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Organised Crime as Irregular Warfare:

Strategic Lessons for Assessment and Response

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Acronyms and abbreviations

ACE	Anti-Corruption Evidence
CISA	College of International Security Affairs
CVR	Community Violence Reduction
CGPCS	Contact Group on Piracy off the Coast of Somalia
COA	Course of Action
CBP	Customs and Border Protection
FARC	Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia
FCDO	Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office
IAP	Integrated Advisory Panel
IW	Irregular Warfare
KWS	Kenya Wildlife Service
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
PRT	Provincial Reconstruction Team

Summary

The project uses decades of lessons and experience gained in irregular warfare (IW) – and in counterinsurgency in particular – to assist assessment and response to organised crime. Whereas recent experience with counterinsurgency in Iraq and Afghanistan presents mostly cautionary tales, tremendous insight can be gained from the scholarship and precedents that emanate from the broader field. Specifically, IW theory helpfully situates divergent or illicit behaviour within a political context, treating the 'threat actor' not as an isolated problem but as a symptom of a socioeconomic-political system that must also be understood and addressed. Treating legitimacy as the strategic centre of gravity, IW focuses attention on the political drivers of illicit behaviour, the contested narratives among the actors involved, and the need – therefore – for a far broader response than is typically employed.

The project applies this contribution of IW theory to the problem of organised crime, emphasising thereby the role of *its* indispensable context: how societies work, how governance and economic practice become corrupted, and how states can react, both to suppress the problem of crime but also to address its root causes. Six lessons from IW are identified, touching upon i) the social embeddedness of the problem, ii) the tendency to militarise our response, iii) the mirror-imaging of state assistance programmes, iv) the role of community mobilisation, v) the lack of strategy, and vi) the problem of political will. On this basis, a follow-on study seeks to adapt a framework for assessment and action previously elaborated for irregular challenges to the specific problem of organised crime, thereby to assist in analysis and response.

1. Introduction

Organised crime both preys upon and caters to human need. It is corrosive and exploitative, but it is empowering, which is also why it is so pervasive. Indeed, though mostly out of sight, organised crime is everywhere: wherever governments draw the line, criminal actors find profitable ways of crossing it; wherever governments fail to deliver on human need, criminal actors capitalise on their desire or despair. For those excluded from the political economy, from patronage systems or elite bargains, organised crime can offer opportunity, possibly also protection. On aggregate, the associated activity amounts to an illicit form of governance, furnishing alternative services to a wide range of clients, be they the vulnerable and weak or a covetous elite. Reflecting the strength and resilience of this illicit order, those who stand in it way – individuals, institutions, even states – find themselves corrupted, co-opted, or violently eliminated.

The wide variety of organised crime, its clandestine nature, and its blending of creative and destructive effects present acute analytical and policy-related challenges. Faced with this complexity, efforts to assess and respond to this phenomenon often adopt a narrow focus on the scourge itself, with inadequate attention paid to its social and political drivers and the functions it performs. Seeking to demonstrate resolve, yet uncertain of how to proceed, policymakers jump to template solutions to 'deal with the problem', rather than query what might be most appropriate for the context at hand. Strategies for countering organised crime therefore tend toward the reactive and palliative, producing cycles of desperation that ultimately benefit those who feed on despair.

Common to organised crime, our response to terrorism since 9/11 has been stymied by 1) conceptual uncertainty of the problem at hand; 2) an urge to address the violence head-on without acknowledging its socioeconomic-political context; and, therefore, 3) unquestioned pursuit of strategies that miss the point, and whose progress is difficult to measure, and which may even be counterproductive. In the case of counterterrorism, *irregular warfare* has emerged as a corrective, in that it seeks to place the terroristic violence within its essential *political* context and as a component of a broader struggle of *legitimacy*. Casting the problem in this manner encourages a broader and politically informed counter.

Might the lens of irregular warfare be helpful also to our understanding of organised crime? Much like terrorism and insurgency, organised crime has a clandestine component but survives due to the functions and tangible benefits it provides to desperate populations with few other options. Though organised crime is not consciously political in its ideological motivation, it is – like insurgency – deeply political in its origins, activities, and effects. Also, much like insurgency, organised crime is oppositional to the rule of law and feeds on the state's weaknesses and vulnerabilities. Going further, organised crime and insurgency both expose deep cracks in an international system supposedly governed by benevolent state actors exercising sovereign control of their peoples and lands. Thus, much like our efforts to counter terrorism and insurgency, interventions to counter organised crime must also operate

both in the underground and above ground, must both counter a threat and address its drivers, and must proceed with far greater awareness of what constitutes success – and for whom.

Based on these commonalities, this report explores the insight of IW to the study of and response to organised crime. The argument is divided into four parts. First, the paper makes the case that, despite key differences, organised crime shares fundamental features with other types of irregular challenges, principally insurgency. Second, the paper lays out six major lessons of irregular warfare, informed by the bruising campaigns associated with the so-called 'War on Terror'. Third, the paper applies these hard-earned lessons to various state efforts to counter organised crime, so as to assess their relevance and contribution. The analysis challenges how organised crime is typically understood – its character, expression, and purpose – and encourages a different and more politically informed way of assessing and responding to this problem.

On the basis of the overlap established in this report, between irregular warfare and organised crime, a follow-on study will propose an analytical framework for how to assess problems of organised crime and design appropriate strategies (see Ucko & Marks, 2020). This framework is based upon previous research by the project leads into the lessons of irregular warfare and could, with minimal alteration, help inform more strategically informed approaches to organised crime. The concluding section of this report provides an idea of what to expect and opens a door to further research.

2. The overlap: organised crime and irregular warfare

Much like terrorism, organised crime is at once easy to intuit but difficult to define. The issue is not that there is no definition, but rather that there are so many. If policymakers can be accused of adopting an all-too narrow focus on the criminal behaviour itself, academics often over-theorise the concept to the point of irrelevance. For the purposes of this paper, *organised crime* is defined as *any group, with some degree of structure, whose primary objective is profit and whose methods include illegal activity, the use or threat of violence, and the corruption of public officials*. This definition captures some of the phenomenon's key components: its i) collective action; ii) pecuniary objective; iii) violent ways; and iv) corrupting and exploitative effects.

Given these components, it is easy to see how organised crime can nest conceptually within the rubric of irregular warfare. The U.S. Department of Defense defines irregular warfare as 'a struggle among state and non-state actors to influence populations and affect legitimacy'; it adds that 'IW favors indirect and asymmetric approaches, though it may employ the full range of military and other capabilities, in order to erode an adversary's power, influence, and will' (U.S. Department of Defense, 2020, p. 2). Irregular warfare is predominantly concerned with nonstate armed groups, desperate to find a way forward against mighty states and the resources they can harness. Accordingly, in the military theory, irregular warfare subsumes the missions of fostering and countering insurgencies, counterterrorism, and stability operations. In other words, irregular warfare is, much like organised crime, concerned with i) collective actors, that ii) use violence among other methods; and which have iii) corrupting, or outright destructive effects on society.

IW contributes to the understanding of insurgency and terrorism by positing these threats as components of a contest for legitimacy, wherein violence merely supports a political struggle. In contrast to the 'regular wars' that, supposedly, are won just through military means, irregular actors employ several lines of effort all at once, weaponise narratives to gain or erode support, and exploit societal, economic, and political weaknesses to build strength and sustain the challenge. Power is a function of credibility, influence, and legitimacy – not just military hardwire or manpower. This is the playbook of insurgents, forcing governments to respond in kind, via political and informational channels and with security forces in support (Ucko & Marks, 2020, pp. 6–13).

The major difference between organised crime and IW actors is the objective: be they insurgents or terrorist, practitioners of irregular warfare pursue a political or ideological objective whereas organised criminals seek profit. Even so, actors involved in organised crime intentionally shape the surrounding political landscape (through corruption, the erosion of institutions, and the insistence on impunity) so as to enable their trade. In doing so, the organised criminal element is, in effect, engaging in a 'struggle among state and non-state actors to influence populations and affect legitimacy'. Their goal is to shape behaviour in line with their business model, creating in that manner a political alternative to the laws and norms proposed by the state.

The conceptual overlap goes further. In 1992, Abadinsky laid out an influential list of attributes to describe organised criminal groups; they are, he suggested, non-ideological, hierarchical, monopolistic, have limited or exclusive membership, operate in perpetuity, use illegal violence and bribery, demonstrate specialisation or a division of labour, and are governed by explicit rules and regulations (Abadinksy, 1992, p. 5). Though certainly ideological, insurgent groups share the rest of these characteristics. Going further, both criminal organisations and insurgent groups operate above ground and clandestinely all at once, using either side of the law to extend their power. Their challenge to the writ of the state also results in an alternative, or illicit, order that displaces the formal rule of law and determines 'who gets what, and when' – the very essence of politics (Lasswell, 1958).

