



The Linkage Between Illicit Drug Trafficking and Terrorist Groups

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Introduction

The nexus between illicit drug trafficking and terrorist organizations is not a new trend. There have been numerous accounts identifying a linkage between drugs and terrorist networks over the past twenty-five years.¹ Links between the terrorist groups and drug traffickers take multiple different forms, ranging from



Opium, motor bikes, suicide jackets and explosives confiscated by Afghan authorities, January 2011.

facilitation, protection, transportation, and taxation, to direct trafficking by the terrorist organizations itself in order to finance its activities. Foreign terrorist organizations (FTOs) have become heavily involved in the drug trade, so there are hybrid organizations emerging. The hybrid FTOs are morphed into one part terrorist organization and one part global drug trafficking cartel.² These hybrid organizations create the

most significant security challenge facing governments of all countries in the 21st century.

Terrorism and traffickers have similar logistical needs in terms of materials and the covert movement of goods, people, and money.³ The relationship between the terrorist groups and the drug traffickers is beneficial to both parties. Not only does drug trafficking provide funds for the terrorist organizations, but it also furthers the strategic objective of the terrorists. Some groups believe they can weaken their enemies by funding their societies with addictive drugs. As for drug traffickers, they benefit from the terrorists' military skills, weapons supply, and access to clandestine organizations.⁴ Additionally, drug traffickers may also gain considerable freedom of movement when they operate in conjunction with terrorists who control large amounts of territory.⁵

Both drug trafficking groups and FTOs benefiting from one another and working together proves to be a dangerous and destabilizing coalition. This poses a major threat to international peace and security and challenges the values of the United Nations. Adding to the human casualties that are cost in the line of terrorism, terrorism acts to disrupt governments, alongside economic and social development. The use of crime, such as drug trafficking, has been an important factor in the evolution of terrorism. Addressing this threat is extremely difficult given the complex and constantly evolving nature of terrorist activity.

¹ Michael Braun. "Drug Trafficking and Middle Eastern Terrorist Groups: A Growing Nexus?" Drug Trafficking and Middle Eastern Terrorist Groups. *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*. July 25, 2008.

² Michael Braun. "Drug Trafficking and Middle Eastern Terrorist Groups: A Growing Nexus?" Drug Trafficking and Middle Eastern Terrorist Groups. *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*. July 25, 2008.

³ Rand Beers, and Francis Taylor. "Narco-Terror: The Worldwide Connection Between Drugs and Terror." *U.S. Department of State*. March 13, 2002.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

The Linkage Between Illicit Drug Trafficking and Terrorist Groups

Its motivations, financing, methods of attack and choice of target are constantly changing.

Terrorist acts often defy national borders; one act of terrorism can involve activities and actors from numerous countries.⁶

Given this complexity, strong coordination and cooperation within national governments and between states and organizations at the regional and international levels is essential to effectively combat terrorism, to share best practices and lessons learned and to assist with the investigation and prosecution of terrorism cases.⁷

Background

One of the main reasons why terrorist organizations are participating in narcotics trafficking is funding. The end of the Cold War marked a decline in state-sponsored terrorism, which pushed terrorists towards alternative sources of financing. This came in the production, taxing, and trafficking of illicit drugs like cocaine, cannabis, and heroin. Different agencies have done a great job at identifying private donors and disrupting the flow of terror financing.

There have been numerous links identified between drugs and terror, and an official count of 43 designated FTOS.⁸ Of those FTOS, the Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) has linked nineteen to global drug trade, and believes that

up to 60 percent of terror organizations are connected with illegal narcotics trade.⁹ Those outfits are all vying for a piece of the most lucrative illicit pie on the planet, according to the U.N. world drug report, the international drug trade generates \$400 billion annually.¹⁰

This has become a fusion of the war on drugs and the war on terror. The Bush administration further amplified the idea of linkage between terrorism and the drug trade, by melding the Global War on Terrorism with the war on drugs. Indeed, following the September 11, 2001 attacks, the FBI, CIA and other intelligence professionals doing "war on drugs"-related work were pulled from those positions to work in newly created "war on terror" seats. Colombia, an important recipient of U.S. drug war aid in the Clinton administration, became the recipient of war on terror funding under the Bush administration.

Military assistance, often in the form of training, was expanded, following in August 2002 a change in U.S. law that had broadened the purpose of lethal assistance, for years limited to counter-narcotics, to now include counter-terrorism.¹¹

The spotlight also turned on State Department designated terrorist groups, including the Taliban, Al Qaeda, Hamas, and Hezbollah, in addition to the Colombian FARC. The evidence of Al Qaeda's participation in drug trafficking is disputed, however. The 9/11 Commission did not report drug trade as part of Al Qaeda's financing, and in the 1990s, it appears that private fundraising financed its operations. On the other hand, many reports suggest that Al

⁶ Olga Lanchenko. "United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime." Terrorism Prevention. <https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/terrorism/index.html>.

