The Crime-Conflict Nexus and the Civil War in Syria

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By January 2017, the Syrian civil war had produced close to 5 million refugees, 6.3 million internally displaced persons, 13.5 million Syrians who required humanitarian aid[1] and estimates put the number of fatalities due to the war at 500,000.[2] Western popular interest in the Syrian civil war tends to focus on the use of chemical weapons by the government of Bashar Al-Assad; the military successes and brutality of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS);[3] Russian military involvement and the refugee 'crisis' which resulted from the conflict. This paper focuses on an often-overlooked aspect of the conflict, but one that is central to its longevity and intensity: the role of organized crime in the Syrian civil war.

Early in the conflict, UNESCO raised alarm about the increased illegal trade in antiquities and artifacts from Syria. Both the policymaking[4] and academic communities[5] have since acknowledged the proliferation of organized crime during the war. These studies show how protagonists in the Syrian conflict are involved in a range of illegal economic activities, including people trafficking, oil smuggling, the illegal narcotics trade, kidnapping and looting. These activities vary in profitability, but they generate sufficient funds to allow insurgents and the government to buy weapons, pay combatants, provide social services and establish institutions in the areas under their control. These factors are crucial in reproducing the armed groups and maintaining the conflict. Yet, very little is known about how the war provides opportunities for this illicit economy to expand. This paper asks how war and organized crime affect each other in the context of the Syrian civil war.

There has been a steady recognition of the role of organized crime in sustaining violent conflict[6] and the threat it poses to international peace, security and stability.[7] This interplay between organized crime and war, the 'crime-conflict

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nexus', has been studied in various contexts, including Colombia;[8] Mali;[9] Afghanistan[10] and Iraq.[11] This article contributes to the study of the crime-conflict nexus by illustrating, in the Syrian context, how armed groups simultaneously engage in political and criminal activities, how organized criminal activity is politically significant in the context of war and how civilians engage with the crime-conflict nexus.

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

The second half of the argument focuses on how organized crime drives war. The expanding illicit economy, which characterizes the Syrian civil war, affects its intensity and duration. Armed groups now have access to funds, which means they can afford to wage a longer and more violent war. Secondly, armed groups also have resources to spend on providing social and political goods in the communities where they are based. This means that they can become perceived as legitimate political actors and this can translate into popular support. This further fragments the central state and destroys the social contract between state and society,[12] making a resolution of the conflict more complex. These relationships between local populations, armed groups and organized crime are central to understanding how organized crime and war interconnect.

This research provides an analysis of the ways in which crime and conflict mutually reinforce each other: how war creates opportunities for an illicit economy to expand and how organized crime, in turn, facilitates war. The study begins with an overview of the literature on organized crime and war. It then proceeds to a description of organized crime in Syria, both before and during the civil war. Following this overview, the first part of the argument (that war provides opportunities for organized crime) presents a consideration of the conditions which make organized crime in Syria feasible. The second part of the argument (that organized crime is a driver of conflict) is then advanced through an analysis of how armed

groups use the revenues gained in the illicit economy and how that impacts the conflict. The article concludes with reflections on the contribution of this case study to the crime-conflict nexus and the prospects for peace in Syria. But, first a conceptualization of organized crime is needed.

Organised Crime

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

> A structured group of three or more persons, existing for a period of time and acting in concert with the aim of committing one or more serious crimes or offences…to obtain, directly or indirectly, a financial or other material benefit.[13]

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

> Individuals, normally working with others, with the capacity and capability to commit serious crime on a continuing basis, which includes elements of planning, control and coordination, and benefits those involved. The motivation is often, but not always, financial gain.[14]

The definitions share several characteristics: they emphasize the collective nature of organized crime (perpetrated by a group, not individuals); its longevity; that it takes place outside the law and that the overall aim is to turn a profit. This approach is underpinned by normative assumptions about a 'legal' vs 'illegal' dichotomy[15] which is assigned by the state. These traditional definitions lead to a focus on state building and the ability of political institutions to respond to organized crime. The law enforcement perspective fits neatly into the Liberal Peace paradigm with its focus on democracy promotion, the rule of law and the building of state institutions.

