Entering the Black Hole: The Taliban, Terrorism, and Organised Crime

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Abstract

Cooperation and imitation among crime and terror groups in recent years has given rise to a crime-terror nexus. A linear conceptualisation of a crime-terror spectrum, suggests that complete convergence of crime and terror in a failed state can give rise to a 'black hole.' Theoretical models of the crime-terror nexus, however, do not specify the means by which a crime-terror group enters this black hole state, yet others do not. Using the Taliban movement as a case study, this article presents a theoretical extension of black hole theory, using organisation-level characteristics to merge black hole theory with the crime-terror continuum.

Keywords: *Taliban; Organized Crime; Terrorism; Crime-Terror Nexus; Narco-Terrorism; Black Holes*

Introduction

Military, law enforcement, and intelligence communities worldwide have witnessed a shift in recent decades in the behaviour of organised criminal enterprises and terrorist groups. This shift has seen vertically-integrated hierarchical groups focused on either profit or political (or religious) agenda morphing into more decentralised networks with robust capabilities in a multitude of crimes. Experts and scholars recognise that terrorism is not a static threat, but rather a dynamic one that adapts and evolves. Recent evolution has motivated scholars to move away from classic terror paradigms and toward a more modern understanding of insurgencies.

According to Kilcullen (2006), classic insurgency theory considers an insurgent challenger to a legitimate, though perhaps fragile, state (p. 112). Such insurgencies operate from geographic sanctuaries that allow them to regroup and resupply. Contemporary insurgency and counter-insurgency theory acknowledges a modernisation of insurgencies that includes globalisation (Gilmore, 2011), diversification of monetary sources (Kilcullen, 2006), and the adoption of terror tactics to facilitate a resistance to state occupation rather than revolution (Bergen & Footer, 2008; Kilcullen, 2009). Contemporary counter-insurgency theory continues to deal with sanctuaries, although it distinguishes geographic sanctuaries from electronic sanctuaries such as the internet (Kilcullen, 2006). Sanctuaries, fostered by cooperation among insurgents and global terrorist campaigns (Gilmore, 2011; Kilcullen, 2006), protract conflicts by engaging political, social, economic, and military networks (Hammes, 2005). Importantly, sanctuaries also allow a dangerous amalgamation of crime and terror by insurgents, known as the crime-terror nexus. This nexus has accordingly taken on greater importance for study and understanding.

The gravity given to the crime-terror nexus is well deserved; symbiotic relationships between criminals and terrorists represent insidious threats to regional and international security wherever they exist. According to Makarenko (2004), the penultimate threat to security posed by the crime-terror nexus is a 'black hole' state, in which a single organisation engaged in both organised crime and terrorism can leverage the conditions of

a weak or failed state to promulgate and prosper without fear of repercussion from governmental authorities. This black hole state is considered by numerous scholars in the crime-terror literature (e.g. Innes, 2007; Korteweg, 2008).

This article offers an extension of the theoretical literature by merging the crime-terror continuum with black hole theory by specifying the mechanisms by which an organisation can cross into a black hole state.[1] This theoretical extension builds on black hole theory by arguing for the incorporation of organisation-level characteristics into black hole theory, moving beyond the near-exclusive focus on state-level characteristics. Our extension draws on the empirical observations of a mutated crime-terror group currently operating in the context of a black hole, the Taliban. The article proceeds by reviewing the crime-terror continuum and black hole theory in more depth, clarifying the gap between the two, and arraying the necessary organisation-level conditions for entering the black hole. We conclude by discussing the flexibility of this extension and directions for future research.

The Crime-Terror Continuum

Historically understood as distinct phenomena, organised crime and terrorism were rarely linked by security, military and law enforcement agencies. Since the September 11th attack on the United States, the divide between the two has eroded (Perri and Brody, 2011), and the threat of transnational organised crime emerged in recognition of the natural symbiosis that exists. Makarenko (2004) formalised this symbiosis, developing a continuum by which crime syndicates and terror groups can be evaluated based on their commonalities. The crime-terror continuum suggests that at one extreme exist organised crime groups, purely motivated by profit. At the other extreme exist terrorist factions who participate in politically or religiously motivated activities only. Sensitive to changing capabilities and motivations, the continuum allows for the groups to shift from one end of the theoretical spectrum to the other. This process is consistent with Dishman's definition of 'transformation' (2001; Sanderson, 2004, p. 50).

