

RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Crime-Conflict Nexus and the Civil War in Syria

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There is a strong relationship between organised crime and civil war. This article contributes to the crime-conflict nexus literature by providing a consideration of the role of organised crime in the Syrian conflict. It provides an overview of pre- and post-war organised crime in Syria. The article then builds the argument that war provides opportunities for organised crime through the state's diminished law enforcement ability; the economic hardship which civilians face during war; and the abundance of armed groups who all need to generate revenue. Secondly, the paper argues that organised crime also affects the intensity and duration of war by enabling militants to reproduce themselves materially and to build institutions amongst the communities where they are active. The relationships between armed groups and local populations emerge as a central theme in understanding the crime-conflict nexus.

Introduction

By January 2017, the Syrian civil war had produced close to 5 million refugees, 6.3 million internally displaced persons, 13.5 million Syrians who required humanitarian aid (UNHCR 2016) and estimates put the number of fatalities due to the war at 500,000 (Graham-Harrison 2017). Western popular interest in the Syrian civil war tends to focus on the use of chemical weapons by the government of Bashar Al-Assad; the military successes and brutality of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS);¹ Russian military involvement and the refugee 'crisis' which resulted from the conflict. This paper focuses on an often-overlooked aspect of the conflict, but one that is central to its longevity and intensity: the role of organised crime in the Syrian civil war.

Early in the conflict, UNESCO raised alarm about the increased illegal trade in antiquities and artefacts from Syria. Both the policymaking (Yazigi 2014; Hallaj 2015; Taylor 2015) and academic communities (for example Lister 2015b; Kravitz and Nichols 2016; Keatinge 2014; Herbert 2014) have since acknowledged the proliferation of organised crime during the war. These studies show how protagonists in the Syrian conflict are involved in a range of illegal economic activities, including people trafficking, oil smuggling, the illegal narcotics trade, kidnapping and looting. These activities vary in profitability, but they generate sufficient funds to allow insurgents and the government to buy weapons, pay combatants, provide social services and establish institutions in the areas under their control. These factors are crucial in reproducing the armed groups and maintaining the conflict. Yet, very little is known about how the war provides opportunities

for this illicit economy to expand. This paper asks how war and organised crime affect each other in the context of the Syrian civil war.

There has been a steady recognition of the role of organised crime in sustaining violent conflict (summarised by De Boer and Rosetti 2015) and the threat it poses to international peace, security and stability (Bergeron 2013; Bosetti et al 2016; Briscoe 2015; Cockayne and Pfister 2008). This interplay between organised crime and war, the 'crime-conflict nexus', has been studied in various contexts, including Colombia (Felbab-Brown 2005); Mali (Lacher 2012); Afghanistan (Goodhand 2008) and Iraq (Williams 2009). This article contributes to the study of the crime-conflict nexus by illustrating, in the Syrian context, how armed groups simultaneously engage in political and criminal activities, how organised criminal activity is politically significant in the context of war and how civilians engage with the crime-conflict nexus.

This article states that organised crime in Syria is both a consequence of the war and, at the same time, a driver of the war. It proceeds from the premise that the crime-conflict nexus is central to understanding the civil war in Syria. In the first half, the focus will be on how war creates space and opportunities for organised crime. The civil war weakens the state's law enforcement capacity and thus lowers the opportunity costs for those engaging in organised crime. Furthermore, the war causes unprecedented levels of hardship amongst the population. This creates a domestic demand for consumer goods on the black or grey markets and produces a pool of labour, which can be absorbed into the illicit economy. Consequently, the civil war produces a range of non-state armed groups that need money to wage war. These groups turn to the illicit economy to raise funds and are instrumental in expanding these markets and opening new avenues for international organised crime.

The second half of the argument focuses on how organised crime drives war. The expanding illicit economy, which characterises the Syrian civil war, affects its intensity and

duration. Armed groups now have access to funds, which means they can afford to wage a longer and more violent war. Secondly, armed groups also have resources to spend on providing social and political goods in the communities where they are based. This means that they can become perceived as legitimate political actors and this can translate into popular support. This further fragments the central state and destroys the social contract between state and society (Grynkeiwich 2008), making a resolution of the conflict more complex. These relationships between local populations, armed groups and organised crime are central to understanding how organised crime and war interconnect.

This research provides an analysis of the ways in which crime and conflict mutually reinforce each other: how war creates opportunities for an illicit economy to expand and how organised crime, in turn, facilitates war. The study begins with an overview of the literature on organised crime and war. It then proceeds to a description of organised crime in Syria, both before and during the civil war. Following this overview, the first part of the argument (that war provides opportunities for organised crime) presents a consideration of the conditions which make organised crime in Syria feasible. The second part of the argument (that organised crime is a driver of conflict) is then advanced through an analysis of how armed groups use the revenues gained in the illicit economy and how that impacts the conflict. The article concludes with reflections on the contribution of this case study to the crime-conflict nexus and the prospects for peace in Syria. But, first a conceptualisation of organised crime is needed.

