Issue Brief
Know Your Enemy:
An Overview of Organized Crime Threat Assessments

There is increasing awareness within police forces and international organizations that organized crime is a growing threat to security. However, due to a lack of data and insufficient knowledge about illicit activities, criminal justice experts are often left chasing shadows. To rectify this problem, more attention has been devoted to developing and using organized crime threat assessments in recent years, particularly for use in vulnerable states that are less resistant to infiltration by criminals. This paper briefly considers the history of organized crime threat assessments, the process in which they have been produced and used, and criticisms that have been leveled against them. Finally, it considers their applicability to fragile and postconflict countries and the kind of requirements that would need to be fulfilled for threat assessments to be an effective tool against organized crime in such contexts.

Background

Organized crime threat assessments have been used by several countries and a limited number of regional and international bodies as a mechanism to understand and respond to organized crime. Threat assessments attempt to gather a range of relevant data and present it in a systematic way to determine current and future trends in organized criminal activity.

While they have mainly been applied at the country level, more recently, regional and global organized crime assessments have been conducted with the purpose of examining cross-border threats in greater detail. The process of assessing threats has not been without its critics and there have been a series of attempts to improve the efficacy and impact of assessments. These relate both to the process of producing them and the way in which their findings are debated and used.

More recently, the growth of organized crime as a consequence of globalization and its impact on a set of weak and vulnerable states has raised important questions as to whether such assessments can be a useful tool—not only to highlight the nature of the threat but also to ensure effective action against it. This presents several challenges, not least the need to bring multiple actors together and the fact that state structures usually tasked with carrying out the threat assessments are weak or nonexistent. In this context, threat assessments would need to be conducted by an external party, gathering information from both internal and external stakeholders.

Country-Level Assessments

As organized crime began to expand globally, several countries sought to develop a more strategic response in order to understand the challenge. This process was understandably driven from the law-enforcement perspective, but has involved a greater number of agencies over time. National-level threat assessments have generally sought to trace the linkages to international criminal networks, albeit through the lens of the impact on the reporting state. In other words, while the threat is transnational, the focus is on the country concerned.

This approach was pioneered in the United Kingdom, where an organized crime threat assessment has been conducted every year for the past decade. The resulting "United Kingdom Threat Assessment for Organised Crime" (UKTA) is a public document (although there is also an internal government version) geared at enabling the public to draw on its conclusions to protect themselves and their property. The UKTA also includes a methodology for estimating harm from organized crime in the physical, social, environmental, economic, and structural spheres, at the individual, community, and national level.[1] This framework could be usefully extrapolated to other contexts, including, with some adjustments, postconflict environments.

The UKTA is regarded as being part of the overall intelligence model of the United Kingdom and its conclusions are presented at the highest levels of government, bringing together a range of other departments and agencies. The result has been several strategic plans to combat organized crime. The most comprehensive attempt was published in 2011 and took a long-term approach to fighting organized crime, one that included achieving better coordination among government actors.[2]

The UK threat assessment can claim some credit for the spread of the idea more widely in Europe. Threat assessments (and various strategies) have been completed in Belgium, the Czech Republic, Germany, the Netherlands, and Sweden. Several Italian state institutions produce annual reports on organized crime, although there appears to be no single national-level assessment. Further afield, Australia and Canada have adopted a similar process to that of the United Kingdom.

In the United States, organized crime threat assessments have followed a different trajectory. In 2007 the Department of Justice published an "International Organized Crime Threat Assessment" that focused on the development of a new strategy for tracking organized crime, including by examining global trends as they impacted on the United States. A National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) of organized crime was conducted in 2009, following the same methodology used for preparing such estimates on other national security issues. The results remain classified.

The use of organized crime threat assessments is more limited in transitional and developing countries. The author was involved in the development of a methodology for conducting such a survey in South Africa. The results were not published and the process has been repeated on several occasions since. Its findings also fed into an overall crime-fighting strategy, although more work remains to be done on measuring whether government interventions have had a real impact on crime as a result.

There has been a notable reluctance in several other transitional and developing countries to embark on organized crime threat assessments. In discussions with officials, the reasons for not doing so are broadly said to be the following:

- the lack of analytical capacity;
- the dearth of available information (although ironically this is arguably a reason for conducting an assessment); and
- the reality that politicians (some of whom may be involved in organized crime) would not welcome such a document.