Yet, there are significant weaknesses to this law enforcement perspective. It assumes that the state is legitimate and criminal organizations are illegitimate – even though this view might not be shared by the population in places where state authority is contested or weak.[16] These state-assigned labels might thus not necessarily reflect civilian notions of what constitutes legitimate economic activity. In fact, there may be significant local support for an 'illegal' economy.

A further weakness of the law enforcement perspective on organized crime is that it underplays the way in which these activities change the nature of the state itself. The close relationships fostered between organized crime and state officials lead to a distortion of local economies as government policies aim to

serve the interests of organized crime, rather than the population.[17] Local economies change over time as organized crime groups extract taxes and enable civilians to circumvent formal markets.

Another criticism of the law enforcement approach holds that organized crime is often an activity, rather than an identity, as actors dip in and out of illegal activities. Organized criminal networks possess a range of motivations, which are not always financially-motivated, but could be political.[18] This recognizes the diverse portfolio of activities to which one conflict actor can subscribe.

This alternative conceptualization of organized crime moves away from the legal-illegal dichotomy, towards a recognition of the complex political, economic and social environments within which organized crime networks operate. This approach is undoubtedly more in line with the assumptions of this study, which recognizes that organized crime networks can have a range of goals. Consequently, violence becomes dual-purpose, serving both individual and strategic organizational needs simultaneously.[19]

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

Civil War and Organized Crime

The relationship between organized crime and conflict has become increasingly recognized in the study of civil war. Theories of 'new wars' developed in the 1990s as scholars turned their attention to the opportunities which globalization and war present to the growth of organized crime.[20] In the new post-Cold War context, regimes and insurgents alike had to find alternative sources of revenue as external backers (particularly the United States and USSR) retreated from involvement in internal conflict.[21] Some scholars analyzed how civil war presents profit-making opportunities to insurgents and states—often by exploiting natural resources such as oil, diamonds or minerals.[22] The argument was that the potential for self-enrichment in a conflict setting will determine the war's feasibility, intensity and longevity. This greed thesis elicited a great deal of academic interest and culminated in a debate about the importance of political economy explanations for war, vis-à-vis more conventional political explanations related to inequality, discrimination, and political grievance.[23]

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

An interpretation of this relationship gained prominence in the years following the 9/11 terror attacks on the United States. The 'crime-terror' nexus literature focuses on the dynamics and networks involved in the funding of international terrorism.[24] In doing so, these studies uncover the alliances between organized crime and terror networks which exist for their mutual benefit. The literature illustrates how international terrorism became involved in a range of organized criminal activities in order to fund political violence.[25]

Increasingly, a similar approach to the study of civil war was adopted. Here the spotlight falls on particular, geographically bound conflicts—as opposed to the global nature of international terrorism. It became known as the crime-conflict nexus.[26]

The crime-conflict nexus literature exposes the fallacy of upholding a hard distinction between organized crime and political violence: organized criminal groups can assume political goals and, likewise, political groups can engage in organized crime in efforts to fund their use of violence.[27] Violence increases in a context where the aims and activities of organized crime and political violence become increasingly blurred. Organized crime and conflict become interdependent and exacerbate each other.[28] In the war economy that results, violence becomes an entry point for participation in these activities as groups that use force are more successful in gaining access to economic opportunities.[29] Indeed, the crime-conflict nexus literature illustrates the extent to which organized crime during violent conflict is political: it funds political violence, it changes the abilities of local political actors and it has long-term political consequences for the state and peacebuilding.

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

Different sections of society are typically involved in the illicit economy during war: the populations that produce and consume the illegal goods and services,

the crime groups such as mafia and drug trafficking organizations, armed military groups such as terrorists, insurgents or paramilitaries, as well as corrupt government officials and law enforcement personnel.[30] A major theme in this paper is the centrality of the relationships between armed groups and the local populations in the crime-conflict nexus. War creates space for strengthening this relationship between insurgents and civilians. The following discussions show how these relationships underpin the illicit economy that expanded during the civil war in Syria.