Organised Crime

Organised crime remains a heavily contested concept. The dominant conceptualisations of organised crime assume a law enforcement perspective. The Palermo Convention and the United Nations Office for Drugs and Crime (UNODC), for example, defines an organised criminal group as:

A structured group of three or more persons, existing for a period of time and acting in concert with the aim of committing one or more serious crimes or offences...to obtain, directly or indirectly, a financial or other material benefit (in Hansen 2014: 64–65).

In 2011, the UK Home Office defined organised crime as:

Individuals, normally working with others, with the capacity and capability to commit serious crime on a continuing basis, which includes elements of planning, control and coordination, and benefits those involved. The motivation is often, but not always, financial gain (in Bergeron 2013: 6).

The definitions share several characteristics: they emphasise the collective nature of organised crime (perpetrated by a group, not individuals); its longevity; that it takes place outside the law and that the overall aim is to turn a profit. This approach is underpinned by normative assumptions about a 'legal' vs 'illegal' dichotomy (Cockayne and Pfister 2008: 13) which is assigned by the state. These traditional definitions lead to a focus on state building and the ability of political institutions to respond to organised crime. The law enforcement perspective fits neatly into the Liberal Peace paradigm with its focus on democracy promotion, the rule of law and the building of state institutions.

Yet, there are significant weaknesses to this law enforcement perspective. It assumes that the state is legitimate and criminal organisations are illegitimate – even though this view might not be shared by the population in places where state authority is contested or weak (Cockayne and Pfister 2008: 13). These state-assigned labels might thus not necessarily reflect civilian notions of what constitutes legitimate economic activity. In fact, there may be significant local support for an 'illegal' economy.

A further weakness of the law enforcement perspective on organised crime is that it underplays the way in which these activities change the nature of the state itself. The close relationships fostered between organised crime and state officials lead to a distortion of local economies as government policies aim to serve the interests of organised crime, rather than the population (Jespersen 2015: 26). Local economies change over time as organised crime groups extract taxes and enable civilians to circumvent formal markets.

Another criticism of the law enforcement approach holds that organised crime is often an activity, rather than an identity, as actors dip in and out of illegal activities. Organised criminal networks possess a range of motivations, which are not always financially-motivated, but could be political (James 2012: 223–225). This recognises the diverse portfolio of activities to which one conflict actor can subscribe.

This alternative conceptualisation of organised crime moves away from the legal-illegal dichotomy, towards a recognition of the complex political, economic and social environments within which organised crime networks operate. This approach is undoubtedly more in line with the assumptions of this study, which recognises that organised crime networks can have a range of goals. Consequently, violence becomes dual-purpose, serving both individual and strategic organisational needs simultaneously (Green and Ward 2009).

This is particularly relevant to the crime-conflict nexus where the boundaries between political and criminal actors are increasingly blurred. Not only are their goals varied, but their impact can vary as they establish social, economic and political relationships with the populations and states where they are active. In addition, the critical approach to organised crime emphasises the relationship between local populations, armed groups and the illicit economy – a recurring theme in this research.

Civil War and Organised Crime

The relationship between organised crime and conflict has become increasingly recognised in the study of civil war. Theories of 'new wars' developed in the 1990s as scholars turned their attention to the opportunities which globalisation and war present to the growth of organised crime (Duffield 2001; Kaldor 1999; Kaplan 1994; Münkler 2005; Van Creveld 1991). In the new post-Cold War context, regimes and insurgents alike had to find alternative sources of revenue as external backers (particularly the USA and USSR) retreated from involvement in internal conflict (Williams 2012: 39–40). Some scholars (notably Collier and Hoeffler 2004) analysed how civil war presents profit-making opportunities to insurgents and states – often by exploiting natural resources such as oil, diamonds or minerals. The argument was that the potential for self-enrichment in a conflict setting will determine the war's feasibility, intensity and longevity. This greed thesis elicited a great deal of academic interest and culminated in a debate about the importance of political economy explanations for war, vis-à-vis more conventional political explanations related to inequality, discrimination, and political grievance (Ballentine 2003; Berdal 2005; Herbst 2000; Pugh et al 2004).²

Both new wars theories and the greed thesis emphasise the role of globalisation in facilitating the activities of international criminal networks and, at the same time, the increasing cooperation between organised crime and violent political actors. This cooperation is beneficial to both the political actors and the organised crime groups: those engaged in political violence engage in organised crime to raise funds, whilst organised crime benefits from the opportunities which war presents.