If organised criminal actors share key traits with insurgents, it follows that there are also commonalities in how to respond. In invoking counterinsurgency theory as a crime-fighting tool, a crucial caveat is immediately needed, given the military connotations of this term. The point is not to militarise further the response to organised crime – a response that already tends to be overwhelmingly suppressive in its logic. Instead, it is important to recall that **counterinsurgency *in its theory* is not a military but a political activity**. Supplanted to the problem of organised crime, counterinsurgency would frame this phenomenon as fuelled by specific political and social drivers which must, alongside the group itself, be addressed – perhaps as the primary focus. In a very similar vein, the purpose of irregular warfare (despite its allusion to war) is to position the competition of legitimacy and influence over contested populations as the primary concern, and the violence as a contingent component of the overall struggle.

In Clausewitzean terms, legitimacy is the 'center of gravity' in irregular warfare – it is the 'focal point of force and movement, upon which the larger whole depends' (Echevarria, 2007, p. 182). This finding stems from IW's central concern with politics and the ability to control or co-opt contested populations. Similarly, in organised crime, the battle for control and co-options speaks powerfully to the 'beliefs and attitudes of the affected actors regarding the normative status of a rule, government, political system or governance regime' (Schmelzle, 2012, p. 7). This – in effect – is the definition of legitimacy, or 'the belief that existing political institutions are the most appropriate or proper ones for the society' (Lipset, 1983, p. 64).

The discussion of legitimacy requires two clarifications. First, the state cannot in any way assume that it holds legitimacy merely because it is 'duly constituted' or has legal status. The tendency to view the state unquestioningly as a benefactor and provider, and its enemies as the main or only threats, wishes away the very heart of the problems: a lack of government legitimacy; split loyalties among the population; and contested governance among a range of actors. Legitimacy is subjective, fluid, contextual, and contested; nothing can be taken for granted.

Second, legitimacy in irregular warfare is not a popularity contest. As Stathis Kalyvas explains in terms of 'geographic loyalty', coercive power can trump political and social preferences; those who control territory and populations – those who decide who lives or dies – can usually muster the cooperation they need (Kalyvas, 2006, pp. 111–145). The point, however, is that it is easier to sustain control if coercion is in some way balanced by co-option so that resistance to the project is reduced or turned into support.

Regardless of how control is achieved, gaining legitimacy means more than just 'being liked'; it also requires a self-interested calculation that such loyalty is likely to pay off. This is, indeed, what is meant by winning both hearts *and* minds.

This framing informs the official military, or 'doctrinal', definition of counterinsurgency as a set of 'comprehensive civilian and military efforts designed to simultaneously defeat and contain insurgency *and address its root causes*' (Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2018, p. xiii). The term 'root causes' has, can, and should elicit healthy discussion of what mobilises individuals and groups into violence – or crime. Regardless, counterinsurgency – as an IW mission – denotes *armed reform*, or *armed politics*, where the security component exists only to support a political process out of war. Transposed to the world of organised crime, this lens would encourage a twin focus not just on the criminal activity itself but also on its deep and variegated enmeshment within a particular social and political order.

3. Afghanistan and the lessons of irregular warfare

So much for the theory. It is no secret that counterinsurgency, as practised by the United States and its NATO allies in the last two decades, does not quite adhere to the ideals laid out in military doctrine (or the manuals it writes to tell itself how to operate). It would be facile to suggest that the theory remains valid even if practice falls short; such an approach shields theory from criticism and generates assertions that cannot be falsified. The better source of insight lies precisely in the accumulated experience from the field – ours and that of others, both negative and positive. What, then, are the lessons?

3.1. The socioeconomic and political context

It became clear soon after the 9/11 attacks that the United States and many of its European allies had unlearned whatever they might once have known about irregular warfare, particularly the matter at hand: terrorism. In responding to attacks by al-Qaeda, no real distinction was made between the use of terrorism *as part of a strategy* and the use of terrorism *as a strategy in and of itself*. As Wieviorka and others have argued, most groups use terror as one of many 'methods', yet for others it becomes all-consuming, that is, it becomes the 'logic' of the political project being pursued (Wieviorka, 1995). We can term the former set of actors *insurgents* and the latter *terrorists*; in the end, the labelling is secondary to the implications raised, particularly for the response.

Indeed, with *terrorism* (also known as 'pure terrorism'), armed politics is divorced from the purported mass base in whose name action is undertaken. These groups have so isolated themselves that they have no social standing and can only express themselves via attacks – one after the other, with no socioeconomic or political follow-up or legitimacy gained. In such circumstances – really a 'failed insurgency' – the state can focus on the perpetrators themselves because these clandestine actors are the sum total of the movement. With *insurgency*, however, a focus on rooting out 'the terrorists', to the exclusion of finding political solutions to sources of conflict, often leads to new cycles of violence that the operationally astute challenger will exploit to mobilise additional support (Marks & Brar, 2016, pp. 483–484). With insurgency, it also becomes important to understand the functions that insurgency serves among its constituents and to design a response that addresses these aspects of its strategy along with its use of violence.

The American-led response to the 9/11 attacks seldom differentiated between these two forms of terrorism. The 'War on Terror', sophisticated efforts notwithstanding, did little to address the reasons for isolated yet significant pockets of support for al-Qaeda or the factors that might spread it further.[1] As Lindholm and Zúquete convincingly argue, this

[1] A Pew Poll taken in 2013, for instance, revealed that more than 15% of those polled in Egypt, Tunisia, Indonesia, the Palestinian territories and Malaysia had a 'favorable' view of al-Qaeda. See Andrew Kohut & James Bell (2013).

was not just a terrorist group; its self-proclaimed 'jihad' exploited a transnational social movement and propelled its concerns onto the global stage, awakening, extending, and radicalising a pre-existing network (Lindholm & Zúquete, 2010). Yet not only was the 'War on Terror' negligent of al-Qaeda's *focoist* insurgent approach to strategy, it was also conducted in a bullish manner that all but ensured the empowerment of al-Qaeda's counter-hegemonic ideology (Payne, 2011).

This problematic approach to insurgency characterised early operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. In the latter, US forces were thought they had defeating the Taliban and then faced the far more difficult tasks of addressing the continued instability in the country, never mind the geo-strategic factors that allowed the Taliban to reassert itself. In Iraq, for several years following the overthrow of Saddam Hussein, the US military treated the insurgency as if its members were both finite and few – as if enough operations to round up former regime 'dead-enders' would surely do the job (Pollack, 2006). US troops confined to large forward operating bases launched discrete raids to 'kill capture' suspected insurgents, but gains made in this manner did nothing to change the political motivation for insurgency nor the opportunity for continued mobilisation (Ricks, 2007, 2010). Incidentally, the US drone programme has followed a similar logic, that 'if only we can get enough of these bastards, we'll win the war' (Coll, 2014).

Missed in all these contexts were the political and social drivers of insurgency. The purpose of security forces should be to provide the shield behind which the government enacts the reforms necessary to mobilise support and gain legitimacy, thereby marginalising violent hardliners. This attempt at social engineering, all while bullets are flying, is also what makes counterinsurgency so difficult – some have compared it to the 'graduate level of war'. In many cases, political elites are more interested in retaining political power and privilege than undertaking the political or social reforms deemed necessary for success. Even where there is political will, and the right reforms have been identified, one cannot underestimate the challenges of sequencing, of balancing short- and long-term goals, of pushing change through a bureaucratic system, and of measuring progress appropriately; and yet these are often the steps needed to address entrenched rebellion and social strife. Needless to say, all of this is compounded in settings where the state is weak or never truly exercised sovereign control to begin with.

3.2. Militarisation of response

Counterinsurgency theory emerged as a corrective to the narrower counter-terrorist lens of the 'War on Terror'. Even so, a review of the application of that theory throughout the 2000s and 2010s reveals a tendency to militarise even our 'whole-of-government' endeavours. In Iraq and Afghanistan, counterinsurgency was executed in a way that, at best, shaped only *military* operations. The very label, *counterinsurgency*, was problematic, as it brought in associations with military campaigning rather than political action. Outside the Pentagon (and even within the Pentagon, if for different reasons), there were minimal appetite and resources to carry the political centre, which made the military efforts a 'moon without a planet to orbit' (Sewell, 2007, p. xl).

The militarisation of counterinsurgency deprived the campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan of political content, leading to the failure of mostly military 'surges' in both theatres. In

Iraq, despite improving security, the United States never truly addressed the sectarian Shia elements it had anointed as the future leaders of the country (Ucko, 2008). This political contradiction undid the hard-won military gains of the surge and fuelled schisms and violent conflict well beyond the departure of US troops (Parker, 2012; Simon, 2008). The jury is still out as to whether the latest mowing of the grass – the military dismantling of the ISIS counter-state – will be politically sustained or have a far more transient effect (Heller, 2020).

In Afghanistan, no political plan emerged to address the conflict's regional dimension or to de-conflict the multitude of contradictory Western aims (Auerswald & Saideman, 2014; Noetzel & Scheipers, 2007; Stapleton & Keating, 2015). Despite a strategy that hinged on establishing the legitimacy of the Kabul government, efforts to address its corruption and the abuses of its security forces never took root. Similarly, the political plan constructed in the West paid scant attention to Afghan norms, resulting in a highly centralised national government that ran counter to the fragmented nature of the Afghan state. It did not help that, in both theatres, the United States gave counterinsurgency only two or three years to work, betraying faith in this concept as a quick military fix for deep-rooted political problems.

