

Letizia Paoli, Cyrille Fijnaut and Jan Wouters (Eds.). *The Nexus Between Organized Crime and Terrorism: Types and Responses* Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2022. 523 pp.; ISBN 978-1-78897-929-0 (hardcover, £ 139.50); ISBN 978-1-78897-930-6 (e-book, £ 25.-).

Reviewed by Alex P. Schmid

This volume, edited by three professors from Leuven University (Belgium), is the outflow of a series of lectures held in early 2018 at their university. It is divided into five parts: I. Literature Review and Conceptualization; II. Transfer of Resources; III. European Case Studies; IV. Non-European Case Studies; and V. International Policies. Five of the twenty chapters are (co-) authored by one or more of the editors, the others were written by researchers and scholars from Belgium, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, Spain, Mexico, the United States, Sweden, Switzerland, Nigeria, and Colombia. It is a comprehensive volume, academic in nature, analyzing also EU, UN and other international policy responses. There are twelve case studies and three comparative analyses on organized crime and terrorist groups in Europe, Asia, Africa and the Americas.

The volume offers a novel tripartite conceptualization of observed and potential linkages between organized crime and terrorism. The first type of nexus, labelled “interaction”, involves, in its ‘milder’ manifestations, the occasional voluntary or non-voluntary transfer of resources (manpower, money, weapons) between organized crime groups (OCGs) and terrorist groups. In its ‘heavier’ manifestation, interaction involves regular collaboration, alliance formation and fusion. The second type of nexus, which the editors call “transformation/imitation”, usually involves a more or less marked shift from terrorism to organized crime - rather than the other way around. The third type, “similarities” is the loosest of the three categories. The editors find similarities in the socio-economic background of the respective individual actors joining clandestine organizations as well as in the type of criminal activities, structure and/or culture of the respective organizations (pp. 9-10). Within each of these three nexus types, L. Paoli and C. Fijnaut distinguish different levels, “...going from zero (thus no interaction, transformation/imitation or similarity) to one (fusion, full transformation or complete overlap)” (p. 490). The last category, they explain, consists, potentially, “...of violent hybrid actors that systematically engage in organized crime activities or act like mafias at the same time as they systematically apply terrorist tactics” (p. 57). This conceptual framework is an improvement over the simplistic but seminal conceptualization of T. Makarenko (2004) which placed the two types of underground organizations on a continuum ranging from profit-oriented crime to politically motivated terrorism.

The new framework is used and tested against actual cases by the editors and the authors of the individual chapters. Prior to that, in chapter 2, the editors identify a number of weaknesses of the existing literature on the assumed nexus, namely, (i) the scarcity of empirical research, (ii) the ambiguous conceptualization of what is meant by “nexus” as well as by the concepts “organized crime” and “terrorism”, and third (iii), a poor understanding of the promoting factors driving organized crime and terrorism to cooperate, despite their different orientations.

The contributors to this volume manage to correct some widespread but untested assumptions about the nexus between terrorism and organized crime. In the case of Libya, for instance, Mark Micallef and Matt Herbert who conducted field interviews with smugglers and other criminal actors, members of civil society, government officials and others between 2015 and 2020, concluded that “Libya is a difficult context to access for foreign terrorist organizations seeking to profit from the country’s illicit economy” (p. 361). In the chapter on Mexico, Luis Astorga concluded that “There are no known links between terrorists and OCGs in Mexico but paramilitary, mafia-type groups have occasionally used terrorist methods and have perpetrated terrorist acts” (p. 408). In one of the volume’s strongest chapters, on Colombia by Gustavo Duncan, Santiago Sosa and Jose Antonio Fortou, the authors noted that “Although drug lords paid FARC to protect their laboratories and runways in some sectors of the country, they were also often kidnapped and extorted by FARC and ELN in other locations” (p. 423). Given the fact that this volume has been four years in the making,

some chapters are unfortunately dated. This is especially true for the one written by Matthew Phillips and Shelby Davis. While the authors note that “The Afghanistan-Pakistan (AfPak) region is perhaps one of the world’s most extreme examples of the nexus between organized crime and terrorism” (p.337), they added only a single paragraph to account for the takeover of Afghanistan by the Taliban without discussing the enhanced status of the Haqqani network which is heavily involved in the illicit drug trade (p. 336).

While the simultaneous presence of terrorist and organized crime groups and the existence of various nexuses are a reality in some countries, they are far from the rule - if only because in more than one hundred countries there are no active terrorist groups. The editors conclude: “Both our review of the literature and the analyses presented in this book reveal that there is typically no nexus between organized crime and terrorism” (p. 489). However, given that in both cases the pool of recruits often consists of unorganized criminals (as in Europe, as acknowledged in this volume), the last word on this is not yet spoken. After reading this volume, this reviewer came to the conclusion that in general, we know far less about organized crime groups than we know about terrorist groups. Yet these remarks should not detract from the great value and the true importance of this volume; it is a milestone on the road towards a better understanding of the linkages in the underworlds of crime and terror.

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