The Civil War in Syria

The current conflict in Syria started in March 2011 with popular protests against the authoritarian regime of President Bashar al-Assad and demands for the release of political prisoners.[31] The government responded violently and the protests spread and escalated. It was initially seen as part of the 2010–2011 wave of popular uprisings against authoritarian regimes in states such as Yemen, Tunisia, Egypt and Libya, known as the Arab Spring. However, the Syrian uprising soon proved to be a more sustained and longer-term conflict and by 2012 the International Red Cross officially labelled it a civil war.

More than 1000 different groups are thought to be involved in the conflict.[32] These include the government of President Bashar al Assad, supported by Hezbollah in Lebanon; ISIS (the Salafist jihadist group who advocates a conservative version of Islamic rule); the Sunni Jihadist Jabhat al Nusra (the Front for the Defense of the Syrian People, which was allied with Al Qaeda, but since its split in 2016, is now known as Jabhat Fateh Al-Sham); the YPG (the Kurdish People's Protection Units); the Islamist groups Ahrar Al-Sham and Jaysh Al-Islam and the Free Syrian Army.[33] In addition to these high-profile groups, there are a myriad of smaller groups who come and go, and who exist in varying degrees of cooperation with the larger groups.[34] The conflict has become internationalized, with Russia and Iran emerging as major military and financial supporters of the regime, whilst the Gulf States and Saudi Arabia support the Sunni Islamist groups.[35]

A range of political, economic, ethnic and social factors caused this conflict. These include growing inequalities and youth unemployment that resulted from the economic liberalization policies that the Assad regime had implemented in the years preceding the uprising. The outbreak of war also signals dissatisfaction with the system of patron-client relationships which have been carefully cultivated by the Syrian Ba'athist regime. The state concentrated its provision of public services such as the provision of electricity, employment, schooling, agricultural

aid and health care in the areas where its support was strongest.[36] The Alawite sect (of which Assad is a member) has long dominated the state and the resulting discontent amongst Sunnis also contributes to the conflict.[37]

Pre-war Organized Crime in Syria

Organized crime is not new to Syria. The country has long been a transit point for drugs originating from Europe, Turkey and Lebanon and destined for Jordan, Iraq and the Persian Gulf.[38] There is also a long-standing tradition of looting and antiquity smuggling from archaeological sites prior to the war in Syria.[39] Matt Herbert provides a comprehensive historical narrative of pre-war smuggling and organized crime in Syria.[40] Local cross-border tribes and groups have engaged in trafficking livestock and consumer goods (and to a limited extent, drugs) between Syria and its neighbors since the inception of the state after the fall of the Ottoman Empire. Initially, the Syrian government was not directly involved in the illicit economy—except for individual government officials who may have benefited financially. In Herbert's analysis, two major events created motivation and opportunity for the Syrian regime to become more actively involved in organized crime.

Firstly, Syria's 1976 invasion and subsequent presence in Lebanon heralded a period of entrenched cooperation between the Syrian government and Lebanese-based criminal groups. Networks of bribery between government officials and smugglers developed. The Syrian military, in particular, became firmly entrenched in the Lebanese trade in hashish and heroin by taxing traffickers. Western sanctions against Iraq in the 1990s are the second major event that provided motivation and opportunity for the Syrian regime to expand its involvement in the transnational illicit economy. Syria helped Iraq to bypass these sanctions by encouraging and directly operating smuggling networks that moved weapons, luxury goods, food and oil to and from Iraq. The Syrian regime retreated from direct involvement in smuggling after the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq, but continued to tax the lucrative Iraq-Syrian trafficking of artifacts and oil.