An interpretation of this relationship gained prominence in the years following the 9/11 terror attacks on the USA. The 'crime-terror' nexus literature focuses on the dynamics and networks involved in the funding of international terrorism (Dishman 2005; Hutchinson and O'Mally 2007; Makarenko

2004; Oehme 2008; Sanderson 2004; Shelley and Picarelli 2005). In doing so, these studies uncover the alliances between organised crime and terror networks which exist for their mutual benefit. The literature illustrates how international terrorism became involved in a range of organised criminal activities in order to fund political violence (Makarenko 2004; Shelley and Melzer 2008).

Increasingly, a similar approach to the study of civil war was adopted. Here the spotlight falls on particular, geographically bound conflicts – as opposed to the global nature of international terrorism. It became known as the crime-conflict nexus (De Boer and Bossett 2015; Lacher 2012; Cornell and Jonsson 2014; Kemp 2004).

The crime-conflict nexus literature exposes the fallacy of upholding a hard distinction between organised crime and political violence: organised criminal groups can assume political goals and, likewise, political groups can engage in organised crime in efforts to fund their use of violence (Bosetti et al 2016: 3). Violence increases in a context where the aims and activities of organised crime and political violence become increasingly blurred. Organised crime and conflict become interdependent and exacerbate each other (McMullin 2009: 84). In the war economy that results, violence becomes an entry point for participation in these activities (Taylor 2015: 2) as groups that use force are more successful in gaining access to economic opportunities. Indeed, the crime-conflict nexus literature illustrates the extent to which organised crime during violent conflict is political: it funds political violence, it changes the abilities of local political actors and it has long-term political consequences for the state and peacebuilding.

The focus in this article is on the ways in which civil war presents *opportunities* for organised crime – as activities, rather than a set of actors – to flourish. A central assumption that underpins this approach is that all or most armed groups in Syria are involved in both political and criminal violence. This research is interested in how large-scale

political violence present opportunities for organised crime, which in turn, stimulates and prolongs the conflict.

Different sections of society are typically involved in the illicit economy during war: the populations that produce and consume the illegal goods and services, the crime groups such as mafia and drug trafficking organisations, armed military groups such as terrorists, insurgents or paramilitaries, as well as corrupt government officials and law enforcement personnel (Felbab-Brown 2012: 3). A major theme in this paper is the centrality of the relationships between armed groups and the local populations in the crime-conflict nexus. War creates space for strengthening this relationship between insurgents and civilians. The following discussions show how these relationships underpin the illicit economy that expanded during the civil war in Syria.

The Civil War in Syria

The current conflict in Syria started in March 2011 with popular protests against the authoritarian regime of President Bashar al-Assad and demands for the release of political prisoners (BBC News 2016). The government responded violently and the protests spread and escalated. It was initially seen as part of the 2010–2011 wave of popular uprisings against authoritarian regimes in states such as Yemen, Tunisia, Egypt and Libya, known as the Arab Spring. However, the Syrian uprising soon proved to be a more sustained and longer-term conflict and by 2012 the International Red Cross officially labelled it a civil war.

More than 1000 different groups are thought to be involved in the conflict (Al-Abdeh 2013). These include the government of President Bashar al Assad, supported by Hezbollah in Lebanon; ISIS (the Salafist jihadist group who advocates a conservative version of Islamic rule); the Sunni Jihadist Jabhat al Nusra (the Front for the Defence of the Syrian People, which was allied with Al Qaeda, but since its split with Al Qaeda in 2016, is now known as Jabhat Fateh Al-Sham);

the YPG (the Kurdish People's Protection Units); the Islamist groups Ahrar Al-Sham and Jaysh Al-Islam and the Free Syrian Army (Al Jazeera 2016; Crowcroft 2015). In addition to these high-profile groups, there are a myriad of smaller groups who come and go, and who exist in varying degrees of cooperation with the larger groups (Sorenson 2016).

The conflict has become internationalised, with Russia and Iran emerging as major military and financial supporters of the regime, whilst the Gulf States and Saudi Arabia support the Sunni Islamist groups (Al Jazeera 2016).

