

‘Criminalised’ Islamic State Veterans – A Future Major Threat in Organised Crime Development?

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Abstract

This article considers the implications of criminalised Muslim Diaspora community members from the West travelling to the Middle East and becoming involved in the terrorist activities of the Islamic State (IS), and ultimately returning from whence they came. It also reflects on the differences over time amongst the profile of recruits that have taken place since the time of the Mujahedeen in Afghanistan, to the ascendancy of IS. Recent research indicates both terrorist and organised crime groups draw recruits from the same Diaspora communities, a position supported in this article. While the focus of law enforcement and media attention appears to be on the potential of Islamic State Middle East veterans committing terrorist acts in the West on returning from conflict zones, there may well be a pervasive danger of them bringing significant risk to their countries of origin through enhanced participation in organised crime. The views of a selection of recently retired police professionals were gathered, and were found to support concerns around this potential significant and dangerous outcome of homecoming foreign fighters.

Keywords: organised crime; foreign fighters; Muslim diasporas; Islamic State

Introduction

This article seeks to address the question of the probability of criminalised western Islamic State (IS) veterans returning from conflicts in the Middle East and becoming involved again in serious crime in the West, with an enhanced skill set acquired during their IS participation.

A description of positions on the Crime/Terror Nexus is provided, with illustrative examples. The article then moves on to consider the backgrounds of previous jihadist participants, utilising Sageman’s wave notion as theoretical context. The focus thereafter is on the largely IS inspired ‘fourth wave’ of jihadi foreign fighters, and explores the veracity of the religious credentials sighted as a basis for the ‘call to action’ that participants experience. The article then considers the potential implications to organised crime behaviours in countries of origin should ‘jihadists’ with previous criminal experience return to their communities with an enhanced criminal ‘skill set’. This consideration is supported by the findings from a consultation conducted with a group of relevant, recently retired security professionals. The article concludes by sketching policy considerations for the future.

‘Islamic State’[1] is the latest evolution of *Tawid wa al-Jihad*, the group founded by a former criminal from Jordan, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi that first came to prominence during the insurgency in Iraq following the US invasion of the country in 2003. It is an extremist Islamist group currently still in control of large swathes of territory across Iraq and Syria. IS is widely acknowledged as a terrorist organisation, and has been designated as such by governments around the world. Its foreign and local fighters utilise mass execution, religious persecution and hostage taking to further their goals. In addition IS operates a sophisticated propaganda machine serviced through innovative uses of the Internet, and both social and print media. Their aim is the to maintain and expand a Caliphate, with a single religious and political leadership ruling over lands previously held under Muslim rule during the Middle Ages.

The movement of foreign fighters from the West into this recently established ‘Caliphate’ as active participants in IS activities is new. It follows the establishment of strong Muslim diaspora communities in the West, a consequence of the migration of Muslims from Turkey, Morocco and other Muslim-majority

countries since the 1960s. These immigrants answered calls to fill low skilled jobs in the post-WWII rebuilding of Western Europe. These migrants and more specifically, their sons and grandsons now move between the Muslim diasporas in the West and the self-styled 'Caliphate'. Those among them regarded as both 'radicalised' toward jihad and possessing a criminal background are the subject of this article.

Terrorism and Organised Crime: Links and Similarities

The period following the collapse of the Soviet Union saw the acceleration of 'globalisation' with a situation developing where for "a myriad (of) criminal, terrorist, or otherwise malevolent state actors... frontiers are irrelevant and governments are an increasingly ineffective hindrance that they attack, undermine, or ignore." [2]

These changes have led to increased opportunities for mutually advantageous interactions between illegal actors and armed groups, with ever-increasing ease of transportation and communication assisting this process, coupled with terrorist groups embarking on increasing forays into criminal activity in order to self-finance, partly due to the decline of state sponsorship with the end of Cold War rivalry.

Instances of terrorism's overall reliance on organised crime for finance are widespread. Examples of an (at times) symbiotic relationship include the Continuity IRA's relationship with Eastern European sex traffickers [3]; ETA at one time ensuring cocaine delivery to Italy through its contacts with Columbian drug cartels in exchange for weapons from organised crime cartels of Campania [4]; and Hezbollah's use of Mexican drug cartels' smuggling routes.[5]

The strikingly similar operating structures of terrorist and organised crime groups have previously been noted by both Robinson [6] and Asal et. al. [7], who found that both have much in common. The membership of groups operating within both phenomena is highly compartmentalised, resilient with an ability to make quick necessary changes to adapt to altered external circumstances. They are often opportunistic, seek out new connections for benefits beyond the immediate goals of their own group.

Having pointed out some similarities, we nevertheless have to keep in mind Bovenkerk's and Chakra's [8] cautioning that the main goals of organised crime groups are profit-related while those of terrorist groups are political. Jamieson [9] also maintains that both phenomena need to be seen as distinct. Yet it is widely acknowledged that either phenomenon can and does utilise the methods and tactics of the other. Madsen reminds us that in analysing such groups it is important to remain focussed on their *motivation*, as "the intent for specific acts committed by two groups might overlap, their motivations do not." [10] As Dishman also observes, "simply put, drug barons and revolutionary leaders do not walk the same path to success. Terrorists may commit kidnappings or extort local businesses, but their fundamental goal remains to shape or alter the political landscape in some manner. Transnational criminal organisations may also employ terrorism as a tactical weapon, but their end game is to avoid prosecution and make money." [11]

Rollins et al. [12], reporting to the United States Congress, identify 3 areas where potential overlap between the phenomena may occur:

- Through shared tactics and methods;
- Through the process of transformation from one group to another over time;
- Through short-term or long-term transaction based service for hire activities between groups.