There is debate in the literature over semantics and proper definitions of terms like 'convergence,' 'transformation' and 'hybrid.' Some conceptualisations of the crime-terror nexus refer to a situation in which a single organisation developing operational capabilities of both organised crime and terror as one of 'transformation' (Dishman, 2001; 2005; Hutchinson and O'Malley, 2007). Many crime-terror scholars who favour this language of transformation use the term 'convergence' to describe a situation in which two organisations – one criminal group and one terrorist group – fuse themselves into a single hybrid entity (Dishman, 2005; Shelley and Picarelli, 2005). To be consistent with Makarenko's crime-terror continuum, we use the term 'transformation' and 'convergence' as defined above. To avoid confusion when referring to a single organisation that has developed both criminal and terrorist elements, while not abandoning its original organising principle, we refer to such a group as a 'mutated' organisation, borrowing language from Dishman (2001). This is in contrast to a merger of two previously distinct groups, forming a 'hybrid' organisation.

Returning to the crime-terror nexus, Makarenko (2004) categorises the seven points on the continuum into four categories, which include: alliances, operational motivations, convergence, and black holes. Alliances refer to the idea that both factions (criminal and terrorist groups) form relationships with one another. Typically, alliances are formed in certain regions in an effort to ensure mutual success. However, alliances may be imperfect. Therefore, many groups avoid them in favour of adopting both criminal and terrorist activities within their own groups, attempting to avoid any alliance-related difficulties. As an example, organised crime groups could use terrorist tactics to solidify their criminal enterprise and foster the

promulgation of conditions necessary to further their criminal activities. Alternatively, terrorists may engage in behaviours common to organised crime as a way of funding their ideological interests and actions. By each attempting to take on the other's role, criminal and terrorist organisations eliminate the need for alliances. Makarenko defines this as 'convergence.'

The convergence hypothesis refers to the idea that both groups have the ability to adopt the other's characteristics, thus becoming a more potent threat. The advantage gained by convergence is summarised by Acharya, Bukhari, & Sulaiman (2009, p. 104); 'the nexus with organised criminal groups gives terrorists a disproportionate advantage in terms of skills and capabilities. Criminal gangs can help terrorists extend their reach beyond the area of their usual operations'. Further, the continuum suggests that after convergence, it is possible for a group to abandon its original motivations and instead occupy a status on the side of the spectrum from which they did not begin.

 At the centre-point or fulcrum of the crime-terror continuum is the 'black hole' thesis. In this situation, a weak or failed state provides the fertile ground allowing for convergence between organised crime and terrorism and creates the 'safe haven' for such groups (whether converged or mutated) to continue their operations largely unimpeded, as in Afghanistan (Makarenko, 2004, p. 138). However, this conceptualisation of the crime-terror continuum does not specify the mechanisms that would lead one organisation to completely reverse its position on the continuum, or transform, while another organisation converges (here, mutates) and enters the black hole.

The Black Hole State

Since the terror attacks of September 11th 2001, counterterrorism and counterinsurgency policy has been quite concerned with the notion of the black hole state, sometimes referred to as terrorist sanctuaries or safe havens (Campana and Ducol, 2011; Innes, 2007; Korteweg, 2008; Piazza, 2008). These operating spaces are troublesome inasmuch they provide terrorists opportunities to train, organise, raise revenue, and plan attacks (Piazza, 2008). Precise definitions of such terms are debatable and controversial (Campana and Ducol, 2011), but at the most basic level share the notion that in such spaces (physical or otherwise), legitimate government influence is sufficiently weak as to be unable to assert control over criminals, terrorists, or political insurgents.

