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Drugs & Thugs: Funding Terrorism through Narcotics Trafficking

Author Biography
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Abstract
To date, much of the literature on the financing of terrorism and insurgency has focused at the macro-level on groups involved in financing their organizations through involvement in the drug trade. This paper discusses some of those implications, but argues that to better understand the threat faced by the new generation of jihadists in the West, security forces and intelligence services must also look at the micro-level of how lower level trafficking, drug dealing and petty criminal activity, combined with prison radicalization and ties to the black market and illicit underworld, combine to present a new spin on a longstanding threat. To be sure, the micro-level is even more difficult to counter, given already poor community-police cooperation and relations in the marginalized communities throughout the West. Further, the threat from drug trafficking at the micro-level can be equally as nefarious, as smaller cells are given greater autonomy to finance plots, recruit new members and ultimately conduct attacks in developed democracies. The paper concludes with some policy recommendations geared toward helping host-nations build capacity in critical areas, including law enforcement and intelligence, from the local to the state to the federal level.

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The analysis and opinions contained in this article are those of the author solely and do not represent the analysis and opinions of The RAND Corporation or any of the other institutions or organizations he is affiliated with.
Introduction

Violent-non-state actors, including terrorists and insurgents, are constantly seeking new ways to fund their organizations. Following the end of the Cold War, superpowers withdrew their financing of proxies, making states weaker and more susceptible to attack. Similarly, terrorist and insurgent groups that previously relied on state financing were forced to either become criminals or fade away. To account for the newfound dearth of funding, non-state actors developed broad portfolios of illicit activities. At various points, al-Qaida relied heavily on funding from wealthy patrons in the Gulf and charities that served as fronts for more nefarious purposes. In Southeast Asia, kidnapping for ransom by Abu Sayyaf Group and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) are further evidence of the blurred lines between criminality and terrorism. Terrorist groups will engage in nearly any activity that generates a profit and have demonstrated an ability to adapt to losses in one area by aggressively expanding into new markets. When the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) began to generate lower profits from the sale of black market oil, it supplemented these losses by trafficking antiquities, managing fish farms, and running car dealerships.

Narcotics trafficking remains one of the most common and most lucrative forms of criminality on which terrorists rely in order to finance their organizations and activities. Due to high pecuniary value and the low volume to value ratio of smuggling and trafficking illicit narcotics (cocaine, ecstasy, heroin, hashish, marijuana, methamphetamine, opiates, etc.) and the chemical precursors required to manufacture some of these drugs, this criminal activity is an attractive one for terrorists or insurgents. In addition to money, the narcotics trade in drug-producing countries has the potential to provide terrorists with recruits and sympathizers among “impoverished,

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neglected, isolated farmers” who can help cultivate drug crops while also serving as a bulwark against pro-government groups and anti-drug campaigns.6

To date, much of the literature on the financing of terrorism and insurgency has focused at the transnational-level on groups involved in financing their organizations through involvement in the drug trade.7 This article discusses some of those implications, but argues that to better understand the threat faced by the new generation of jihadists in the West, security forces and intelligence services must also look at how lower-level trafficking, drug dealing, and petty criminal activity, at the local level, combined with prison radicalization and ties to the black market and illicit underworld, combine to present a new spin on a longstanding threat. To be sure, the local level is even more difficult to counter, given already poor community-police cooperation and relations in the marginalized communities throughout the West. Further, the threat from drug trafficking at the local level can be equally as nefarious, as smaller cells are given greater autonomy to finance plots, recruit new members and ultimately conduct attacks in developed democracies.

Involvement in the Drug Trade

Involvement in the narcotics trade can bring together terrorist or insurgent groups and drug cartels.8 Furthermore, the demise of the latter could present opportunities for terrorists or insurgents to fill the void, as in Colombia when FARC took over some of the territory previously controlled by the Medellin and Cali cartels in the 1990s. Other times, as with the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) and its drug trafficking activities in Europe, rather than cooperate with traditional criminal enterprises, insurgent or terrorist groups seek to drive them out of the market to supplant them themselves.9 Finally, as we have seen with the relationship between drug traffickers and Sendero

Luminoso in Peru, the dominant party in the relationship can change over time. In the 1990s, a powerful (and brutal) Sendero held sway, while more recently, especially in the Valley of the Apurimac and Ene River (VRAE), the insurgents have been keen to play a more secondary role.10