A range of political, economic, ethnic and social factors caused this conflict. These include growing inequalities and youth unemployment that resulted from the economic liberalisation policies that the Assad regime had implemented in the years preceding the uprising. The outbreak of war also signals dissatisfaction with the system of patron-client relationships which have been carefully cultivated by the Syrian Ba'athist regime. The state concentrated its provision of public services such as the provision of electricity, employment, schooling, agricultural aid and health care in the areas where its support was strongest (De Juan and Bank 2015: 94). The Alawite sect (of which Assad is a member) has long dominated the state and the resulting discontent amongst Sunnis also contributes to the conflict.³

Pre-war Organised Crime in Syria

Organised crime is not new to Syria. The country has long been a transit point for drugs originating from Europe, Turkey and Lebanon and destined for Jordan, Iraq and the Persian Gulf (Al-Hemiary et al 2014). There is also a long-standing tradition of looting and antiquity smuggling from archaeological sites prior to the war in Syria (Casana 2015: 147). Herbert (2014) provides a comprehensive historical narrative of pre-war smuggling and organised crime in Syria. Local cross-border tribes and groups have engaged in trafficking livestock and consumer goods (and to a limited extent, drugs)

between Syria and its neighbours since the inception of the state after the fall of the Ottoman Empire. Initially, the Syrian government was not directly involved in the illicit economy – except for individual government officials who may have benefited financially. In Herbert's analysis, two major events created motivation and opportunity for the Syrian regime to become more actively involved in organised crime.

Firstly, Syria's 1976 invasion and subsequent presence in Lebanon heralded a period of entrenched cooperation between the Syrian government and Lebanese-based criminal groups. Networks of bribery between government officials and smugglers developed. The Syrian military, in particular, became firmly entrenched in the Lebanese trade in hashish and heroin by taxing traffickers.

Western sanctions against Iraq in the 1990s are the second major event that provided motivation and opportunity for the Syrian regime to expand its involvement in the transnational illicit economy. Syria helped Iraq to bypass these sanctions by encouraging and directly operating smuggling networks that moved weapons, luxury goods, food and oil to and from Iraq. The Syrian regime retreated from direct involvement in smuggling after the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq, but continued to tax the lucrative Iraq-Syrian trafficking of artefacts and oil.

Several factors can explain the success of the illicit economy in Syria before the civil war. Syria's central geographic position in the Middle East makes it attractive for organised crime. It has access to the coast, which provides it with connections to international markets and gives it value as an export point. Syria is surrounded by weakened states and shares lengthy and poorly controlled borders with states that are known to harbour active international organised crime networks, notably Iraq, Turkey and Lebanon (The Global Initiative 2013). The country's pre-war infrastructure enhanced the feasibility of illicit economic activities: it has an elaborate road network linked to seaports, good electricity

supply and relatively high levels of industrial development (Kravits and Nichols 2016: 35). These factors, combined with the state's inability (and unwillingness) to control its borderlands, create a fertile environment for organised crime.

This discussion implied that a range of actors were involved in Syria's pre-war organised crime networks and many of them remain active. These include the local tribes; small-time cross-border smugglers; larger, more sophisticated trafficking networks and the Syrian regime itself. The Shabiha are an interesting example of a group that has straddled the pre-and post-war organised crime periods (Starr 2012). The Shabiha were a small group of government militias (mostly from Assad's Alawite sect) who were deeply (and brutally) involved in trafficking and smuggling in the borderlands during the 1980s and 1990s. The outbreak of civil war has led to an explosion in their numbers. This was partially due to the government's policy of releasing career criminals in exchange for political loyalty during the early years of the conflict. The Shabiha illustrate how armed groups can simultaneously assume political and criminal roles and how these roles can change over time: these groups remain deeply involved in war-time organised crime, but they also play a role in political violence as government militias which control towns and villages. The Shabiha illustrate an important aspect of the crime-conflict nexus: an armed group's ability to assume and shed political and criminal identities as circumstances change.

Participation in the illicit economy in Syria widened as the conflict intensified. The trafficking of weapons into Syria at the start of the conflict illustrates this (The Global Initiative 2013: 2): initially, armed groups in Syria would procure weapons in neighbouring countries (usually Iraq) and these would be smuggled into the country by vehicle, donkey or on foot. However, as the conflict intensified and became prolonged, weapons smuggling became more sophisticated. By 2012 the Free Syria Army was

acquiring weapons through professional arms traffickers and international weapons dealers. Entirely new business networks have emerged since the start of the war to supply the demand for weapons, fuel and consumables (Yazigi 2014: 7). It is difficult to paint an accurate picture of the nature of cooperation between armed political groups and criminal groups – not least because the distinction between political and criminal motives and activities are blurred (McMullin 2009: 89). What is clear, however, is that that insurgent groups have learnt how to capitalise on the economic opportunities which war presents.

Organised Crime During the Syrian War

Ultimately, this paper argues that organised crime both aggravates and is a consequence of the war in Syria. An overview of the range of illicit economic activities which exist in the context of the civil war in Syria is useful. The activities which will be described often co-exist in the same settings and are undertaken by the same actors. Consequently, the focus is on discussing the activities which constitute the war-time illicit economy in Syria—rather than producing an account of each armed group's involvement in these areas.

