

RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ORGANIZED CRIME AND VIOLENT RADICALIZATION

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Abstract: *Organized crime became a problem of international interest for law enforcement authorities and security field from the perspective of its transnational nature and the areas in which it can manifest itself: drug trafficking, arms trafficking, human beings or cultural relics. On the other hand, violent radicalization is a phenomenon that security institutions are making efforts to combat considering the security risks generated by this manifestation: political violence or terrorism. The purpose of this research is to extract the similarities and differences between the two phenomena, using comparative analysis as a methodology. The research question targeted by this study refers to the identification of the relationship between the two phenomena, as well as the connecting elements.*

Keywords: *organized crime, radicalization, political violence, security risks.*

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1. Introduction

Following a review of definitions in the specialized literature, organized crime can be defined as a formation that has its own structure that systematically carries out illegal activities with the aim of obtaining profit, using means such as violence, intimidation, threats and corruption of officials¹. According to the United Nations definition, illicit trafficking involves obtaining money, goods and values as a result of illegal or immoral

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¹ Jay S Albanese, "The causes of organized crime: do criminals organize around opportunities for crime or do criminal opportunities create new offenders?", *Journal of Contemporary Criminal Justice*, Vol.16, no.4/2000, Sage Publications, Inc.

activities such as trafficking in drugs or prohibited substances, human beings, smuggling of goods or natural resources and arms trafficking².

Several authors have emphasized that in the case of organized crime, the motivations for the use of violence are purely egocentric and financial, in the sense that the members of these structures are not interested in influencing public opinion or changing the system³. On the other hand, radicalization is a manifestation of extremism, being a psycho-social process characterized by the adoption of a violent ideology that legitimizes the use of violence by individuals to change the political regime, system or order in a society⁴. One scenario of the intensification of this process consists in carrying out terrorist acts as a manifestation of political violence, but it is not limited to these. The intensification of political ideological beliefs can lead to an extremist form that justifies violence to achieve political means, both from the perspective of tyrannical regimes and of political terrorism.

However, it is important to differentiate between radicalization that leads to terrorism and violent radicalization that leads to autocratic and tyrannical governments, because in the case of tyranny, the use of illegal and illicit means for the survival of the regime is not a main characteristic, as is violence against political opponents. Research on the link between crime and terrorism is not new, since the 1980s, there has been interest in studying the idea of narco-terrorism, starting from the manifestation of the Colombian drug cartels and Pablo Escobar, being a conclusive example considering the sublimation of the lines between terrorism and organized crime in the field of narcotics⁵.

The Irish Republican Army (IRA) was also involved in oil, cigarette and consumer goods smuggling to fund its agenda, just as the Taliban organized and taxed heroin production in Afghanistan⁶. The success of the terrorist organization ISIS also included its ability to finance its structures and agenda through drug and natural resource trafficking in Iraq and

² World Customs Organization. "Illicit Trade Report 2012", available at http://www.wcoomd.org/-/media/wco/public/global/pdf/topics/enforcement-andcompliance/activities-and-programmes/illicit-trade-report/itr_2012_en.pdf?db=web, accessed on 19.06.2025.

³ Bruce Hoffman, "The Radicalization of Diasporas and Terrorism: A joint conference by the RAND corporation and the Center for Security Studies, ETH Zurich", *Rand Corporation*. Vol. 229, 2007.

⁴ Alex Schmid, "Radicalisation, de-radicalisation, counter-radicalisation: A conceptual discussion and literature review". *ICCT research paper*, Vol.97, No. 1/2013.

⁵ John Picarelli, "Osama bin Corleone? Vito the Jackal? Framing Threat Convergence Through an Examination of Transnational Organized Crime and International Terrorism", *Terrorism and Political Violence*, Vol. 24, No. 2/2012.

⁶ Rajan Basra, Peter R. Neumann, "Criminal Pasts, Terrorist Futures: European Jihadists and the New Crime-Terror Nexus", *Perspectives on Terrorism*, Vol.10, No.6/2016.

through taxing and extorting the population in Syria⁷. Recent research on the link between violent radicalization and organized crime has shown that most often people recruited by both terrorist organizations and organized crime structures or cartels find themselves through similar social connections and organizational environments, which often overlap⁸.

However, there are still research gaps in understanding the nuances of the connectivity between violent radicalization that can advance towards terrorism and organized crime in relation to the manifestation of violence. Thus, understanding the concept of violence is essential to understanding the specific conceptual elements of organized crime in relation to those of radicalization. Therefore, this article aims to highlight the conceptual similarities and differences between organized crime activities and the phenomenon of radicalization in order to understand various manifestations of violence. In this sense, we will use a methodology based on the comparative analysis of the two manifestations of violence by highlighting some conclusive examples.