Narcotics remain both the most common and most lucrative form of organized crime used by terrorist groups, including well-known traffickers like the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA),11 Basque Homeland and Liberty or ETA in Spain, and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU).12 Profits derived from drug trafficking have enabled groups like FARC to obtain sophisticated weapons and communications technology.13 More recently, an investigation in Australia uncovered 40 separate money laundering operations in that country, one of which delivered proceeds from drug trafficking to Hezbollah.14 The cultivation of illicit crops like poppy or coca is labor-intensive and provides employment to hundreds of thousands to millions of people in particular countries, including Afghanistan and Colombia, respectively.15 Producer countries are often the least profitable part of the process; the lion’s share of earnings is garnered by those who refine and market the drugs.16

Historical Examples

The examples of insurgent and terrorist groups relying on criminal activities to fund their organizations, particularly drug trafficking, are abundant in both historical and contemporary cases. Moreover, no single typology of terrorist or insurgent group can claim the mantle of relying on narcotics to finance its activities. From the Cold War era to modern times, the examples span ethno-nationalist groups, separatists, Marxist-oriented organizations and religious groups alike, making it difficult to predict which groups may be more or less likely to rely on this method of raising funds.

10 Ibid., 33.
12 Sanderson, “Blurring the Lines,” 52. See also Williams, “Insurgencies and Organized Crime,” 44.
13 Sanderson, “Blurring the Lines,” 51.
Among the most prolific terrorist organizations to rely on narcotics trafficking to fund its activities was the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in Sri Lanka. Involvement in the drug trade first became apparent as early as 1984 when Swiss police reported that Tamils were responsible for trafficking approximately 20 percent of the heroin coming into the country. The “Tamil connection” in Switzerland, as it came to be known, was eventually dismantled by the police, although the drug market in Sri Lanka itself expanded, with an estimated 100,000 users by the end of the 1990s. Italian police also broke up several Tamil heroin rings throughout the 1980s. Sri Lanka's geographic proximity to the Golden Triangle of Laos, Myanmar, and Thailand, combined with the LTTE’s advanced maritime capabilities made heroin trafficking an obvious racket for the group to pursue. The LTTE also extended operations into Pakistan, where its members linked up with notorious Indian crime boss Dawood Ibrahim and his “D-Company” gang. They used the port city of Karachi to solidify a foothold in South Asia and diversify smuggling activities to include humans, in addition to heroin.

Other groups, such as the Provisional Irish Republican Army (PIRA), had an ambiguous relationship with the drug trade over time. In Republican neighborhoods, there was a tacit understanding that one had to pay “revolutionary” taxes to avoid drawing the ire of the Provos and there exists widespread speculation that the PIRA profited from the selling of drugs, although the group was not actively smuggling and trafficking narcotics itself. Still, some PIRA members did “take a cut” of the profits earned by drug dealers operating on territory dominated by the group. At various points, the PIRA was also known to “ride shotgun,” or provide armed escort on international drug shipments.

18 Williams, “Insurgencies and Organized Crime,” 46.
21 “Riding shotgun” is a term used for providing an armed escort on international drug shipments. See Horgan and Taylor, “Playing the Green Card, Part 1,” 8.
Two well-known terrorist groups in the Middle East have both been associated with involvement in the drug trade at various points: Hezbollah and Hamas. Known Hezbollah supporters and brothers, Ali Farhat and Hassan Farhat, were accused of trafficking cocaine, heroin, and marijuana, in collaboration with a Nigerian drug dealer in possession of a Canadian immigration document. More broadly, Hezbollah has also dealt methamphetamine and in the last several years has been receptive to a burgeoning relationship with Mexican drug cartels. Hezbollah operatives have been accused of trafficking in arms, drugs, and women. Indeed, Hezbollah operatives have been tied to drug operations in Poland, Hungary, Moldova, the Balkans, and Romania.

Hamas has taken advantage of the Muslim diaspora in South America’s semi-lawless tri-border area, a region known for money laundering, drug trafficking, and a host of other illicit and unsavory activities. In the tri-border area of Latin America, it is well-known that Hamas (perhaps emulating Hezbollah) has established partnerships with various drug trafficking organizations. The group has also been involved with drugs in the United States, at least on the margins—a pseudoephedrine smuggling scam in the Midwest United States involved bank accounts tied to Hamas.