The crime-conflict nexus literature provides a ready tick-list of illegal economic activities which typically present profit-making opportunities to conflict actors: the illegal trade and smuggling involving natural resources such as alluvial diamonds (e.g. Sierra Leone); timber (e.g. Cambodia); minerals (e.g. DRC) and oil (e.g. Iraq). International drug trafficking is a major explanation for the intensity and longevity of the Colombian civil war, where the FARC have been involved in cocaine production for decades (Cornell 2005: 756), the heroin trade is closely associated with Taliban involvement in poppy cultivation in Afghanistan (Goodhand 2008) and the Kosovo conflict was heavily influenced by the billion-dollar narcotics trade in the Balkans (Andreas 2004; Chossudovsky 1999).

An armed group's ability to control movement from and into its territory is crucial to its political and economic success. Control over territory in Syria is not only a sign of geopolitical military prowess, but also provides access to sources of revenue. A secondary, illicit economy has been built around the unofficial movement of commodities into areas and neighbourhoods under siege. Extracting bribes and fees at border crossings or on highways is an important source of income for local militias and army officers (Ohl et al 2015; Yazigi 2014: 5). Rebels that control border crossings set fees for allowing vehicles and individuals to cross and for the movement of luxury items, food, livestock and oil to and from neighbouring countries (Herbert 2014).

The most profitable form of cross-border trafficking involves oil. There is significant variation between different groups and regions in terms of how oil is extracted, transported, taxed and sold (Almohamad and Dittmann 2016). In some cases, local tribal chiefs are in charge of extracting oil from small oil fields under their control and produce about 300–1000 barrels a day (Hallaj 2015). Local militias then tax oil smuggling in their territories or provide armed protection (at a price) to the rudimentary refineries (Herbert 2014: 78).

ISIS, for example, is heavily involved in oil smuggling and extraction. At the height of its power, it controlled around 80 per cent of Syria's oil fields (including the largest oil producing area of Deir az-Zour) and produced 65,000 barrels of oil per day (Almohamad and Dittmann 2016). Oil has become one of ISIS's main sources of income. It is impossible to get an accurate estimate, but according to some reports the organisation earned approximately US\$2 million per day through its control and sale of oil in Syria and Iraq (Lister 2015b). ISIS sells oil to various local and international buyers, including its main adversary, the Assad government, through a series of middlemen (Almohamad and Dittmann 2016: 11). This strategic cooperation between the regime and one of its

fiercest adversaries illustrates the shifting and varying patterns of cooperation between armed groups which typify conflict settings (Staniland 2012).

Considerable international media attention has fallen on the production and smuggling of the illegal narcotic, Fenethylamine, in Syria. This amphetamine is marketed under the street name 'Captagon' (Baker 2013; Henley 2014; Holley 2015). Captagon is popular as a recreational drug on the Arabian Peninsula (Herbert, 2014), but there are reports that combatants on all sides in the Syrian war are using it too – prompting TIME magazine to refer to them as 'super-human soldiers' (Baker 2013). By early 2014, the UN reported increases in the Syrian production of amphetamines (Kalin 2014) and some armed groups are directly involved in this production and cross-border trafficking of Captagon (Kravitz and Nichols 2016: 38–39; The Global Initiative 2016: 23).

Looting is another form of economic activity that is dependent on the illicit market. Post-Saddam Iraq is an obvious example of large-scale looting in the context of violent conflict. Hospitals, museums and shops were emptied during the chaos that followed the toppling of the Saddam Hussein regime. Looting is often a symptom of the collapse of a political and security structure at the start of the war (Mac Ginty 2004: 863). In the case of Iraq and Syria, the availability of lootable items (like oil or cultural artefacts); the presence of large groups of people (as individuals and armed groups) who are able to loot; and a culturally permissive environment (Mac Ginty 2004), were all in place to make looting possible. According to reports, members of pro-government groups are allowed to loot in areas previously held by rebels. Rebels loot factories and industrial areas under their control, selling the bounty on local or international markets (Hallaj 2015).

The looting of antiquities has become a prominent feature of the Syrian conflict's symbiosis with organised crime. In October 2013, UNESCO warned about the increase in the looting of antiquities and other valuable

artefacts from Syria and there were reports of endemic racketeering and smuggling in many of the rebel-held areas (Fielding-Smith 2013). The stripping of archaeological sites in Syria and the selling of artefacts on international markets are commonplace (*The Guardian* 2016; UNESCO 2013). By 2015, satellite imagery comparing historical sites before and after the start of the war, showed a significant increase in illegal archaeological excavations in Syria (Casana 2015: 147). Interestingly, this analysis of archaeological digs found evidence of an increase in both minor looting (which is probably done by individuals and civilians who are merely trying to survive economically), as well as severe looting which requires some organisational and mechanical capacity and is generally more destructive. The revenues for rebel groups through this trade have been estimated at US\$300–US\$500 million in the two years since 2013 (Hallaj 2015: 4).

