



**ITAC** *Presents*

**Trends in Terrorism Series**

# **Actual and Potential Links Between Terrorism and Criminality**

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## Executive Summary

- The global 'war on terrorism' and the consequent reduction in financial support for terrorism is pushing terrorist groups to become more reliant upon criminal activity.
- In general, terrorist groups will resort to criminal activity that is on a scale commensurate with their organizational capacity and their needs.
  - One-off, small-scale operations are not costly and may require little or no income from crime.
  - On the other hand, larger groups planning sustained terrorist activities will require more continuous and larger income streams which may lead them to more organized criminal activities comparable in scale and complexity to those of organized crime.
- Alliances between criminal groups and terrorist groups are unusual. Organized criminal groups tend to be nationalistic, territorial, and reluctant to risk the attention from authorities that accompanies cooperation with terrorist groups. Further,
  - Terrorist groups encroaching upon organized crime activities and profits are likely to be seen as rivals.
  - Many organized crime groups are entrenched and highly nationalistic (which includes being tied in to national economies) and would thus be unwilling to cooperate with terrorists that pose a threat to their home country or its market stability.
  - Alliances with organized crime groups pose inherent risks for terrorists as well. The profit-focus of organized crime renders it especially vulnerable to loyalty problems, whereas this is much less likely with terrorist groups.
  - Criminal groups do not desire media, public, or government attention, whereas the opposite is true of most terrorist groups. Where terrorists seek political inclusion and legitimation or political dominance, crime groups seek optimal 'business' environments.
- Despite these general conclusions, there is some evidence of cooperation in certain contexts, namely:
  - In regions loosely controlled by 'weak' or 'transitional' states (those with weakened social, political, and economic controls);
  - In competitive illicit markets that are controlled in large part or in whole by existing organized crime syndicates;
  - With respect to new 'transnational' organized crime groups and terrorists.

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- An important question is whether and to what extent terrorist groups will link with *one another* to pursue criminal fundraising activities, rather than the extent to which they will link with organized crime, which is unlikely.

## Introduction

The global 'war on terrorism' and the consequent reduction in financial support for terrorism are pushing terrorist groups to become more reliant upon criminal activity. Some have created their own 'in-house' criminal capabilities – for example, FARC, Al Qaeda, and the Tamil Tigers. Even terrorist groups that can boast state sponsorship (such as Hezbollah, which is supported by Iran) must rely increasingly upon crime to sustain their activities and improve their operational capabilities. This report draws upon evidence of the criminal activities of terrorist groups, and of existing connections between terrorist and criminal organizations, in order to speculate on the future probabilities of terrorist crime performance, and terrorist-criminal cooperation.

Some have argued that in the present environment, a 'mutation' of terrorist group activities will lead them to mimic or ally with existing organized crime groups which have extensive experience with successful illicit activities.<sup>1</sup> Others have suggested that distinct ideological differences between terrorist and criminal groups will preclude any cooperation between them.<sup>2</sup> Evidence points to the latter. As we will suggest, however, there are conditions in some areas of the world which may lead to hitherto unusual relationships between terrorists and criminal groups. We further suggest that the best predictors of the types of criminal activity that terrorist groups will engage in are their own organizational infrastructure and their particular needs. Only those groups that have organizational characteristics akin to those of organized crime, and who require sustained and extensive income streams, will participate in the forms of criminal activity commonly associated with organized crime. Other types of terrorist groups are likely only to engage in criminal activity, if at all, in temporary and sporadic ways.

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## Terrorist criminal activities: what we know

Drug trafficking is now the largest source of income for both international organized crime groups and terrorists.<sup>3</sup>For example, there are reports that the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) was trafficking in heroin in order to raise money for its operations during the Kosovo conflict, and that guerrilla groups in Spain, Sri Lanka, Turkey and Lebanon, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), Hezbollah, and the Kurdish Workers Party (PKK) also engage in drug trafficking. The Taliban in Afghanistan has also long financed itself through the drug trade.<sup>4</sup>

