Terrorism and Organised Crime: Exploring the ‘Initial Nexus’

Research Report

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This report is drawn from a Master of Literature Thesis submitted to the Centre for the Study of Terrorism and Political Violence, St. Andrews University, and is based on research conducted during 2011. The author has successfully completed his studies, and received his qualification in June 2012.

Executive Summary

Current known interactions between terrorist and organised crime groups in Scotland are small and when they do occur are thought to be criminal and social in nature. Individuals connected to Irish related terrorism are the most known to be involved in such interactions.

Incarceration is a likely key meeting point for individuals involved in terrorism or organised crime and interactions that occur may involve a strong element of deception on the part of terrorist groups.

Organised criminals are likely to be very calculating in relation to any interaction they have with law enforcement and an intervention to seek cooperation from such criminals in relation to a terrorist group would most likely succeed when they have the least to lose, both financially and in relation to their ‘community’ standing.

Non-indigenous organised criminals and terrorists operating in Scotland arguably pose the most significant risk to the community here.

Intangible ‘codes of behaviour’ amongst organised criminals may exist, and further to this, may have a significant bearing on their interaction with terrorists.

Background Literature

A full literature review was undertaken. From this there were certain aspects of current knowledge regarded as being of particular import.

There is widespread agreement in the academic fields of research into both organised crime and independently into terrorism that participating groups within both phenomena now mainly operate along network systems, having largely moved away from hierarchical structures. Most groups’ memberships
are also often transitory, with membership and individual functionalities altering on a frequent basis (Albini, 1971 and 1975; Van Duyne, 1996).

Perri et al. (2009) posit that organised crime is at its most prevalent where the rule of law is at its weakest and where law enforcement performance is poor. They also note its particular prevalence where there are significant ethnic minority groups in a community that law enforcement have difficulty policing. Similarly, in relation to modern terrorism, expatriate communities are the recruiting ground of the current jihad against the west, the influence of friendship, kinship, shared isolation through expatriate experience has led to “seventy percent of the terrorists join(ing) the jihad as expatriates” (Sageman, 2005, pp. 5)

Makarenko (2004) provides a useful illustration of the convergences that can occur between organised crime and terrorism, copied below.

Many academic authors consider the morphing of terrorist groups into organised crime groups, as is argued has happened to many of the groups with roots to the conflict in Northern Ireland, and is illustrative of points 2, 3 and 4 on Makarenko’s diagram.

Fewer consider the co-operative interface, the business arrangement that might exist between groups engaged in the two phenomena. Where the ‘initial nexus’ of point 1 in Makarenko’s illustration has been considered, there has often been a perception that organised criminals will assist anyone who is prepared to pay for their services, be they terrorists or otherwise.
It is this point of interaction, the ‘initial nexus’, which this study concentrated on.

**Method**

Drawing on the information gleaned from the literature review senior staff from Scottish law enforcement bodies handling intelligence regarding serious and organised crime and, in addition, those with a similar responsibility concerning counter terrorism, were interviewed and provided information on the current situation in a form they were satisfied could be subject to publication.

A questionnaire was then devised to assess how police officers with experience of serious and organised crime investigations perceived organised criminals might make new contacts and how an initial relationship between contacts might function. This approach sought to ascertain where any potential ‘initial nexus’ between participants in organised crime and terrorism might occur. To gain further understanding of how an ‘initial nexus’ relationship might function hypothetical sets of questions were utilised, drawing on possible points of collaboration.

**Results**

The information provided by subject matter experts showed that although small, an ‘initial nexus’ of co-operation between organised criminals and terrorists exists in Scotland. This initial nexus relates primarily to Irish related terrorism but there are a very few known connections to international terrorism. The nature of the connections to those involved in Irish related terrorism appear to be social and criminal in nature.

Both the pro-Republicans and the pro-Loyalists are minority groups within Scotland and although they may not fit current definitions of ethnic minority groups in the typical parameter of ‘race’, they are both distinct sub cultures within wider Scottish society. Both produce SOCGs and individuals who become involved in Irish related terrorist activity. It is therefore not surprising that the initial nexus has been found here. Individuals involved in either form of activity share common lineage, schooling, culture and associations; all the factors necessary for the safe establishment of trust for a working relationship to develop between those involved in both phenomena, in tandem with the views of Van Duyne (1996), and the participants in this study. Police awareness of these interactions is also understandable. Although particularly the pro-Republicans were an immigrant community one would expect difficult to police (Perri, 2009) this is no longer the case, with over a hundred years passing since first arrival and the overall immigrant community now largely being part of mainstream Scottish society.
Participants in the study largely drew clear lines of distinction between Irish related terrorism and international terrorism. They could perceive that the potential cultural and social links of the SOCG members may have an effect on their behaviour, from the ‘kudos’ association within these sub cultures that can be attained through their background, allied to the underlying sympathy they may hold with a cause.