Makarenko [13] challenges the clear distinctions between the phenomena that some authors still make. She instead suggests a sliding scale of nuanced metamorphosis between terrorism and organised crime, with the phenomena at opposite ends of a sliding scale, moving along this scale from their original purpose when

they form alliances with those involved in the other phenomena (terrorists aligning with organised criminals to pursue shared goals), and thereafter mutating further when they utilise the tactics of the other to further their own ends. Finally, if they continue to alter their operational activities the group enters what Makarenko terms a 'black hole', where they are no longer clearly organised criminals or a terrorist group, but instead a confluence of the characteristics of both; it may ultimately mutate into a group categorised as being wholly transformed into one which fits the criteria of the other phenomena.

This is a position supported by a subsequent report to the U.S. Congress by Rollins et al. in 2010. That report describes how globalisation, advances in technology, trade, the finance industry and the advent of cybercrime have led many organised crime and terrorist groups to adapt "more readily to new market niches and establish more fluid alliances with external individuals and groups." The report cites the ransom and hostage plot carried out in Algeria in 2013 as a striking example, with Moktar Belmoktar as the plot leader being an illegal actor with close and long-standing links to both organised crime and Islamist groups.[14]

Such a model fits well with Ekblom's extension of the Situational Crime model into the arena of Organised Crime. Ekblom sees organised criminals as operating within a 'niche for offending' where there is "an identifiable concentration or flow of wealth from which offenders can make a living, using the resources at their disposal to exploit it whilst maintaining acceptable levels of effort and risk," within a context where organised criminals seek to engineer opportunities and overcome difficulties.[15]

Real world examples of such behaviours present amongst terrorist groups which have found their own niche for 'fundraising' are the Colombian FARC and the Provisional Irish Republican Army (PIRA). Members of both have increasingly become involved in criminal activity, initially to fund their cause. However, as circumstances altered through an end of hostilities with the state, they mutated into post-conflict criminal organisations driven by profit relying on their members skills and the reputations attained through their past record of terror to ensure continuing success.[16] These organisations have fallen into Makarenko's 'black hole', becoming mutated organisations, no longer serving their original purpose and utilising tactics from the repertoire of both phenomena. Examples of organised crime's move to the use of terror tactics for political purposes are the Italian Camorra's adoption of the bombing tactics of the ELN, and the 'Red Commandos' of Brazil embracing terror tactics embellished by a radical socialist ideology to justify the accumulation of illicit gain.[17]

A shift from conflict to criminality is not a new phenomenon. The first African American gang to emerge in the street of Los Angeles was filled with veterans of World War II.[18] In more recent times, Volkov has written on the number of Soviet veterans of the Afghan conflict who became involved in organised crime as their country transformed in the post-Soviet area.[19] Glennly [20] noted the number of veterans of the Balkan conflicts who fill some of the upper echelons of European organised crime. Similarly McDermott [21] refers to the very same phenomenon following the disbanding of the paramilitary United Self Defence Force of Colombia (AUC), while Naim sights a similar transformation of members of the Mexican military into Zeta's narco-traffickers.[22] These authors all note how each organisations member's skill sets, honed through brutal conflict, lent themselves particularly well to the management of other illicit activities.

Various other entry modes to participation in organised crime have been noted. The UK National Crime Agency (NCA) has recently attempted to define the common modes of access and summarises these as involvement in petty crime from a young age which leads to a form of progression; specific skills or professions where holders are targeted, recruited or corrupted into becoming facilitators and members of crime groups; and network access where familial links, relationships and peer groups provide access points. The NCA report, while accepting the variety of influences at play, does acknowledge that "young people brought up in deprived neighbourhoods by troubled or fragmented families with no impetus to complete their education are particularly vulnerable to approaches from members of crime groups and street gangs. [23]

Organised Criminal Involvement with Al-Qaeda

To understand the current level of criminal co-operation IS is undertaking, it is necessary to look back at the recent history of 'Jihadi Terrorism'. Marc Sageman [24] provides a narrative of events, supported by an academic model drawing on David Rappaport's seminal 'Four Waves of Terrorism' theoretical framework [25], where he identifies similar waves of Jihadi terrorist involvement.

The 'inspirational' first wave, which brought the cause of a worldview of an international oppressed Muslim community to the fore consisted of religiously inspired foreigners drawn to join Mujahedeen and participate or assist in the conflict in Afghanistan following the invasion by the Soviet Union. This wave included the original members of Al-Qaeda, such as Osama Bin Laden.

The second wave was constituted by 'elite' expatriates of Middle Eastern origin who attended Western universities and then, following contact with first wave members and supporters, became involved in the conflicts in Bosnia, Chechnya and Kashmir; they also formed the core of the terrorists responsible for the attacks of 11 September 2001.

Sageman noted that these "members of the global Salafi jihad were generally middle class, educated young men from caring and religious families." The large majority of them were married, many with children; no 'hardened' criminals could be detected amongst their ranks; and only a few had connections to petty crime. [26]

Good examples of this wave's participants, beyond Mohammed Attah and the 9/11 conspirators, were, for instance, the 'Glasgow Airport' attackers: Khafeel Ahmed was an engineer with a doctoral degree, and Bilal Abdullah was a Medical Doctor. Both Ahmed and Abdullah had travelled to the West, been educated, and lived in the UK without obvious crime links.

The 'third wave' of home-grown jihadists emerged in the wake of the Iraq war and were largely sought out by a variety of 'inspirers' to encourage participation. Richard Reid, the infamous failed 'shoe bomber' serves as a good example. Reid is perhaps the archetypal criminal convert to Islam of this period (he served three years in prison for a string of burglaries prior to conversion) [27], recruited and utilised by the jihadist leadership. Reid came from a very different background than some of the self-starters of the second wave.