The charge of militarisation in the US and allied response should not be taken to mean the military has no role to play in countering political violence. There is a clear need for security forces in targeting predatory actors and in providing security for contested populations. The issue with counterinsurgency in practice, however, is that the former typically receives far more resources and attention than the latter, as strategies seek victory through repeated strikes rather than by changing conditions on the ground. Whatever their contribution, the deployment of military force must be linked with a viable political process that gives military activity strategic meaning. This usage may also call for military forces structured, equipped, and trained in new ways (Blaufarb, 1977; Ucko, 2009).

When the US Department of Defense published its National Defense Strategy in 2018, it included an annex on irregular warfare that sought to address precisely this lag in capability. As the Annex recognized, 'the United States entered irregular wars in Vietnam, Afghanistan, and Iraq unprepared'. The Annex therefore included a classified implementation plan for building up the required skills and mindset, but it also cautioned that 'the successful conduct of IW relies upon unified action with our U.S. interagency and multinational partners'. At present, it noted, 'structural divisions limit our ability to respond to non-military aspects of adversarial competition'. Changing this system will be very difficult, requiring deep-seated and radical reform – to budgets, authorities, and culture. And yet, as the Annex warns, 'We cannot assume unified action will occur on its own'; it must be deliberately pursued (U.S. Department of Defense, 2020, pp. 4–5).

3.3. Mirror-imaging: state, society, interests

A third lesson, from Afghanistan, Iraq, but also elsewhere, lies in the tendency to confuse the interests and norms of the intervening states with those of the state where the conflict is unfolding. Mirror-imaging takes many forms. Militarily, the US and allied

partners have typically evinced insufficient understanding of the abilities and needs of the institutions they seek to support. Unaware of local institutions and organisational culture, the assistance instead defaults to the norms and practices of the intervening institution, which may not be appropriate for the setting at hand (Hammes, 2015, p. 332). One problem, reflecting US military culture, is the reliance on high-technological capabilities as silver bullets for irregular warfare challenges. Elsewhere, the US military has provided operational advice based not on the requirements of the recipient force but on what constitutes military effectiveness for the United States. As Greentree notes, 'It is hard to get around the fact that militaries can only attempt to transfer what they know' (Greentree, 2013, p. 336).

This military dimension is emblematic of a broader political problem. It simply is not clear that the interests and objectives fuelling a Western intervention are matched by the local governments through which action is to be taken. Early in the occupation of Iraq, the United States presumed that both itself and the fledgling Baghdad government were united in seeking a representative democracy, all while the parties in charge were sponsoring radical Iran-backed militias (Diamond, 2013, p. 8). Following the surge, it quickly became clear that the Maliki regime had no interest in using the security gains achieved to reconcile with the Sunni tribal leaders and political elite (Negus, 2008). In Mali, the West has provided counterterrorism assistance in the belief that the political elite will move to spread 'good governance' in the areas most affected by extremism. Instead, it has proved extremely challenging to sway the 'indifferent political elite in Mali', which is perceived as doing 'the bare minimum ... to invest in the violence-wracked north and central regions of the country' (Devermont, 2019, p. 8).

In Afghanistan, a large part of the problem for NATO and the international community was the uncertainty of its own political aims and how to achieve them, with counter-terrorist prerogatives often conflicting with, or eclipsing entirely, efforts to support local institutions capable of sustaining peace and security (Lieven, 2007; Suhrke, 2008, p. 244). On that basis, it was never clear which goals, if any, enjoyed true buy-in in Kabul; certainly, Karzai's theft of the 2009 election and his government's close relationship to organised crime suggested significant differences of opinion on two of the campaign's major fronts (Whitlock, 2021). Given this brittle political foundation, NATO's mission too often devolved into peripatetic charity services in the rural hinterland in the hope of thereby winning hearts and minds (but for what?) (Fishstein & Wilder, 2012).

At the broadest level, this concerns not only divergent political interests but completely different conceptions of the state. In Nigeria, Mali and indeed most of the Sahel, in Mozambique, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and – in Asia – Pakistan, Afghanistan, and the Philippines, insurgencies drag on in part because the areas affected are not a core concern to the government. Efforts at 'state-building' do not often acknowledge this reality and instead assume a level of ownership that may not obtain.

Even in Colombia, where counterinsurgency helped beat back FARC, entrenched schisms in the state have hampered strategic progress; there are undeniably compelling arguments for any government to focus on the western sierra region, where the major cities are located and 95% of the population lives, rather than the more vulnerable minority, which resides in FARC's former stronghold and where violence, drug trafficking, and insecurity still prevail (Ucko, 2022, Chapter 3). Meanwhile, given the

lack of alternative livelihoods, the profits of the drug trade, and the power of local gangs, there are compelling arguments for the rural population to return to coca cultivation. Thus, the schism endures.

The case of Colombia raises the crucial question of whether it is possible to redeem the Weberian ideal of state in the median insurgency-affected country. The counterinsurgency effort there benefited from professional security forces, generous US military aid, and a tradition of democracy reaching all the way back to the late nineteenth century. Even then, the incentives of electoral democracy and the strict limitations on national resources made truly unifying the country a fleeting priority. The implications for less stable and less coherent nation states are deeply inauspicious.

3.4. Community mobilisation

For all the successes of the Colombian counterinsurgency strategy, the case points to a key political lesson: the need for more creative ways of tying the periphery to the centre, all as part of a stable political compact (Ucko, 2022, Chapter 6). If, in these contexts, the Weberian ideal of the state will probably remain a myth, how can insurgency-threatened governments nonetheless exercise control over their territory and govern their people? Some scholars suggest an alternative basis for order – one that reflects the fissiparous nature of statehood yet retains sufficient central oversight to avert conflict. A possible recourse lies in what Ken Menkhaus terms the 'mediated state' – one in which 'the government relies on partnership (or at least coexistence) with a diverse range of local intermediaries and rival sources of authority to provide core functions of public security, justice, and conflict management in much of the country' (Menkhaus, 2006, p. 78). Others have called such arrangements 'hybrid political orders' and lauded this lens as a pragmatic recognition of how many states function in reality, rather than in theory (Boege et al., 2009).

These terms not only acknowledge the artificiality of the state in many of those countries threatened by insurgency, but also that the attempted imposition of the state can, in such contexts, be dramatically counterproductive. In Somalia, a major reason for popular resistance to the strong state sought through various Western interventions is that, historically, that very same state has acted as 'a catalyst for criminality, violence, and communal tensions' (Menkhaus, 2006, p. 11). In Afghanistan, local communities also rejected the authority imposed upon them by the centre, in part owing to vivid memories of abuse, injustice, and cruelty perpetrated by the state (Fishstein & Wilder, 2012, pp. 30, 37). In post-war Iraq, the continued empowerment of an increasingly sectarian Shia government to deal with a Sunni insurgency led to predictable outcomes, with death squads in government uniforms cleansing entire neighbourhoods and pushing their Sunni compatriots into the arms of al-Qaeda (Ucko, 2008). Here and elsewhere, 'more state' is no recipe for more stability.

This insight runs counter to counterinsurgency theory, which tends to equate progress with the gradual expansion of governance to previously 'ungoverned areas'. This type of thinking can be dangerous. For one, while the theory emphasises that government control spreads like ink spots across paper, it does not evince much concern for what was on that paper before the ink reached it. In fact, the analogy is critically flawed, as

there is really no societal equivalent to a blank piece of paper. Instead, each human locality heaves with activity, intrigue, and politics.

The point matters, because how these areas are understood determines how they are handled. If seen as places where institutions are absent, the go-to solution will be to quickly impose the state to fill the void. A more promising approach is to engage with the local structures that regulate life away from the state, so that they may be co-opted to benefit both centre and periphery within the context of a loosely unified national compact. Be they systems of governance, security, or justice, these local institutions are often seen as more meaningful by the local population. In Afghanistan, for example, the thin spread and many deficiencies of the national courts meant that most Afghans preferred informal bodies – such as *jirgas* and *shuras* of local elders – for conflict adjudication (Shurkin, 2011, pp. 9–10). In Mali, popular trust in traditional structures by far exceeds that placed in the police and national courts (Pézard & Shurkin, 2015, p. 49). In post-conflict Timor Leste, rural areas far away from the administrative reach of the state are instead governed through 'customary forms of community organisation'. As Bjoern Hofmann notes, state-based institutions 'acknowledge these forms of self-governance and work alongside them, while at the same time aiming to strengthen the new administrative structures staffed by elected representatives' (Hofmann, 2009, p. 82).