1. In the 1990s there was an enormous rise in human smuggling and trafficking by organized crime, in part because of a significant potential for profits coupled with lessened risk of detection and prosecution compared with the drug trade.<sup>5</sup>Organized crime groups from Russia, China, Central Asia, and India have been moving large volumes of human cargo in a business estimated at billions of dollars.<sup>6</sup> This activity can serve a number of ends for terrorists, in addition to its high profitability. Most importantly, it can mask the movement of members of terrorist organizations and organized crime groups. For example, substantial evidence points to the Tamil Tigers having smuggled and trafficked Sri Lankans, while the movement of Afghans and Pakistanis in the Middle East is known to have masked the passage of at least one Al Qaeda operative.<sup>7</sup>
2. Kidnapping for ransom has become an important tool for terrorist financing. Members of the Abu Sayyaf Group, reportedly linked to Al Qaeda, and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front, for example, have been kidnapping foreign tourists and aid workers in the southern Philippines for profit.<sup>8</sup>
3. Cigarette smuggling is another identified source of income for terrorist groups, most notably perhaps in North Carolina where cigarettes were smuggled to other states such as Michigan where taxes are higher. Money from these ventures went to Lebanese-based Hezbollah.
4. Other illegal money-raising activities pursued by terrorist groups include robberies, extortion, kidnapping, and arms trading and smuggling.<sup>9</sup> Some smaller-scale crimes also fund the activities and operations of various groups and individuals. Both the Tamil Tigers and Al Qaeda are known to manufacture fake credit cards and conduct credit card fraud. The terrorists who bombed the trains in Madrid in March of 2004 also supported themselves through petty crimes. Protection rackets have served to fund various terrorist organizations, particularly within émigré communities. The Tamil Tigers have been linked to a number of such rackets in Canada and elsewhere, including extorting an estimated one million Canadian dollars a month from the Tamil diaspora in Toronto.

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Overall, this broad spectrum of criminal activity has led many commentators to contend that terrorist groups are diversifying and expanding their revenue streams. While this is important to know, it is likely that almost any form of revenue-producing activity will be adopted where the opportunity presents itself and where there is need. As a result, comparatively little can be deduced about future probabilities in this way.

Rather, the limits on, and the potential for, terrorist criminal activity are most likely to be understood in terms of the organizational characteristics of such groups. Broadly speaking, terrorist groups may readily adopt the form of criminal activity which corresponds to their own level of organizational capacity. This helps explain why terrorist insurgencies (which conduct terrorist attacks over the long term, control territory, govern populations, and maintain large armed forces) seem to engage in more organized criminal activity such as drug trafficking, while dispersed Islamic terrorist groups seem to engage in more sporadic crime, if any at all.

### Ephemeral-sporadic terrorist groups

The ephemeral-sporadic terrorist group or cell may quite easily engage in smaller-scale sporadic crime because this type of crime usually requires few specialized skills, an elementary division of labour, few resources, low initial expenditure, and requires little or no reliance on the existence or establishment of stabilizing techniques such as corruption. While violence may be expected, given a central commitment to terrorism, low levels of violence in relation to the criminal activity performed would be consistent with these groups. This is because they will not wish to attract attention (from law enforcement, the media, or otherwise) given their generally low level of sophistication and minimal resources for eluding capture.

The capacity to organize and generate income will influence what types of crime such groups will engage in. Crimes requiring broader organizational capacity but which have larger profit yields will remain the realm of more organized terrorist groups. Cells or individuals may engage in crime only to accumulate enough resources (monetary or otherwise) in order to carry out a specific attack or set of attacks. On the ground level, an ephemeral-sporadic terrorist group's financial requirements may be quite low, perhaps in the low thousands of dollars, or even less, to carry out a specific attack. The USS *Cole* bombing in 2000 is estimated to have cost as little as \$5,000, while the Madrid train bombings are estimated to have cost as little as \$10,000.<sup>10</sup> The London bombers from July of 2005 may have spent only \$5,000. Financing beyond these immediate requirements is not necessary, nor desirable, as it may increase the risk of detection or capture pre-attack.

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Much of the sporadic terrorist's equipment, resources, and even funding can be entirely self-generated. The explosive device used at the World Trade Center in 1993 was constructed out of ordinary, commercially available

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materials (including lawn fertilizer and diesel fuel) and cost less than \$400 to build.<sup>11</sup> For these reasons, and consistent with the available evidence on the criminal activities of ephemeral-sporadic terrorist groups, it seems most likely that they will engage, if at all, in low-risk, low-yield crime – for example, cheque forgery and other types of minor frauds such as mail fraud and social insurance fraud, minor or petty theft, and low-level drug peddling.