2. Characteristics of organized crime and radicalization as violent manifestations

One of the factors that predispose a person to radicalization is previous involvement in criminal activities⁹ or membership in cartels or organized crime structures¹⁰. For example, a study conducted by German law enforcement authorities showed that of 699 foreign fighters who went to Syria to join ISIS, two-thirds had previously been involved in criminal activities or were part of organized crime structures¹¹. On the other hand, empirical studies have highlighted that another reason for joining the Islamic State cause is to evade the supervision of the authorities in the host states following involvement in criminal activities¹².

Other studies have shown that a fairly high percentage of members of terrorist organizations join an organized crime structure after the

⁷ Colin Clarke, "Drugs & Thugs: Funding Terrorism through Narcotics Trafficking". *Journal of Strategic Security*, Vol.9, No.3/2016.

⁸ Basra, Rajan, Peter R. Neumann, *op. cit.*, pp. 25-40.

⁹ Edwin Bakker, "Jihadi terrorists in Europe." *The Hague: Cliengendael*, 2006.

¹⁰ Louise Shelley, "Illicit trade and terrorism." *Perspectives on Terrorism*, Vol. 14, No. 4/2020.

¹¹ BKA, BFV & HKE. 'Analyse der Radikalisierungshintergründe und-verläufe der Personen, die aus islamistischer Motivation aus Deutschland in Richtung Syrien oder Irak ausgereist sind', 2015.

¹² Vera Mironova, "Who Are the ISIS People?", *Perspectives on Terrorism*, Vol.13, No.1/2019.

organization's dissolution or after leaving the terrorist group¹³. In the radicalization model proposed by Quintan Wiktorowicz, we find the concept of "rehabilitation of the offender" among the causes of radicalization¹⁴. Thus, people with a criminal past experience a cognitive opening following a significant personal event or crisis, which determines their conviction to redeem their "sins" and adopt a new radical lifestyle. This theory explains the transition of people with a criminal past from simple members of an organized crime structure or a cartel to members of a terrorist organization that legitimizes a violent ideology for a cause perceived as noble.

However, even if individuals with criminal backgrounds do not adopt an ideology that justifies behavioral change, leaders of jihadist terrorist organizations attribute the imperative of stealing from non-believers as obligatory and legitimate¹⁵. Essentially, involvement in criminal activities as a cause of radicalization is also explained in terms of desensitization to law-abiding behavior, societal norms and the incorporation of criminal violence. Familiarity with violence can diminish a person's resistance to certain psychological barriers, even if the means or purpose of exercising violence is different in the case of terrorism than in organized crime¹⁶.

Thus, the transition from criminality to radicalization leading to terrorist acts may be much faster or facilitated by desensitization to violence in these cases¹⁷. On the other hand, including empirical studies have indicated that essentially radicalized individuals are encouraged by members of terrorist organizations to engage in criminal activities both to afford travel to conflict zones and to collect funding for carrying out terrorist attacks.

If we extract specific elements of radicalization, we can highlight the following aspects specific to this manifestation:

1. It represents a psycho-social process that can manifest itself at an individual, group or societal level, through which an extremist ideology is promoted and accepted.

¹³ Philip Luke Johnson, "The Crime and State Terrorism Nexus: How Organized Crime Appropriates Counterinsurgency Violence". *Perspectives on Terrorism*, Vol. 13, No. 6/ 2019.

¹⁴ Quintan Wiktorowicz, "Radical Islam Rising: Muslim Extremism in the West". *Rowman & Littlefield*, 2005.

¹⁵ Thomas Joscelyn, "Anwar al Awlaki: Jihadists should steal from disbelievers". *Long War Journal*, 2011.

¹⁶ Sylvia Longmire, John Longmire, "Redefining Terrorism: Why Mexican Drug Trafficking is More than Just Organized Crime", *Journal of Strategic Security*, Vol. 1, No. 1/2008.

¹⁷ Rajan Basra, Peter R. Neumann. "Criminal Pasts, Terrorist Futures: European Jihadists and the New Crime-Terror Nexus", *Perspectives on Terrorism*, vol. 10, no. 6/2016.

2. Extremist ideology aims to legitimize violence as the only means for societal or political regime change.

3. Violent radicalization can intensify as an extremist manifestation to the point of committing terrorist attacks. In the case of political violence, we can also find the justification of an extremist ideology as a societal tool to maintain the power of a single party or to suppress political opposition and violate citizen rights, being specific to tyrannical political regimes.