Police opinion regarding 'third wave' jihadists like Reid was that although a small proportion had a background in minor criminality, such ties were quickly cut by participants, and seen as to be expunged from their sphere of social interactions.[28]

This is not to say that Al Qaeda and some of its contemporary jihadists did not participate in criminal activities at that time nor have (ex-) criminals amongst their ranks. They did. There are many examples of participation in criminality. Some of Al-Qaeda's front organisations which had channelled donations from wealthy supporters, and were designated by international bodies as financiers of terrorism, also became involved with international drug trafficking networks.[29] At the operational level, South African organised crime groups were known to have supplied forged documents to Al-Qaeda members.[30]

However, following Makarenko's scale, being a terrorist who utilises criminality to further political ends (point 2) is far removed from being a terrorist who embraces crime for profit only (point 4).

The recruitment of Reid, and similar individuals of his calibre [31], showed perhaps a dilution of the requirements and expectations for participation in the struggle. The expectation of a solid understanding of the religious cause became secondary, and while the rhetoric continued to contain a religious tone, the depth of understanding amongst those taking up arms was less than with the original mujahedeen of the first wave.

Of particular note in relation to these three generational 'waves' is that after each there is a noticeable decline of 'religiosity' of the participants. This is a development not missed by the analysts of Europol [32], who see

the current situation as being perhaps best described as an ‘extremist social trend’ rather than as Islamist ‘radicalisation.’

‘The Fourth Wave’ – The ‘Criminal’ Jihadists

Many of those now becoming involved in jihadist activities have backgrounds far removed from the ‘pioneers’ of Al-Qaeda. The largely ‘middle class/intellectual’ credentials of ‘second wave’ jihadists have been replaced with recruits drawn from “immigrant gangs (that mix) jihadism with gangsta criminality.”[33] Van San’s (2015) study of 35 Belgian and Dutch foreign fighters joining IS found that half were converts to Islam, all aged between 18 and 30, and none holding a university education.[34]

Similarly to the breeding ground for organised crime described above, Sageman found that expatriate communities are the main recruiting ground of the current jihad against the West.[35] In extending Sageman’s model, Rik Coolsaet [36] sees a ‘fourth wave’ of the jihad as being upon us. These are the young Muslims (and converts) who were reacting to the successful establishment of the Islamic State, with the ‘third wave’ reaction to the post Iraq war conflict having now largely run its course.

The Belgian anti-terrorist police superintendent Alain Grignard sums up the current situation in these words: “previously we were mostly dealing with ‘radical Islamists’ – individuals radicalized toward violence by extremist interpretation of Islam – but now we’re increasingly dealing with what are best described as ‘Islamized Radicals.’”[37]

Indeed, Watts illustrates this well by noting that “ISIS has turned al Qaeda’s recruitment pattern on its head—to spectacular effect.... Unlike al Qaeda, which heavily screened members to weed out potential spies or those with criminal pasts ISIS, at least at its height in 2015, took in any foreigner that volunteers, giving the disenfranchised a new home, purpose and direction.”[38]

Such a situation is summed up in a manner that might be regarded as comic were its context not so serious, in the behaviour of jihadists Yusuf Sarwar and Mohammed Ahmed who purchased copies of ‘Islam for Dummies’ and ‘The Koran for Dummies’ before their departure to Syria to join an al-Qaeda offshoot there in 2013.[39] They returned to the UK from their ‘adventure’ a year later and are now both serving prison sentences of 13 years.

French anti-terrorism Judge Marc Trevidic described the profile of ‘fourth wave’ participants in these words: “ninety percent... who leave do it for personal reasons: they are looking for a fight, or for adventure, or revenge, because they do not fit in society . . . Religion is not the engine of this movement and that’s precisely its strength.”[40]

In drilling further into this ‘ninety percent’ segment, a UK Special Branch source was recently quoted as stating that ‘the so-called jihad in Iraq and Syria has been particularly inviting to some young British Muslims who are already involved in violent crime in this country’ [41]. Metropolitan Police Assistant Commissioner Mark Rowley explicitly stated that IS is seeking to recruit from criminal elements [42], and that ‘young people who were getting drawn into gang crime, particularly those with troubled histories, are now turning to (IS)’ [43]. Such a path was taken by Mashdur Choudhury, a petty fraudster who travelled with friends from Portsmouth to Syria to join IS [44]. In a similar way Jafar Turay, a wanted ex gang member of Willesden, north-west London went to Syria where he still remains. [45]

Perhaps the following 3 examples typify the personal nature of involvement of IS by western travellers:

<p>Ebrahim B. (pseudonym under German privacy laws) – IS Member active in Syria, now incarcerated in Germany</p>	<p>“If I had been picked up by a rocker gang in Jamaica or by Hell’s Angels in America or something, I would have gone along with it.”[46]</p>
<p>Abdelhamid Abaaoud, presumed leader of the French and Belgian IS-inspired attacks of November 2015</p>	<p>A self-described ‘Terrorism Tourist’ with selfies taken of his activities on his mobile phone.[47]</p>
<p>Harry Safro, convicted safe breaker, who was active as an IS member in Syria, now also incarcerated in Germany</p>	<p>Joined IS as he believed he was answering a holy calling. His disillusionment came when he realised execution videos in which he participated were staged, with a fellow German IS member asking if his method of execution looked good on camera. [48]</p>

The quote from Ebrahim B. shows clear parallels to the recruitment path for organised crime members as described in the earlier referenced NCA report [49].

Enrolment in IS by Westernised, but disaffected and disillusioned Muslim diaspora youth also fits very well with the loose transmission of ideology, methods and allegiances that Moies Naim [50] has identified as characteristic across globalised modern societies.