Both the political and academic realms have been inundated with the use of terminology to describe a situation in which a failed or failing state is exploited by terrorist actors for nefarious purposes. In arguing over the semantics of what constitutes a black hole state, terrorist sanctuary, or safe haven, scholars and policymakers endeavoured to identify the characteristics of black hole states and the signposts that signal their emergence. Some treatments of black holes and safe havens have focused on the geographic dimensions of states, following the lead set by the 9/11 Commission report produced in 2004 (Innes, 2007, p. 4), examining such factors as porous borders and physical inaccessibility. Others have examined non-physical attributes of the state such as demographic and political conditions, for example population density, historical legacies of violence and conflict, poverty, and weak political efficacy. Still others studied less tangible characteristics such as localised power dynamics, social, and religious factors.

However, the extant literature conceptualising black hole states and their empirical relationships to terrorism are overwhelmingly preoccupied with measuring state-level constructs. In other words, variables considered and studied almost uniformly describe some attribute of the state. Campana and Ducol (2011) offer a critique of this limited paradigm, arguing that theoretical formulations of black holes and safe havens be expanded to include local social dynamics (such as clan or tribal governance). This critique argues that local "social space"

has remarkable potential to affect order and routine even when centralised government cannot, thus shaping favourable opportunities for terrorists when local populaces are sympathetic, or curtailing crime and terror when the motives of insurgents are not conducive to the social order. Groh (2010) offers a similar argument, providing an in-depth analysis of the Pashtunwali system of local governance in Afghanistan and Pakistan, suggesting that the tribal structure lent itself to prolonged resistance to outside authority.

Merging the Crime-Terror Continuum with Black Hole Theory

Currently, the literature posits two simultaneous but separate contentions. The crime-terror continuum suggests that criminal or terrorist organisations have the potential to change their identities along a continuum based on their actions and motivations. Such organisations could transform from one type into another, or could mutate or converge into a hybrid organisation with joint terrorist and criminal capabilities. In the context of a failed state, a converged organisation can enter the black hole state. Separately, black hole theory suggests that failed or sufficiently weak states offer terrorist organisations a breeding ground for future operations, and multiple studies examine the state-level correlates of these black hole states or terrorist safe havens.

What is missing from the literature is an examination of organisation-level characteristics that contribute to the black hole state. Characteristics of organisations are crucial to the crime-terror continuum. To enter the black hole state, the continuum requires an organisation whose operational identity is in flux to converge or mutate, rather than simply transform. To transform is simply to move from one extreme of the continuum to the other. The black hole exists at the centre of the continuum. Thus, a reconciliation of black hole theory and the crime-terror continuum incorporating organisation-level characteristics will have utility in explaining why one organisation in flux transforms, while another converges to enter the black hole state. This article offers a limited initial step toward the theoretical integration of organisational characteristics into black hole theory by examining a mutated organisation currently operating in a black hole state; the Taliban movement in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Entering the Black Hole

We offer an extension of black hole theory by considering organisation-level characteristics that contribute to a mutated or hybrid crime-terror group entering the black hole state. To construct our theoretical extension, this article builds on observations of one such group, the Taliban movement of Afghanistan and Pakistan. The Taliban provide a useful case study for this purpose inasmuch as Makarenko (2004, p. 138) identifies Afghanistan as a failed state in her paper outlining the crime-terror continuum (as well as others; see Campana and Ducol, 2011; Groh, 2010; Innes, 2007; Korteweg, 2008; Piazza, 2008), and because both the criminal and terrorist activities of the group are well documented, as will be seen below. Begun for purely religious motivations, the terror group evolved and mutated into an organisation equally adept at organised crime. Although crafted from observations of the Taliban, we argue this extension is flexible enough to explain why some organisations enter the black hole, while others simply transform.

We posit three factors that push a transforming organisation into the black hole state. First, the organisation must be operational within the geopolitical context of a failed or weak state. Second, the organisation must have simultaneous and continued activities in both terrorist operations and organised crime. Third, and most critical, the organisation's original organising principle, or 'raison d'être', must carry continued

strategic value to the group. Using the Taliban movement as a case study, each of these factors are elaborated and documented below. It warrants noting the first two factors are *preconditions* for the black hole state, rather than discriminatory factors. In other words, their presence is by definition necessary for a black hole state to exist. We include them here because the operational environment and capabilities of a group are organisation-level characteristics, rather than state-level, even if only preconditions for the black hole state.

