



# SMALL WARS

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## JOURNAL

## Criminalization of the Syrian Conflict

By *[Asher Berman](#)*

Journal Article | *May 16 2012 - 3:46am*

As the civil war in Syria enters its second year, observers such as [Soner Cagaptay](#) at the Washington Institute of Near East Policy have been discussing how the conflict is likely to evolve as it continues to protract. The debate has revolved exclusively around the likelihood for increased radicalization within the opposition, which would provide a growing constituency for jihadist groups such as the al-Nusra Front. A second likely, and as yet ignored, development is an increased role for criminal networks on both sides of the conflict.

Organized crime played a major role in creating nearly insolvable insurgencies in both Iraq and Afghanistan, as the governments became hopelessly corrupt, and insurgents secured regular sources of weapons and cash. As time went on, it became difficult to differentiate between insurgents, criminals, and government officials, as the profit motive became at least as salient as political motives, creating a volatile mix of war, crime, and corruption. It is likely that the conflict in Syria will move in the same direction as the fighting continues.

### Government Side

The combined US, EU, Arab League sanctions have already had a profound effect on the functioning of the Syrian economy. Syria can no longer access the basic financial instruments needed for international trade, making it difficult to import vital products such as grain. In early May, [Reuters](#) reported that the regime now uses Lebanon as a front to handle transactions, allowing the government to import basic foodstuffs. This, however, is just the beginning.

As the international community moves to isolate dictators deemed particularly egregious, the offending dictators often use international criminal networks to get around sanctions, at times devolving into criminal states as seen in North Korea, Serbia, and Iraq. The decade of sanctions against Saddam Hussein turned Iraq's economy into a gangster's paradise as smugglers partnered with the government to move oil and other goods out and bring money in. In other cases, states partner with criminal groups not out of necessity but simply to turn a profit. In this model, the state does not establish centralized control over criminal activity but learns how to manipulate criminal organizations to extract funds. This model, known as the elite exploitation model, was exemplified in the relationship between the Mexican state and the drug cartels until 2000 when the Institutional Revolutionary Party was voted out of power after 71 years, leading to a decrease in corruption (and an attendant decrease in control over the cartels).

The Syrian regime has plenty of experience manipulating criminal activity for profit. During Syria's occupation of Lebanon, drug production and counterfeiting proliferated in the regions under its control. The regime was at times directly involved in criminal activity, or stayed on the fringes by offering protection to criminal groups. In 1987, the U.S. News and World Report stated that then-president Hafez al-Assad's brother, Rifaat, ran Syria's drug operations in Lebanon that brought in an estimated \$500

million per year, without which Syria's anemic economy would have barely stayed afloat.

Within Syria, a criminal/militia network known as the Shabiha, led by Alawite families connected to the Assad family, has controlled organized crime since the 1970s. The media has referred to the Shabiha in their role as street-level enforcers employed by the government to terrorize opposition neighborhoods and break-up protests, but they also control smuggling and the illicit antiquities trade. In the past, Shabiha leaders have even had their own ports.

Not only will the sanctions increase business opportunities for the Shabiha, the government will become more reliant on them, enhancing their influence. There opposition Local Coordination Committees have reported that the ability of the government to pay the Shabiha to intimidate the population has diminished, leaving the Shabiha to, in the words of Syrian dissenter Yassin al-Haj Salih, "self-fund through plundering..., treating the property of regular citizens as booty, legitimately obtained in the regime's war against society."

As the economic noose tightens around the regime, it is likely to turn to illicit networks to obtain the cash and materials it needs to continue prosecuting the war. As more money and goods flow through these groups in and out of Syria, they will become stronger, increasing the already high levels of corruption in Lebanon. Within Syria, criminals connected to the regime will also see their resources and power increase creating worrying trends for the post-Assad era.

### **Insurgent Side**

The link between insurgent groups and organized crime has long been a feature of intra-state conflict. Rebels often turn to criminal activity to obtain the weapons and funding they need to maintain the fight. This not only strengthens criminal groups in the vicinity of the conflict, but can also lead to a blurring of the lines between insurgent and criminal, as occurred in Iraq and continues in Afghanistan.

**Joseph Holliday at the Institute for the Study of War** pointed to the dramatic increase in black market weapon prices in countries neighboring Syria as evidence of both the link between weapons dealers and Syrian insurgents, as well as proof that the demand in Syria has not been met. Insurgents by their very nature exist in a shady underworld, and without state sponsorship they have to work with criminal groups in order to obtain arms. But do not expect Syrian insurgents to simply work with criminals. If the price of weapons is high, as Holliday established, insurgents will have to find means of generating revenue. In Iraq, insurgent groups raised funds through a mixture of smuggling, kidnapping, thieving, and extortion. The Tamil Tigers in Sri Lanka are well known for imposing a "revolutionary tax" on the Tamil population to fund their insurgency, and Hezbollah has long played a central role in Lebanon's drug trade.

This blurring of the lines between criminals and insurgents is likely to occur in Syria as well, as Syrian insurgents turn toward extortion, smuggling, and looting to raise funds. Last week, residents of Damascus reported to **Reuters** that car thefts have been increasing since the conflict began, sometimes for use in attacks by both insurgents and the government. The news site **Middle East Online** has reported looting of antiquities, both from museums and the sites of ancient cities. Meanwhile, government newspapers read as bulletins on insurgent criminal activity. The state, of course, has an interest in portraying any insurgent activity as criminal and in tracing any criminal activity to the insurgents, but surely some of the reports of kidnapping, stealing, and extortion are happening, and they would be in line with how modern insurgencies evolve.

As governments in the West stay on the sidelines for fear of being sucked into a messy conflict with complex ethnic and religious fault lines, Syrian society will see an increasing criminalization that may play a major role in how the post-Assad era unfolds.

## About the Author



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