⁷ Olga Lanchenko. "United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime." Terrorism Prevention. <https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/terrorism/index.html>.

⁸ Michael Braun. "Drug Trafficking and Middle Eastern Terrorist Groups: A Growing Nexus?" Drug Trafficking and Middle Eastern Terrorist Groups. *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*. July 25, 2008.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Remi Roy. "How Lucrative Illegal Drug Trafficking Finances International Terrorist Organizations" *Alternet*. October 26, 2014. <http://www.alternet.org/drugs/how-lucrative-illegal-drug-trafficking-finances-international-terrorist-organizations>

¹¹ <http://www.ciponline.org/colombia/0302ipr.htm>

The Linkage Between Illicit Drug Trafficking and Terrorist Groups

Qaeda has benefited from the rising poppy trade in Afghanistan in the last several years. The nexus between terrorism and drug trafficking is creating what Michael Braun, speaking as the DEA Chief of Operations in 2008, called ‘hybrids’ that are one part terrorist organization and are becoming one part global drug trafficking cartel. Braun included FARC, the Taliban, Hamas and Hezbollah in his categorization.¹²

One of the regions where the drug-terror connection is most prominent is the tri-border area in Latin America between the borders of Argentina, Brazil, and Paraguay. Intelligence gathered by the United States showed the involvement of Hamas and Hezbollah in the local drug trade. Both Hamas and Hezbollah are militant groups and political parties denounced by the United States and the European Union as terrorist organizations. Hamas controls the Gaza strip within Palestinian territory,¹³ while Hezbollah is mostly active in Lebanon where it is often described as a “state within a state” and it has strong ties to Iran.¹⁴ These organizations view Israel as the primary enemy and Western involvement in Middle East as evil.

Their involvement in Latin America stems from a community of Arab businessmen located in the previously mentioned tri-border area in Latin America. By aiding the local extensive drug trafficking, these organizations ensured a source of funding for their terrorist activities. According to US Representative Ted Deutch, a

“specially designated global terrorist entity in Paraguay provided a lump-sum payment of \$3.5 million to Hezbollah.”¹⁵ Bombings in Argentina have been linked to Hezbollah, whereas the terrorist organization has been creating ties with Mexican cartels and establishing operations in Texas, U.S.¹⁶

Also in Afghanistan there is the Taliban, who were one of the largest distributor and producer of opium until 2000. The Taliban are a militant group in Afghanistan whose primary vision is to take over ethnically Pashtun areas in Afghanistan and Pakistan and enforce strict Sharia law. They were toppled from power after the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan in 2001. The Taliban declared poppy cultivation un-Islamic in 2001 and issued a ban on its cultivation, but Taliban leaders maintained close ties with opium traffickers.¹⁷ A 2009 report by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime indicated that Taliban earnings from their engagement narcotics sales amounted to \$125 million, which is about 4% of the estimated \$3.4 billion generated in Afghan opium sales.¹⁸

Narco-terrorism

The term “Narco-terrorism” is often attributed to Peru’s president Belaunde Terry in 1983, to describe attacks by cocaine traffickers against the police, who suspected that the Maoist rebel group, Sendero Luminoso (Shining Path) had found common ground with cocaine

¹² Michael Braun. “Drug Trafficking and Middle Eastern Terrorist Groups: A Growing Nexus?” Drug Trafficking and Middle Eastern Terrorist Groups. *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*. July 25, 2008.

¹³ Zachary Laub, “Hamas,” CFR Backgrounders, *Council on Foreign Relations*, August 1, 2014 <http://www.cfr.org/israel/hamas/p8968>

¹⁴ Zachary Laub, and Jonathan Masters, “Hezbollah (a.k.a. Hizbollah, Hizbu’llah),” CFR Backgrounders, *Council on Foreign Relations*, January 3, 2014 <http://www.cfr.org/lebanon/hezbollah-k-hizbollah-hizbullah/p9155>

¹⁵ Edwin Mora, “U.S. Concerns Growing over Hezbollah and Hamas Activities In Crime-Ridden Latin American Region,” *CNSNews*, Mar 28, 2011, <http://www.cnsnews.com/news/article/us-concerns-growing-over-hezbollah-and-hamas-activities-crime-ridden-latin-american>

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ginger Thompson, “Trafficking Terror,” *The New Yorker*, Dec 14, 2015, <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2015/12/14/trafficking-in-terror>

¹⁸ Ibid.