Combining top-down and bottom-up initiatives in this manner may be the best political model for several insurgency-threatened states. The burning question, of course, is what level of divergence to accept, and at what cost. Even if authority is ceded to the periphery, the state must nonetheless be capable of intervening when local-level mechanisms turn predatory and risk the legitimacy of the arrangement and of the state. The key lies in the state underwriting and even supporting informal variations on the periphery, thereby satisfying local needs, empowering local political allies, and contributing to a desire to be part of, rather than resist, the state at the heart of it all. Needless to say, while the mediated state provides a more realistic lens, it does not significantly simplify the task of achieving justice and peace.

3.5. Lack of strategy

Bruising experiences in Afghanistan have forced a sharp learning curve. It was through this process of learning that counterinsurgency theory re-emerged as a helpful guide, indicating for a US military the paradoxes of war 'as it is' rather than 'as imagined'. Specifically, so-called 'counterinsurgency principles' emphasised the importance of achieving a nuanced political understanding of the campaign, of operating under unified command, of using intelligence to guide operations, of isolating insurgents from the population, of using the minimum amount of force necessary to achieve set objectives, and of assuring and maintaining the perceived legitimacy of the counterinsurgency effort in the eyes of the populace (Cohen et al., 2006).

For American and other soldiers, these principles were helpful. Nonetheless, once discovered, this guidance risked becoming mantras, eclipsing the role of context and of strategy. In Afghanistan, rather than subscribe to a campaign plan that viably tied operational activity to a clear strategic objective, military units let the necessarily broad principles of counterinsurgency guide their way – not least because of pervasive

confusion as to actual strategy in place (Strachan, 2010). The problem was not necessarily the absence of actual strategic goals but rather their multiplicity, contradictions, and lack of ordering (Lieven, 2007).

Clearly, 'best practice' is not 'best strategy'. Strategy – in this instance – can be defined very simply. Eliot Cohen casts it as 'the art of choice that binds means with objectives'. He elaborates that 'It is the highest level of thinking about war, and it involves priorities (we will devote resources here, even if that means starving operations there), sequencing (we will do this first, then that) and a theory of victory (we will succeed for the following reasons)' (Cohen, 2009). Plainly, a counterinsurgency field manual will be unable to address these difficult questions or to resolve the attendant trade-offs, though it may provide some guidance on how to think and engage with the modern battlefield.

Arriving at a strategy requires two broad steps. On the first hand, the essential foundation for strategy is understanding the problem. What type of war are we embarking on, asks Clausewitz. French Marshal Ferdinand Foch put it in similar terms: *de quoi s'agit-il?* – or, 'What is it all about?' (Général de Lattre, 1949, p. 588). What the military calls mission analysis, also known as a '*strategic estimate of the situation'*, is crucial, because it unpacks a complex situation, places it in its political context, and maps the strategies and interests of its various players, thereby to examine and critique our own approach.

This step, however, appears to have been all but absent in Afghanistan and only fleetingly applied in Iraq. In Afghanistan, it took too many years to appreciate the geo-strategic context of the Taliban's struggle, the resistance to a central state, the effects and roles of corruption at the central and local levels, and the exact relation between the Taliban and America's actual target, al-Qaeda (Strick van Linschoten & Kuehn, 2012). In Iraq, during the surge years, it was finally acknowledged that within a sectarian Shia-controlled political context, the Sunni community had some legitimate grievances and were pushed toward al-Qaeda on account of government predation. The compacts made with Sunni partners on the ground, to protect them from both Shia death-squads and al Qaeda coercion, stemmed from precisely this estimate (Ucko, 2008).

The Pentagon defines an 'estimate' as 'an analysis of a foreign situation, development, or trend that identifies its major elements, interprets the significance, and appraises the future possibilities and the prospective results of the various actions that might be taken' (U.S. Department of Defense, 2021, p. 76). For irregular warfare challenges, the estimate must interrogate the nature of the problem, its contextual drivers (be they political, economic, societal, or otherwise), the contesting frames and narratives at the heart of the conflict, the strategy of the adversary, and the limitations of the state's own response (Ucko & Marks, 2020, pp. 14–33). The assessment thereby focuses both on the threat actor and on the context that sustains it, on the competition for legitimacy among relevant audiences, and on the state's role in sustaining a cycle of conflict.

Such in-depth analysis turns the estimate into a viable foundation for the second crucial step, namely the formulation of strategy. This product must be driven by a specific set of objectives and a way of achieving them. It must query and explain how the proposed methods used will achieve the desired outcomes (also known as a 'theory of victory') and it should fit this plan within the national interests of the power expected to act.

From then on, a strategy entails close interrogation of existing and needed legal authority, of the assumptions that had to be made to plan future activity, and the risks that are created both by the plan's implementation and by its possible sources of failure. More difficult, perhaps, is the need to measure progress adequately, not confusing that which is measurable for what to measure nor confusing activity with progress. The result should be a phased, viable step-by-step itinerary from here to there, from now to then, that responds to the situation as it is and as it evolves, to achieve interim objectives on the way to strategic ends (Ucko & Marks, 2020, pp. 34–48). It is, as Cohen put it above, 'the highest level of thinking about war' – and about peace – and yet if it fails our efforts are almost certainly doomed (Cohen, 2009).

3.6. The black box of political will

If the art of strategy offers a way out of darkness – a method for effective response – its countervailing force is the lack of political will for precisely such action. 'Political will' is the ball and chain of any discussion of irregular warfare. How good are concepts, theory, and best practices if the government that is to act prefers to go in a different direction? Against such calculations of interest, there appears to be little that can be done. In such cases, the conflict festers and grows, all while the state loses its legitimacy and coherence. In other cases, external powers seek to address the issue of political will by removing the politician in charge (think of Diem in South Vietnam) – an approach steeped in risk.

Political will eats strategy for breakfast. Only a handful of the 47 countries that deployed troops to Afghanistan authorised their forces to operate at an intensity appropriate for the campaign; others imposed caveats on where and how their troops could be deployed. In Mazar-e-Sharif, a Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) of 500–600 soldiers was responsible for stabilising four provinces and a combined population of roughly 2.5 million people. What does this say about the contributing states' political will? Can any strategy, or any field manual, truly change the likely outcome of such an investment? The search for better practice and more enlightened approaches appears, then, simply to chase the shadow of a larger problem.

Political will is crucial, but its role in analysis and prescription can become paralysing. First, how does one measure political will? In the absence of some gauge, the main sign of its absence will be the lack of progress, yet such analysis quickly becomes circular: failed operations reflect inadequate will whereas successful ones do not. Political will then becomes a catch-all and purely retrospective argument that is both impossible to disprove but also analytically meaningless. Second, political will is not a static variable; it fluctuates according to events on the ground, domestic developments, electoral interests, and understandings of foreign affairs. As Jeremy Black has noted, 'to talk of American or French interests or policy, as if these are clear-cut and long-lasting, is to ignore the nature of politics and the character of recent history' (Black, 2004, p. 142).

Thus, as well as acknowledge political will, those concerned with making a positive change must also work hard to shift opinion accordingly. Specifically, it would seem necessary to focus analysis on *why* states engage in various types of irregular campaigns; how they perceive their adversaries; and the balance of interests that

determines both commitment and approach. The task of altering such conceptions of interest is daunting, yet the challenge is mitigated by fostering greater awareness of what inaction will yield, and of which practices and strategies have shown promise in other settings.

4. Lessons of IW, applied to organised crime

Decades of experience with irregular warfare speak to a need for more comprehensive analysis of informal political economies and better proficiency at strategy development. What is striking is that any review of state efforts to counter organised crime reveals a similar set of lessons. For sure, the precise contextualisation of these lessons differ, but it would seem as if policy actors and researchers are victim to the same analytical tendencies. This commonality speaks to an apparent pathology in how we frame and respond to irregular problem sets, organised crime included.

4.1. The socioeconomic and political context

Much as with challenges of irregular warfare, efforts to counter organised crime struggle to consider and evaluate the effect of the socioeconomic and political context in which this phenomenon unfolds. Rather than a self-standing problem of illicit behaviour, organised criminal enterprises are enmeshed within social and political networks that must be incorporated in analysis and in the overall response. Specifically, as with irregular warfare, that response must speak to both the drivers or roots of the problem, as well as its symptoms. Thus, it becomes necessary to query the social embeddedness of criminal actors or behaviour: how do drivers lead people to participate in or rely on crime? What is the role of the state in perpetuating this function?

Though these questions may appear commonsensical, they too seldom inform praxis. Efforts to combat wildlife crime in sub-Saharan Africa generally frame the poachers as the problem to be suppressed and fail to consider the local embeddedness of this practice. And yet, in northern Kenya for example, poaching occurs within a context of 'cattle rustling, road banditry, and inter-communal conflict', and therefore requires a broader and more political response (Maguire, 2017, p. 69). For similar reasons, 'commercial poaching' must be distinguished from 'subsistence poaching', because while both threaten local fauna, each has its own drivers and dynamic (Humphreys & Smith, 2017, pp. 32–37). Where poaching is perceived locally as a legitimate coping mechanism due to the state's failure to govern, a response targeting the activity in isolation risks further polarisation, desperation, and – potentially – conflict (Maguire, 2017, p. 67). Similarly, state efforts to counter corruption must also account for the social and political acceptance of such practices in contexts where the licit order is failing. Where patrimonialism, nepotism, and corruption are simply the way to get things done, suppressing these practices risks displacement and chaos (Blundo & Olivier de Sardan, 2006; Marquette & Peiffer, 2018, 2021; Walton, 2013).