Failed or Weak State

Literally central to the crime-terror continuum proposed by Makarenko (2004), the "black hole' thesis' represents the penultimate threat to international security posed by transnational organised criminal groups. Referring specifically to the melding of organised crime and terrorism, the black hole thesis goes beyond the prior state of convergence in that it occurs in a weak or failed state incapable of counteracting such groups, thus fostering the conditions for the continuation of the groups' criminal operations. This governmental weakness is the first precondition of our extension of black hole theory.

Fortunately, finding empirical examples of black holes is difficult. This is due to the fact that black holes require the simultaneous presence of a failed state and a group that has converged to display both organised crime and terrorist operational capabilities. Afghanistan's status as a black hole state is evidenced by the absence of central authority capable of providing law and order, chronic instability caused by factional feuds between rival warlords, and the sanctuary the country's political situation provided to a number of terrorist groups and transnational organised criminal groups since the Soviet withdrawal in 1989 (Atran, 2010).

After the withdrawal of Soviet forces, the Taliban were able to consolidate their control over the country, becoming the de facto ruling government of Afghanistan. As the ruling party between 1996 and 2001 (Reese, 2012, p. 94), the Taliban provided social welfare services, essentially performing some functions of the state (Rashid, 2010). However, the Taliban undertook these projects not for philanthropic reasons, but for self-interested reasons.

Much of the strength of the Taliban movement is found in an equally weakly governed region of Pakistan. Following the US-led military invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, the core group of the Taliban had fled the country and emigrated to Pakistan to reorganise. Concurrently, the Pakistan Taliban emerged, a decentralised amalgamation of local tribes and military commanders loyal to Mullah Omar, but with separate structures and leadership from both the Afghan Taliban and each other (Acharya et al., 2009; Atran, 2010; Rashid, 2010). In the mountainous terrain of the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) and the North-West Frontier Province (NWFP), the Pakistan Taliban operate a regime capable of functioning well beyond the reach of the Pakistani government (Atran, 2010; Rashid, 2010).

The Taliban movement is capable of operating its criminal and terrorist agenda with relative impunity within its locus of power in Afghanistan and Pakistan precisely because in those geopolitical contexts, the legitimate governments are incapable of removing the Taliban's influence. A failed or weak state – such as that seen in current day Afghanistan (and the FATA and NWFP regions of Pakistan) – is a necessary precondition for a mutated organisation to enter the black hole. However, it is by no means a sufficient condition.

Simultaneous and Continued Operations in Terror and Crime

A second precondition for entering the black hole, an organisation must be chronically engaged in both terrorism and organised crime. In other words, the organisation must be a mutated one, whose threat comes

from its duality. The Taliban have a well-documented history of religiously-motivated terrorism. While harbouring Al-Qaeda members in Afghanistan, the Taliban trained in and adopted the tactics favoured by Al-Qaeda. These include the use of both suicide bombers and improvised explosive devices (IEDs) in both Afghanistan and Pakistan (Rashid, 2010).

Recent Taliban activities in Afghanistan and Pakistan continue to document the movement's fervour in using violence to advance its ideological agenda. NATO coalition forces, Afghan police, Pakistani military, and ordinary civilians remain targets of the Taliban's lethality (Crilly, 2013; Rosenberg & Shaw, 2014). The widespread violence in Afghanistan and Pakistan is prototypical of the Taliban's target selection patterns and modus operandi, as they attempt to eliminate threats to their extreme ideology.

Although established purveyors of religious terror, the Taliban are equally adept at organised crime. The Taliban's involvement in the opium and heroin trades dates back to their ascension to power in Afghanistan in the mid-1990s. Afghanistan harbours something of a feudal system for which opium and heroin is the lifeblood (Rashid, 2010; Schmidt, 2010), extracting profit at all stages of the trade.

The Taliban's involvement in the opium and heroin trades is an important component of their identity and the threat they pose to regional and transnational security. But equally important is the acknowledgement that their interests in organised criminal ventures became more varied and pronounced. Controlling lucrative trade and commerce corridors, Taliban warlords and their soldiers systematically collect taxes on virtually every shipment moving through the territory (Acharya et al., 2009; Reese, 2012, p. 105), including commodities like electronics, clothing, tea and silk, to contraband like rifles, opiates, and precursor chemicals (Rashid, 2010).