There is much individualised ‘enrolment’ by vulnerable youth in the West, where they disoriented individuals seek involvement through largely self, or small peer group, immersion, rather than by way of cultural involvement. The equivalent of Bloody Sunday, often seen as PIRA’s most effective recruiting sergeant, is not happening on the doorstep of Western diaspora Muslim youths. In general, they and those around them are far removed from the consequences of the wars currently engulfing the Middle East. While their immersion in this conflict comes for some through their associations, be these friends or family, for others it is only through the evening news, from their viewing of YouTube videos and Facebook posts such as the coverage of the violence inflicted on Sunni protestors at Hawijah in 2013.[51] Another source are pronouncements by imams sympathetic to the jihadist cause at a mosque they may attend, or stems from the grooming of ‘influencers’ such as Zhalid Zerkani [52] in Belgium or Edis Bosnic [53] in Bosnia, who seek to identify and guide the curious towards recruitment for IS.

Weggemans, Bakker and Grol [54] noted the high speed with which five Dutch individuals appeared to move from ‘normal’ to ‘radicalised’, and ready to participate in jihad. The biographies of those five youth show a background in petty crime, with participants coming from diverse ethnic backgrounds and ‘bad neighbourhoods’. This same factor has been noted by Higgins [55], when he described two dozen young men who had gone to fight for IS from the ‘grimy’ Molenbeek district of Brussels, where there were the lines between criminality and jihadi violence were blurred, directly echoing Sageman’s findings discussed above.

Consequently, in the case of those radicalised in such a manner, it would perhaps be more appropriate to consider a variant of Makarenko’s scale, applied on an *individual* basis, rather than looking at group dynamics—that is, seeing the pathway more as a *personal* rather than cultural journey, whereby IS ‘recruiters’ specifically target individuals with appropriate backgrounds.

There are good examples to suggest such consideration is warranted. One individual who embarked on a personal journey to IS was Aine Davis, who went from being a London drug dealer to become a Syria-based jihadist, “like dozens of others.” [56] Davis had access to firearms circulating in drug supply networks in the UK, as his previous convictions showed. Then we have Suhaib Majeed, provided online ‘tuition’ via the Internet from Syria to conduct actions in the UK, supported by two converts to Islam, Nathan Cuffey

and Nyall Hamlett, who were able to utilise their own network to obtain a number of firearms to mount operations.[57]

The motivation for such individuals wanting to join IS remains to be considered. Jürgen Todenhöfer—a German politician and journalist who travelled throughout the Islamic State to observe the ‘governance’ conducted by IS first hand—perhaps captures this perfectly in his observation that “they (foreign fighters for IS) are people who were unimportant in the West and now told they are in an apocalyptic last battle between good and evil – heroes in Nike trainers and Jack Wolfskin boots . . . posing with their brutality and talking openly and proudly about a religious cleansing if they had the power.”[58]

This observation ties in well with notions of extreme thrill-seeking [59] coupled to a form of (perverse) redemption for past perceived misdeeds, and the ability to create a new identity at odds with the one they held in the West.[60] While many Islamic State volunteers appear motivated by a desire to combat the Assad regime’s brutality or were attracted based on theological grounds, we have the testimony of many IS defectors who have admitted to be motivations by material gain and adventure [61], with their past criminal career pointing to “a predisposition for nefarious activity and violent conduct prior to heading out for jihad in Syria and Iraq.”[62]

Western travellers who participate in IS activities will not all be involved in conflict. The IS leadership not only called for foreign fighters but also appealed for engineers, doctors and construction workers to travel to the Caliphate.[63] The experience such individuals have may, or may not, be significantly different from those highlighted above. What is likely to occur for all travellers though is some form of immersion in quasi-governmental functions, be that as simple as providing some form of ‘protection’, as a basic state necessity. Whether we regard the lands controlled by IS as representing a ‘failed state’, or not, Western participants in its activities will likely have been attracted by the prospect of state-building. The Islamic State’s environment is one where organised crime flourishes [64] and where the skills acquired by participants may well have some bearing on their future. However, the extent to which they develop and utilise them if they leave IS territory will likely be significantly different should they travel to a country such as Libya rather than a modern functioning Western state.

Opinions on the Subsequent Effects of Former IS Participation

Current publicly articulated Western government and security thinking is largely focussed on the consequences of foreign fighters returning to Western Europe, committing acts of terrorism, rather than considerations of their possible re-integration in an ‘enhanced manner’ to the underworld of organised crime.

Returning to the work of Weggemans, et al., more recent radicalisation in respect of the current Syrian jihad appears to be unusually fast when compared to the transformations of those who became involved earlier in international terrorism. The question inevitably becomes whether the desire to participate—when confronted with the harsh realities of battle in a desert context with few opportunities for cover, and large casualty rates—will wear off just as quickly as it arose.

The act of joining with IS will mean that on their return to their country of origin identified foreign fighters will be incarcerated. The recent imprisonment of the brothers Hamza and Mohommod Nawaz who returned from Syria [65] serves as a telling example.

The imprisoned, or those who return and escape detention (but are likely to be ever mindful of the possibility of detection), are hardly likely to find themselves enticing prospects for employers, with their previous background in criminality already serving as a dissuading factor. Their participation in jihad will stay with them, and other than those few with funds for their own or those who can rely on a few charitable

institutions that may assist, their prospects for a normal life look bleak. So, what could a former drug dealer possibly do with his enhanced skills in the use of firearms and explosives, coupled with experience of managing illicit commodity routes, to make a living? The answer, a return to crime with a potentially 'enhanced' reputation and relevant skill set, does appear a logical proposition. This is not to say that all those who were involved in criminality and have embarked on jihad will return as enhanced organised criminals. Many will no doubt likely try to support their cause through more peaceful means, some may embark on terrorism in their home country, such as Khalid and Ibrahim el-Bakraoi, both armed robbers prior to their involvement with IS and subsequently participated in the Belgian terror attacks of March 2016.[66] Some may slip into obscurity; however, it does seem glaringly obvious that the possibility exists that some (if not all) of returning foreign fighters from ex-organised crime circles will return to their previous way of life in crime.

