

POLICY BRIEF



The Crime-Terror-Insurgency Nexus Security Threat: The Impact in Central Asia

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Executive Summary

This policy brief analyses the impact of the relationships between organised crime, terrorism and insurgency on security in Central Asia. The nexus between terrorism and organised crime is the strategic alliance of two non-state actors, able to exploit illegal markets and influence policy-making at the global level. It refers to a complex of insecurities, specifically the ability of criminals and terrorists to increase their performance at the global level, to establish their headquarters inside failed and weak states, and to interact with other groups that violently oppose the state, namely insurgents and paramilitaries. As a region affected by various security threats, authoritarian regimes, unstable political and economic institutions, and as a strategic area located between Europe and Asia, Central Asia offers an important point of observation for the convergence of various subversive actors and their negative impact on political institutions. The state plays an essential role in the worsening of local security conditions. Organised crime groups are more likely to build closer links with state structures, either indirectly or directly. Thus, a 'crime-state nexus' may be an additional component.¹ This deserves further investigation. The brief initially describes the nexus and its impact on security; then explores the potential danger in Central Asia; and ends by providing some policy recommendations which focus on the need to draw responses in the light of the hybridity of threats.

Connections between Subversive Actors: a Hybrid Security Threat

Recent scholarly and policy analyses suggest that the nexus between terrorism and organised crime constitutes a renewed kind of security threat, able to interact with other subversive actors such as insurgents and to adapt to different regional conditions, but there is considerable debate on this.² The nexus can be defined as the strategic alliance between two non-state actors, both able to exploit illegal markets and to influence policy-making on a global level. Although they remain two separate phenomena, the changing nature of global security in favour of hybrid challenges and threats and the increasing effects of globalisation have contributed to blurring the distinction between politically and criminally motivated violence and to revealing operational and organisational similarities. The spreading of proxy and civil wars, the proliferation of armed groups and the diversification of strategies and tools by subversive groups are only some of the visible manifestations of those changes.³ The investigation into those conditions, which may be push factors or constitutive ones, has been attracting interest recently.

¹ D. Lewis, "Crime, terror and the state in Central Asia," *Global Crime* 15, no. 3-4 (2014): 337-356.

² T. Makarenko, "The Crime-Terror Continuum: Tracing the Interplay between Transnational Organised Crime and Terrorism," *Global Crime* 6, no. 1 (2004): 129-145; T. Makarenko, "Terrorist Use of Organised Crime: operational tool or exacerbating the threat?" in *Defining and Defying Organised Crime: Discourse, Perceptions, and Reality*, eds. F. Allum, F. Longo, D. Irrera, P. Kostakos (Routledge, 2009); C. Oheme, "Terrorists, Insurgents, and Criminal-Growing Nexus?, *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*," 31, no. 1 (2008): 80-93; P. Williams, "Cooperation Among Criminal Organizations," in *Transnational Organized Crime and International Security: Business as Usual?*, eds. Mats Berdal and Monica Serrano (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2002), 67-80.

³ V. Ruggiero, "Hybrids: on the crime-terror nexus," *International Journal of Comparative and Applied Criminal Justice* 43, no. 1 (2019): 49-60; P. Wang, "The Crime-Terror Nexus: Transformation, Alliance, Convergence," *Asian Social Science* 6, no. 6 (2010): 11-20.

According to some scholars, the nexus proliferates more easily in unstable countries, while according to others, political and economic instability are not a structural cause, but rather an exacerbating condition.⁴ Therefore, the nexus effects may be deteriorated in troubled contexts and amplified by conditions of war and insurgency, failed and weak state institutions, which can constitute a haven because of ungoverned entities.⁵ The linkages between the nexus and institutional failure or instability and, increased wars and civil conflicts, and the extent to which the nexus may have an impact on the escalation and/or duration of conflicts, or, alternatively, the existence of an armed conflict, may facilitate a variety of case studies and policy considerations.⁶

Those which are defined conditions of non-governability and conduciveness to terrorist or insurgent presence are conditions in which the presence of criminal networks opens the possibility of strategic alliances through which terrorists or insurgents and criminal groups can share logistical corridors, safe havens, and access to sources of funding.⁷ Given that they can be found in several regional contexts and with a myriad of regional variations, the need for a reconceptualization of the nexus, particularly for adapting policy responses, is urgent.