Here, and elsewhere, organised crime provides a safety valve for populations with few other options. The cultivation of, and trade in, narcotics – in Afghanistan, Peru, and Colombia – stems fundamentally from the vulnerability of abandoned communities. As Buxton describes, these circumstances make the cultivation of drugs an obvious choice, given the minimal start-up costs or technical requirements, the durability of the product,

the ease of its transport, and – of course – the reliability of its market (Buxton, 2015). In the absence of viable alternatives, crop eradication is unlikely to affect this coping mechanism over the longer term; indeed, it may only exacerbate vulnerability and alienation and thereby incentivise exactly the type of criminal activity that it seeks to prevent (Ballentine & Nitzschke, 2006, p. 164; Farthing & Kohl, 2005; Marks, 2007, pp. 281–282).

In a similar vein, people smuggling is rooted in profound global inequalities and intense insecurity in the origin countries. To crack down on the illicit service provided by smugglers, rather than address its demand, is to gamble that the journey to safety can come to be seen as even more miserable than that which is being fled. In the face of imminent danger and possibly death at home, even the marginal possibility of successful migration will probably remain more appealing to many. In the meantime, the added pressures on the smuggling networks will force greater countermeasures and higher costs, compelling those still desperate for this service to do whatever it takes – crime, prostitution, or predation – to raise the necessary funds (Reitano, 2017, p. 205).

Criminal gangs, too, provide protection and a sense of belonging in communities that the state has forgotten (Skaperdas, 2001). In Rio de Janeiro, Comando Vermelho blends coercion with co-option, providing employment, some degree of government service, and even entertainment to the disadvantaged citizens of the city's *favelas*. In many other slums, enforcement against the gangs has been perceived (not least because of its 'collateral damage') as attacks on the community, resulting in alienation and the elevation of the gang as local heroes (Cruz, 2011). Again, the social embeddedness of the crime matters greatly in terms of response, which is why Skaperdas recommends viewing criminal, inner-city gangs as 'essentially part of the larger problem of the successful integration of such areas into mainstream society and the modern nation-state' (Skaperdas, 2001, p. 194).

The overriding lesson is that organised crime 'is *not* an extension of a foreign body to the existing system, country or infrastructure. If anything it is the product of a country's history, its social conditions, its economic system, its political elite and its law enforcement regime' (Allum & Gilmour, 2022, p. 1). It must therefore be asked what it is about the social contract and existing political settlement that allows organised crime to flourish. This is not an invitation to moral relativism. Instead, framing organised crime as socially embedded should encourage a distinction between coping mechanisms and exploitation, and an understanding of the role of the state in necessitating such bargains. It should also encourage a distinction between foot soldiers, who in dysfunctional conditions can readily be replaced, and the organisers of criminal activity, who will be more difficult to reach, may even enjoy some level of protection by the state, but also play a far more strategically meaningful role.

As a positive example, the nations involved in patrolling the Gulf of Guinea have come to recognise, over time, the need not just for naval coordination at sea but, also, a comprehensive approach to the push factors on land that are fuelling the problem of piracy. As Ralby explains, 'Focusing on three pillars – security, development and stewardship – this non-traditional military effort seeks to combine operational security matters with efforts to safeguard the marine environment and improve the quality of life on land. Food security, economic security, energy security, and environmental

sustainability are all part of this effort' (Ralby, 2017, p. 140). Of course, the more comprehensive the strategy, the more challenging its implementation.

In a similar vein, the strategy adopted by the Contact Group on Piracy off the Coast of Somalia (CGPCS) purposefully went beyond the purely military to focus instead on 'the financial networks behind the individual groups of Somali pirates… the masterminds, or kingpins, and the funders' (Forbes, 2017, p. 119). Going further, in some Somali communities, the creation of viable economic alternatives caused local elites to drive off rather than shelter pirates (Shortland, 2017, p. 178). This is the type of systemic response needed, borne out of a full mapping of the problem and the different players involved.

Within a globalised environment, such 'mapping' must extend to the international level. For example, it is unclear how the Philippine government can combat the availability of illegal drugs without addressing the transnational connections of that archipelago nation, not least to the lawless parts of Myanmar where the product is cultivated, or to the seas over which it is shipped. A state policy of killing an ever-growing number of poor Filipino drug users, or even the low-level operators, is unlikely to do the job (Allard, 2019; Marche, 2021). Similarly, while naval patrols in South East Asia can catch the low-level pirates, their bosses, investors and fixers sit in the big cities of Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore and can readily replace lost earners (von Hoesslin & Ruiz-Benitez de Lugo, 2017, p. 157). Many of the poachers arrested in South Africa are from the lowest rungs of an enterprise that also includes far more evasive crime lords, who keep their distance from the action, benefit from political and business protection, and won't so easily be caught red-handed (Rademeyer, 2017, pp. 53–54).

A final note is necessary on this topic of embeddedness, and it concerns the ways in which the illicit world connects with its licit counterpart, or how a state's own systems and institutions have become complicit within a criminalised incentive structure. Indeed, in many cases, because of the large sums involved, the threat of violence, and the weakness of institutions, the ultimate enabler of criminal enterprises can be found within the very institutions charged with response. This situation not only challenges the supposedly bright line that ought to divide 'coppers' from 'robbers', but highlights another way in which strategies of response must go beyond the criminal activity itself and, also, consider its drivers and roots.

4.2. Militarisation of response

Much as with campaigns of irregular warfare, the struggle against organised crime typically takes on a militarised form. 'Militarisation', in this context, does not speak exclusively to the use of military forces – though this happens – but rather to the theory of victory at hand. Specifically, a militarised theory of victory relies on a purely suppressive logic, hoping thereby to increase costs to active criminals and deter those who might consider following their footsteps or using their services. Be it in counterinsurgency or counter-crime, unless these efforts also address the *reasons* behind the behaviour, they typically confront the 'hydra effect' of eliminating one target only to find another. Also, as the threat adapts, the response must give chase, leading to an endless game of cat-and-mouse.

On the southern border of the United States, the Customs and Border Protection (CBP) agency has adopted an 'enforcement-only' strategy that places its faith 'in a single concept – *deterrence*' (Erickson, 2017, p. 237). CBP is not a military unit, but it is the 'largest police force in the world' and accounted for 60,000 personnel in 2014, with 'a fleet of some 250 planes, helicopters and unmanned aerial vehicles like the Predator drones'. Yet as Erickson explains, this effort at deterrence 'failed to address the complexity behind peoples' decision to move, struggled to measure success in relation to recidivism and reaped immeasurable human costs and daunting economic ones' (Erickson, 2017, p. 242). It has also made the services provided by smugglers all the more lucrative (Reitano, 2017, pp. 205–206).

Other examples include the deployment of warships to fight smugglers in the Mediterranean, the Australian effort to hold migrants in offshore detention centres, the deployment of the Turkish military on its beaches, the mining of the Turkish-Syrian border, and other measures intended to obstruct smuggling operations. In all these cases, countermeasures address the symptom rather than the conditions that fuel migration, make the services of smugglers more lucrative, and risk victimising those caught up in this miserable situation (Doherty, 2016; Jones et al., 2020; 'Royal Navy to Tackle People Smugglers in Mediterranean', 2015; Spijkerboer, 2018).

In a similar vein, anti-poaching efforts often apply the same search-and-destroy mentality as seen in the 'War on Terror', resulting in hunting expeditions to target those who themselves hunt the animals. On the seas, well-intended expeditions to stop the poaching of whales apply the same logic – that by locating the actors involved and obstructing their business model, the activity will stop or at least be reduced. In both cases, a necessary (but often absent) component would be to address the political economy sustaining the market. Unless this need is addressed, our countermeasures may make the crime more profitable, as those involved can claim higher prices due to the elevated risk (Graff, 2014).

As a final example, various counter-gang operations in Central and South America have illustrated the futility of force as a self-standing strategy. Operating from tightly packed slums where opportunity is lacking, the gangs use their local population as a source of labour, creating a symbiosis, but also a human shield to deter enforcement. When states do launch into these areas, the operation is hugely dislocating to the local community and ineffectual in weakening the gangs. In most cases, it either empowers them by cementing their bonds with a beleaguered population or creates a power vacuum within which new gangs fight for control. Even so, these strategies are remarkably common, as can be seen with the so-called *mano duro* (firm hand) or *cero tolerancia* (zero tolerance) strategies adopted by Guatemala, Honduras, Haiti and El Salvador (Cockayne, 2014, p. 747; International Crisis Group, 2017, p. 16).