In contrast, if we analyze the activity of cartels in Mexico, we observe that violence is generated by illicit activities such as oil theft and drug and arms trafficking¹⁸. The illegal activity of cartels in Mexico has contributed decisively to violence and political instability in the state, especially from the perspective of oil and drug trafficking coordinated by Los Zetas and the Gulf Cartel¹⁹. The same manifestation can be observed in the case of Colombia and Venezuela²⁰. The criminal activities carried out by cartels in Latin America contribute decisively to the intensification of corruption, insurgency and violence at the societal level in the state for the illicit monopoly²¹.

However, there are differences between organized crime structures such as organized groups or cartels and street gangs. In the case of street gangs, even if they carry out criminal activities, they have a less centralized and flexible structure compared to cartels and the purposes of the crimes are temporary and most often territorial²². Cartels, on the other hand, have a much more solidified structure and reinvest the profits obtained from illicit activities in the survival of their structures compared to the operating methods of street gangs²³.

Thus, organized crime activity should not be understood exclusively from the perspective of illicit trafficking but also as an instrument of violence used by political regimes against political opponents, as in the case of the cooperation of the Christian Democratic Party in Italy between 1946 and 1993 with the Sicilian Mafia to eliminate political opponents in exchange for support for their illegal activities. Between the 1980s and 1990s, Pablo Escobar's cartel undertook a systematic campaign of

¹⁸ Angélica Durán Martínez, "The Politics of Drug Violence: Criminals, Cops and Politicians in Colombia and Mexico". Oxford University Press, 2018.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*.

²⁰ AEI Working Group on transnational organized crime in the Americas. Venezuela: A State Destroyed by Crime and Corruption. In *Kingpins and Corruption: Targeting Transnational Organized Crime In The Americas*, American Enterprise Institute, 2017.

²¹ Philip Luke Johnson, "The Crime and State Terrorism Nexus: How Organized Crime Appropriates Counterinsurgency Violence". *Perspectives on Terrorism*, Vol. 13, No. 6, 2019.

²² Scott Decker, David Pyrooz, "Gangs, Terrorism, and Radicalization Source". *Journal of Strategic Security*, Vol. 4, No. 4/ 2011.

²³ *Ibidem*, pp. 151-166.

intimidation against national politicians to avoid the extradition of Colombian drug traffickers to the United States²⁴.

Therefore, in the case of organized crime, we observe the following characteristics:

1. The use of violence as a method of obtaining profit and carrying out illicit or immoral activities such as drug or prohibited substance trafficking, human trafficking, smuggling of goods or natural resources, and arms trafficking;

2. The adoption of violent techniques and methods to intimidate rival cartels or political or government figures who threaten the survival of the organized group or future profit.

3. The lack of an ideology that justifies the manifestation of violence, the motivation for using violent means being exclusively for financial purposes or the continuity of the group.

3. Similarities, differences and connectivity

The main similarity between the two manifestations is the exercise of violence or its acceptance as a way to quantify the agenda of the organization or group or to intimidate rivals, civilians, authorities. However, in the case of organized crime, illegal activities such as drug, arms or human trafficking or kidnapping for reward are carried out in a secretive manner, while the illegal and violent activities undertaken by terrorist organizations aim to attract public attention²⁵. Another significant difference between the two manifestations refers to the fact that radicalization leading to terrorism is a form of politically or socially motivated violence that aims to achieve societal change, while the agenda of an organized crime group is profit-oriented, acting against the national government in the context where the survival of the structure or financial objectives is threatened²⁶.

One of the fundamental differences between radicalization leading to terrorism and organized crime is that the former is motivated by ideological reasons, compared to cartels that carry out criminal activity solely for purely financial reasons. Although both a terrorist organization and an organized crime structure may have violent agendas to secure their funding, a terrorist organization may nevertheless aim to destabilize the political regime and

²⁴ Alesina Alberto, Salvatore Piccolo, Paolo Pinotti, "Organized Crime, Violence, and Politics". *Oxford University Press*, 2018.

²⁵ Louise Shelley, John Picarelli, "Methods not motives: Implications of the convergence of international organized crime and terrorism". *Police Practice and Research*, Vol.3, No.4/ 2002.

²⁶ Harmonie Toros, Luca Mavelli. "Terrorism, organized crime and the biopolitics of violence", *Critical Studies on Terrorism*, Vol.6, No.1/2013.

state stability, while a cartel may pursue the destabilization of the domestic and regional economic environment to ensure its survival²⁷.