Organized crime threat assessments have, however, been published by think tanks to promote discussion about the extent of and appropriate response to organized crime. For example, the International Peace Institute has published a threat assessment of organized crime in Kenya and the

---

1 Serious Organised Crime Agency, "The United Kingdom Threat Assessment of Organised Crime 2009/10," London, 2009, p. 69.
2 HM Government, "Local to Global: Reducing the Risk from Organised Crime," 2011, available at
    www.homeoffice.gov.uk/publications/crime/organised-crime-strategy .

Center for the Study of Democracy, based in Sofia, has published a threat assessment for Bulgaria.[3]

There is a strong argument to be made that such assessments would greatly benefit technical-assistance processes by determining the priority areas for external assistance. Taken in a constructive sense, they can be considered as a gap analysis or a needs assessment. In Bulgaria, the Center for the Study of Democracy has engaged in an active campaign to argue for the production of such an assessment to assist policymaking in this regard.[4] Nevertheless, there is some way to go before threat assessments form an institutionalized part of technical assistance. Conducting assessments in fragile and postconflict states would be an important step in this direction, given the urgent requirements for assistance in such contexts.

Because of the transnational nature of modern organized crime, national threat assessments have their limitations. There is therefore a growing tendency to take a wider perspective, either regional or global, focusing on groups, markets, and trends.

Crossing Borders

At the regional level, Europol has begun to produce an "Organised Crime Threat Assessment" (OCTA) for the European Union (EU), which draws on information held both by the organization and external country partners. The document is publicly released and is specifically designed to assist strategic decision makers in the prioritization of organized crime threats. The EU OCTA remains the only significant threat assessment produced by a regional organization. In 2006 a joint organized crime threat assessment conducted by Canada and the United States was completed and made public.[5]

In Southern Africa, the Institute for Strategic Studies produced a regional threat assessment for the Southern African Regional Police Chiefs Cooperation Organisation (SARPCCO).[6] There appears to have been some unhappiness among SARPCCO officials about the way in which the report was made public, illustrating the sensitivity involved in agreeing upon and conducting an effective and transparent process around such assessments (see below).[7] A limited number of global (but now dated) assessments of organized crime have been published by academic think tanks.[8]

The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) has sought to use regional and global assessments as a mechanism for highlighting the challenge of cross-border organized crime. The work began some years back with a focus on collecting information on different criminal groups to produce a global picture. The available data collected from countries was not sufficient to achieve this, so the office published a set of typologies of organized crime groups instead.[9] Early threat assessments for West Africa and Central Asia shifted to an approach that draws on information about individual criminal groups as well as publicly-sourced, secondary information.

UNODC's approach now focuses on criminal markets as the most effective target for analysis, and the organization has completed a global threat assessment of organized crime, as well as a regional study of West Africa.[10] In the latter case, there is agreement that such a study will be produced on a yearly basis to monitor trends. Regional threat assessments are also underway in several other places, most notably East Africa and East Asia.

An Evolving Concept

The variety and growth of publications focusing on assessments at national, regional, or governmental level has been useful in highlighting the challenges

---

3 Peter Gastrow, "Termites at Work: Transnational Organized Crime and State Erosion in Kenya," New York: International Peace Institute, September 2011. Center for the Study of Democracy, *Organized Crime in Bulgaria: Market and Trends* (Sofia, 2007).

4 See Center for the Study of Democracy, "Introducing Organized Crime Threat Assessment," *Policy Brief* No. 24, June 2010.

5 Drug Enforcement Administration, Federal Bureau of Investigation, and Royal Canadian Mounted Police, "2006 Canada/US Organized Crime Threat Assessment," 2006, available at www.publicsafety.gc.ca/prg/le/_fl/2006_Canada-US_OC-TA_en.pdf .

6 Annette Hübschle, "Organised crime in Southern Africa: First annual review," SARPCCO and Institute for Security Studies, 2010.

7 Interview with SARPCCO officials, Harare, November 2010.

8 See Sabrina Adamoli, Andrea Di Nicola, Ernesto U. Savona, and Paola Zoffi, *Organised Crime Around the World* (Helsinki: European Institute for Crime Prevention and Control, 1998).

9 United Nations Centre for International Crime Prevention, "Assessing Transnational Organized Crime: Results of a Pilot Survey of 40 Selected Organized Criminal Groups in 16 Countries," *Trends in Organized Crime* 6, No. 2 (Winter 2000): 44-92.