The Pakistan Taliban have expanded their organised criminal activities beyond those of the Afghan Taliban. The various Taliban factions have subsumed hardened criminals from Pakistan to leverage their expertise in committing bank robberies, vehicle thefts, and kidnapping for ransom schemes (Acharya et al., 2009; Freeman, 2012, p. 15). Kidnapping for ransom is thought to be one of the largest sources of revenue for the Pakistan Taliban (National Counter Terrorism Center, 2008; Reese, 2012). The proceeds from all of these endeavours are diverted to Taliban coffers.

Diversification and professionalism are now the hallmarks of Taliban organised crime in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Once a tightly-integrated resistance movement singularly focused on the control of their home country, the Taliban embraced the role as a loosely connected and overlapping network of organised criminals able to generate immense revenue from quite divergent sources. This mutation satisfies the second precondition for entering the black hole.

Strategic Value to Retain the Group's Raison D'être

The third and final component of our extension of the black hole thesis concerns a group that has undergone transformation from a terrorist organisation motivated solely by political or religious ideology into a mutated group equally ensconced in profit generation. Makarenko's (2004) original formulation of the crime-terror continuum holds that it is quite possible for a sort of total transformation in which the group comes to occupy a position on the opposite side of the crime-terror continuum from where it started. However, to enter the black hole state, such an organisation by definition cannot complete this total transformation. In other words, the group cannot abandon its original organising principle, or by extension its religious or political motivations. This organising principle, or raison d'être, must continue to hold strategic value,

thus ensuring its retention as part of the group's identity. Else, the principle could be jettisoned, the group transformed, and the black hole state avoided.

Since its inception, the Taliban movement has been organised around its radical Islamic ideology and strict interpretation and implementation of Sharia law (Atran, 2010; Rashid, 2010). This radical agenda was formerly directed and guided by Mullah Omar and the Taliban's Supreme Shura (Rashid, 2010), presiding over a monolithic and hierarchical structure. But the Taliban movement is no longer monolithic (Acharya et al., 2009). The Taliban movement has evolved into 'fragmented, transnational force devoid of many of the group's prior characteristics' (Schmidt, 2010; Peters, 2009). Illustrating the evolution from consolidation to fragmentation, Schmidt (2010) frames the Taliban structure as one that shifted from a 'spider' organization to a 'starfish' organization[2] (see Brafman and Beckstrom, 2006). Essentially, this characterisation reflects changes the Taliban have undergone as they reinvented themselves, and emerged as a new decentralised network.

While Mullah Omar remains the de facto leader of the Taliban, he is something of a figurehead, controlling only the core group in Afghanistan (Peters, 2009; Schmidt, 2010). The larger Taliban are decentralised, their commanders showing greater autonomy for their own factions. The characteristics of the Taliban embody the starfish organisation set forth by Brafman and Beckstrom (2006). The removal of any one faction of the Taliban today would not significantly harm the organisation. The factions fund themselves, and cooperate with one another absent any directives from central leadership (Schmidt, 2010).

Part and parcel to their radical ideology, the Taliban are committed to the defence of their home country from outside rule. This resistance to interference from states such as Britain, the Soviet Union, and the United States is tied into a local tribal governance known as Pashtunwali (Atran, 2010; Groh, 2010). This ethnically-based system of alternative governance relies on a decentralised tribal network (Campana and Ducol, 2011; Groh, 2010) easily leveraged by and integrated into Taliban authority. The current decentralised structure of the Taliban movement, harkening back to Pashuntwali, is entirely congruent with the norms and mores of the populace with whom the Taliban interface. Because the Taliban soldiers are largely drawn from local populations (Rashid, 2010), structure reinforces commitment to the movement.

In this new and decentralised Taliban movement, abandonment of the group's organising principle is unfeasible. Ideology gives the Taliban shared identity. Although organised crime under the Taliban banner is rampant, profit generation is not the ultimate goal. As a unifying principle, the group is largely focused on the implementation of radical Islam, and eliminating those who violate their religious tenets. Without this identity, the movement likely would fragment (Atran, 2010). Given the number of Taliban factions under the autonomous command of their various warlords, a lack of belonging toward one another could very well cause the factions to become direct competitors. For the Taliban, radical ideology provides identity, and that identify provides unity. Thus we see the strategic value in the Taliban's raison d'être.

