

Human Smuggling and Trafficking: An International Terrorist Security Risk?

By Jacob Townsend and Hayder Mili

INTERNATIONAL BORDERS ARE becoming more of a challenge for terrorists, encouraging stronger links to organized crime in the businesses of people smuggling and trafficking.¹ Quantitatively speaking, smuggled terrorists are dwarfed by the diffusion of ideology and training via the internet. They are, however, qualitatively much more significant, and the support rendered by organized crime makes them difficult to eliminate. This analysis will be of interest to law enforcement, national security agencies and policymakers in contributing to the threat assessment on the terrorism dimension of human smuggling and trafficking.

An Expanding Market

Since 2001, al-Qa`ida's infrastructure has weakened and many important cadres have been killed. Decentralization has resulted, and the contemporary counter-terrorism challenge posed by radical Islamism is one of identifying, disrupting and destroying operationally autonomous cells. International cooperation has frozen terrorist assets and impaired the operational procedures of groups attempting to organize globally. The coordination of migration databases² and widespread improvements in document security have raised the logistical demands for international terrorists. There is no doubt that training and indoctrination can occur without physical contact, notably via the internet; there is also no doubt, however, that this is inferior to face-to-

face instruction, certainly for training³ and probably for indoctrination. The best method for groups wanting cells in multiple countries is still to infiltrate a member, with recruiters directed at long-term development and operatives for specific attacks. The alternative is to establish a base in a safe haven and import recruits, requiring ex-filtration from target countries and subsequent re-infiltration. Even homegrown operatives need migration to undertake effective training. This centralized training option has become more difficult with greater pressure on safe havens. Nevertheless, travel for instruction continues, especially to Iraq and Afghanistan, which act as giant training centers. Recent examples are available in the Sinjar Records, documenting the movement of militants into Iraq, many steps of which must have involved illegal migration.⁴ One such route moves militants from Europe to Tangiers in Morocco and onward to Syria.⁵

In key areas for jihadist activity—such as the Middle East, Afghanistan, Pakistan and North Africa—cross-border community links remain useful and are often sufficient for infiltration. Entering the Western heartland is another matter. Relative to these higher barriers, terrorists have diminished mobility and benefit from the services of specialized networks. Forging documents and negotiating secure transport are challenges much easier to overcome with a network extending into the target territory. While terrorist groups may have contacts in much of the Western heartland, it has become rare for them to possess the expertise or access required to facilitate clandestine movement.⁶ By contrast, organized criminal groups have demonstrated proficiency in combining any or all

of the elements of forged documents, concealed transportation, corrupt officials and secure residence. Like terrorist groups, criminal networks have responded to law enforcement and globalization by decentralizing. Driven by profit, operating in illicit industries and against state power, such networks are economically efficient. Human smuggling and trafficking is a profitable business with strong and inelastic demand—in other words, any extra costs that criminal networks incur in developing and operating their expertise can be passed onto clients.

As the risks of international travel rise, terrorist groups are encouraged to move only in moments of necessity. Maintaining permanent capacities for irregular moments is inefficient. Organized criminal groups are better at organizing clandestine movement, they are available for hire and can be engaged with a high level of anonymity. Ultimately, the security of a terrorist's attempt to migrate is a question of their ability to pay.⁷

Masking Movements

Robbery, petty crime and trafficking in various goods⁸ are common means of subsistence for terrorist cells. Some have developed sophisticated divisions of labor under which one group runs criminal enterprises, while another plans and undertakes operations. A few include in their repertoire the forcible movement of people, such as described by a Tajik victim: "the mujahideen in Tajikistan routinely kidnap children and release them after extorting ransom, steal people's belongings, including their livestock."⁹ Terrorist kidnappings of foreigners or locals for ransom have increased in North Africa, while they have remained a constant in Iraq and Afghanistan.

1 Smuggling is the procurement, for material gain, of the illegal entry of someone into a state of which they are neither citizen nor resident. Trafficking is the movement of a person for exploitation, defined by a lack of consent. Smuggling is always transnational, whereas trafficking can also occur within a single state.

2 An example is the Regional Movement Alert System, created under the auspices of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation organization. It allows real-time sharing of passport data between the United States, New Zealand and Australia, with plans to incorporate new members.

3 The problems that terrorists face in training themselves with little expert assistance were demonstrated in the poor technical planning for the Glasgow and London attacks in 2007.

4 Joseph Felter and Brian Fishman, *Al-Qaida's Foreign Fighters in Iraq: A First Look at the Sinjar Records* (West Point, NY: Combating Terrorism Center, 2008).

5 Raphaël Mergui, "Les Islamistes passent par la route du Haschisch," *Marianne*, September 11, 2004.

6 Jihadist logistical support structures in Europe were significantly weakened following the anti-GIA campaign launched by French (and other European) law enforcement in the mid-1990s.