Several factors can explain the success of the illicit economy in Syria before the civil war. Syria's central geographic position in the Middle East makes it attractive for organized crime. It has access to the coast, which provides it with connections to international markets and gives it value as an export point. Syria is surrounded by weakened states and shares lengthy and poorly controlled borders with states that are known to harbor active international organized crime networks, notably Iraq, Turkey and Lebanon.[41] The country's pre-war infrastructure enhanced the feasibility of illicit economic activities: it has an elaborate road net-

work linked to seaports, good electricity supply and relatively high levels of industrial development.[42] These factors, combined with the state's inability (and unwillingness) to control its borderlands, create a fertile environment for organized crime.

This discussion implied that a range of actors were involved in Syria's pre-war organized crime networks and many of them remain active. These include the local tribes; small-time cross-border smugglers; larger, more sophisticated trafficking networks and the Syrian regime itself. The Shabiha are an interesting example of a group that has straddled the pre-and post-war organized crime periods.[43] The Shabiha were a small group of government militias (mostly from Assad's Alawite sect) who were deeply (and brutally) involved in trafficking and smuggling in the borderlands during the 1980s and 1990s. The outbreak of civil war has led to an explosion in their numbers. This was partially due to the government's policy of releasing career criminals in exchange for political loyalty during the early years of the conflict. The Shabiha illustrate how armed groups can simultaneously assume political and criminal roles and how these roles can change over time: these groups remain deeply involved in war-time organized crime, but they also play a role in political violence as government militias which control towns and villages. The Shabiha illustrate an important aspect of the crime-conflict nexus: an armed group's ability to assume and shed political and criminal identities as circumstances change.

Participation in the illicit economy in Syria widened as the conflict intensified. The trafficking of weapons into Syria at the start of the conflict illustrates this: initially, armed groups in Syria would procure weapons in neighboring countries (usually Iraq) and these would be smuggled into the country by vehicle, donkey or on foot.[44] However, as the conflict intensified and became prolonged, weapons smuggling became more sophisticated. By 2012 the Free Syria Army was acquiring weapons through professional arms traffickers and international weapons dealers. Entirely new business networks have emerged since the start of the war to supply the demand for weapons, fuel and consumables.[45] It is difficult to paint an accurate picture of the nature of cooperation between armed political groups and criminal groups—not least because the distinction between political and criminal motives and activities are blurred.[46] What is clear, however, is that that insurgent groups have learned how to capitalize on the economic opportunities which war presents.

Organized Crime during the Syrian War

Ultimately, this paper argues that organized crime both aggravates and is a consequence of the war in Syria. An overview of the range of illicit economic ac-

tivities which exist in the context of the civil war in Syria is useful. The activities which will be described often co-exist in the same settings and are undertaken by the same actors. Consequently, the focus is on discussing the activities which constitute the war-time illicit economy in Syria—rather than producing an account of each armed group's involvement in these areas.

The crime-conflict nexus literature provides a ready tick-list of illegal economic activities which typically present profit-making opportunities to conflict actors: the illegal trade and smuggling involving natural resources such as alluvial diamonds (e.g. Sierra Leone); timber (e.g. Cambodia); minerals (e.g. DRC) and oil (e.g. Iraq). International drug trafficking is a major explanation for the intensity and longevity of the Colombian civil war, where the FARC have been involved in cocaine production for decades,[47] the heroin trade is closely associated with Taliban involvement in poppy cultivation in Afghanistan[48] and the Kosovo conflict was heavily influenced by the billion-dollar narcotics trade in the Balkans.[49]

An armed group's ability to control movement from and into its territory is crucial to its political and economic success. Control over territory in Syria is not only a sign of geopolitical military prowess, but also provides access to sources of revenue. A secondary, illicit economy has been built around the unofficial movement of commodities into areas and neighborhoods under siege. Extracting bribes and fees at border crossings or on highways is an important source of income for local militias and army officers.[50] Rebels that control border crossings set fees for allowing vehicles and individuals to cross and for the movement of luxury items, food, livestock and oil to and from neighboring countries.[51]