One-time attacks – often suicide attacks – are frequently planned and carried out by relatively small numbers of individuals, and so there is no requirement for continuous income streams, especially where members of the terrorist group or cell are in legitimate paid employment, or have other material resources at hand. 'Home-grown' terrorists, those who are recruited or emerge from within (target) countries, avoid many of the risks that require expensive preparation. They are less visible to national and international law enforcement, avoid the high-risk practices of crossing international borders, and thus lessen the necessity for risky criminal money-raising activity. Perhaps the most salient examples are the London bombers from the summer of 2005, who committed no crimes prior to their attack and were quite easily able to avoid attention from law enforcement. Other examples include Al Qaeda's recruiting of US nationals such as Jose Padilla and John Walker Lindh, British citizen Richard Reid (the 'shoe-bomber'), and more recently French citizen Lionel Dumont.

All of this suggests that given the generally low financial demands of sporadic and one-off terrorist groups, we might conclude that the risks associated with even low-sophistication offences such as mugging, drug-peddling, credit card fraud, theft, and so on, are normally too high to attract their involvement.

## Organized-enduring terrorist groups

Organized crime is best understood in terms of two closely related characteristics: 1) its endurance over long periods of time; and 2) the concomitant production of and necessity for an enduring income stream. Given its illegality, organized crime must generate 'endurance practices'. These include four primary techniques which respond to four primary needs:

1. A capacity to threaten and deliver violence as a means of securing external and internal compliance, given the inability to call upon state enforcement of 'contracts';
2. The development and encouragement of systematic corruption designed to neutralize law enforcement and (optimally but not necessarily) to produce a legal environment favourable to its activities;
3. The development of techniques for securing the ongoing loyalty of members;

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4. The repeat performances of acts of crime in order to provide a steady and reliable income stream both to finance the endurance practices and to generate profit.

For organized crime, the third factor, loyalty of members, is a particular problem. A primary motivation of members is to make money. This leaves them prone to disloyalty when offered bribery, subversive opportunities to make money, or threats of violence. Consequently, trust is a chronic problem for organized crime, and is related to a common feature of such groups – the reliance upon internal ties which are principally associated with enhancing trust, such as the inclusion of family members or the formation of other 'primary' social bonds.

Given these key characteristics of organized crime, certain issues become more clear in relation to the criminal potential of organized terrorism:

- An organized terrorist group likewise requires an enduring and reliable income stream to provide the foundations for its continued operations. This may include the need for bribery, but certainly includes the costs of running a covert organization, accumulating intelligence, carrying out its own research exercises, gathering materials and coordinating expertise.
- Problems of internal trust are much reduced compared to organized crime groups, assuming that the terrorist group is united by strong commitment to a specific political or religious cause. One implication is that the costs of running organized terror groups are reduced, as members do not require a premium payment for their risk or to secure their loyalty, as is the case with organized crime. Nor are members of terrorist groups so easily seduced by monetary (or possibly violence-based) inducements to betrayal.
- Terrorist groups can be assumed to have the resources necessary for violent coercion, whether of their own members or of those others whose compliance is required, which otherwise provides them with an additional degree of ruthlessness that may facilitate entrance into and domination of criminal markets.
- The issues surrounding internal trust also apply to external 'protective' requirements: alliances may readily be made with law enforcement and other officials sympathetic to the political cause pursued by the terrorist group – whether as an effect of infiltration, threat, or pre-existing loyalties.

These characteristics indicate that organized terrorist groups are functionally and organizationally well-placed to engage in organized crime. Put another way, they are well-structured to engage in money-raising activities that rely on exactly those characteristics and performances that they already possess. As suggested, in some respects they may be able

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to operate criminally in ways superior to 'ordinary' organized crime groups. Perhaps one of the best examples of this is the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), who have established criminal cells in thirty-eight countries in Europe, North America, and the Middle East. These provide funding for the organization through extortion, the drug trade, credit card fraud, social security fraud, counterfeit currency trading, piracy, people smuggling and gun running.<sup>12</sup> All of this is accomplished 'in-house' with special cells devoted to these activities, and all of these activities provide enormous income for the group.