All the participants believed that incarceration was a key point for new interactions to occur. As recent émigré SOCGs become known to law enforcement in their new country of operation, so their members may become incarcerated. Through their incarceration they are likely to encounter individuals involved in terrorist causes, likely through work as ‘front’ funding criminal work. Such interaction may have disastrous consequences for Scotland, as a new type of ‘initial nexus’, far removed from that of the pro-Republicans and the pro-Loyalists could be formed.

Scottish pro-Republican and pro-Loyalist sub cultures provide a very interesting insight into the potential nature of ‘initial nexus’ relationships between terrorists and organised criminals. The views of the participants, coupled with a review of the literature concerning the subject, suggest that there are four distinct types of relationship that might exist between persons involved in the two phenomena, and have consequent impact on their interactions. The background of SOCG and Terrorist group members appears to have an impact on the nature of any relationships they might become involved in and would, most probably, have an effect beyond bald calculations of risk versus reward that SOCG members would likely involve themselves in during such a relationship. Profit would remain the main driver for any SOCG; however the proximity of danger to the SOCGs area of operations a terrorist group poses would be a factor in their reasoning.

The four suggested ‘initial nexus’ relationships between terrorists and organised criminals are outlined below:

‘Initial Nexus Relationship A’

Within Relationship A the SOCG and Terrorist group members are from the same cultural background and the actions of both are directly relevant to their immediate social groupings.

An example of a confluence that would meet this criterion is Scottish associated PIRA members and Scottish origin SOCGs from the pro-Republican sub group within the Irish past émigré community.

Such an association may have strong bonds: trust through common views, shared backgrounds and ease of ‘referencing’ through common associates or known past activities (criminal or otherwise) would be likely. The ‘kudos’
element that might occur from such a relationship within the shared sub culture would also be of relevance.

‘Initial Nexus Relationship B’

Within Relationship B the SOCG and Terrorist group members are from differing cultural backgrounds however the actions of both are directly relevant to their immediate social groupings.

An example of a confluence that would meet this criterion is Scottish associated UVF members and Scottish origin SOCGs from the pro-Republican sub group within the Irish past émigré community.

There are obvious negative features of such a relationship, such as contrary viewpoints and detrimental opinions of the SOCG or Terrorist group might occur were the details of the relationship to become known in their sub cultures. However, ‘trust’ gained through known past activities (criminal or otherwise) and shared associations would be very likely.

‘Initial Nexus Relationship C’

Within Relationship C the SOCG and Terrorist group members are from differing cultural backgrounds where the actions of one party only would be directly relevant to their immediate social grouping.

An example of a confluence that would meet this criterion is non-Scottish origin al Qaeda inspired terrorists and Scottish origin SOCGs from the pro-Republican sub group within the Irish past émigré community.

Trust and ‘referencing’ in the establishment of such a relationship would likely be difficult.

‘Initial Nexus Relationship D’

Within Relationship D the SOCG and Terrorist group members are from differing cultural backgrounds where the actions of neither party would be directly relevant to their immediate social grouping.

An example of a confluence that would meet this criteria are non-Scottish origin al Qaeda inspired terrorists and non-Scottish origin SOCGs, such as Chinese origin Cannabis cultivation groups.

As with Relationship C trust and ‘referencing’ in the establishment of such a relationship would likely be difficult.
Although one can in no way be definitive regarding how SOCGs will behave, as individuals with their own particular foibles and morality constitute each group differently, one can see how the argument that relationship D would be more dangerous is one worthy of consideration. The nature of SOCGs businesses, such as the example of Chinese origin Cannabis cultivation groups, inherently harm the communities in which they are based, through the illicit product they produce but also through the further criminal elements they attract to the business when it is a success; and the risks their criminality brings both through disputes that may affect the wider public but also through their methods. The exemplar Chinese origin Cannabis cultivation groups typically jury rig electrical systems that are massive fire risks with no consideration of those who neighbour properties they are utilising for their businesses. When one takes the status quo elements of SOCG behaviours and couple them with a group whose members have a minimal past in a particular area the common tactics of law enforcement to track an individual are greatly reduced, which non-indigenous SOCG members are very well aware of. Align to this a lack of social connection through a ‘past’, I.E. a lack of family or friends in the host community provides an absence of impact of criminality of the non-indigenous SOCGs behaviour on persons they might feel restrained from allowing be harmed the dangers of ‘initial nexus D’ relationships become all too apparent. It is the added disconnection from the society of operation that provides the increased danger.