The most profitable form of cross-border trafficking involves oil. There is significant variation between different groups and regions in terms of how oil is extracted, transported, taxed and sold.[52] In some cases, local tribal chiefs are in charge of extracting oil from small oil fields under their control and produce about 300-1000 barrels a day.[53] Local militias then tax oil smuggling in their territories or provide armed protection (at a price) to the rudimentary refineries.[54] ISIS, for example, is heavily involved in oil smuggling and extraction. At the height of its power, it controlled around 80 per cent of Syria's oil fields (including the largest oil producing area of Deir az-Zour) and produced 65,000 barrels of oil per day.[55] Oil has become one of ISIS's main sources of income. It is impossible to get an accurate estimate, but according to some reports the organization earned approximately $2USD million per day through its control and sale of oil in Syria and Iraq.[56] ISIS sells oil to various local and international buyers, including its main adversary, the Assad government, through a series of middlemen.[57] This strategic cooperation between the regime and one of its fiercest adversaries illus-

trates the shifting and varying patterns of cooperation between armed groups which typify conflict settings.[58]

Considerable international media attention has fallen on the production and smuggling of the illegal narcotic, Fenethylline, in Syria. This amphetamine is marketed under the street name 'Captagon.'[59] Captagon is popular as a recreational drug on the Arabian Peninsula,[60] but there are reports that combatants on all sides in the Syrian war are using it too—prompting TIME magazine to refer to them as 'super-human soldiers.'[61] By early 2014, the UN reported increases in the Syrian production of amphetamines[62] and some armed groups are directly involved in this production and cross-border trafficking of Captagon.[63]

Looting is another form of economic activity that is dependent on the illicit market. Post-Saddam Iraq is an obvious example of large-scale looting in the context of violent conflict. Hospitals, museums and shops were emptied during the chaos that followed the toppling of the Saddam Hussein regime. Looting is often a symptom of the collapse of a political and security structure at the start of the war.[64] In the case of Iraq and Syria, the availability of lootable items (like oil or cultural artifacts); the presence of large groups of people (as individuals and armed groups) who are able to loot; and a culturally permissive environment,[65] were all in place to make looting possible. According to reports, members of progovernment groups are allowed to loot in areas previously held by rebels. Rebels loot factories and industrial areas under their control, selling the bounty on local or international markets.[66]

The looting of antiquities has become a prominent feature of the Syrian conflict's symbiosis with organized crime. In October 2013, UNESCO warned about the increase in the looting of antiquities and other valuable artifacts from Syria and there were reports of endemic racketeering and smuggling in many of the rebel-held areas.[67] The stripping of archaeological sites in Syria and the selling of artifacts on international markets are commonplace.[68] By 2015, satellite imagery comparing historical sites before and after the start of the war, showed a significant increase in illegal archaeological excavations in Syria. [69] Interestingly, this analysis of archaeological digs found evidence of an increase in both minor looting (which is probably done by individuals and civilians who are merely trying to survive economically), as well as severe looting which requires some organizational and mechanical capacity and is generally more destructive. The revenues for rebel groups through this trade have been estimated at $300USD—$500 million USD in the two years since 2013.[70]

Control over grain is an unusual activity that forms part of organized crime in Syria. Martínez and Eng provide a fascinating account of the political capital that bread provision holds in Syria, which helps to explain why bakeries are often

targets in military campaigns.[71] The subsidized provision of bread has long been a corner stone of the welfare state in Syria. As insurgent groups took control of new territory, they continued the provision of this public good as part of their 'hearts and minds' strategy. Various armed groups in Syria have become involved in a protection racket in the grain industry where bakeries must pay for 'protection' from other groups. In other cases, insurgent groups are directly involved in the milling of grain themselves.[72]

Kidnapping and hostage taking is another common activity for those involved in organized crime in conflict zones. Both rebels and state security forces in Syria are involved in kidnapping and hostage taking. Ransoms are often negotiated through chains of contacts involving local peace committees.[73] It is estimated that, in 2014, ISIS earned $45USD million from ransoms.[74] Hostage taking is of huge symbolic significance to terrorist groups, in particular: it provides them with publicity and a psychological advantage vis-à-vis their enemy. In contrast to the indiscriminate nature of terror attacks in general, terrorist groups are generally selective in who they take as hostages in order to maximize the publicity and impact.[75]