The Linkage Between Illicit Drug Trafficking and Terrorist Groups

traffickers.¹⁹ Narco-terrorism is used to refer to groups that have political intentions that engage in or support drug trafficking to fund their activities.

Examples of this are seen in the Revolutionary



United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime

Armed Forces of Columbia (FARC) and the Taliban. The funds distinct political agenda that was originally used in reference to Latin America, in the 1980's cocaine cartels to extract political concessions from their governments. However, more recently, the term has been used to refer to groups who use terrorism on behalf of political agenda (terrorist groups) who use drug trade to fund their political activities. The Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) of the U.S. has traced the evolution of these organizations for a long time, and the Taliban is currently where the FARC organization levels or operation where at ten years ago.

United Nations action and landmark resolutions

Drug trafficking is not thought to be the largest source of income for both international organized crime groups and terrorists. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) has estimated that trade in narcotics amounts to two percent of the global economy, and the United

¹⁹ Rand Beers, and Francis Taylor. "Narco-Terror: The Worldwide Connection Between Drugs and Terror." *U.S. Department of State*. March 13, 2002. <https://2001-2009.state.gov/p/inl/rls/rm/8743.htm>.

Nations that it makes up seven percent of international trade.²⁰

Paragraph 4 of UN Security Council Resolution 1373 of 2001 expressed the UN's concern related to the close connection between international terrorism and illicit drugs, money laundering, illegal arms, trafficking, and illegal movement.²¹ It also laid emphasis on the needed cooperation among national, subregional, regional and international levels so as to form a better global response to such threats to international security.²²

Over five decades, the UN has produced universal legal framework enforced and monitored by 19 universal legal instruments. One of them is the **Terrorism Prevention Branch of the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC)**, which provides legal counter-terrorism technical assistance to member states.²³ As mandated by the UN General Assembly, the Branch provides help to any member state that requests it concerning the ratification, legislative incorporation and implementation of the universal legal framework against terrorism.²⁴ The UNODC itself aids states through research and analytical work and caters to a number of other social issues such as

²⁰ Steven Hutchinson, and Pat O'Malley. "A Crime-Terror Nexus? Thinking on Some of the Links between Terrorism and Criminality 1." *Studies in Conflict Terrorism* 30, no. 12 (2007): 1095-1107.

²¹ United Nations, "Resolution 1373 (2001)," Security Council Resolution S/RES/1373 (2001), Sep 28, 2001

https://www.unodc.org/pdf/crime/terrorism/res_1373_english.pdf

²² Ibid.

²³ United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, "The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime and Terrorism Prevention," *UNODC*

<https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/terrorism/index.htm>

²⁴ Ibid.

The Linkage Between Illicit Drug Trafficking and Terrorist Groups

human trafficking, corruption, terrorism and criminal justice reform.

The most important legal document for this issue is the **Convention against Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances** adopted by the UN in 1988. While the document guarantees national sovereignty and territorial integrity, it lays down decisive provisions. Article 3 classifies any illicit production, preparation, trade, and transportation of narcotic drugs and psychedelic substances as a criminal offense and the offenders are subject to punishment according to each state's criminal law.²⁵ Drug related money laundering, or buying and transferring property through profits obtained by illicit drug activities, is established a



criminal offense by the same article.²⁶

Iraqi Air Force airstrikes
against ISIS

Issues facing the body

Involvement of terrorist groups with drug trafficking networks poses a serious threat to international security. First of all, it undermines states' effort of weakening terrorist organizations. When a political party or a militant group is internationally recognized as a terrorist organization, member-states of the UN cease to provide financial aid to them, with

²⁵ United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, *The International Drug Control Conventions* (New York: United Nations, 2013), 127-131.

²⁶ Ibid.

hopes of driving them to bankruptcy. Drug trafficking, as indicated above, thus becomes a significant source of funding for terrorist groups, which allows them to continue their operations. Not only do these groups bypass the problem of funding, but they also gain access to resources such as arms and human capital. This increases their ability to further their goals, undermines the legal market of firearms, and violates the human rights of the individuals who fall victim to human trafficking.

Consequences to the local population are also a major concern. In cases like Afghanistan, drug cultivation and trade become so integral to the economy and everyday life of the people that if the local government or even outside influence attempt to eliminate the practices, it hurts the national economy and drives thousands to poverty.