10 United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), *The Globalization of Crime: A Transnational Crime Threat Assessment* (Vienna, 2010). UNODC, *Transnational Trafficking and the Rule of Law in West Africa: A Threat Assessment* (Vienna, 2009).

posed by organized crime. It has also generated a debate as to the accuracy and use of threat assessments.

While their use has expanded relatively quickly over the last decade, organized crime threat assessments are not yet standard practice, particularly in developing countries. As organized crime continues to constitute a key challenge to states, the methodology and strategic function of threat assessments become more important. The World Bank's most recent *World Development Report* argues for a greater focus on understanding and responding to the challenges of crime and violence in developing and fragile states.[11] Several recent meetings of developing-country officials and police chiefs have also argued for more effective information on strategic trends to guide policy making and resource allocation.[12]

In the developed world, the concept of organized crime threat assessments continues to evolve, particularly in the sphere of policy development. They are used primarily as a strategic tool to ensure a "whole-of-government" approach to countering organized crime. They are particularly useful for exposing the challenge of tackling organized crime to a broader policy debate, especially one that draws in a wider number of stakeholders. If produced regularly, they hold the prospect of being excellent monitoring tools.

While arguments for their wider use are now common, these have been accompanied by a debate about the quality and effectiveness of assessments where they have been applied. Six interconnected issues have been raised:

- *Unit of analysis:* Given the subject matter, threat assessments have struggled to focus on a clearly discernable unit of analysis. Should this be criminal groups themselves or the markets in which they operate? Initial threat assessments in South Africa, for example, published simple

numbers on more than 800 criminal groups, but the conclusion was quickly drawn that this did not, in itself, add value. A focus on criminal markets is now regarded as more useful and all threat assessments now take this approach, although significant questions remain as to the overall methodology and the sources.

- *Sources:* Given the wide variety of criminal markets that need to be covered and the fact that much of these activities are hidden, the use of some sources and statistics as opposed to others (as well as their subjective use) has been questioned.[13] More critically, many organized crime threat assessments also do not attribute the source of much of the data, particularly if it is drawn from internal law-enforcement files. Academic commentators in particular have argued that this makes the validity of threat assessments difficult to judge.

- *Too static:* Because criminals are opportunists, they adapt quickly. As a result, the shelf life of a threat assessment is relatively short. To be effective, threat assessments need to be done regularly, rather than as a one-off.

- *The involvement of external experts:* Producing threat assessments has largely been the work of police or criminal-intelligence staff with little outside input and based on unclear methodologies. A strong argument has been presented to make the process more transparent, involving outside analysts and academics and forms of data collection, such as community surveys, that strengthen the conclusions.[14]

- *Too narrow a focus:* The complaint is often raised that organized crime threat assessments—compiled by intelligence experts or crime analysts—fail to put the issue of crime into a broader context; namely, its impact on development, justice, and governance, not just on security.

---

11 The World Bank, *World Development Report 2011: Conflict, Security and Development* (Washington, DC, 2011).

12 See Jay Albanese, "Assessing Risk, Harm and Threat to Target Resources against Organized Crime: A method to identify the nature and severity of the professional activity of organized crime and its impacts (economic, social and political)," paper presented to the National Institute of Justice Expert Working Group at the conference, "Connecting International Organized Crime Research to Policy and Practice: The Strategic Context in the US and the UK," November, 2010. Regional programming workshops conducted by UNODC in the past two years have all concluded that the completion of a threat assessment is a requirement.

13 Peter Andreas, "The Politics of Measuring Illicit Flows and Policy Effectiveness," in *Sex, Drugs, and Body Counts: The Politics of Numbers in Global Crime and Conflict*, edited by Peter Andreas and Kelly M. Greenhill (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2010).

14 See, for example, National Institute of Justice (NIJ), "Connecting International Organized Crime Research to Policy and Practice: The Strategic Context in the US and the UK," summary of an NIJ-sponsored working group, November 2010, available at www.nij.gov/topics/crime/transnational-organized-crime/expert-working-group-report.htm .

- *Linking threat assessments to operational outcomes and policy:* Internally, within several governments, threat assessments have been regarded as bland statements of trends produced by isolated research departments without relevance to the day-to-day realities of operational law enforcement and policy. Or worse, they have been regarded as a political instrument to emphasize the extent of the threat or to highlight government responses without having any practical relevance. All of this demonstrates the importance of linking the process to policy making from the start.

These criticisms highlight a number of factors, related to both methodology and process, that are likely to be debated more vigorously in coming years. An evident lacuna lies in the lack of publicly-available and accepted set of guidelines around which organized crime threat assessments could be produced.