As the noose was tightened around charities that funded al-Qaeda after 9/11, the group attempted to diversify its revenue sources, to include garnering money earned through drug trafficking, particularly through an alliance with the IMU in Central Asia, but also in North Africa by one of its affiliates. In the latter case, al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) has been linked to Colombian cocaine traffickers in a quid pro quo relationship that brings cash to the terrorists while providing the traffickers with unfettered access (and in some cases, heavily armed escorts) across the desert region between Mauritania, Mali, and Algeria, where narcotics transit through on their way to a growing European market. In addition to money obtained through

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23 Ibid., 227.
24 Sanderson, “Blurring the Lines,” 53.
kidnapping for ransom (KFR), AQIM earns significant sums of money from trafficking cocaine and synthetic drugs between Spain and Algeria.\(^\text{27}\) Perhaps the most prolific terrorist organization associated with drug trafficking today is the Afghan Taliban. On narcotics, the Taliban’s position has evolved considerably throughout the years and at different points the group has knowingly suppressed the cultivation of poppy in Afghanistan in order to manipulate the international market price. At one point, a Taliban ban on poppy cultivation suppressed the supply by 90 percent, thus increasing the value of the group’s stocks by ten times the price.\(^\text{28}\) While the Taliban flip flopped back and forth on its stance toward involvement in the illicit narcotics trade between 1994 and 2001, its position since then has been consistent for the most part.\(^\text{29}\) Once the insurgency began in earnest, Taliban fighters made a series of shrewd maneuvers, including the advancement of loans to opium farmers in order to obtain their backing whilst simultaneously ensuring a future source of revenue.\(^\text{30}\) Keeping in line with its renewed offensive to win “hearts and minds,” the Taliban now actively promotes the growing of poppy and provides protection to farmers growing the crop.\(^\text{31}\)

**From Local to Global and Back Again**

A study by Emilie Oftedal of the Norwegian Defence Research Establishment (FFI) looked at data on the financing of 40 jihadi cells that have plotted attacks against European targets between 1994 and 2013 and concluded that the second most common method of funding for these attacks (in 28% of cases analyzed) was illicit trade (which included drugs, cars, forged documents, and weapons).\(^\text{32}\) Three-quarters of the plots cost less than

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$10,000 to plan. The 2004 Madrid train bombings killed 191 people and injured another 1,600 in an attack financed primarily by the leader of a small, yet effective, drug trafficking network that smuggled hash from Morocco and ecstasy from Holland to Spain. Relatively small amounts of money could just as easily be used to plot and conduct a terrorist attack in Western Europe similar to the Charlie Hebdo attacks in Paris in January 2015 or the Copenhagen attacks the following month. And while the Charlie Hebdo attack was allegedly funded with $20,000 from AQAP, it is easy to see why some terrorists planning similar types of attacks would follow the Madrid model—small sums of money collected over time through the use of somewhat banal criminal activities like drug dealing, various types of fraud, and petty theft. Besides the 2004 Madrid cell, proceeds from drug trafficking are also suspected of funding another plot against Madrid aimed at the National Court (2004), the Hofstad Group in Holland (2004), a Swedish cell (2010), Mohammed Merah’s rampage (2012), and an attack at a kosher supermarket in Paris (2012).

Indeed, where the concept of a nexus between crime and terrorism might be most interesting is the emerging profile of small-time crook to terrorist, a profile which is now emerging in many of the jihadist attacks and plots recently targeting Europe. As Williams notes, “with continued politicization and radicalization of organized crime, instances of transformation from criminal or drug trafficker to terrorist and from criminal enterprise to terrorist organization will become more frequent.” Abdelhamid Abaaoud, the leader of the Paris November 2015 attacks, Ahmed Coulibaly, a key figure in the Charlie Hebdo attacks, and numerous other terrorists were involved in various forms of criminality before becoming jihadists.

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Lahouaiej Bouhlel, the terrorist who killed 84 people by driving a truck through a crowd on Bastille Day in Nice, France, also had a history of petty crime. A study by Edwin Bakker on jihadi terrorists in Europe found that about a quarter of terrorists sampled in the study had a criminal record while many had been involved in various forms of crime without having been in prison or sentenced in a different way. A more recent study, focused strictly on ISIS, found that of 58 individuals linked to 32 ISIS-related plots in the West between July 2014 and August 2015, 22 percent had a past criminal record or were in contact with law enforcement. The most common felonies were related to drugs. Finally, recent analysis by Sam Mullins noted that, of 47 cases of jihadist-inspired violence carried out in Western countries between January 1, 2012 and June 12, 2016, half of the attackers had a criminal past.

Are Drugs Funding ISIS?