Three major categories, cooperation, coexistence and convergence, can be used to describe various gradations of intersections among terrorists, criminals and insurgents.⁸

Cooperation refers to the most predictable case, the established alliances between terrorists and criminal groups. Short-term or occasional relations may be frequent and outweigh the risks which are automatically associated with this set of relationships, especially if focused upon specific operational requirements. In some cases, relationships, which are similar to a customer-service provider, have developed, as both criminals and terrorist groups often require similar expertise, support structures and services, including fake passports, IT and communications equipment.⁹

Coexistence may be located in an intermediate position, producing a condition in which criminals and terrorist groups operate in the same business, but explicitly prefer to remain separate entities unless something else is rationally required. It can happen during a conflict or in a non-democratic political regime. Some of the features that construct a situation conducive to organised crime also make it attractive to terrorist groups. However, the lack of border control and law enforcement, and the eventual presence of certain types of infrastructures and services for operations, may be found in democratic states as well. The combined presence can amplify the threat to state structures in both weak or democratic states, even if they do not explicitly act together they may produce cross-border effects.

Convergence is perhaps the most difficult case to explain and refers to a very frequent

⁴ R. Pettinger, *Mastering Organisational Behaviour* (New York: Palgrave, 2000).

⁵ P. Wang, (2010), "The Crime-Terror Nexus: Transformation, Alliance, Convergence," *Asian Social Science* 6, No. 6 (2010): 11-20.

⁶ S.E. Cornell, "The Interaction of Narcotics and Conflict," *Journal of Peace Research* 42, no. 6 (2005): 751-760.

⁷ A. Rabasa et al., *Ungoverned Territories: Understanding and Reducing Terrorism Risks* (Santa Monica: Rand, 2007).

⁸ D. Irrera, "The crime-terror-insurgency 'nexus': Implications on multilateral cooperation," in *Insurgency and Counterinsurgency in Modern War*, ed., S. Romaniuk (New York: CRC Press, 2016).

⁹ W. Hansen, *The Crime-Terrorism Nexus* (International Relations and Security Network, 2012).

condition in which the two actors make use of their respective techniques for practical purposes. Organised criminal networks have used terror tactics to safeguard business interests and protect their working environments, but even the use of criminal expertise by terrorist groups to meet operational requirements is increasing.¹⁰

These categories may be applied to several different regional contexts, producing likewise different variations. Central Asia represents an interesting ‘hybrid’ case study that needs to be explored and explained.

The Impact on Central Asia

Central Asia is a region marked by several insecurities at all levels. Due to the convergent presence of an increased activity of organised criminal networks after the collapse of the USSR, and the emergence of transnational militant Islamist groups in the 1990s, the five post-Soviet republics of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan are frequently referred to in emerging literature on the nexus as a relevant case study. In particular, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) represents one of the best examples of a hybrid organisation, practising terrorist activity and using the funding methods of organised crime, particularly cross-border smuggling of Afghan opiates.¹¹

Additionally, the growing drug trade and the exchange of drugs for weapons, due to the influence of the Syrian conflict in recent years, have created the conditions for a closer connection to insurgency.¹² Two local factors need to be considered, which may deepen the debate and identify Central Asia as a ‘hybrid’ case of coexistence and convergence. On the one hand, organised crime and terrorism coexist and exploit the social structure and the strategic location of the five countries. On the other, the functional relationship which may appear between the two actors is distressed by the impact of conflicts and insurgents and, more importantly, by state institutions.

The first local factor deals with the role of clans. The situation of serious economic uncertainty which Central Asia experienced after the Cold War attracted criminals, warlords and political and religious extremists to the area, all vying for economic advantage. Drugs rapidly became the most reliable currency for the acquisition of arms, munitions and provisions. Consequently, Afghanistan offered a stable production of opiates during the Cold War and up until the fall of the USSR. Within the context of uncertainty, the clans in many countries became strong competitors with the State, since

¹⁰ E. Alda and J.L. Sala, “Links Between Terrorism, Organized Crime and Crime: The Case of the Sahel Region,” *Stability: International Journal of Security & Development* 3, no. 1 (2014), 1-9; D. Irrera, “The crime-terror-insurgency ‘nexus’. Implications on multilateral cooperation,” in *Insurgency and Counterinsurgency in Modern War*, ed., S. Romaniuk, New York: CRC Press, 2016); Institute for Economics & Peace, “Global Terrorism Index 2019: Measuring the Impact of Terrorism,” Sydney, November 2019, <http://visionofhumanity.org/reports>.