The most comprehensive publically-available guide to producing an organized crime threat assessment is produced by UNODC.[15] It contains an overview of the importance of threat assessments, guidance as to how the process should be conducted, and suggestions for translating threat assessments into strategies. It also contains some ideas about the kind of information that should be targeted, with a basic set of questions provided for some crime types as an example. The explicit objective of the publication is to highlight to national governments the importance of conducting an organized crime threat assessment and to show how the process should be conducted. It does not claim to provide a detailed set of guidelines for information collection and assumes a working set of institutions within the framework of a relatively stable political context.

Using Threat Assessments in Fragile States and Postconflict Countries

Organized crime threat assessments have had limited usage in fragile states and postconflict countries. The World Bank and UNODC published a threat assessment of organized crime in Afghanistan, but the situation at the time did not provide an opportunity for a wider debate about the use of the instrument in other postconflict environments.[16] Yet, a review of the development of threat assessments suggests that they may have particular currency in postconflict and fragile states for a number of reasons:

- There is not a good understanding of the extent or impact of organized crime in such contexts and the effect it may be having on peace processes. Organized crime in postconflict states has specific characteristics. There is no shared analysis, and there is a lack of clarity as to what to look for and what constitutes organized crime.

- There are multiple actors involved in international peace operations (both internal and external actors from different disciplines—political, military, law enforcement) who could benefit from a shared assessment of the challenge. Organized crime has implications that go beyond law enforcement and may be strongly connected to the overall success of political transitions in general.

- Since criminal groups can be spoilers in a peace process, and criminals exert considerably more leverage in fragile states because of weak rule of law, underdevelopment, and instability, keeping and building peace require a clear understanding of vulnerability to organized crime.

- Organized crime in fragile and conflict states has strong regional and international linkages that could be traced effectively. This suggests that any assessment must include a range of regional states which may not have information to judge the impact of organized crime in their own domestic context. A focus on one weak state may therefore have wider utility for its neighbors' understanding of the challenge.

- Threat assessments could be used as an effective tool for targeting and prioritizing technical assistance to counter organized crime in fragile and postconflict states. To date, development actors have been reluctant to pursue such forms

---

15 UNODC, *Guidance on the preparation and use of serious and organized crime threat assessments: The SOCTA Handbook* (New York: United Nations, 2010).

16 Mark Shaw, "Drug Trafficking and the Development of Organized Crime in Post-Taliban Afghanistan," in *Afghanistan's Drug Industry: Structure, Functioning Dynamics, and Implications for Counter-Narcotics Policy*, edited by Doris Buddenberg and William A. Byrd (World Bank and UNODC, 2006).

of assistance, in part because the impact of organized crime and related forms of illicit trafficking is not well understood. To achieve this, assessments must be in a position to show the impact of organized crime on development and community security.

Organized crime threat assessments constitute a useful mechanism to address all of these issues at the strategic level. The challenge, however, is that there is little or no guidance available to peacekeeping operations, bilateral development partners, and governments as to what such an assessment should look for and what form it should take. This suggests, at the very least, the following conclusions:

- A standardized set of methodologies, trainings, and guidelines should be developed and tested for the specific conditions in postconflict states.

- A cross-section of experts needs to be involved in finalizing the guidelines, as well as the assessments themselves.

- Assessments should be conducted as a joint effort by multiple players and not exclusively as a law-enforcement project.

- Assessments should make use of community-based surveying and information collection to determine both the dynamics of illicit trafficking and its impact.

- The process for applying the threat assessment to strategic planning and policy should be determined from the outset.

- The threat assessment should be repeated over time to monitor trends and improve methodologies.

- Threat assessments should be used as a tool to plan for the allocation of resources, to determine areas for technical assistance, and to measure progress.

In this way, practitioners will be better at identifying warning signs and better equipped to respond to the threat posed by organized crime, particularly in fragile states.

The **INTERNATIONAL PEACE INSTITUTE (IPI)** is an independent, international not-for-profit think tank with a staff representing more than twenty nationalities, with offices in New York, facing United Nations headquarters, and in Vienna. IPI is dedicated to promoting the prevention and settlement of conflicts between and within states by strengthening international peace and security institutions. To achieve its purpose, IPI employs a mix of policy research, convening, publishing, and outreach.

IPI

**INTERNATIONAL
PEACE
INSTITUTE**