Control over grain is an unusual activity that forms part of organised crime in Syria. Martínez and Eng (2017) provide a fascinating account of the political capital that bread provision holds in Syria, which helps to explain why bakeries are often targets in military campaigns. The subsidised provision of bread has long been a corner stone of the welfare state in Syria. As insurgent groups took control of new territory, they continued the provision of this public good as part of their 'hearts and minds' strategy. Various armed groups in Syria have become involved in a protection racket in the grain industry where bakeries must pay for 'protection' from other groups. In other cases, insurgent groups are directly involved in the milling of grain themselves (Al-Abdeh 2013).

Kidnapping and hostage taking is another common activity for those involved in organised crime in conflict zones. Both rebels and state security forces in Syria are involved in kidnapping and hostage taking. Ransoms are often negotiated through chains of contacts involving local peace committees (Hallaj 2015: 4). It is estimated that, in 2014, ISIS earned US\$45 million from ransoms (Lederer

2014). Hostage taking is of huge symbolic significance to terrorist groups, in particular: it provides them with publicity and a psychological advantage vis-à-vis their enemy. In contrast to the indiscriminate nature of terror attacks in general, terrorist groups are generally selective in who they take as hostages in order to maximise the publicity and impact (Forest 2012).

This section described how a range of conflict actors are involved in the very lucrative illicit economy in Syria. These economic activities vary from the highly profitable extraction and trafficking in oil, to the illegal trade in narcotics and antiquities; from control over grain and bread production to kidnapping and hostage taking. The activities discussed above are not necessarily exhaustive of all illicit economic endeavours in this conflict, but they illustrate the diversity and complexity of the crime-conflict nexus in Syria. There is evidence that the illicit economy has expanded since the outbreak of the war and many of these activities are highly lucrative. The following section provides an explanation for this expansion of the illicit economy during the civil war and considers how civil wars provide opportunities for organised crime.

War Provides Opportunities for Organised Crime

Several aspects of the Syrian war created an environment that created further opportunities for organised crime. These conditions include a diminished state capacity, which reduced opportunity costs for the illicit economy; a population that faced unprecedented economic hardship which made participation in the illicit economy attractive and the existence of armed groups who needed to raise funds for weapons and other war-related expenses (Usman and Khan 2013).

Firstly, armed conflicts weaken state legitimacy and capacity to function, and thus provide opportunities for organised crime. This lowers the opportunity costs for insurgents and civilians to become involved in

the illicit economy. It makes the black and grey markets more attractive and viable alternatives for civilians in need of consumer goods and employment (Bosetti et al 2016: 3; McMullin 2009: 85). The state diverts much of its resources to the war, which reduces its capacity for maintaining law and order. Consequently, the state is less able to control borders and to contain illicit economic activity.

Secondly, sanctions against the Syrian government since 2011 contributed to fuel shortages for households, a decline in oil revenue and had a negative effect on the livelihoods of poor Syrians, in particular (Nasser et al 2013: 13). The sanctions, combined with the general economic catastrophe that accompanied the descent into war, stimulated a demand for grey and black market goods and provided incentives for the smuggling of consumables. Drug production and trafficking, for example, provide profits for insurgents with which to buy weapons and to pay recruits. But, importantly, it also provides employment opportunities for civilians (Clarke 2016: 3) who can become couriers, be involved in the manufacturing process, or sell the drugs.

The relationship between armed groups and the communities where they operate is central to understanding the opportunities which war presents for organised crime. In her focus on the illegal drugs economy, Felbab-Brown (2012: 4) argues that the non-state armed groups provide security and act as economic and political regulators to local populations through their involvement in the illicit economy: they protect the local population's livelihood from government efforts to repress the illicit economy, they mobilise revenues from these illicit activities towards social services and they protect local populations from other predatory groups.

An example of how the population directly benefits from the decentralisation of the economy that characterises the crime-conflict nexus is again found in the oil industry in Syria:

With the rebels selling a barrel of oil for anything up to \$22, refiners can make a profit of 30 cents on every litre of gasoline sold to the public. Those who make their living from road haulage and associated trades have seen their business boom; body shops, for instance, can't keep up with the demand from truckers who need giant tanks fitted to the backs of their vehicles. Unemployed young men can now make a living selling fuel from roadside kiosks, and mechanics have plenty to do in repairing engines damaged by the low-quality fuel. The free market that the rebels have unconsciously fostered is a win-win for suppliers (the rebels themselves) and consumers (everyone else) (Al-Abdeh 2013).