¹¹ D. Lewis, “Crime, terror and the state in Central Asia,” *Global Crime* 15, no. 3-4 (2014): 337-356; T. Makarenko, “Crime and Terrorism in Central Asia,” *Jane’s Intelligence Review* 12, no. 7 (2000).

¹² L.E. Reyes & S. Dinar, “The Convergence of Terrorism and Transnational Crime in Central Asia,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 38, no. 5 (2015): 380-393; P. Foroughi & N. Bekmurzaev, “Central Asia and Counterterrorism: The Contrasting Cases of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan,” in *The Palgrave Handbook of Global Counterterrorism Policy* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 553-571.

they were able to provide goods to satisfy the needs of their members and to control territory. Thus, they strengthened their influence and legitimised it from the bottom up. To meet all of the requests of their affiliates, the clans established a close relationship with the State, and with transnational organised crime groups.¹³

As for the rise of terrorism, the IMU represents the apparently strongest and most organised group. While Makarenko and other scholars stress its ability to network and indiscriminately align with criminal and/or insurgent groups to build functional alliances, some other scholars point out that such relations are only occasional and far from being structured.¹⁴ In particular, the IMU would be likely to engage in the use of drug trafficking and other criminal activities as a means of strengthening the organisation's need for local, spatial control. Close links between organised criminal activities and radical Islamist groups emerge only in particular spatial conditions, in which such activities contribute towards the social, ideological and economic control of local communities.¹⁵ The geostrategic location of the five countries contributes to such coexistence, which may occasionally turn to a convergence. The former Silk Road, also known as the Northern Route, is a dominant trafficking route of illicit opiates, as well as various other illicit goods passing through Central Asia.

This brings us to the second local factor. The dissolution of the Soviet Union and the international presence (mainly US and NATO) have contributed to increasing the use and importance of such a route. Additionally, the presence of conflicts in the region continues to have an impact. The more recent debates point out that local conflicts in the neighbourhood, such as in the Southern Caucasus, far from being simply 'frozen,' can be more properly defined as 'intractable,' a more serious condition in which the use of traditional conflict management is useless and the effects continue to have a negative impact in terms of insurgency (Nation, 2014). Over the years, the Northern Route has become more financially lucrative, allowing drug traffickers, insurgents, terrorists and other subversive actors to network and converge, blurring the lines of their once distinctive qualities. Therefore, political changes combined with the role of growing transportation infrastructure can be particularly instrumental in facilitating interactions among subversive actors, producing occasional convergence.

The relations with the State, however, complicates the analysis. Local governments have used the danger represented by the crime-terror nexus for justifying serious limitations to basic freedom. The literature has rather focused on the emergence of the crime-state nexus, which suggests that state institutions may constitute a threat for public security.¹⁶ The lack of efficiency and efficacy of political institutions, their inability to provide assets and goods and to control the territory are at the basis of the criminalisation processes. State weakness is the main cause of the retreat of the State itself in front of subversive actors which replace institutions and acquire more influence and power.¹⁷ Other analyses

¹³ A. Ceccarelli, "Clans, politics and organized crime in Central Asia," *Trends in Organized Crime* 10, no. 3 (2007): 19-36

¹⁴ Ceccarelli, *ibid.*

¹⁵ Lewis, *ibid.* 345.

¹⁶ E. Marat, *The state-crime nexus in Central Asia: state weakness, organized crime, and corruption in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan* (Uppsala: Central Asia-Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies Program, 2006).