In the case of radicalization leading to terrorism, we can see that most terrorist organizations use illegal means to finance their activities, such as kidnappings, ransoms, and arms trafficking, these methods being similar to those used by organized crime²⁸. These activities are carried out by terrorist organizations with the aim of financing their activities (drug trafficking, smuggling, ransoms in exchange for kidnappings) while in the case of organized crime, cartels and other criminal groups carry out the same type of activities with the sole aim of obtaining financial gains. On the other hand, if we analyze the methods used by some cartels in Latin America, we will see that they can borrow tactics specific to terrorist organizations, such as car bombings by the Medellin cartel in Mexico and Cali in Colombia²⁹. Car bombings were used as a technique of insurgency against the police between 1989 and 1992, as well as a method of targeting civilians during Pablo Escobar's critical period.

In other circumstances, both the Cali and Medellin cartels used these methods against government officials, police, and civilians to destroy commercial and public facilities³⁰. Last but not least, the rivalry between the two cartels involved the use of violent techniques and explosive materials. Analyzing the activity of the Los Zetas cartel in Mexico, we can see that the methods by which violence is exercised, such as ransoms, assassinations, and torture, and the intimidation of civilians are reminiscent of ISIS techniques, as well as the use of female, *the panthers*, as members who are as capable as men of committing violence in order to intimidate, kidnap, or assassinate police or government officials who would endanger the survival of the cartel³¹.

On the other hand, regarding the points of convergence between organized crime structures and terrorist organizations, we specify that at the organizational level there is a reluctance to develop cooperation based on a common agenda: if terrorist organizations consider that ideological, social or political reasons will be dissolved by prolonged cooperation with a criminal structure, on the other hand, cartels avoid an obvious approach to

²⁷ Gregory Treverton, Carl Matthies, Karla J. Cunningham, Jeremiah Gouka, Greg Ridgeway, "Film Piracy, Organized Crime, and Terrorism". *RAND Corporation*, 2008.

²⁸ Shelley, Louise. "Illicit Trade and Terrorism". *Perspectives on Terrorism*, Vol. 14, No. 4/ 2020.

²⁹ Robert Bunker, John P. Sullivan. "Cartel car bombings in Mexico". *Strategic Studies Institute*, 2013.

³⁰ *Ibidem*, 2013.

³¹ George Grayson, "The evolution of Los Zetas in Mexico and Central America: Sadism as an instrument of cartel warfare". *Strategic Studies Institute*, 2014.

terrorist organizations in order not to attract the attention of the authorities³². However, not all researchers agree with the lack of connectivity between organized crime structures, identifying four modalities: interaction, incorporation, assimilation, and transformation³³.

The interaction between organized crime groups and terrorist organizations refers to their ability to cooperate or to enter into competition or conflict, while incorporation involves borrowing techniques and methods; respectively, terrorist organizations resort to illicit means, and cartels borrow terrorist tactics to achieve their objectives. Assimilation refers to the process by which a terrorist organization incorporates an organized crime structure and vice versa, while transformation involves changing the composition and objectives from a terrorist organization to an organized crime structure and vice versa³⁴. In fact, even if terrorist organizations do not resort to cooperation with organized crime structures, they still use methods similar to those applied by cartels to finance their agenda. However, not all terrorist organizations apply methods specific to organized crime to finance themselves, in the idea that purely ideological reasons are considered priority. Among the terrorist organizations that have specific capabilities of cartels or carry out illegal activities to finance their activity, we mention FARC, Egyptian Islamic Jihad, Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA), Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), and Provisional IRA³⁵.

Conclusions

Consequently, the two manifestations have sufficient points of convergence in the conduct of illicit or immoral activities in relation to the adoption of similar techniques of exercising violence or obtaining material profit. Also, the use of violence in both manifestations erodes stability within society, citizens' trust in the ability of the authorities to preserve public order and safety, and respect for the rights of civilians. In contrast, even without the existence of a violent ideology to legitimize social or political change, we consider that the exercise of violence as a tool for the agenda of a structured group involves national security risks.

³² Gregory Treverton, Carl Matthies, Karla J. Cunningham, Jeremiah Gouka, Greg Ridgeway. "Film Piracy, Organized Crime, and Terrorism". *RAND Corporation*, 2008.

³³ Sam Mullins, James K. Wither. "Terrorism and Organized Crime". *Connections The Quarterly Journal*, 2016.

³⁴ *Ibidem*, 2016.

³⁵ Gregory Treverton, Carl Matthies, Karla J. Cunningham, Jeremiah Gouka, Greg Ridgeway, "Film Piracy, Organized Crime, and Terrorism". *RAND Corporation*, 2008.



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