In light of the historical work of Tilly [67], their (re-)turn to organised crime, is a source of concern. Western foreign fighters generally had no fighting experience when arriving in Syria as recruits. Once there most males are subject to a basic weapons training. Some are moving along the scale of immersion to the ten-stage training of *quwat khas* (special forces) prior to deployment in combat [68]. Whatever methodology is taught to the newcomers, there can be little doubt that many who undertake IS activities in Syria will become Tilly's 'specialists in violence' through their endeavours there. Tilly's work has clearly demonstrated that such individuals, when placed amongst non- or less violent individuals invariably act as a catalyst for increased violent activity. Where Western IS veterans become involved in organised crime activity on their return, the experiences and 'skills' they bring may well act as enablers for increased levels of violence in their home countries.

However, it would be remiss not to consider that their experiences in IS territory may have a debilitating effect, with post-traumatic stress common even amongst conventional military forces involved in high-intensity conflict zones. Trauma will be taking its toll on these unconventional veterans too, but their instability might not only end in suicide but also in harm to others even when not immersing in crime, with domestic violence being one possible result.

For some, the time of involvement with IS and the distance from their own networks may strain, or sever, links to organised crime groups these individuals may have had before travelling. Yet the ubiquity of social media, and the networking made easy by them, speaks against such a hypothesis.

The motivation of IS recruits is likely similar (in some part) to that of the earlier mentioned shoe bomber Reid. What differs is that Reid was, at the time, atypical. Today, his background is now strikingly similar to the plethora of foreign recruits to IS. While Al-Qaeda targeted true believers as recruits IS has, with the 'fourth wave' been also targeting and embracing of those with dubious backgrounds in criminality.

Expert Opinions on IS Veterans' Involvement in (Organised) Crime

Testing hypotheses in respect of IS members is an extremely difficult endeavour. IS, by its very nature, does not present an easy subject for academic enquiry and, for obvious operational reasons, law enforcement and security bodies are inevitably reluctant to share most of the intelligence they hold. However, one source of information that has not frequently been tapped are persons who had, until recently, investigated such activity as part of their professional work.

Utilising initial Delphi method principles [69] to provide a starting point of credible opinion on potential behaviours, eight recently retired senior detectives and two senior analysts who had recently left the field of law enforcement—all with a background in the investigation of organised crime and many with a shared background in counter terrorism—were consulted by the present author through a questionnaire, distributed via email.[70]

The consultees [71] were as follows:

QA	Senior Detective with international experience of investigating organised crime (including in Eastern Europe).
QB, QE	Senior Detective with experience of investigating organised crime in UK region.
QC, QF	Senior Analyst with experience of investigating organised crime in UK region.
QD, QG, QI, QJ	Senior Detective with experience of investigating organised crime and counter terrorism in UK region.
QH	Executive level officer with experience of investigating organised crime in UK region.

The aim of this consultation was to gather their views on organised criminals engagement and relationship with IS.

Contact with respondents no longer working in the field avoided a host of issues in terms of confidentiality of operationally sensitive information. At the same time their recent employment ensured that their views could be regarded as a credible source of expert opinion. While direct engagement with those involved in organised crime may have proved extremely illuminating in terms of diagnosing the potential impact of returning foreign fighters from the Islamic State, such research is beyond the scope of this article. Further research in this regard is no doubt merited.

Here are some of the findings resulting from the responses:

- Respondents were divided regarding the question whether or not Western foreign fighters with a background in organised crime would become involved in criminal activity, with 6 out of 8 believing they would.
- Of the 6 respondents who believed that organised criminals would remain involved in criminal activity while with IS *all* believed they would seek to expand their criminal networks.
- 7 respondents thought it likely that individuals with an organised criminality background would become disillusioned with IS activities, with a number of respondents citing such individual's almost intrinsic desire for personal gain being over ridden by the pressure to fund IS activities and frustrations this will ultimately engender.
- 7 respondents saw returning organised criminals reputation, and those of any organised crime groups, as likely to be significantly affected by their IS participation.
- 8 respondents believed that if an organised criminals travelled to the Middle East to become involved in IS activity and later returned to their country of origin, they would re-engage in organised criminal activity.
- All 10 respondents stated that exposure to IS activity in the Middle East would make an organised criminal a more dangerous individual upon return to their country of origin.

In terms of notable observations, respondents provided the following:

Respondent QH was keen to point out that crimes committed would be to the benefit of IS as opposed to being for personal gain due to personal danger, while respondent QE disagreed, believing that organised criminals who travel would likely continue to exploit opportunities for personal gain.

In terms of network expansion, respondent QA cited “recent conflicts in the Balkans, Chechnya and Afghanistan prov(ing) [support for] this case”. Respondent QD pointed out that such behaviour will be in IS interests to ensure the maintenance of their funding streams. Respondent QC believes that “the associated risk here is high. I would anticipate those engaging in other criminality e.g. human trafficking/ black market firearms, will establish criminal networks particularly to assist with smuggling routes back to the UK and other EU markets.”

In terms of reputation, notoriety, criminal kudos and the general ‘connectedness’ of an individual were all thought likely to be enhanced through IS participation, with the intimidation potential of groups containing such individuals as members being increased significantly.

The respondents were particularly clear that if an organised criminal travelled to the Middle East to become involved in IS activity and later returned home, he would return to organised crime activities, using terms like ‘highly likely’ or ‘inevitable’ to describe their belief in this regard.