It is well established that the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) is the wealthiest terror group in modern history, having built a nascent war chest of approximately $500 million after looting bank vaults throughout northern Iraq. One of the reasons ISIS has been so successful in financing its organization has been the group’s ability to earn vast sums of income from several different revenue streams. To date, two sources of revenue in particular have provided ISIS with the lion’s share of its wealth—oil and taxation/extortion. But an outstanding question remains whether ISIS does now, or may in the future, seek to diversify its activities to include drug

trafficking. While there is no current evidence indicating in-depth involvement in the smuggling or sale of narcotics, it is important to note that many ISIS recruits, particularly those from Europe, have relied on drug trafficking as a means of generating revenue at a low level in what Magnus Ranstorp has called “micro-financing the Caliphate.” It is not necessarily that the sale of drugs goes directly into ISIS coffers, but proceeds garnered from peddling narcotics affords jihadists in Europe the financial flexibility to travel back and forth to Syria as well as to save the money to help procure the resources necessary for planning a terrorist attack (e.g. weapons, vehicles, cell phones).

ISIS’s predecessor, Al Qaida in Iraq (AQI), was led by a criminal-cum-jihadist named Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, whose background included street gangs and prison time for sexual assault. Indeed, ISIS seems to attract many jihadists with a similar profile, including the main link between the Paris November 2015 attacks and the Brussels March 2016 bombings, Salah Abdesalam, known by his penchant for drinking, smoking, and gambling, rather than his piety. Abdesalam was a regular patron (and brother of the manager) of a Molenbeek bar named Café del Beguines, a place known for drug dealing and

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other illicit activity and shuttered after “compromising public security and tranquility.”

Involvement in crime, especially drug trafficking, can lead to prison, which in some cases serves as an incubator for religious radicalization and violent extremism. As criminals become radicalized, this potentially increases involvement in the plotting and execution of terrorist attacks. A 2012 report by the European Parliament titled “Europe’s Crime-Terror Nexus: Links Between Terrorist and Organised Crime Groups in the European Union” noted the prevalence with which jihadist attacks involved links to criminality, including drug trafficking. In some sense, a background in the criminal underworld left behind for militant Islam can play into the appeal of what has been called “jihadi cool,” which blends “traditional notions of honor and virility, but also a strong undercurrent of oppositional, postmodern cool.”

The modus operandi ISIS has developed for generating foreign fighters and for relying on smaller cells of attackers to both raise funds and to carry out attacks external to the main theatre of operations (e.g. in Europe instead of the Middle East) works particularly well with a local criminal funding model. This model fits into how ISIS conceives of extra-territorial contributions on a tactical level. Terrorist organizations other than ISIS may have less of an affinity for this model, especially those that place a high value on political coherence and central control, with funds being central to the management of more disparate elements. But for ISIS, this model works extremely well for several reasons. First, ISIS has less concern than other groups about what happens outside of the Caliphate. Second, the eschatological stance of ISIS


50 This is not to suggest that jail or prison is the only factor in the radicalization process. To be sure, this analysis is not meant to be causal, merely a narrative of how some cases unfold. A robust discussion of the causes of radicalization is beyond the scope of this article, but suffice to say it results from a combination of economic, social, political, religious and cultural factors/variables including wide-ranging grievances.


offers a redemptive narrative for petty criminals to carry out terrorist attacks.\textsuperscript{54}

All of this suggests a real challenge for law enforcement authorities and intelligence agencies. These entities are already stretched thin and hurting for resources, concentrating (rightly so) on significant threats like the return of foreign fighters from Iraq, Syria, and other jihadist hotspots throughout the globe. Where these fighters are part of an existing network with roots stretching back to neighborhoods like Molenbeek, Belgium, the Liselby district of Fredrikstad in Norway, or the \textit{banlieues} of Paris, the threat becomes even more significant. To be sure, ISIS training camps are “the breeding grounds of tomorrow’s Brussels or Paris attacks.”\textsuperscript{55}

According to a report on foreign fighters by The Soufan Group, European countries account for a significant percentage of Islamic State recruits from outside of the Middle East (see Table 1 below). Perhaps even more troubling, roughly 3700 of the 5,000 plus European Union foreign fighter contingent come from just four countries–France (1700), Germany (760), Belgium (470) and the United Kingdom (760).\textsuperscript{56}

\textbf{Table 1: Estimated Number of Foreign Fighters from European Countries}\textsuperscript{57}

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Estimated Number of Foreign Fighters</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Albania</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Austria</td>
<td>300</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belgium</td>
<td>470</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bosnia</td>
<td>330</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denmark</td>
<td>125</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finland</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>France</td>
<td>1700</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