7 "The W-5 of Human Smuggling to Canada," RCMP Criminal Intelligence Directorate, October 2006. Such services do not come cheap; according to the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, fees to reach Canada from South-east Asia, for example, can reach US\$60,000.

8 Trafficked products have even included precious metals and endangered species. See Adrian Levy and Cathy Scott-Clark, "Poaching for Bin Laden," *Guardian*, May 5, 2007.

9 Ismail Khan, "How Tajik Boy Joined 'Jihad,'" *Dawn*, October 23, 2004; "Court Rejects Bail Plea of 10 Foreigners," *Dawn*, April 29, 2006.

With global annual profits in the billions of dollars, a slice of the illicit migration market is valuable to terrorists for finance alone.¹⁰ Throughout the 1990s, the Tamil Tigers were involved in human trafficking and smuggling to countries such as Canada. More recently, investigations into a Milan-based Ansar al-Islam network uncovered cells responsible for organizing safe houses, recruiting volunteers and raising upwards of a million euros smuggling Kurdish migrants into Europe.¹¹ These funds were then reinvested into smuggling around 200 militants in the opposite direction, from Europe into Iraq.

Terrorists also use people-moving connections for operational purposes. In Belarus and Ukraine, border guards describe networks used to smuggle Chechen militants out of Russia through the western Commonwealth of Independent States region. The same officials readily admit that it is often impossible to determine the country of origin of illegal migrants for repatriation since they almost never carry any documentation.

In Portugal, the national intelligence service observed a regular pattern of terrorist fundraising through drug trafficking, theft and illegal immigration operations.¹² An Italian example of criminal cooperation for terrorist migration involved three persons convicted in May 2005 of providing al-Qa`ida members in Europe and the Middle East with support, including the provision of false documents. Belgium is considered a major hub for human smuggling to England and onward to the United States, with extremist groups exploiting connections between Indian/Pakistani people smuggling networks and Islamic fundamentalists. An important route reportedly runs from India through Uzbekistan, Moscow, Ukraine, Slovakia, Austria, Italy and Belgium.¹³ Long-distance smuggling

routes are more often than not circuitous and change frequently to avoid detection. The modus operandi varies within and between routes. Some border controls may be completely circumvented, while others require fraudulent documents and an international flight; others require a bribe. At present, terrorists are more likely to circumvent borders than attempt to claim refugee status, as was the case in the past.

Servants or Sympathizers?

While criminality gives financial autonomy to a terrorist cell, it places greater stress on anonymity and the capacity to plan terrorism. It also brings terrorists into more frequent contact with criminal networks. Terrorists' financial aims are only slightly higher than subsistence and they tend toward small-scale criminality or retailing for organized crime. For example, extremists in Central Asia increasingly rely on organized crime to import heroin from Afghanistan, finding it more efficient and secure to concentrate on retailing.¹⁴

Criminals have varying levels of knowledge when smuggling terrorists. On the one hand, if terrorists conceal their identity, criminals may be more willing to offer services. On the other hand, if terrorists can cultivate a sympathetic criminal network, it may increase operational security. Ethnic and cultural links between terrorists and criminals facilitate cooperation but are not necessary when the profit motive is at work. Nevertheless, for terrorists whose priority is infiltration and secrecy, collaboration with criminal outfits that share a language and/or culture is preferable, while human smugglers generally "recruit" within their own ethno-cultural group. Some criminal groups or individuals may, out of ethnic/cultural loyalty, even partially sympathize with terrorists' aspirations. Notably, symbiosis can emerge in prison, where extremists convert fellow inmates.¹⁵

In Morocco, one recently apprehended terrorist cell had prepared human smuggling rings in anticipation of attacks. The networks were set to intervene immediately following the operation to remove the operatives to Europe or the Middle East (Egypt, Tunisia and Libya). This suggests a high degree of collusion, or at least that the criminal group had some understanding of its clients.¹⁶ Similar relationships developed between the Armed Islamic Group (GIA) and Algerian criminals during the 1990s in both Algeria and France.¹⁷ In Central Asia, an ex-member of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan explained that he had used Iranian drug traffickers to move him through the Iranian city of Mashaad.¹⁸

Some organized criminal groups pursue specific industries, while some diversify heavily. In August 2005, arrests linked to a plot during the pope's funeral suggested that terrorists can benefit from the ability to use criminal links for multiple purposes. Notably, weapons for the operation—missile launchers and explosives—were to be trafficked to Europe using human smuggling routes through Slovenia and the northeastern Italian port of Trieste.¹⁹ The implications of this type of smuggling for international security are clear, especially taking into account the stated aim by terrorist groups to use weapons of mass destruction.

Trafficked for Terrorism?

