



Risky Business: The Global Threat Network and the Politics of Contraband

Combating Terrorism Center at West Point

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This study looks at the interrelationship between illicit activity in the economic and political arenas. It offers a different perspective on the global illicit marketplace and the connectivity between crime and terror through examining the relationships of those who produce and profit from fear for financial or political purposes. Looking across a range of illicit activities that include terrorism, the illegal narcotics trade, organized crime, human smuggling and political corruption, the network analysis includes 2,700 individuals linked by 15,000 relationships spanning 122 countries. Conventional wisdom suggests that criminal-terrorist connectivity is a phenomenon found in failed and economically poor states. This argument relies on four assumptions: (1) poor economic conditions drive people into the illicit sectors; (2) criminal and terrorist actors are more likely to thrive in environments with weak governments and poverty; (3) because it is easy for terrorist and criminals to cooperate, they will; (4) governmental and illicit actors are adversaries. The results of this study suggest that there is good reason to question each of these assumptions and in turn to revisit the fundamental empirical data relating to and explanations of crime-terror connectivity. This large-scale data analysis, in some ways the first of its kind, offers a number of conclusions: The criminals and terrorists are largely subsumed (98%) in a single network as opposed to operating in numerous smaller networks. Connectivity among actors within the illicit marketplace is relatively high. This should not be construed to say that the network is a cohesive organizational entity. The phenomenon observed and documented here is a self-organizing complex system built through social connections from the bottom up. By most measures of connectivity, terrorists are more central than almost all other types of criminals, second only to narcotics smugglers. The transnational nature of terrorist actors allows them to link disparate criminal groups. It does not appear that terrorists are shunned based on social norms or fear of inviting retribution from law enforcement, as many criminals seem willing to interact with terrorists. An empirical analysis of the network shows that 46% of terrorists' connections are linked to actors involved in activities other than terrorism, while those involved in other illicit activities link to terrorists 35% of the time. Almost half of those in the network were not directly identified as being criminals or terrorists but were suspected for involvement in illicit activities. The prominence of these peripheral actors may reflect the importance of operating across the licit and the illicit spheres. The conventional wisdom that explains crime-terror connectivity as a product of failed or economically poor states is challenged here. Just because it is easy for criminals and terrorists to work together does not necessarily explain why they would. Three additional explanations are considered: the comparative advantage among criminals and terrorists in capable states, state sponsorship to augment state weaknesses and revolutionary state behavior. Generally speaking, connectivity between terrorists and criminals is highest in resource-rich countries that have little incentive to support substate actors (comparative advantage theory) and resource-poor countries that are incentivized to support criminal or terrorist groups (augment state capabilities theory).

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