In terms of the danger factors associated with returnees, QB believed “there would be a tendency to be more violent, ruthless and confident”; QC was of the opinion they “may use their ‘skills’ and new contacts to further (their) criminal career”; QD thought that “their drive, determination to succeed and levels of violence will increase”; QE also thought that “If working with IS has been successful and profitable they are very likely to maintain those links and build upon their successes on their return”; QF sees such individuals as being “enhanced by new contacts, associates and knowledge of commodities, routes and opportunities”; QG believes that such individuals will be “more robust, more resilient and more ruthless”; and QH stated that “As well as being more ruthless (they will be) more surveillance aware and will have the ability to construct weapons and firearms. They will also be more adept at making themselves less subject to intelligence development. In short they will be more dangerous and effective”.

Respondent QB did caution that Organised Crime Groups (OCGs) may be very wary of any adverse attention and/or publicity returnees may bring. QE pointed out that the standing of such a group would likely suffer in the eyes of their surrounding environment.

Respondent QG pointed out that although their standing may rise within their particular OCG, those with whom they ‘trade’ may view groups with such members as “highly dangerous, highly unpredictable and not to be trusted....(with) their motivation towards power and wealth (being) replaced by motivation to terrorist aims”.

The final observation of note comes from respondent QI, who said: “I would be very surprised if *established* (my italics) organised criminals left their lucrative business to sign up to fight for their cause. That’s not to say they wouldn’t but in my opinion it would be the foot soldiers”.

Analysis

The founder of IS’s predecessor organisation, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, was a career criminal with no theological training [72]. It is therefore unsurprising that his organisation has sought from the outset to capitalise on the skills a background in criminality brings.

The views of the respondents above are supported by previous research. Pantucci and Dawson [73] noted in relation to returning IS veterans with a criminal past, that their access to relevant networks will make

obtaining weapons far easier. The worsening involvement in organised crime of those individuals involved with IS who lose their thirst for the 'cause' appears a real, and all too dangerous, possibility.

Not only will such returning ex-jihadists likely have access to international criminal networks beyond their previous reach, their experiences will have led to enhancement, in terms of their contacts, methodology, reach and, very importantly, a major commodity for all involved in organised crime, their *reputation* [74].

The new contacts and methods criminals embarking as 'would be' jihadists encounter commence even before they reach Syria. Men like Mohammed Abu Mustafa have been smuggling goods from Turkey into Syria for years; now his commodity, and that of his peers, is foreign fighters.[75] Mustafa is one of the many organised criminals operating on the Turkish/ Syrian border involved in getting IS's new recruits into the conflict theatre. To these recruits he is an obvious link into serious criminality. Mustafa's multi-commodity 'business', his branching out into people smuggling, is nothing new. A similar example of such criminal entrepreneurship could be observed following the Tiananmen Square massacre of 1989: many Hong Kong based organised criminals got themselves involved in smuggling dissidents out of mainland China, rather than following their usual trade in more standard illicit commodities.[76]

It is a given that the trade of Mustafa and his ilk can flow both ways across borders, and that commodity traffickers can move people, weapons or other goods with equal skill. Contact with men such as him could prove an invaluable starting point for disillusioned IS participants seeking new friends to enhance their previous illicit networks.

Movement through Turkey, the international hub for the heroin trade [77] will no doubt present many tempting opportunities and future networks for exploration to these perhaps reluctant jihadists whether with Mustafa or his peers. Such networks, and the knowledge of how to utilise them, will be part of the enhanced skill set. 'Roman', a veteran of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, who became heavily involved in organised crime, perhaps summed this up perfectly when talking about how he was able to function in the world of international organised crime:

"You see, it is very easy for me to work in the country, because as a result of my war trips I have acquired a wide circle of acquaintances in different places.... They recommend to me the right people for the business."[78]

The work of Gill et al. [79] on PIRA is of particular note for potential comparison purposes with development around IS. They found that while one would expect PIRA members to have close associations going forward with those they were in close geographic proximity too, this was not the case. It was shared skill sets that led to continuing and ongoing associations across terrorist cells. That is, those involved with drugs or kidnapping associated with others involved in similar crimes, rather than where associations through proximity would be expected. Were this to be repeated in terms of IS participants, an enhanced skill set of criminality and new 'contacts' in these fields present significant potential areas for concern, with a massive risk of new crime networks or enhancement of those that currently exist as new skills and actors are introduced. Perhaps a telling example of this type of behaviour to provide illustration would be—to remain with PIRA—their 'franchising' of bomb making skills to the FARC, following the Good Friday Agreement in Northern Ireland [80] and before the recent peace between the Columbian government and FARC.

Participation as a jihadist—whether an individual turns his back on the cause or not—provides that individual also with the one commodity massively important in circles of organised crime: that (as stated above) of their *reputation*.

The benefits are two-fold. Mustafa, the people trafficker referenced earlier, and his compatriots, will have little to fear in terms of law enforcement entrapment through trading with jihadists, repenting or otherwise. They will feel safe in the knowledge that no law enforcement body is going to allow its agents to be involved in the

extreme behaviours of IS. The typical need for ‘referencing’, where criminals keenly establish the bona fide of their ‘business’ partners before engagement, becomes redundant.