The reasons for militarisation are manifold. First, there is an unquestioned link between criminal behaviour and traditional policing, whose job it is to stop and deter crime. In criminology, deterrence requires the *credible* threat of *swift* and *severe* punishment, leading therefore to increasingly punitive strategies (Howe & Brandau, 1988, p. 797). Second, in an unfolding crisis, there is an undeniable appeal to how quickly security forces can be deployed to 'deal with it' – a more comprehensive response would require a far more generous timeline. Finally, once a security response is deployed, it is all too

tempting for governments to consider the crisis 'managed' and move on, rather than transition to a longer-term, less reactive, and more effective strategy. As such, what might have been intended as crisis response becomes the whole response.

Militarisation of response is not just ineffective; it can also lead to harm against non-combatants (be they criminals or their clients). In response to mounting abuse and corruption within the CBP, the Obama administration created an Integrated Advisory Panel (IAP) to professionalise the force. The body's interim and final reports spoke of a vast and uneven entity that, despite progress, struggled with containing the power and resources it had been handed. Indeed, stories from the southern border reveal the mass dehumanisation of migrant populations, as the response seeks to make their experience increasingly difficult. As the provider and user of criminal services are conflated, and the focus remains punitive, the result can be the mass targeting, incarceration, or worse, of entire populations.

Because these strategies do not work, there is also a danger of spiralling costs and commitment. In the United States, 'Congress continues to channel more U.S. taxpayer dollars to immigration enforcement agencies (more than $28.6 billion now) than all other enforcement agencies combined, including the FBI, DEA, ATF, US Marshals, and Secret Service' (*Border Facts*, n.d.). Over time, the militarisation of response becomes so entrenched as to become, perhaps, irreversible – not least if it leads organised crime to escalate in response (Reitano, 2017, p. 211). Also fuelling the approach is the fact that militarised strategies tend to poll well, even when they do not work, because they give the appearance of decisiveness (the same applies within the context of counterterrorism). In the Philippines, for example, a drug war that has caused at least 6,000 deaths (and possibly four times that), and which has patently not solved the drug problem in the country, is nonetheless approved by 81.6% of the population (Allard & Lema, 2020; Cabato, 2019; 'Rodrigo Duterte's Lawless War on Drugs Is Wildly Popular', 2020). *In extremis*, militarisation creates a nation at war with itself.

The deep problem of militarisation does not mean that states should eschew enforcement measures altogether. Where states have sought to address gang problems via negotiations or non-violent measures, such as 'Community Violence Reduction' (CVR) programmes, they have found that operating by the gang's rule severely limits what they can achieve. As the International Crisis Group points out, bargaining with the gangs assumes, at least implicitly, that they are willing to 'abandon extortion and other criminal practices, and eventually disarm and demobilise', and this is unlikely when the state is engaging from a position of weakness (International Crisis Group, 2020, p. 32). As to CVR, aimed at providing employment and political inclusion, such initiatives face strategic and ethical hazards when attempted in gang-owned territory. In effect, they must then choose between working *with the gangs*, even paying them off, and seeking to avoid them altogether – and thereby miss the most at-risk demographic (Schuberth, 2017). It is in part for this reason that crime experts question the impact of violence prevention initiatives within contexts of chronic insecurity (International Crisis Group, 2017, p. 20).

The point, then, is not to eschew enforcement, but to integrate it within a broader strategy that addresses the *push and pull* factors of organised crime, as well as its manifestations. As with many various irregular warfare missions, this requirement

raises difficult questions regarding the type of force needed and the other efforts alongside which it must be deployed. This balancing act is what informs the traditional counterinsurgency principles of using only the 'minimum use of necessary force' (or applying only as much coercion as necessary) to achieve strategic objectives, and of maintaining 'political primacy' (that is to say, ensuring that military operations support a viable political process). Even then, this also assumes that security forces, when deployed, adhere to strict rules of engagement, can properly define what level of force is correct, and understand their supporting role within the strategy, which – further – must be resourced with the necessary non-military means. The absence of such aptitude and awareness on the part of the security forces, or of their civilian partners in the field, almost ensures that the coercive component will backfire or lack follow-up. In either case, the result will be more insecurity, illegitimacy and the felt need for more enforcement.

4.3. Mirror-imaging: state, society, interests

Much as with irregular warfare, efforts to counter organised crime often involve a better resourced state assisting one that is less able and more directly threatened. Taking this commonality one step further, in both contexts such relationships can do much good but also fall victim to mirror-imaging, whereby the interests and norms of the intervening party are confused with those of the party receiving help. Such confusion can have counterproductive – or even disastrous – consequences.

A major root of the problem is that not all states are similarly seized by the problem of organised crime. Reflecting the very weakness that triggers the attempts to help, some states have long ago accepted the need for various arrangements with organised criminal groups so that they, and the state, can both function. In defining this equilibrium, it is not lost on the government that the criminal group at times has the edge, be it in terms of 'wealth, organization, communications', or 'weaponry', all of which 'can create qualitatively different bargaining relationships with regional or even national governments' (Bailey & Taylor, 2009, p. 9). Given the dangers of confrontation (and to what end?), maintaining a stable pact with the enemy may seem like the better alternative. This is particularly the case in states where organised crime is estimated to bring in as much as 40 to 50% of the national income (Hall & Hudson, 2022, p. 185).

Where third-party states miss the nature of such arrangements, their efforts are likely to disappoint. The role of corruption looms large and must be understood from the local perspective. As some scholars have stressed, corruption can mask 'a vast and intricate system of patronage', and so 'to assail it (especially without proffering any alternative framework of political access or economic redistribution) is to endanger the livelihood of millions of people, including those who otherwise denounce corruption stridently' (Ebenezer Obadare as cited in Marquette & Peiffer, 2022, p. 476). A necessary starting point is to interrogate local norms and the local political economy and to appraise what constitutes 'societally approved of, or at least socially ignored, forms of corruption' (Beare, 1997, p. 169).

The failure to understand local norms contributed to policy failure in Afghanistan. When the West belatedly came to appreciate the problem of corruption, it found a host nation

government that viewed the issue very differently. It should be said that it was initially the United States that, for reasons of counter-terrorism, invited into the Afghan government the very warlords that would haunt its later state-building efforts. Still, when the United States sought to undo this damage and address the criminalisation of the state, it only gradually dawned upon it that its partner in Kabul was itself a main impediment. Major targets for counter-corruption were effectively untouchable, such as Ahmed Wali Karzai, the president's half-brother (Whitlock, 2021, p. 123). Warlords that the United States now worked to marginalise were invited back in by the Karzai regime. Stephen Hadley, Bush's one-time national security adviser, put it starkly: 'Karzai was never sold on democracy and did not rely on democratic institutions, but instead relied on patronage'. Christopher Kolenda also speaks to the American frustration, recalling that by 2006, the Afghan government had 'self-organised into a kleptocracy' (Whitlock, 2021, pp. 313–315).

The frustration in Afghanistan reflects not just the teething pains of a largely improvised experiment with 'nation-building' but also the compromises that each state makes in relation to organised crime. In Nigeria, for example, the state has elected to pay off armed groups in the country's oil-rich south rather than address their largely legitimate grievances of neglect and abuse (Golden-Timsar, 2018). In Russia, write Finckenauer and Voronin, organised crime includes gangsters but also businesspeople and government officials (Finckenauer & Voronin, 2001); it 'has penetrated all layers of society and the economy' (Cheloukhine et al., 2022, pp. 105–106). In Dubai, and in Marbella, Spain, the local authorities are known to turn a blind eye to a booming organised crime scene so as to avoid confrontation and to soak up the cashflow (Carretero & Lezcano, 2021; Greenaway, 2020). Whereas conventional wisdom frames criminal enterprises as 'an easy and convenient villain', such a lens can easily lead to 'sloppy analysis and a false diagnosis'. As Peter Andreas further notes, 'Pointing an accusing finger at illicit business also tends to deflect attention and blame away from the deeper political roots of conflict and motivation for international intervention' (Andreas, 2011, p. 43).

The vast variety of ways in which states are involved in organised crime will forcefully challenge any external effort to address the drivers sustaining this problem. Indeed, there is typically deep institutional and political resistance on the part of the elite to precisely such action. The attempt to wish away or subvert such resistance is likely to be destabilising, forcing those seeking change to balance carefully the preservation of order and the quest for justice. Any attempt to move from the former to the latter must appreciate that deeply conservative forces will mobilise to protect the institutions which legitimise and protect their advantageous positions of privilege. Rather than engage on the basis of unfounded assumptions, the interests and incentives at play – within both the intervening and host government – must be carefully accounted for.[2]

[2] I am grateful to Tom Rodwell for informing our thinking on this point.

4.4. Community mobilisation

Where state governments are enmeshed within the political economy of organised crime, it follows that they will often appear unpredictable or uncommitted to the efforts intended to address such activity. How then to achieve change? Much as with irregular warfare, one response to uncooperative states is to shift from top-down to bottom-up approaches and to work through the community rather than the state. This method relies upon mobilising those most affected by the problem and those with the highest interest in a solution, so as to build resistance and resilience at the local level (Felix & Tennant, 2022, p. 489).