More sinister than terrorists using people smuggling to transport themselves is utilizing those same networks for unwitting recruitment. Human trafficking is movement without consent and generally occurs to service illicit labor markets. Emerging evidence suggests that terrorist groups may

10 The ILO estimated \$31.6 billion of annual profit in trafficked persons alone. See Patrick Belser, *Forced Labour and Human Trafficking: Estimating the Profits* (Geneva: International Labour Office, 2005).

11 Lorenzo Vidino, "Jihad from Europe," *Journal of International Security Affairs*, September 27, 2005.

12 "International Jihadist Networks are a Threat to Portugal: Report," Agence France-Presse, March 30, 2006.

13 Centre for Equal Opportunities and Opposition to

Racism, July 2007; *Knack*, July 11, 2007.

14 Personal interviews, Tajik and Kyrgyz law enforcement, September 19, 2005, June 29 and July 1, 2006.

15 Cecilia Gabizon, "De plus en plus de détenus tentes par l'islamisme Radical," *Le Figaro*, May 2, 2005; International Crisis Group, "'Deradicalisation' and Indonesian Prisons," November 19, 2007.

16 Abdelhak Najib and Karim Serraj, "Le Trafic de Drogue, L'émigration Clandestine et le Terrorisme Islamiste," *La Gazette du Maroc*, February 9, 2004.

17 The above examples notwithstanding, it should be assumed that most criminal groups would shun the heightened law enforcement attention this type of activity would bring.

18 Kathy Gannon, "Uzbeks Find Their Way Home Through Network of Terrorist Trails," Associated Press, June 12, 2005.

19 Center for Strategic and International Studies, *Transnational Threats Update* 3:10 (2005); "Italy, Croatia Jointly Foil Group's Suspected Plan for Attack in Italy—Press," BBC Monitoring European, August 26, 2005.

traffic children to obtain new, pliant recruits—a common form of recruitment in many conflicts across Africa. Jihadists now seem to have adopted the tactic, at least in Waziristan. Lieutenant General Safdar Hussain, who leads Pakistan's hunt for al-Qa`ida militants in northwestern Pakistan, reported to Radio Free Europe the presence of young foreigners, "boys whose average age is 16 or 17 years, and it is my assessment that most of them have either been kidnapped or they were sold...and after bringing them here, these [boys] are used for terrorism."²⁰ Whether smuggled or trafficked, most youths are reported to come from Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and northern Afghanistan.²¹

Responses

Some governments have become concerned about people smuggling as a potential national security menace. Moving from cognition to action is crucial, however, and much more research and analysis is needed in this area.

Collaboration and cross-pollination between terrorists and criminals create opportunities for clandestine terrorist movement. Criminal involvement in smuggling terrorists is a small subset of terrorist-criminal interaction. Clandestine movements by terrorists comprise a tiny sub-set of illegal immigration. Many more people are exposed to jihadist propaganda and training via the internet than undertake migration to receive or impart instruction. The movement of terrorists and trainees, however, has a special importance for global jihadism. It enables the most powerful processes of conversion from a disgruntled individual to a radicalized and capable terrorist. It is also the means of placing a team in a target country prior to a planned attack. These movements are sharp, deadly needles in the haystacks of global migration and terrorist-criminal collaboration.

Disrupting terrorist smuggling networks may require stiffer penalties for smugglers in key transit regions

such as the CIS and more awareness-raising of the threat convergence among law enforcement agencies in the West, particularly border staff. An important improvement would be strong cooperation between counter-terrorism units and people-smuggling teams—in the reverse direction to that usually imagined. For defensive purposes, it is important for counter-terrorism

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agencies to inform immigration agencies of terrorist identities. Yet, for proactive counter-terrorism, it is crucial that immigration agencies are sensitized to the possibility of unidentified or disguised terrorists swimming in the sea of “ordinary” people smuggling. Sensitization is particularly important as intelligence agencies become more involved in monitoring and disrupting smuggling networks, which risks solidifying a one-way information flow from intelligence agencies to law enforcement/immigration. The latter remain more comprehensively involved in irregular migration and need to guard against passivity in assessing the counter-terrorism intelligence significance of people smuggling and trafficking. They must understand that they are not just implementing agencies for counter-terrorism, but also information generators.

Improvements should be extended to origin countries, including greater interoperability between databases and capacity-building in areas like document fraud and immigration data analysis. Caution is warranted, however, in securitizing further the issues of labor migration and trafficking. Many countries are responding overly aggressively, in the process compromising the intelligence value of migrants arrested. Human smuggling is more than a law enforcement or labor migration challenge. Transnational crime is a national security threat in its relationship to terrorism (as well

as other reasons). A migrant worker looking for a better life should not be confused with terrorists infiltrating, but the latter is clearly a danger.

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²⁰ Antoine Blua, “Central Asia: Pakistan Says Militants Kidnap Central Asian Boys For Training,” RFE/RL, December 2004.

²¹ Qudssia Akhlaque, “Hunt Launched for Key Militants,” *Dawn*, December 18, 2004.