¹⁷ S. Strange, *The retreat of the state: The diffusion of power in the world economy* (Cambridge University press,

focus on structured collusion between organised crime and political élites which produce alternative and standing political orders. The state-crime nexus has been theorised by using different models of interaction between political institutions and criminals. In this respect, Central Asia does not constitute a monolithic set of weak states. As Lewis maintains, at least two main models emerge in the region. The consolidated state control model is characterised by an extensive security service and widespread surveillance and control mechanisms which cover most aspects of organised criminal activity. It has been observed in Turkmenistan, where state officials have been involved in drug policy in the 1990s, but is even more visible in Uzbekistan. Here, criminal activities have been tolerated by highly authoritarian political élites and, in some case, co-opted, with the help of some powerful entrepreneurs and the limited autonomy of economic activities.¹⁸

The second model, contested control, presents a contestation of control and an on-going struggle around illicit economic flows. It can be found in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan where state control is extremely high. In the first country, the attempt to centralise control over criminal groups failed under local patronage networks and the ability of criminal leaders to mobilise masses of supporters. In Tajikistan, a more authoritarian regime reduced contestations by bringing warlords into the state system and then later removed them.¹⁹ Both models demonstrate that, in the region, interactions with state institutions are preferred by subversive actors, mostly by criminals, whereas relations with terrorists constitute a secondary and functional option.²⁰

Therefore, Central Asia constitutes a complex region in which both actors coexist, together with clans and insurgents, and all profit from their geostrategic location for mutually strengthening their powers and influence. Convergence may occur and be functional. The presence of the State, in its various forms, strong or less consolidated, may be to some extent considered as an additional component of the nexus or at least a relevant distressing factor.

Policy Recommendations

As explained in the previous paragraph, regional variations including a troubled context, a transitional state or a democratic regime determine the set of interactions between criminals and terrorists, and their impact on regional security. The evanescence of traditional boundaries is currently marking the new manifestations of the nexus and imposing on scholars and policy-makers a reconceptualization of the whole phenomenon, which includes, on the one hand, the flexible set of interactions between separate entities and, on the other, the multi-layered implications they can produce at the regional and global level.

1996).

¹⁸ K. Bektemirov & E. Rahimov, *Local government in Uzbekistan: Developing New Rules in the Old Environment* (Budapest: LGI/OSI Europe, 2001), 469-520; F. De Danieli, "Beyond the drug-terror nexus: Drug trafficking and state-crime relations in Central Asia," *International Journal of Drug Policy* 25, no. 6 (2014): 1235-1240.

¹⁹ D. Lewis, "Who's socialising whom? Regional organisations and contested norms in Central Asia," *Europe-Asia Studies* 64, no. 7 (2012): 1219-1237.

²⁰ Lewis, *ibid.*

Policy prescriptions should necessarily take into account the extreme volatility of non-traditional security threats and be shaped accordingly, particularly on a regional level. In this respect, an overall process of renovation and change would be necessary in Central Asia:

- Although it has been considered for years as an intangible concept, the set of connections between criminals and terrorism and their eventual relationship with insurgency appear as a current real threat which seriously affects regional security;
- Lack of reliable data or empirical evidence constitutes a serious limit in the building up of a common understanding of the threat and an obstacle to closer cooperation. More coordination and data sharing among intelligence services is required;
- Given the previous limits and the sensitivity of the issue, the current level of cooperation is mainly a governmental one, only slowly moving towards a multi-layered set of policies and measures, which involve law enforcement, police and, when necessary, the military. This structure was useful during the Cold War and as a response to traditional security threats. The changeable current environment requires a rather more flexible set of responses, as well as interoperable decisions;
- The main issue in the region which impacts and worsens the nexus is the presence of weak state institutions, an elevated rate of institutional corruption, the rising impact of clan-based clientelism. Not only are Central Asian states not able to elaborate efficient security policies, but they are mostly part of the criminalisation process. This is the main basic condition on which efforts should be concentrated;
- The presence of highly authoritarian regimes, centralisation of state control and local patronage networks have been essential in the building up of the state-crime nexus which affects the security and stability in several countries. The external actors and international organisations (US, NATO, EU, OSCE) operating in the area can more proactively promote this political change. It should happen through the consolidated channels, financial investment and political monitoring, but also through initiatives addressed to the empowerment of the most vital parts of the local communities, promotion of human rights, expansion of civil liberties and political pluralism;
- Civil society should be part of the abovementioned process. The involvement of local non-governmental organisations, the promotion of civic fora even in rural areas and the increase of the education programs offered to young generations are essential for complementing state reforms;
- An integrated approach based on an extended awareness of the actual problems, on the building up of common capabilities, on the involvement of all expertise and available actors, can be useful to face increasingly fluid security threats.

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