Avoiding the Black Hole

Certainly, there are a multitude of nefarious organisations besides the Taliban with operational capabilities in both organised crime and political or religious terrorism. Al-Qaeda, for example, has been clearly documented as a potent terrorist group engaged in such criminal enterprises as money laundering, kidnapping, and fraud (Freeman, 2012). It is also the case that for Al-Qaeda, its original raison d'être retains strategic value. Indeed, it is equally committed to global jihad and radical Islam as (and arguably more than) the Taliban. Its message has been propagated worldwide through their networks of operatives and splinter

groups. Much like the Taliban, radical ideology provides Al-Qaeda with identity. But unlike the Taliban, Al-Qaeda has not entered the black hole because it does not operate within a failed or suitably weak state. Al-Qaeda's global dispersal – in contrast to the Taliban's near-exclusive regional focus – rarely allows it to gather sufficient force to challenge legitimate states[3]. Al-Qaeda and its scions remain interested in taking advantage of failed or weak states, but thus far have been unable to do so. Although at the midpoint of the crime-terror continuum, Al-Qaeda has not entered the black hole because it has not met the theoretical precondition of operating in the geopolitical context of a failed state.

It is quite possible for terrorist or criminal organisations to operate in failed or failing states, retain their original organising principle, but not to show both terrorist and criminal capabilities. The narcotics cartels operating in Mexico would serve as a prime example. While not a failed state, Mexico ranks highly on the Fragile State Index[4]. The cartels are efficient and ruthless organised criminals, but are not terrorists inasmuch as they do not attempt to shape the political process. Cartels have not met the precondition of simultaneous terrorist and criminal operations, and thus avoid entering the black hole thesis as defined herein.

Our extension of the black hole thesis is further applicable to crime-terror groups who avoid entering the black hole because they abandon their original organising principle. For example, Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) is one of the oldest terror groups in the Western hemisphere. Initially committed to supplanting the Colombian government with a populist government in its image, FARC evolved into a premier narcotics trafficker that also made extensive profits through kidnappings in its home country. Many have argued that with the immense profits of Colombian cocaine and heroin, FARC's commitment to its populist agenda waned (Dishman, 2001; Hutchinson and O'Malley, 2007). When it lost strategic value, the organising principle was jettisoned, and thus the FARC never entered into the black hole. It bears mentioning that the Colombian government, though weak at times, was buttressed by the United States, offering further barrier to FARC entering the black hole.

Conclusion

Much has been said of the crime-terror nexus, both of the theoretical connection and the empirical evidence of the melding of crime and terror around the world. The shift from monolithic groups specialising in particular transgressions to decentralised networks of multi-threat generalists sharpens the need for understanding the conditions that erode national and international security. This article endeavours to further the current literature by offering an extension of the black hole thesis, specifying the necessary conditions for a mutated crime-terror organisation to enter the black hole. We have done so by studying one such group operating in a black hole state, the Taliban. We have also endeavoured to merge the crime-terror continuum with black hole theory by considering the organisation-level characteristics necessary to produce black hole states. This article does not present any grand new theory, but instead offers a limited theoretical extension arguing that black hole theory should strive to incorporate organisation-specific variables into future analysis. We argue for moving beyond an exclusive focus on state-level characteristics. In a black hole state, the direct threats to national, regional, and global security emanate not from states, but from the criminal and terrorist actors. Without considering the properties of such actors, theoretical and empirical analyses will be incomplete.

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Notes

[1] We are grateful to the anonymous reviewers who provided helpful feedback on this paper.

[2] This characterisation is derived from the nature of the two organisms. Spiders have a head that is clearly distinguishable from its legs. By contrast, starfish have legs radiating from a central hub, but no head. The head of the spider directs the organism, and if removed the spider will die. If a leg is removed from a starfish, the starfish will survive.

[3] A notable exception is Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb's December 2012 martial takeover of northern Mali. AQIM's attempt to capitalise on Mali's weakness was stymied by international forces.

[4] The index can be accessed at http://ffp.statesindex.org/rankings-2014.

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