## Barriers to cooperation between terrorists and crime groups

Despite organizational similarities, there are several barriers to cooperation between terrorist and organized crime groups.<sup>13</sup> Empirical evidence suggests that terrorist-crime alliances at both the ephemeral-sporadic and the more organized level are unusual.

- Where organized terrorist groups encroach upon existing organized crime activities, they will most often appear as rivals or competitors for revenues - and it is more than likely that competitive relationships will not be decided in favour of the terrorists. In most cases, organized crime groups will have much more experience with the methods and techniques for sustaining continued illicit income streams, for example by cornering black markets, developing shadow economies, and feeding on state infrastructures. In Turkey, the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) is said to control about 30 percent of the laboratories for refining heroin, while the Turkish mafia controls the rest.<sup>14</sup>
- On the other hand, organized terrorist groups will not often need such alliances, and thus will not seek them out; they may even seek to extirpate them. Alliances with organized crime groups pose inherent risks for terrorists as well the reverse. As seen already, the profit focus of organized crime renders it especially vulnerable to loyalty problems, whereas this is much less likely with terrorist groups. There is little reason for organized terrorist groups to form such inherently risk-laden connections.
- Evidence also suggests that ephemeral-sporadic terror groups are not likely to form connections with existing criminal groups. This is partly because of the discontinuous and temporary nature of their criminal activity: it is not necessary for such groups to form lasting contacts or other ties to 'external' groups and individuals, or to secure lasting incomes. They may not even form fixed ties with one another. Some groups which are amorphous and transitory, and who lack the modus operandi of an actual terrorist organization, simply gravitate toward one another for a specific, one-time operation or attack.

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*Alliances with organized crime groups pose inherent risks for terrorists as well the reverse*

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An example of such a group would be the four World Trade Center bombers from 1993, who joined forces based upon common attendance at a New Jersey mosque, and had no plans to continue further terrorist or criminal activities after the bombing.<sup>15</sup>

- It seems equally unlikely that criminal groups – centrally organized around 'profit' rather than 'politics' – would have any incentive to collaborate with terrorists. For a criminal group, even short-term association with terrorists may encourage unwanted attention from law enforcement. Criminal groups do not desire media, public, or government attention, whereas the opposite is true of most terrorist groups. Where terrorists seek political inclusion and legitimation or political dominance, crime groups seek optimal 'business' environments. The risks to their own operational security will in general far outweigh the benefits of cooperation.
- Many 'entrenched' crime groups are highly nationalistic, such as the *Yakuza* in Japan, who served the Emperor by putting down political opponents, and the Mafia in the United States, who guarded the waterfronts during WWII in order to prevent German sabotage.<sup>16</sup> These groups will often break off contacts with others who are suspected of being more terrorist- than profit- oriented.<sup>17</sup> The Medellin cartel, for example, refused to maintain channels of communication and cooperate with FARC and the National Liberation Army (ELN) in the 1980s. The economic development of the state is for these entrenched groups paramount, since they feed on the state's economic and financial institutions, and often have established familial and network ties in the communities from which they operate. The symbiosis between them and their host states would thus be hampered by terrorist groups with revolutionary political aims. The Russian Mafia and the EZLN, for example, have shied away from collaborative relationships largely because their aims and motivations differ from those of their potential collaborators.<sup>18</sup> Both have opted to remain on their respectively criminal (Mafia) and political (EZLN) courses.

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The overall conclusion is that, based upon existing evidence and due to these and other barriers to cooperation, alliances between organized crime and terrorist groups appear highly unlikely. Perhaps the more important conclusion to draw is precisely that organized terrorist groups are very well organizationally disposed to carry through their own organized crime activities.

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## Exceptions: 'weak' states, controlled markets, and 'transnational' criminal groups

Despite this general conclusion, there is some evidence of cooperation in certain contexts.

1. In regions loosely controlled by 'weak' or 'transitional' states (those with weakened social, political, and economic controls).