\textsuperscript{57} Ibid., 7-10.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>760</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ireland</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Italy</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kosovo</td>
<td>232</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Macedonia</td>
<td>146</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Netherlands</td>
<td>220</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Norway</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spain</td>
<td>133</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sweden</td>
<td>300</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Switzerland</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United Kingdom</td>
<td>760</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

So while drugs might not be directly funding ISIS, the sale of drugs (in addition to other forms of petty crime) by the group’s European recruits seems noteworthy on several levels. Besides the functional component of providing jihadists with funds, drug trafficking also puts terrorists in touch with criminals and helps expand illicit networks, many of which are critical to the facilitation of a terrorist attack. In April 2016, the Director of National Intelligence, James R. Clapper, Jr., publicly stated that ISIS is operating clandestine terrorist cells in Britain, Germany, and Italy. And although the director did not go into detail on how these cells were funded, it seems likely to assume that many of the individuals comprising these cells could be connected to local criminal elements, including drug traffickers. It is unclear how many individuals belonging to ISIS are in Europe, but the group has boasted that it sent “many operatives” to the Continent disguised among the hordes of refugees that has streamed in over the past several years. To be sure, many are also homegrown.

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Conclusion

This endemic criminal violence that results from every step of the drug trafficking value chain erodes state institutions and is often difficult to reverse. The international community must figure out a way to deal with the spill-over violence and the human security implications, including refugee flows, addiction, disease, corruption, and general instability generated from the illicit trade in illegal narcotics. Where criminal violence should be considered acutely problematic is in cases where it merges with traditional forms of political violence like terrorism and insurgency. In these cases, criminality (and the violence that often accompanies criminality) helps fund the insurgency and groups can morph over time into criminal-insurgent hybrids. Moreover, war profiteers disguised as rebels seek to enact strategies that will serve to prolong the conflict as a means of continuing to reap the economic benefits, as in conflict zones throughout the globe, from the jungles of Colombia to the mountains of Afghanistan.

The clearest implication for international security policy is the need to become more effective at building the capacity of states to combat transnational organized crime and criminal violence. This can be accomplished through focusing security cooperation efforts in vulnerable countries on ministerial capacity, institution building, and defense reform, all of which are foundational to other forms of capacity, like border control and anti-corruption efforts. Furthermore, ministerial capacity can be improved even when the partner nation’s absorptive capacity is generally low. This is a self-reinforcing cycle since ministerial capacity building can itself improve a partner’s absorptive capacity, thus enabling future capacity building in other areas. Best practices and lessons learned, gleaned from higher-level strategic analyses, should be revisited in order to determine potential synergies applicable to more parochial settings.

Low-level criminality and petty drug dealing are no longer strictly the domain of local law enforcement. This issue is now a critical counterterrorism concern. As this article has demonstrated, there are numerous links between criminality and terrorism, especially in Europe, and numerous ISIS militants have ties to the illicit underworld and black market. Further probing into what at first seem like local criminal elements may shed light on broader networks with connections to terrorist groups in the Middle East and North Africa. And while the actual “day of attack” cost is low, these cells can be

connected to a broader infrastructure and support network like ISIL’s external operations branch.\(^{62}\)

In Europe, preventing attacks like the Paris November 2015 attack and the Brussels March 2016 attack require local police forces to work closely with state and European Union officials, better integrating grass roots intelligence with profiles and backgrounds of individuals that have been identified as foreign terrorists fighters, especially those seeking to return to Europe. This will prove to be a major challenge, as many local police departments are plagued by a shortage of resources. Moreover, the decentralized nature of some city governments—Brussels has 19 separate administrative police districts that operate independently and three separate administrations for the government, NATO, and the EU—make countering crime at any level a major challenge.\(^{63}\)

The onus is on federal and state agencies to work together with local departments to identify potential areas of concern and help provide the resources—manpower, training, material—necessary to help mitigate the threat. To give a sense of the magnitude of the challenge, consider that it takes a country like France 20 agents to monitor just one suspect for 24 hour surveillance. France currently has approximately 10,000 names on its “S-List,” which is a database of people believed to have been radicalized.\(^{64}\)

With sufficient ministerial capacity, countries plagued by high levels of illicit trade and criminal violence will be better prepared to plan and integrate strategy and operations against the range of threats arrayed against them. States need to be better prepared to exploit potential vulnerabilities. In cases


where terrorists or insurgents are cooperating with criminals, this opens the door for the possibility of infiltration by law enforcement and intelligence agents. Along these same lines, states should seek to develop counter-narratives that discredit the ideological appeal of terrorists and insurgents by emphasizing their linkage to common criminality.