This illustrates how the insurgents' stake in the oil industry has created a range of economic opportunities for civilians in Syria. Armed groups expect to gain some level of popular support (even if this support is strategic and opportunistic, rather than principled) in exchange for the economic opportunities they provide.

Thirdly, as the greed thesis emphasises, armed groups require funds in order to be able to afford to wage war. The illegal economy gives non-state armed groups access to resources that enable them to wage war. As the earlier section has shown, it is not only insurgents who turn to organised crime to raise funds, but states do so, too. Sanctions also affected the Syrian regime's involvement in the illicit economy as they became forced to seek alternative intermediaries for international transactions (Yazigi 2014). This provided new opportunities for the cultivation of local and international networks involving the state.

This section has considered the ways in which war provides opportunities for organised crime in the Syrian context through: the state's weakened law enforcement capacity; an economically vulnerable population that

creates domestic markets and participates in the illicit economy; and the abundance of armed groups that require an income. These combined factors provide a suitable environment for organised crime to flourish.

Organised Crime Contributes to War

The flipside of how war creates opportunities for the illicit economy, lies in asking how does organised crime contribute to the conflict? An obvious contribution lies in the funding streams it provides for rebel groups and the government to buy weapons, pay insurgents and help them to capture territory. This helps to prolong and intensify the conflict. These funds also enable them to provide political and social goods to communities, such as subsidising bread or setting up local mechanisms for resolving disputes. In exchange for these services, armed groups receive protection, loyalty and cooperation from local communities. It leads to a further fragmentation of a central authority. This section will illustrate how organised crime during war is political: it enables the material reproduction of armed political groups and affects the socio-political infrastructure of a society.

Clearly, militants in Syria— as in most conflicts— raise significant profits from their involvement in the illicit market. We need to consider how armed groups spend these profits in order to understand the medium to long-term impact of this symbiosis between organised crime and armed conflict. Of course, it is entirely plausible that a certain amount of the profit disappears into the pockets of powerful individuals. However, much of armed groups' expenditure goes towards paying its supporters; the acquisition of weapons and technology needed to fight the war; and lastly, into the institution-building projects which many of the protagonists engage in.

One of the major expenses for armed organisations in Syria are stipends for combatants. A new member of the FSA, for example, would be paid \$50 per month, but it is well known that the Islamist organisations

pay their members the highest salaries (Ohl et al 2015: 8). ISIS fighters claim to receive \$100 per month from the organisation, in addition to other privileges such as stipends for their families or their rent and electricity (Weiss and Hassan 2016: 338). It is impossible to know the exact numbers of ISIS fighters, but estimates vary wildly between the 17 000 suggested by the Pentagon to 200,000 suggested by the Kurdish forces (Fromson and Simon 2015: 9). Whatever the real figure may be, if all the tens of thousands of soldiers receive similar benefits, the organisation's monthly expenditure is significant.

Another obvious expense is weapons and ammunition for military campaigns. Its international allies, notably Russia, supply the Assad regime with weapons (Cordesman 2015). However, the rebel groups tend to use weapons from a variety of sources. Many weapons are recycled from nearby conflicts in Libya or Iraq (Robson 2015) or had originally been sold by European manufacturers to other MENA countries such as Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Qatar (Taylor 2015: 3). There is clearly a great degree of recycling and transferring of weapons which involves international weapons smuggling networks. Evidence shows that ammunition used early in the Syrian conflict was manufactured in a range of countries such as China, Sudan, Romania and Iran (Jenzen-Jones 2014). The varying suppliers and sources of weapons used in the Syrian conflict points to a sophisticated (and expensive) weapons trafficking network which all groups tap into to continue their campaigns. Organised crime thus contributes to the political struggle by enabling armed groups to buy weapons and to pay combatants.

Insurgent organisations often engage in complex processes of institution-building and service delivery in the areas which they dominate. Hezbollah in neighbouring Lebanon, for example, has established a sophisticated network of organisations through which they fund and manage schools, medical centres, urban infrastructure development projects and provide municipal services such

as garbage removal in the Shia areas under their control (Flanigan and Abdel-Samad 2009; Harb 2008). It is crucial for armed groups to enjoy some level of legitimacy and acceptance in their communities. If the population does not acquiesce to their presence, they will either withhold compliance with taxation, production or conscription policies directed by the military group, or they can instigate a violent challenge to the group's presence in their community (Martínez and Eng 2017: 2). Armed groups' provision of public and political goods is an important technique for acquiring this tacit acceptance.