A number of the studies participants believed that the majority of organised crime group members have a world view that would put international terrorist actions in a bracket of carrying some degree of ‘wrongness’ that cuts across established (if wholly unwritten and in no way tangible) criminal codes of behaviour, in much the same way that paedophilic behaviour is viewed. The ‘criminal code’ alluded to by may be impactive regarding each of the ‘initial nexus relationships’ listed and understood better within these conceptual frameworks. Perhaps, such a code is, to a degree, in fact an innate link between the criminal and their wider community values, where although their criminality may cross the normal bounds of wider societal behaviour the ‘code’ constrains behaviour within their sub groups. If this were to be the case one can see how such a ‘code’ would impact on interactions with contacts out with the SOCG and have differing effects dependent on which of the relationships, from A to D, the SOCG were engaged in. Deception would also be key, and if the SOCG were to perceive their relationship to be simply a criminal relationship between differing origin SOCGs, while it was instead, through deception, a relationship with terrorists (Relationship type C), this could be significantly impactive on the continuing nature of their interactions.

Deception could also be highly impactive on relationship D associations that might develop in prisons. Many terrorist groups have criminal ‘fronts’, for fundraising and other purposes. Individuals detected for such activity may well be incarcerated for criminal offences, with no detection of their terrorist
links being uncovered by the authorities. Such individuals would then enter the prison system being perceived as serious criminals only. Any associations with other serious criminals that then occurred in the prison system would only be seen in this context and possible relationships would be thought of as criminal in nature, and may well appear as such even to the SOCG with whom the relationship has been formed, as discussed above.

**Comment**

The study has been successful in identifying a number of areas of potential interaction between terrorists and organised criminals worthy of further consideration.

SOCG members may well take executive action against terrorist groups they have been interacting with to preserve their own ends. It is likely SOCGs are being misled in some of their relationships with those they believe to be like groups, who in fact have terrorist related motivations. Discovery of these deceptions may well affect their continuing engagement, result in action against the deceivers or assist any attempt by law enforcement to engage with the SOCG to solicit co-operation.

Interactions in prisons may well not be what they might first seem and there is a need for an open mind as to why non-indigenous SOCG members might be striking up associations, both with indigenous SOCGs and non-indigenous SOCGs from differing cultures. As the research has found, terrorist groups are using criminality as a cover for their actions and may well have members incarcerated through this cover, who would then conceivably continue to further their terrorists groups aims by increasing useful associations.

Terrorists and organised crime groups with no cultural affinity to their area of operation have less restraint upon their actions as the direct impact of their activities will not be felt by persons from within their immediate cultures, sub cultures or own circle of interaction, such as friends or family.

Co-operation by an SOCG with the authorities may be forthcoming when an SOCG calculates it is in their interests to make a proactive approach. There are a myriad of factors that would affect such a decision however SOCGs are likely to be clinical in such calculations and may only be held back if they have a cultural affinity with the terrorist group. An approach by the authorities would appear to have most chance of successes, continuing the calculated argument, when the SOCG have the least ‘invested in the relationship’, both in terms of their position perhaps within their own sub culture but also in terms of monetary or criminal activity exposure.

The natures of terrorism and organised crime make it very likely that participants in both will encounter one another, particularly when
incarcerated. This study has found that although such interactions do not appear high in number in Scotland the potential harm to society that can arise from them is considerable. The area of greatest concern that has emerged from this study is that of interaction between non-indigenous terrorist and organised crime groups, whose co-operation may be largely unrestrained, difficult to detect and lead to increased capability for action resulting from the co-operation by both parties.

**Potential for Further Research**

Extrapolating the Scottish findings into the wider world context would be very interesting. The dynamics of connections between Scotland and Northern Ireland, with the exchange and counter exchange of communities against the background of religious conflict is unusual. It may be the case that the relationships between terrorists and SOCGs that have been formed against the background of the conflict in Northern Ireland are in no way atypical of such interactions, which wider research may provide an insight into.

Direct interaction with SOCG members would provide excellent information as to how any ‘initial nexus’ relationship might function. Ideally, both SOCG members (indigenous and non-indigenous) with known cultural affinity to terrorist causes and those without could be identified. The views of these individuals could then be gathered in relation to specific issues around an ‘initial nexus’ relationship, to test the theory of the initial nexus relationship template posited above. From this greater insight not only into how relationships might occur would be forthcoming, but also a greater understanding of where the substantial risk of such relationships might lie. Access to SOCG members would possibly be best achieved through interaction with those incarcerated or undertaking probationary work, which would give the added benefit of the potential to explore the significance of the criminal justice system, and specifically prisons, to enabling potential terrorist and SOCG relationships.

An exploration of any ‘criminal code’ amongst SOCG members and commonality of standards that might exist would be very interesting. Exploring such ‘codes’ and what effect they might have on association to terrorism, and association to terrorism through the SOCG being deceived, would seem to be very worthwhile areas for exploration.
Diagrams

Figure 1, ‘The Crime Terror Continuum’, Makarenko (2004)

Bibliography


About the Author

Martin Gallagher is a serving Lothian and Borders Police Inspector, currently seconded to the Association of Chief Police Officers Scotland, where he is the national mutual aid manager. His background in policing is varied, but centres on the investigation of serious crime and illicit drug supply.