisme Est Là Pour Longtemps en Europe," *The Conversation*, March 29, 2018, available online at <https://theconversation.com/pourquoi-le-djihadisme-est-la-pour-longtemps-en-europe-94046>.

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