

## Webs of Corruption: Trafficking and Terrorism in Central Asia

by Mariya Y. Omelicheva and Lawrence P. Markowitz, New York, Columbia University Press, 2019, 232 pp., \$65.00 (hardcover), ISBN 9780231188548

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BOOK REVIEW

**Webs of Corruption: Trafficking and Terrorism in Central Asia**, by Mariya Y. Omelicheva and Lawrence P. Markowitz, New York, Columbia University Press, 2019, 232 pp., \$65.00 (hardcover), ISBN 9780231188548

Herodotus tells us that in the 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE, Polykrates, the tyrant of Samos, hijacked cargos from Greek ships and traded them in western Anatolia and Egypt. In Roman times, human trafficking was serious business. In medieval times, corsairs profited by smuggling between Christian and Muslim states, while Japanese pirates raided Korea and China for black market luxuries. Today, trafficking contraband across state borders remains lucrative.

*Webs of Corruption*, the recent book by Mariya Omelicheva and Lawrence Markowitz, investigates the evolution and spread of organized crime and terrorism in four Central Asian republics (Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan) since the 1980s. Based on field research (supplemented by the Global Terrorism Database, UN documents, and news media) the authors provide an interesting typology for the crime-terrorism nexus that stakes out four types of relationships (coexistence, operational, alliance, and convergence) between the state, organized crime, and terrorism. By highlighting the critical role of the state, the volume challenges the assumption that crime-related violence amplifies terrorist activity. And the book offers new information about trafficking-terrorism connections based on geospatial patterns and state control.

The authors divide their work into two general parts: a typology regarding the crime-terror nexus, and case studies in Central Asia. The authors argue that the crime-terror connection is much more varied than is typically assumed. They find that the relationship between criminal organizations and terrorist behavior is neither static nor direct, and that Central Asia is an excellent place for such a study, because it is the world's largest drug trafficking hub, situated between major producing regions (Afghanistan and Pakistan) and major markets (Russia and Europe).

High levels of opioids and organized crime have done little to increase Central Asia as a terrorist threat zone. The authors try to solve this puzzle by asserting that so-called weak states tend to witness low levels of terror: state immersion in illicit economies shapes the crime-terror connection by spreading and redirecting terrorist actors into other spheres. In addition, the authors claim that external security sector assistance (from the United States, Russia, or international groups) may have ambiguous effects. Lastly, the authors expand the application of their model to countries in West Africa, South America, South Asia, and the Middle East.

Goldilocks conditions are needed for drug trafficking and terrorism to overlap. By calculating important causal factors (population density, poverty, infant mortality, proximity to urban centers, education levels, gender ratios) the authors endeavor to map, visually and statistically, the conditions that give rise to the trafficking-terrorism nexus. A central premise of *Webs of Corruption* is that political motives drive terrorist groups, while profit motives drive criminal organizations.


For Omelicheva and Markowitz, the state is the pivotal factor: Four types of state capacity (hegemonic, degraded, predatory, and captured) illustrate their hypothesis about state-involvement and the prevalence of terror acts. They conclude that high state involvement in an illicit economy tends to dampen the intensity and frequency of terrorist attacks. In geographically remote and rugged regions, the trafficking-terrorism connection is prone to emerge. It is also more likely to occur when urban centers are near, poverty is high, males outnumber females, and the youth have few opportunities for enrichment. If the state is willing and capable of delivering peace and security to the people (even while engaging in illicit trade), then the level of terrorist violence tends to decline. If the state is highly corrupt and the government preoccupied with rent seeking, state involvement can facilitate the trafficking-terrorism link.

The second part of *Webs of Corruption* explores the trafficking-terrorism connection across Central Asia. With the assistance of data driven maps, the authors examine how different state capabilities lead to varying relationships between crime actors and terrorists. In a comparison of drug trafficking in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, the authors find that Tashkent's decision to remove the state from the drug trade enabled the security apparatus to prevent the trafficking-terrorism link; thus, the country has experienced little nonstate violence. As the Uzbek security apparatus became a central pillar of the state, the leadership was able to craft hegemonic state capacity, and combat political threats (101–104).

In contrast, Tajikistan's shared 810-mile border with Afghanistan has increased its vulnerability. The inclusion of warlords into the government in the 1990s facilitated the convergence of drug trafficking and terrorist groups. Deep-seated corruption and well-organized criminal networks have plagued local and central governments; the security apparatus has become eviscerated. However, the rate of terrorist incidents has been low, in part because the relationship between organized crime and jihadist groups has been fleeting and mutually supportive.

*Webs of Corruption* employs the examples of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan to outline the contrasting trajectories of state responses to the convergence of terrorism and crime. In the former two states, a weak security infrastructure has opened space for traffickers and extremists to coordinate their activities. In Tajikistan (“a predatory state”), bringing drug barons into the government has enabled the president to consolidate control over illicit rents and invest in a coercive apparatus to maintain dominance over crime, trafficking, and politics. The states' capacities to enforce laws and enhance counter-narcotics capabilities have remained poorly coordinated, inadvertently allowing for operational relationships at the intersection of drugs, crime, and terrorism. This practice may ensure less systemic violence, but it also squeezes former opposition figures out of power, and tramples on individual liberties.

Why hasn't Central Asia hosted the ideologically violent Islamist organizations of other Muslim-majority areas? The authors demonstrate that state involvement in the trafficking-terrorism connection, and the region's fragmented identity, has made Central Asia poor soil for religious radicalization. However, the authors should have explored more thoroughly that the price to pay for high security and diminished terrorist violence is human rights abuse. In Uzbekistan, the state's withdrawal from the drug trade has enabled the police to focus on domestic repression and retention of power, which are evils arguably as dangerous as drug trafficking and terrorism. Dismissing unruly elites, increased government control, and removal of democratic norms have decreased the probability of the crime-terror convergence, but at the expense of human dignity and social justice. All the same, this book is a solid work of scholarship that illuminates a very important topic.

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