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

War Provides Opportunities for Organized Crime

Several aspects of the Syrian war created an environment that created further opportunities for organized crime. These conditions include a diminished state capacity, which reduced opportunity costs for the illicit economy; a population that faced unprecedented economic hardship which made participation in the illicit economy attractive and the existence of armed groups who needed to raise funds for weapons and other war-related expenses.[76]

Firstly, armed conflicts weaken state legitimacy and capacity to function, and thus provide opportunities for organized crime. This lowers the opportunity costs

for insurgents and civilians to become involved in the illicit economy. It makes the black and grey markets more attractive and viable alternatives for civilians in need of consumer goods and employment.[77] The state diverts much of its resources to the war, which reduces its capacity for maintaining law and order. Consequently, the state is less able to control borders and to contain illicit economic activity.

Secondly, sanctions against the Syrian government since 2011 contributed to fuel shortages for households, a decline in oil revenue and had a negative effect on the livelihoods of poor Syrians, in particular.[78] The sanctions, combined with the general economic catastrophe that accompanied the descent into war, stimulated a demand for grey and black market goods and provided incentives for the smuggling of consumables. Drug production and trafficking, for example, provide profits for insurgents with which to buy weapons and to pay recruits. But, importantly, it also provides employment opportunities for civilians who can become couriers, be involved in the manufacturing process, or sell the drugs.[79]

The relationship between armed groups and the communities where they operate is central to understanding the opportunities which war presents for organized crime. In her focus on the illegal drugs economy, Felbab-Brown argues that the non-state armed groups provide security and act as economic and political regulators to local populations through their involvement in the illicit economy: they protect the local population's livelihood from government efforts to repress the illicit economy, they mobilize revenues from these illicit activities towards social services and they protect local populations from other predatory groups.[80]

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

> With the rebels selling a barrel of oil for anything up to $22, refiners can make a profit of 30 cents on every liter of gasoline sold to the public. Those who make their living from road haulage and associated trades have seen their business boom; body shops, for instance, can't keep up with the demand from truckers who need giant tanks fitted to the backs of their vehicles. Unemployed young men can now make a living selling fuel from roadside kiosks, and mechanics have plenty to do in repairing engines damaged by the low-quality fuel. The free market that the rebels have unconsciously fostered is a win-win for suppliers (the rebels themselves) and consumers (everyone else).[81]

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

Thirdly, as the greed thesis emphasizes, armed groups require funds in order to be able to afford to wage war. The illegal economy gives non-state armed groups access to resources that enable them to wage war. As the earlier section has shown, it is not only insurgents who turn to organized crime to raise funds, but states do so, too. Sanctions also affected the Syrian regime's involvement in the illicit economy as they became forced to seek alternative intermediaries for international transactions.[82] This provided new opportunities for the cultivation of local and international networks involving the state.

This section has considered the ways in which war provides opportunities for organized crime in the Syrian context through: the state's weakened law enforcement capacity; an economically vulnerable population that creates domestic markets and participates in the illicit economy; and the abundance of armed groups that require an income. These combined factors provide a suitable environment for organized crime to flourish.

Organized Crime Contributes to War

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

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

One of the major expenses for armed organizations in Syria are stipends for combatants. A new member of the FSA, for example, would be paid $50 per

month, but it is well known that the Islamist organizations pay their members the highest salaries.[83] ISIS fighters claim to receive $100 per month from the organization, in addition to other privileges such as stipends for their families or their rent and electricity.[84] It is impossible to know the exact numbers of ISIS fighters, but estimates vary wildly between the 17,000 suggested by the Pentagon to 200,000 suggested by the Kurdish forces.[85] Whatever the real figure may be, if all the tens of thousands of soldiers receive similar benefits, the organization's monthly expenditure is significant.