There is evidence, for example, that Peru's Shining Path and Colombia's FARC guerrillas provide security support for narcotics production and trafficking by drug cartels in South America. There is also strong evidence that the Palestinian PFLP-GC has been using its own established security infrastructure, including secure landing fields and production facilities, to support drug trafficking by organized crime in Lebanon. In these cases, the cartels are provided with armed protection and enhanced security in exchange for large sums of money which can be used for terrorist purposes. The Tamil Tigers in Sri Lanka and the Colombian leftist group M19 have engaged in similar collaborative activities, including being deployed as protection (buffers) against government detection and raids. In other cases, territories controlled by revolutionary or terrorist groups are used by criminal organizations as safe shipment routes. In these instances it is most often the case that organized crime uses terrorist groups in one way or another for its own economic ends.

2. In competitive illicit markets that are controlled entirely or in large part by existing organized crime syndicates.

In regions where criminal markets are completely controlled by existing organized crime groups, organized terrorist groups wishing to enter such markets will have no choice but to seek alliances. This is especially likely in regions of Africa, Central Asia, the former Soviet Union, and the Balkans. It applies also in countries such as Afghanistan, Myanmar, and Colombia, where illicit markets, including drugs and kidnapping, are largely or completely controlled by a few organized syndicates. A process of 'gangsterization'<sup>19</sup> may also occur where revolutionary and terrorist movements drift into money-making as a primary activity (the reverse process of 'politicization' is also possible, where crime groups become primarily concerned with politics). For example, the Shan United Army of Burma has blurred the line between a revolutionary (terrorist) movement and a drug trafficking empire, and the Shining Path and FARC are thought to be on this path as well.<sup>20</sup>

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*(Nevertheless) there is some evidence of cooperation - Peru's Shining Path and Colombia's FARC guerrillas provide security for drug cartels*

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### 3. Between 'transnational' organized crime groups and terrorists.

Organized criminal groups that have been long-established in their home states, and have developed along with that state, depend upon existing institutional and financial structures to earn profits. As we have noted, it is rare for these established crime organizations to link with terrorist groups because their long-term financial interests require the preservation and relative stability of state structures. Newly formed transnational crime groups, on the other hand, often originate in post-conflict regions and in failing states, profiting from state chaos and ongoing conflict. Such 'transitional' states are particularly vulnerable to indigenous and transnational organized crime because they experience the malfunction of state agencies, the erosion of legitimate economies, and the re-orientation of relationships with other countries, usually involving an opening of the economy and the society itself. In transitional states, as well as in weak states more generally, terrorist and revolutionary groups are often already present. Thus the influx of transnational organized crime groups into such 'weakened' countries may set up pressures for cooperation.

In some cases, transnational criminal groups have been known to use their profits to fund domestic insurgencies or terrorism, such as those in contemporary Afghanistan and in the Caucasus, so they can then profit from the consequent volatility. Yet even so, there is probably an optimum level of instability beyond which transnational criminal organizations would prefer not to go. If the process of social disintegration goes too far, it can hinder national markets. Most obviously this was the case in Somalia, where the entry of large-scale transnational organized crime groups was halted by the clan-based chaos and war that dominated the country. As a result, we may say that the regions where transnational crime groups and terrorists may converge are in Latin America, the Balkans, the Caucasus, the conflict zones of West Africa, Central Asia, the former Soviet Union, the Balkans, and counties such as Afghanistan, Iraq, and Myanmar.

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## Terrorist-terrorist networking?

Considering the above, a speculative question we might pursue is whether terrorist groups will link with one another to pursue criminal ends, rather than the extent to which they will link with organized crime. It has been suggested recently that militant Islamic organizations from Al Qaeda to Hamas interact and support one another in an international web of logistical, financial, and sometimes operational activity.<sup>21</sup> For example, while there are no known leader-to-leader connections between Al Qaeda and Hezbollah, the two groups are thought to have held senior-level meetings over the past decade and to maintain ad hoc, person-to-person ties in the areas of training and logistics.<sup>22</sup> Recent attacks such as those in Istanbul and Casablanca, perpetrated by what would seem loose associations of terrorists, demonstrate that these types of relationships are perhaps just as important as particular group affiliations. Not every Al Qaeda operative has pledged a bayat (an oath) to Osama bin Laden. There have also been reports that of the two men who played central roles in training and funding the cell of American Muslims in Portland, one was associated with Palestinian terrorism, and the other with Al Qaeda. Similarly, an al-Aqsa International Foundation representative from Yemen, Mohammed Ali Hasan al-Moayad, was arrested for funding Hamas while providing money, arms, technology, and recruits to Al Qaeda.