Another benefit comes in terms of the ‘kudos’ in the right circles of having participated in IS’s jihad. Criminals thrive on their reputational enhancement achieved through association with notoriety, James “Whitey” Bulger, a Boston-based organised crime group member and long-time associate of PIRA, would be a prime example.[81] Those known as decapitators and to have been involved in kidnappings where millions are extorted from national governments [82], will no doubt be feared and respected in organised criminal circles should they return, in line with views previously expressed by senior detectives in relation to ‘terrorist kudos’.[83]

The cachet of association with a group such as IS in these circles is clear. The recent claims of affiliation to IS by a German kidnapper [84] and the one of ‘Lizard Squad’ [85], a notorious hackers group involved in denial of service attacks, illustrate this perfectly. When one appreciates the consternation and concern these hackers have caused by their claimed association, it is not difficult at all to extrapolate this into the actual level of fear and respect a *known* association to a group such as this will induce in the relatively closed circles of the underworld organised criminals operate. This likely applies also to an individual who had participated in IS; along with the cachet a group having such members would experience amongst other organised crime groups who it interacted with, or were indeed its rivals. Fear is a common currency amongst those involved in organised crime; fear of retribution for welching on a deal or ripping associates off over an illicit deal is often prevented when there is a history of extreme violence; it serves to maintain a level of intimidation needed for deterrence.[86] The ‘fear’ of participants that would result from former participation in extreme behaviours *a la* IS is not difficult to imagine. This is not in any way to say that those currently involved in organised crime are angels when it comes to extreme violence. Instead, the potential participation of IS veterans simply brings a new dynamic to an already dangerous milieu.

Discussion

The comments from AC Rowley of the Metropolitan Police Service, and those of a Special Branch source about the recruitment of criminals by IS chime well with the research of Sageman and Perri—namely, that participants are typically drawn from the same diaspora communities. Their views are supported by the Weggemans et al study, the findings of Higgins, and a number of cases such as the one of Aine Davis mentioned earlier.

The majority of the questionnaire participants believe, as does the present author, the basis of the evidence and analogies presented, that organised criminals recruited from the West to participate in the IS jihad will also become involved in criminality while in the Middle East.

The views of participant QA regarding post-conflict criminal activity echo the referenced findings of Volkov, Glenny, McDermott and Naim: participants in an armed struggle with criminal antecedents have a strong propensity to continue criminal activity once the struggle is over. The existence of ‘transferable skills’ makes such a transition extremely plausible.

The unanimous view amongst the experts of the increased danger potential returnees present should not in any way be overlooked. This observation, strengthened by evidence from other authors, is the most important point made in this article. Returning OCG members will likely have far greater skills and capacities than whence they left, and this is likely to present serious future challenges to Western law enforcement agencies.

This author finds himself in agreement with participant QI who observed that it is likely that it will be OCG ‘foot soldiers’ who find themselves seduced by the lure of IS. This low rank predominance does not in any way mitigate the potential risk these individuals may pose in future. If one accepts that it is the young OCG

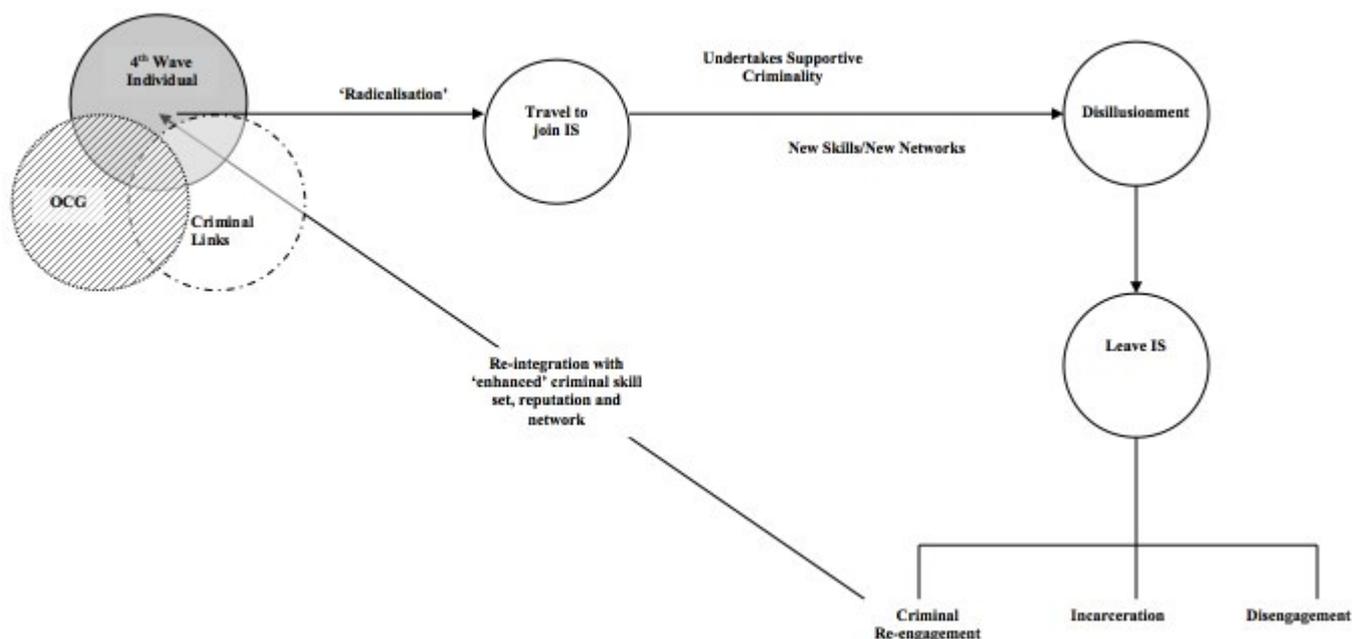
members travelling (and returning), these individuals will likely have long criminal careers ahead, careers very different in terms of reach and capability from those of the fellow OCG members who did not go to Syria. These individuals will be returning with enhanced reputations in criminal circles, knowledge of international illicit distribution networks and tradecraft tested in the crucible of intense conflict. It may well be the case, as participant QG points out, that other indigenous OCGs may be wary of these returnees. They likely would have good cause to be wary, but this may well not be enough not to ‘do business’ with them.

It may be a number of years before it becomes clear whether these IS veterans will indeed become re-involved in organised crime; what appears clear though is that the potential seems very likely and the implications may be very significant.