Another obvious expense is weapons and ammunition for military campaigns. Its international allies, notably Russia, supply the Assad regime with weapons.[86] However, the rebel groups tend to use weapons from a variety of sources. Many weapons are recycled from nearby conflicts in Libya or Iraq[87] or had originally been sold by European manufacturers to other MENA countries such as Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Qatar.[88] There is clearly a great degree of recycling and transferring of weapons which involves international weapons smuggling networks. Evidence shows that ammunition used early in the Syrian conflict was manufactured in a range of countries such as China, Sudan, Romania and Iran.[89] The varying suppliers and sources of weapons used in the Syrian conflict points to a sophisticated (and expensive) weapons trafficking network which all groups tap into to continue their campaigns. Organized crime thus contributes to the political struggle by enabling armed groups to buy weapons and to pay combatants.

Insurgent organizations often engage in complex processes of institution-building and service delivery in the areas which they dominate. Hezbollah in neighboring Lebanon, for example, has established a sophisticated network of organizations through which they fund and manage schools, medical centers, urban infrastructure development projects and provide municipal services such as garbage removal in the Shia areas under their control.[90] It is crucial for armed groups to enjoy some level of legitimacy and acceptance in their communities. If the population does not acquiesce to their presence, they will either withhold compliance with taxation, production or conscription policies directed by the military group, or they can instigate a violent challenge to the group's presence in their community.[91] Armed groups' provision of public and political goods is an important technique for acquiring this tacit acceptance.

It is therefore unsurprising that insurgent groups are keen to engage in some form of institution-building in the regions where they have established military control. The notion of the caliphate is central to ISIS ideology and means that the group has a dual purpose of Jihad and state-building. The latter implies governance and the delivery of public services. In contrast to ISIS's well-known brutal-

ity, this use of soft power (the 'carrot' in the carrot-and-stick approach) is an important part of their strategy for dominance and control.[92] It provides not only an extensive network of courts based on a very strict form of Sharia law, but also schooling, medical care, public transport, water and sanitation, flour for bakeries and price caps on necessities such as bread or rent.[93] Insurgents' welfare provision and governance roles are also central to their long-term military success as it creates an impression of a viable alternative to the existing regime and affirms their political legitimacy.[94]

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

Conclusion

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

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

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

This paper illustrated how militant groups in the Syrian war succeed in straddling both the political and criminal worlds. Organized crime during war is

undoubtedly political in its effects. It enables armed groups to reproduce themselves materially, to build institutions and to gain some level of political legitimacy and cooperation. Local populations are central to the crime-conflict nexus: civilians provide markets and participants to the illicit economy and they are the beneficiaries of armed groups' spending.

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

Militants could be unwilling to negotiate an end to the conflict, as peace (and the accompanying disarmament and demobilization of armed groups) will be bad for business. Armed groups may actively resist or spoil peacemaking and peacebuilding activities, because their economic interests are so closely aligned to the informal economy. Local populations too, may be less enthusiastic about peace and the economic uncertainty that it could bring. It could lead to a strategic trade-off where peace operations accept organized crime as part of the political settlement to achieve short-term stability. This could entrench organized criminal structures into the post-war state. Smuggling networks rely heavily on the cultivation of political relationships and these are likely to exploit the fragile post-war context. In addition to these political-criminal networks, the close relationships of mutual dependency between civilians and armed groups will probably continue amid the unstable security, economic and political contexts which often characterize immediate post-war societies.[95] Peace processes in places as diverse as Bosnia-Herzegovina, Northern Ireland and South Africa have shown that peace could indeed strengthen war-time criminal networks.

Insurgent groups leave behind formal and informal institutions, which could become an obstacle to the new post-war state's attempts to provide centralized governance. It is unlikely that the future Syrian state will resemble the centralized version that existed before the war because of the way that the conflict has fragmented authority, territorial control and governance in the country. The continuing relationships between local communities, politicians and armed groups will pose a significant threat to the success of peace operations and may well thwart efforts to establish a fair, transparent and effective post-war state and society.[96]

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