On the other hand, barriers to cooperation among terrorist groups will still be important. These may include, for example, divergent religious convictions and different timelines, goals, and objectives. However, in the area of terrorist financing and logistical support, there seems to be overlap and cooperation between some Islamic groups, and there is no reason yet to assume that this overlap will not or has not extended to their criminal activities. In an increasingly risky environment for terrorists, and considering the unlikely event of their cooperation with purely criminal groups, it seems important to question if, how, and to what extent terrorist groups may cooperate with one another to achieve criminal profits.

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## Conclusions

The review of existing evidence of terrorist criminal activity and terrorist-criminal cooperation allows us to draw several speculative conclusions. For isolated terrorist groups, especially those planning a single attack, one-off or sporadic engagement in crime is normally sufficient, if needed at all. The types of crime in which these groups engage are likely to be low-risk, low-yield, so as not to increase the chances of detection pre-attack. For more organized terrorist groups who follow a long-term political program, 'organized' criminal activity is more likely given the need for a continuous income stream. If kept 'in-house', this will reduce the risks that accompany cooperation with ideologically distinct groups such as organized crime syndicates. Organized terrorist groups are already well-shaped to enter into these types of organized illicit activities. This suggests that terrorist groups will copy the 'best practices' of organized criminals, rather than go out of their way to cooperate with them. An important and timely question is thus whether and to what extent terrorist groups will link with one another to pursue fundraising activities and criminal ends, rather than the extent to which they will link with organized crime which, as we have seen, is unlikely.

Where there is evidence of alliances between existing organized crime groups and terrorist groups, these tend to occur in weak and transitional states. This is especially the case where black markets and economies are largely or completely controlled by existing organized crime groups, or where newer transnational organized crime groups form working relations with terrorists. Such alliances are more often temporary and parasitic (one feeding off the other) rather than fully symbiotic (mutually dependent), and short-term and shifting rather than formal or longer-term. Such links do not amount to a systematic nexus between terrorism and organized crime. In some instances, organized crime uses terror tactics to further their profit-oriented goals, while some terrorist organizations use organized crime techniques and activities to fund their political and military campaigns. However, this does not amount to a convergence of organized crime and terrorism, and the distinctions between them remain crucial. ♦

Pat O'Malley  
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## ENDNOTES

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- <sup>2</sup> Schmid, A. (1996), 'The Links Between Transnational Organized Crime and Terrorism Crimes', *Transnational Organized Crime*, Vol. 2, No. 4.
- <sup>3</sup> Shelley, L. and J. Picarelli (2002), 'Methods Not Motives: Implications of the Convergence of International Organized Crime and Terrorism', *Police Practice and Research* 3/4, p. 305-318.
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- <sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*
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- <sup>8</sup> Sanderson, T. (2004), 'Transnational Terror and Organized Crime: Blurring the Lines', *SAIS Review* Vol. XXIV No. 1, pp. 49-61.
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- <sup>13</sup> For a lengthy discussion of these, see Schmid, A. (1996), 'The Links Between Transnational Organized Crime and Terrorism Crimes', *Transnational Organized Crime*, Vol. 2, No. 4.
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- <sup>15</sup> Hoffman, B. (1999), 'Terrorism Trends and Prospects', In: *Countering the New Terrorism*, RAND.
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- <sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>19</sup> Schmid, A. (1996), 'The Links Between Transnational Organized Crime and Terrorism Crimes', *Transnational Organized Crime*, Vol. 2, No. 4.
- <sup>20</sup> See for example Godson, R. and W. Olson (1995), 'International Organized Crime', *Society* 32, p. 18-29, Sanderson, T. (2004), 'Transnational Terror and Organized Crime: Blurring the Lines', *SAIS Review*, Vol. XXIV, No. 1.
- <sup>21</sup> Levitt, M. (2004), 'Untangling the Terror Web: Identifying and Counteracting the Phenomenon of Crossover Between Terrorist Groups', *SAIS Review* Vol. XXIV No. 1 (Winter-Spring), pp. 33-48.
- <sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*