Human smuggling provides a potent example of where 'the debate…and the locus of responses need to be shifted from the state level to a grassroots debate' (Reitano, 2017, p. 213). The reason, Reitano explains, is that many of the states from which migrants and refugees hail are too mired in conflict to respond or are themselves responsible for the problem at hand. Hoping to address the top-down failures of the state with more top-down assistance – as was attempted with both Sudan and Eritrea – is to put the foxes in charge of the henhouse (Grinstead, 2016). In the absence of unlikely reform, rewarding the state with capacity building and technical assistance is only going to compound the problem and make both donors and recipient governments complicit in continued criminality.

Conversely, anti-poaching initiatives in northern Kenya illustrate what can be achieved through the local level. In an area of scarce socioeconomic opportunity, minimal interest in conservation, and continued resource-based conflicts, criminal groups found a perfect environment in which to operate. Over time, however, community-based initiatives have challenged their grip. Through UK and US assistance, local-level conservancies have gained assets to gather and share intelligence on poaching with the Kenya Wildlife Service (KWS), which is more trusted than the country's security agencies. Not only is this partnership informing anti-poaching operations, but the conservancies are also emphasising the need for local buy-in. Thus, community policing is undertaken by local rangers benefiting from local knowledge and support. Counter-poaching policies are also being complemented with 'socioeconomic development programmes and land-reform initiatives', providing clinics, schools, and inter-ethnic conflict-resolution mechanisms. As MacGuire explains, 'these programmes have both fomented alternative livelihoods to poaching, and reduced deterioration of rangelands and resource conflict' (Maguire, 2017, p. 77). Though this progress was disrupted by climate crises and national-level political instability, it points to the potential of community involvement.

As Gastelum Felix and Tennant note, community mobilisation has also been used in a range of counter-gang efforts. In Chicago, as part of the so-called 'Cure Violence' programme, civil society leaders and community members have mobilised against gang activity, with 'violence interrupters detecting and preventing shootings in communities, mediating conflicts between gangs or gang members, identifying and engaging with high-risk individuals and encouraging community mobilization and behaviour change' (Felix & Tennant, 2022, p. 493). In 2004 in Palermo, Italy, student activists created the AddioPizzo campaign to encourage businesses and consumers to fight extortion by the mafia. As well as raise awareness, the organisers provided legal support to targeted

businesses and educated for change, especially among young people (Addiopizzo, n.d.; Vazquez, 2020). Informed by these types of programmes, the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime is engaging in local resilience initiatives worldwide aimed at identifying, organising, engaging with, and empowering civil society to take on local challenges ignored or abetted by the state (Bird & Gomes, 2022).

These local-level initiatives can be productive, but they face the same obstacles as local security efforts in irregular warfare settings. In the absence of state buy-in, community-led efforts are often limited by a lack of coordination, a lack of funds, and the extreme vulnerability of unarmed actors in the face of powerful criminal entities (Felix & Tennant, 2022, pp. 498–500). Also, because of the sheer informality of bottom-up initiatives, there is simply no guarantee that they will play to the progressive and community-oriented tune hoped for by international donors. It can be tempting to view the 'local level' as a refuge from politicking, as an 'authentic response of "civil society" to the predation, manipulation and violence of outsiders', and yet this lens can be deeply misleading (Berdal, 2009, p. 127). In Tancítaro, Mexico, the local, homegrown response to the predation of gangs was the formation of a militia, commanded by warlords who rule violently and without accountability (Fisher & Taub, 2018). In Rio de Janeiro's *favelas*, a local response to gangs is the formation of vigilante paramilitary units, structured around ex-police, that provide some degree of security but also extort the local population, engage in organised crime, and violently remove those standing in their way.[3]

As indicated by these examples and others, the search for local responses to organised crime requires careful judgement as to which informal structures to support. Even where the community is a viable partner, a further consideration obtains: the 'balloon effect' and the ability of criminal actors to go elsewhere. Community empowerment can help inoculate it against criminal infiltration, yet it will not address the elite elements of the enterprise – those reaping the highest rewards. With piracy off Somalia, it quickly emerged that the local coastal communities were not the key beneficiaries or enablers of the problem but rather an underpaid labour force exploited by political elites inland (Hansen, 2009; Shortland, 2012). The latter are also those with the start-up capital to entice other communities to cooperate should one prove resistant. Similarly, while enlightened, community-oriented efforts to stem poaching in Kenya's rangelands are promising, those higher up in the ivory trafficking market remain untouched, adapt, and continue to act with widespread impunity (Maguire, 2017, p. 78).

4.5. Lack of strategy

The latter point speaks to the difficulties of crafting an effective strategy to combat organised crime. Much as with irregular warfare, the problem is so widespread, involves so many players, and touches upon so many interests, that precise interventions and clear definitions of success are difficult to achieve. In both contexts, that of irregular warfare and organised crime, this absence of strategy leads to reactive policies that go on despite no real signs of change. In terms that also describe the counterinsurgency

[3] By 2019, these militias – really a mafia organisation – were said to control 'roughly a quarter of the Rio de Janeiro metropolitan region', or 45% of the city's roughly one thousand *favelas* ('Mafias Run by Rogue Police Officers Are Terrorising Rio', 2019). See also (Arias, 2020, pp. 43–45).

effort in Afghanistan, Rademeyer describes the 'war on poaching' as 'an unwinnable war' – and the same could be said for the 'war on drugs' (Rademeyer, 2017, p. 54). Despite widespread recognition of this fact, these wars drag on, much as it did in Afghanistan, with 'bureaucracy doing its thing' (Komer, 1972).

In Afghanistan, an expeditionary counterinsurgency effort lacking strategic direction fell back on principles and slogans that offered some guidance but no prioritisation or trade-offs. In the world of countering organised crime and corruption, practitioners looking for strategy come to rely 'on "best practice" tactics and solutions whether appropriate or not, or whether they are actually working' (Marquette & Peiffer, 2021, p. 473). The kingpin strategy in Mexico, for example, was clearly intended to reduce the power of the drug lords by targeting them directly, and yet did not question the consequences of creating a leadership void in an insecure environment in which criminality remained hugely lucrative (McDermott, 2017, p. 266). Similarly, the Transnational Institute suggests the 'high homicide rates' in Central America's northern triangle stem in part from security forces 'successfully' disrupting the gangs and their markets, which generates a violent competition for the spoils (Metaal & ten Velde, 2014).

The point here is that organised crime requires the same strategic process as other irregular warfare challenges. This process begins with a full Strategic Estimate, focused on the nature of the political problem, the contextual forces that sustain it, the contending narratives that motivate involvement and usage of criminal networks, and the strategies these actors use to shape their environment, overwhelm opponents, and secure profit. A crucial final question concerns the role of the government response in addressing this problem, or in contributing to it, as may be the case.

This type of Estimate will encourage a more comprehensive identification and mapping of the problems raised by organised crime. As with the response to other irregular warfare challenges, such an Estimate would also help inform a more effective response, one that addresses the full extent of the problem. Such a lens is crucial, in that organised crime is adaptive, almost fluid, and will respond rapidly to changes in the environment. Policymakers and strategists involved in countering these efforts must therefore consider very carefully what it is that they seek to achieve and measure progress appropriately. Questions must, for example, explore whether the purpose of an intervention is to halt the crime itself (say, human smuggling) or to target its more violent and abusive enablers. Where criminal activity is being targeted, strategy must account for how to address the local desire for the services provided, be it basic governance in the favelas, a livelihood through poaching or drug cultivation, or a yearning to migrate from an active conflict zone.

Much as with the response to irregular threats, the crafting of strategy to counter organised crime requires skill and methodological discipline. A first step is arriving at a broad concept of response, informed by a theory of success – one that can explain how the anticipated inputs will lead to identified outcomes. From then on, crafters of strategy must consider the assumptions – both explicit and implicit – that are incorporated in their plan, as well as the legal authority to proceed as suggested. To balance trade-offs and compromises, a phasing construct can assist in showing how incremental steps are to be achieved over time, so as to reach – gradually – the desired objectives. As with any change in policy, a risk assessment, and discussion of how to mitigate these risks, also

become necessary. These are the basic foundations of crafting strategy and yet the task is too often approached with neither the skills nor situational awareness needed.

4.6. The black box of political will

Given the difficulties highlighted above, it is unsurprising that – much as with counterinsurgency – the political will to counter organised crime is sometimes lacking. Not only is organised crime deeply socially embedded, so that interventions are likely to cause extensive 'collateral damage', but – as seen – many governments are also enmeshed with the phenomenon, be it via occasional, individual bribes, institutional corruption, or outright state complicity (Idris, 2022, pp. 17–18). Unfortunately, political will is also deemed an indispensable, if insufficient, driver of state action. Thus, much as with irregular warfare, we confront the same fundamental obstacle: how to get governments galvanised to act and – when they do – to do so in the most effective and strategically appropriate manner?