It is therefore unsurprising that insurgent groups are keen to engage in some form of institution-building in the regions where they have established military control. The notion of the caliphate is central to ISIS ideology and means that the group has a dual purpose of Jihad and state-building. The latter implies governance and the delivery of public services. In contrast to ISIS's well-known brutality, this use of soft power (the 'carrot' in the carrot-and-stick approach) is an important part of their strategy for dominance and control (Khalaf 2015; Lister 2015a: 49; McCants 2015: 152).⁴ It provides not only an extensive network of courts based on a very strict form of Sharia law (Lister 2015a: 45), but also schooling, medical care, public transport, water and sanitation, flour for bakeries and price caps on necessities such as bread or rent (Lister 2015a: 47–8). Insurgents' welfare provision and governance roles are also central to their long-term military success as it creates an impression of a viable alternative to the existing regime and affirms their political legitimacy (Martínez and Eng 2017).

The state and insurgents, alike, use the funds raised through their involvement in organised crime to pay combatants; buy weapons and technology; and most importantly, to provide public and political goods to the populations where they are based. The provision of these social and political goods is essential in acquiring legitimacy and support from the communities where they are based.

Conclusion

This article describes the range of activities that constitute the war-time illicit economy in Syria. Various actors, including the state, insurgents, and local populations are involved in activities that include drug manufacturing, oil trafficking, extortion and looting. Local populations are clearly important in the crime-conflict nexus: inhabitants of conflict areas directly participate in the illicit economy. In return, they are the recipients of political and social goods, which the armed groups provide and which are funded by the proceeds from organised crime.

The research shows how war provides opportunities for organised crime by creating an environment where the central authority is unable to regulate economic activity within its borders. The economic hardship facing populations during war often leaves them with little choice but to engage in organised crime – either as direct participants in the activities, or as consumers. Lastly, war facilitates organised crime by creating a pool of armed political groups who need to raise revenue in order to wage war. These groups dominate and expand the illicit markets.

In turn, organised crime also exacerbates the conflict. Organised crime enhances an armed group's capacity for violence. It thus affects the intensity and longevity of the war by providing armed groups with revenue with which to buy weapons to intensify their struggle. Furthermore, it enables these groups to engage in institution-building and to provide social and political goods to the communities where they are based. This can buy them loyalty, cooperation and protection from civilians.

This paper illustrated how militant groups in the Syrian war succeed in straddling both the political and criminal worlds. Organised crime during war is undoubtedly political in its effects. It enables armed groups to reproduce themselves materially, to build institutions and to gain some level of political legitimacy and cooperation. Local populations are central to the crime-conflict nexus: civilians provide markets and participants

to the illicit economy and they are the beneficiaries of armed groups' spending.

So, if war creates opportunities for crime, and organised crime can drive war, then where does that leave the prospect for peace in Syria? It is not the intention of this paper to engage in depth with the implications of the crime-conflict nexus for peacebuilding, but it will certainly affect the post-war state and society.

Militants could be unwilling to negotiate an end to the conflict, as peace (and the accompanying disarmament and demobilisation of armed groups) will be bad for business. Armed groups may actively resist or spoil peacemaking and peacebuilding activities, because their economic interests are so closely aligned to the informal economy. Local populations too, may be less enthusiastic about peace and the economic uncertainty that it could bring. It could lead to a strategic trade-off where peace operations accept organised crime as part of the political settlement to achieve short-term stability. This could entrench organised criminal structures into the post-war state. Smuggling networks rely heavily on the cultivation of political relationships and these are likely to exploit the fragile post-war context. In addition to these political-criminal networks, the close relationships of mutual dependency between civilians and armed groups will probably continue amid the unstable security, economic and political contexts which often characterise immediate post-war societies (Steenkamp 2009, 2014). Peace processes in places as diverse as Bosnia-Herzegovina, Northern Ireland and South Africa have shown that peace could indeed strengthen war-time criminal networks.

Insurgent groups leave behind formal and informal institutions, which could become an obstacle to the new post-war state's attempts to provide centralised governance. It is unlikely that the future Syrian state will resemble the centralised version that existed before the war because of the way that the conflict has fragmented authority, territorial control and governance in the country. The continuing relationships between local

communities, politicians and armed groups will pose a significant threat to the success of peace operations (Kemp et al 2013) and may well thwart efforts to establish a fair, transparent and effective post-war state and society.

Notes

- ¹ The organisation is also known as the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), 'Islamic State' or by the Arabic acronym of 'Daesh'.
- ² This became known as the 'greed vs grievance' debate in war causation literature, but a deeper engagement with this debate does not fall within the remit of the paper.
- ³ More detailed discussions of the causes of the Syrian civil war can be found in Sorensen (2016) and Erlich (2014).
- ⁴ ISIS's effectiveness as a shadow state is debatable (Fromson and Simon 2015: 38) and some reports suggest that this might not be as sustainable as initially declared (Sly, 2014).

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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