Use of drug trafficking channels by terrorist groups can promote the radicalization of addicted populations and the rallying of local support. Drug traffickers can promote the causes behind terrorist activities, alter public opinion about them and eventually recruit support for the organization. Then, there is a risk of a new branch of the same organization emerging in a separate region, as was the case with Al-Qaeda which has branches in central Africa and India. Sympathetic feelings towards terrorist organizations can yield more funding for them, this time through individual contributions.

The key question this body will be called to answer is how to tackle all the relevant threats.

Cooperation in the national, regional and international levels is the aspect of the solution promotes mostly by the UN. Sharing technology, intelligence, tactics and results of attempted solutions is the best way to learn from past mistakes and increase the effectiveness of the new. However, sovereignty becomes an issue. States are keen on keeping their government secrets to themselves, especially

The Linkage Between Illicit Drug Trafficking and Terrorist Groups

when it comes to intelligence and tactics being shared with non-traditional allies. In addition, some countries simply do not have the necessary resources and thus feel that their voices are not heard, even though they may be directly affected by the issue at hand.

However, the biggest issue with cooperation is that it is simply not enough. Some countries treat terrorist organizations as an imminent threat that needs a decisive and aggressive response. Countries such as United States and Russia have conducted drone attacks in the areas controlled by terrorist organizations. Other countries worry about the collateral damage associated with the attacks, including target inaccuracy and destruction of hospitals, schools or civilian housing. Instead, they promote humanitarian aid to the affected population and the extensive use of campaigns against drug use and terrorist organizations. Providing locals with arms and military training has been a controversial strategy because there is the danger of this knowledge and arms falling in the wrong hands or the ultimate radicalization of the local population. In order for any of these solutions to materialize however, the local government has to approve of it, otherwise it can be considered as an act of war.

Perhaps the most progressive solution to the problem would be the legalization of drugs. The international community has taken steps towards the decriminalization of drugs after research has indicated the lack of desired result of the war on drugs. It is undeniable, however, that the majority of member states, especially the most powerful ones, have yet to adopt such policies. Therefore, any decisive step towards the international decriminalization and legalization of drugs will not materialize soon.

Country and Bloc Positions

China: The Chinese government has been very rigorous about persecuting drug trade and trafficking within their borders. In several cases,

the death penalty has been issued. The international character of the problem forces the government to cooperate with UN and other's countries' institutions in fighting the issue. China's stand towards terrorism abroad has been as hands-off as possible. There has been no interest for involvement of any type and in some instances, the government is hesitant to even recognize terrorist organizations as such.

European Union (EU): As many as 5 EU member states have taken steps towards the decriminalization and legalization of drugs in order to eliminate their illicit use and trade. Deeply concerned about human rights violations, the EU supports humanitarian aid to the affected regions and cutting down funding for terrorist organizations as a way to weaken them.

Non-Aligned Movement (NAM): For some countries in this, the UN's largest bloc, this is a very sensitive issue. The vast majority of Latin American countries are pushing for the decriminalization and legalization of drugs. Through establishing legal ways to regulate drugs, cartels lose a significant part of their revenue and it will be easier to trace illegal channels of drug trade associated not only with cartels but with government officials as well. African countries, especially in Central and Western Africa are also primarily affected by this issue because of terrorist organizations' disregard of national borders. Causing drug addictions of local populations and undermining the official government are two of the most devastating consequences of the nexus between terrorism and illicit drug trafficking. Also, African countries have repeatedly expressed their complaint regarding lack of voice in the international dialogue about these problems.

Russian Federation: Drug control is a strict practice in Russia as well. The government shows little signs of moving towards decriminalization of drug possession or consumption. There are some local terrorist organizations financed by drug trade posing a

The Linkage Between Illicit Drug Trafficking and Terrorist Groups

threat to the Russian national security, which have been met with heightened security and preventative measures. Illicit drug trafficking is the biggest threat that the instability of the Middle Eastern region poses to Russia, since a significant portion of drugs originate in Afghanistan. Russia, therefore has been one of the most active fighters against Islamic terrorist groups via air strikes.

United States: Even though attitudes towards some drugs are slowly changing, the U.S. maintains a non-tolerant policy towards the possession and consumption of the majority of drugs. When dealing with international terrorist organizations associated with drug trafficking,

the US has attempted to impose sanctions by cutting financial and other types of aid. Once a terrorist organization poses a serious threat to national security, as it happened with Al Qaeda or more recently with ISIS, the U.S. has increased border security, monitoring of civilian activities suspect of terrorist association and of course drone strikes and training of government militia to respond to terrorist activity.

The Linkage Between Illicit Drug Trafficking and Terrorist Groups

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The Linkage Between Illicit Drug Trafficking and Terrorist Groups

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