First, political will is not a static variable. It cannot become, as it oftentimes does, a self-fulfilling alibi for not trying. A better approach is to dissect exactly what has shaped the prevailing interest in solutions. Malena provides a useful framework, adapted for SOC ACE (Marquette 2022), casting will as a function of political *want*, political *can*, and political *must* – leaders must desire the change, believe that they can achieve it, and that it is necessary (Malena, 2009, p. 19). It is a breakdown that hints also at potential levers for how political will can be built up – or destroyed. Rather than stop the discussion at the point of political *want*, progress can be achieved by illustrating issues of opportunity (*can*) and motivation (*must*).

Starting with the latter – the *must* – much can be achieved through 'public pressure and citizen engagement, organisational rules and regulations, and a personal sense of civic duty' (Idris, 2022, p. 11). From the bottom up, avenues of communication must be opened that allow the victims of organised crime to express their grievances to the political leaders charged with response. Particularly as concerns corruption – which typically is where the state comes in – there is merit in adopting a 'victim perspective', not least because corruption can easily be mistaken as a 'victimless' crime (Brooks, 2016, p. 5). As Marquette and Peiffer argue, by demonstrating how corruption diminishes democracy and by emphasising 'the downstream violence that may occur in chains of activities that corruption facilitates', it might be possible to generate the well-placed allies needed to start a movement (Marquette & Peiffer, 2021, p. 477).

Meanwhile, from top-down, the international community can play a valuable role in prescribing behaviour and reinforcing norms, though enforcement will clearly remain a challenge. In a four-year period starting in 2000, the international community passed a flurry of measures to address transnational crime and corruption.[4] These have since

[4] New instruments signed in this period include the UN Convention against Transnational Organised Crime (UNTOC, in 2000); the Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, especially Women and Children (2000); the Protocol against the Smuggling of Migrants by Land, Sea and Air (2000); Protocol against the Illicit Manufacturing of and Trafficking in Firearms, their Parts and Components and Ammunition (2001); United Nations Convention against Corruption (UNCAC, in 2004).

been complemented by more agency-specific guidelines and conventions. The activity is tremendous and helps shape norms, and yet – much as with the UN's sprawling architecture for counterterrorism – it suffers from a lack of coordination. The bigger problem is that these conventions ask states to engage productively with politically sensitive areas, where policy is determined by conceptions of interest and fear, not by the entreaties of international action plans. There are instruments to ratchet up external pressure, but does the international community itself have the political will to impose itself on an unwilling government?

International engagement is also relevant to the political *can*. Indeed, donors must be able to determine whether the lack of political will stems from a dearth of motivation or simply a lack of capacity. In such settings, where questions of political *must* have been or are being resolved, a complementary necessity lies in the fields of security cooperation and building of partnership capacity. As seen, this is an area where the intent of assisting states can easily be subverted through mirror-imaging, or an inadequate understanding of the local political and social setting. Effective engagement may require a candid agreement on what are truly common interests (rather than just on those pushed by external actors) and, then, a creative mix of carrots and sticks to ensure progress. Much as in various efforts to build capacity for irregular warfare, it is also critical that the engagement be far more than episodic, go beyond enforcement agencies, and is tracked carefully in terms of outcomes. Indeed, to guard against the tendency to militarise the response to organised crime, those providing assistance must similarly demilitarise their guidance and advice.

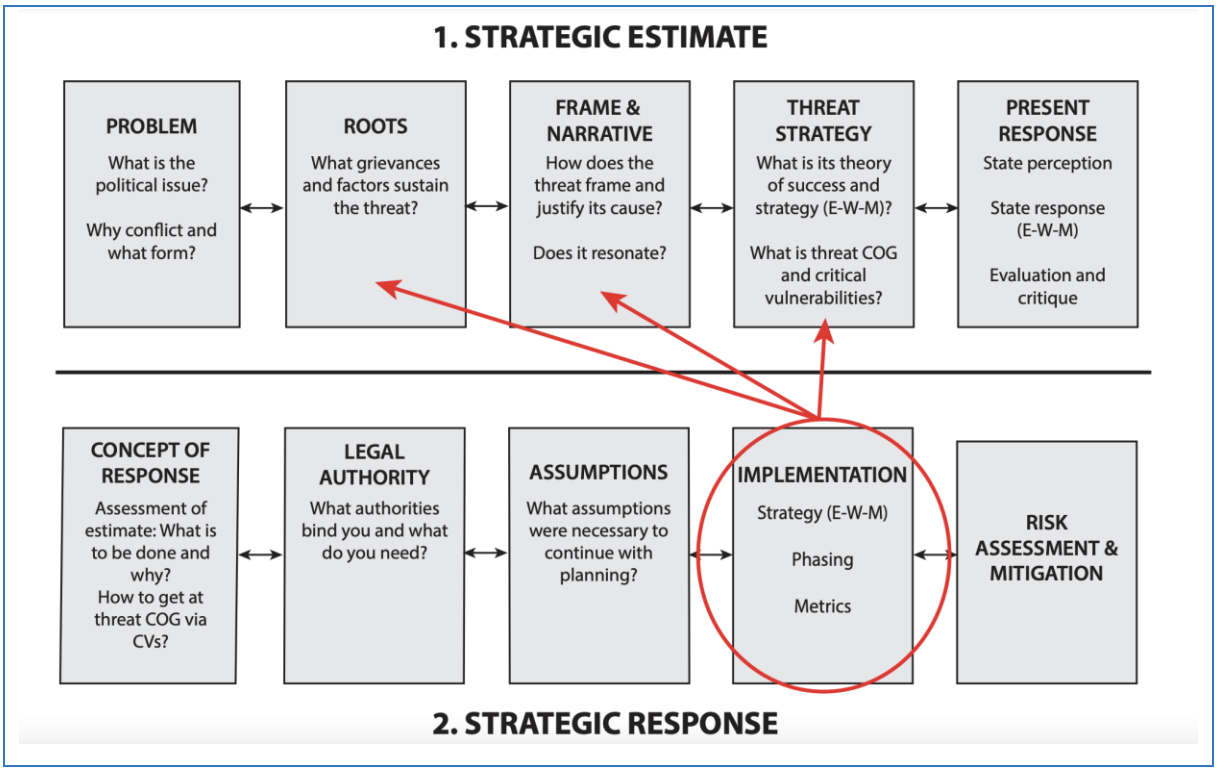
5. Conclusion

Terrorism and crime are both scourges of society. Both are illegal and are conducted by clandestine actors challenging the status quo. The two phenomena share at least one further trait: our response to both is bedevilled by the complexity of the threat, its social and political embeddedness, and the difficulty of mustering the necessary political will. On the basis of these commonalities, and others, this report has enumerated the lessons gained in two decades of engagement in irregular warfare, particularly in Afghanistan, and exported these to the praxis of countering organised crime.

The lessons identified are broadly applicable to organised crime. There is a tendency, in both fields, to militarise the response, or to let it be governed by a purely suppressive logic. There is a tendency, therefore, to neglect the social, political, and economic functions of organised crime. In both contexts, mirror-imaging subverts the efforts of donor states wanting to help those at the frontlines of instability, and in both cases this extends from the technical to the philosophical, with implications for how we understand the state. There is, in both cases, a need to mobilise bottom-up networks and work alongside communities as crucial partners, particularly where national governments are absent or uninterested in intervening. Indeed, in both cases, there is a need to engage far more closely with what produces political will and with how calculations of elite interest can be shaped over time.

Given these common difficulties, there is a final common requirement – for strategy. Rather than fall back on principles, on best practices, and on conventional wisdom, there is a need for far greater awareness of what constitutes strategic thinking. In a follow-on report, the present authors will use the thematic commonalities between irregular warfare and countering organised crime to propose a framework of analysis and action that guides practitioners through a Strategic Estimate and Course of Action. This framework builds upon lessons, both negative and positive, from decades of experience with irregular warfare and counterinsurgency, not least in Afghanistan. It is a framework that finds its origins, and is actively used, within the U.S. National Defense University's College of International Security Affairs (CISA) – the Pentagon's flagship for irregular warfare education at the strategic level. This 'framework of analysis and action' is a resource for both academics and policymakers and is proposed as a valuable tool for mapping irregular problems and for designing a viable response (Ucko & Marks, 2020).

Figure 1: The Estimate and Course of Action (COA) frameworks and their relationship



Legend: COG = Center of Gravity; CV = Critical Vulnerability; E-W-M = Ends, Ways, Means. Source: (Ucko & Marks, 2020, 2018)

Future research will adapt and test out the applicability of the CISA Framework for Assessment and Action to problems of organised crime. It is our contention that, with minimal tweaks, such a framework would be helpful in building capacity for the art and science of strategy-making, so that the plans we craft respond both to the threat and to its social and political drivers. A major contribution lies in the Framework's emphasis on mapping, which helps visualise the threat actor's social and political embeddedness as well as the full extent of its strategy. Finally, from then on, a strategy must be informed by prioritisation and trade-offs, but work towards the desired conditions incrementally via phases and steps. It must be capable of measuring progress along this journey accurately and meaningfully and it must account for the risks faced along the way. More than anything, it must be clear on what it seeks to achieve and why, and on what truly matters.

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