Illustrating the Issue

The research and discussion outlined above points to the need to provide an illustration of how the transformation of an individual might occur, building on Makarenko’s work in terms of terrorist groups. Figure 1 illustrates this cycle of radicalisation and re-criminalisation in terms of an individual career.

Figure 1: A Cycle of Radicalisation to Re-Criminalisation



From Criminal to Terrorist (and back again)

The model in Figure 1 illustrates the potential journeys of ‘fourth wave’ individuals becoming involved in IS activities, in particular those with a background in serious and organised crime. However, with modifications, it could equally applied to those who have no such previous history. The model shows the individual as a potential participant in organised crime activity, and with potential criminal associations.

This article has sought to engage the reader in thinking about those who are connected to criminality, and their ‘journey’ to participation with IS. Those involved in crime, even at a low level, will have engagement with organised crime activity; this may be as simple as a shoplifter who engages with a ‘handler’ who sells stolen goods and accesses organised criminals for ‘protection’. Or it could be a low-level drug dealer who

sources his commodity from those further up the chain, ultimately from those involved in organised crime. The exemplar individuals highlighted in this article will sometimes come from these lower echelons, but others were full members of an organised crime group. Whatever the 'fourth wave' individuals' initial exposure, they are in some way linked to criminality, even when some degrees away from classical organised crime. Their path to the decision to travel to IS occurs through 'radicalisation', a paradigm shift in their mind-set, triggered by a variety of push and pull factors, depending on an individuals past and social context. Given such individuals' previous bent towards criminality there is a strong possibility that a previous skill set will result in associations with actors in IS territory of similar history as well as IS own criminal activities. To illustrate this: think of an organised criminal with pre-jihad know-how of extortion techniques. Following the model outlined above, there is every likelihood that after radicalisation and arrival in IS territory, he will strike up, or be driven towards, association with similar characters involved in extortion activity in support of IS. There is also every likelihood that some will remain willing participants in IS activities and stay in their territories undertaking these, and not move to the next point on the scale, that of disillusionment.

However, for the disillusioned, and those able to negotiate their exit (or perhaps escape) from IS, there is a point of departure from IS, with three apparent potential outcomes. The first is a return to the country of origin and wholesale disengagement, both from IS and their previous life of crime. The second possibility is that of incarceration upon arrival in the home country. Although significant prison sentences await those returning from Syria for having participated with IS, essentially coming home and being caught, their prison terms will end. At this juncture they will either become wholly disengaged, or instead move into option 3, that of re-engagement in crime.

One can also easily imagine those finding themselves incarcerated seeing a return to crime as a positive option on release, their criminal reputation enhanced through IS participation. Additionally, for those without prior organised crime connections, their experience in IS will likely have provided them with criminal know-how, from their trafficking into the conflict zone onwards. If it is not their enhanced skill base that draws them to crime on their return it may well be a period of incarceration with its likely consequence of a realisation, through association with their fellow prisoners, that they have a valuable skill set and 'standing' that will be sought by some.

Option 3 is a particular source of concern. It suggests a return to previous activity; with the experience and reputation enhancement resulting from IS participation that may carry massive negative connotations in general society but represents kudos of exceptional worth and operational value in the underworld of organised crime. They are either actually, or likely perceived to be, 'agents of violence'. If we accept the catalyst argument about such individuals, their impact on the criminal scene they operate in may be extremely significant, resulting in game changing behaviours. This may occur both within their own sphere of criminal operations, but also amongst competitors and associates, as each side steps up activities to match those they see being undertaken by rivals and enemies. Reputations must be preserved.

Arguably, events over the last ten years in Mexico—where ultra-violence from organised crime groups costing tens of thousands of civilian lives has become the norm—may provide a telling warning of what the re-integration of IS fighters and their new 'skill sets' in Western organised crime circles might bring to our countries as well.

Conclusions

This article sought to draw attention to the parallels between the efforts of IS and other terrorist campaigns, focusing on the potential dangers of returning foreign fighters. It is of particular note that the experts contacted for their opinions on the issue of IS returnees were unanimous regarding the likely future risk of these individuals participating in organised crime upon return to their home countries. The potential impact

of their input into conventional organised crime in Western democracies should not be underestimated and surely merits close monitoring. As indicated above, research among members of organised crime regarding the expected impact of IS veterans would likely prove extremely illuminating. Such engagement should be accompanied by a monitoring of organised crime developments in the years ahead to ascertain whether or not IS veterans do indeed become (re-)involved in serious criminality.

The model that has been provided, Radicalisation to Re-Criminalisation, seeks to individualise the path from criminal to terrorist, enhancing in particular the previous work of Makarenko on the Crime-Terror Continuum. It illustrates the key points in this journey. If organised criminals who participate in IS are allowed to return unchecked, and un-shepherded, it is difficult to imagine a situation where they would not slip into their past associations and utilise their new skill sets and contacts. Although it would be almost impossible to influence those who return in such circumstances without being spotted, the same cannot be said of those who are detected and incarcerated. For them there are two areas that must be addressed. Ensuring they do not slip back into their IS ideology and inflict attacks on their country of origin is one—something which is rightly receiving significant attention. However, of equal import is ensuring that they do not leave prison with their burnished credentials and enhanced skill set to return to the world of crime to cause significantly greater misery and despair than they could possibly have done before they became seasoned foreign fighters. Adequate policies can make an impact on this potential outcome. It would appear incumbent on law enforcement and penal agencies to ensure that such concerns are taken into account by closely monitoring increased levels of violence and new forms of criminality emerging. We might stand at the beginning of more than the usual change to criminal ‘business’: the potential start of a whole new form of organised crime activities facilitated by the involvement of past and present members of IS and other jihadist groups.

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Notes

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