Rational Choice Theory and the Crime-Terror Nexus: How and Why Terrorist and Organized Criminal Groups are Working Together

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A thesis submitted to the faculty of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of a Master of Arts in the Department of Political Science.

Chapel Hill
2007

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ABSTRACT

NICOLE CONTEGIACOMO: Rational Choice Theory and the Crime-Terror Nexus: How and Why Terrorist and Organized Criminal Groups are Working Together (Under the direction of Gary Marks)

Transnational organized criminal groups and terrorist organizations are conspiring, creating a worldwide security malaise. This thesis presents this nexus formed between these two groups, and seeks to explain this phenomenon through the use of classic rational choice theory. After presenting both rational choice theory and the basic reasons behind the formation of this nexus, this paper presents two of the most prevalent and dangerous terrorist and criminal groups for a case study; al-Qaeda and the Albanian mafia. With this, the paper shows how al-Qaeda and the Albanian mafia are not only linked to numerous other criminal and terrorist groups, but how the two have colluded with each other to exceed their individual criminal capabilities. Successfully analyzing the nexus through the lens of rational choice theory allows for an understanding into these groups means and motives, which can help to prevent future cooperation from taking place.
Acknowledgements

I am especially grateful to Dr. Gary Marks and the entire faculty of the Trans-Atlantic Master’s Program at UNC-Chapel Hill for their guidance and knowledge. I am also very thankful to my family and my peers for their constant support.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

**Chapter**

I. **INTRODUCTION** .......................................................... 1

II. **RATIONAL CHOICE THEORY: RATIONAL DECISIONS, RATIONAL ACTORS** .................................................. 5

   Organized Crime ‘Bosses’ as Rational Actors ....................... 6

   Terrorists as Rational Actors ........................................... 8

III. **THE CRIME-TError NEXUS: BACKGROUND AND FRAMEWORK FOR ANALYSIS** ........................................ 11

   Background to the Crime-Terror Nexus ............................ 11

   Structural Similarities .................................................. 13

   Operational Mechanisms .............................................. 14

   Information Technology ............................................... 15

   Location and Transit ................................................... 16

   Money ........................................................................... 16

   Differences .................................................................. 17

IV. **FORMS OF INFLUENCE, COOPERATION AND TRANSFORMATION: THE NEXUS FRAMEWORK** .................................. 19

   Transformation ................................................................ 19

   Cooperation and Strategic Alliances ................................ 20

   Influence and Activity Appropriation ................................ 21

V. **CASE STUDY: AL-QAEDA, THE ALBANIAN MAFIA, AND THEIR ‘AFFILIATES’** ........................................ 23
I. Introduction

Terrorist and organized criminal groups have been in existence for centuries, creating a security malaise that has consistently plagued societies and governments alike. Since the September 11, 2001 attacks (hereafter referred to as 9/11) these two groups have come into the academic limelight, as the attacks on 9/11 brought unprecedented coverage to the workings of these various criminal underworlds and the power these groups behold. These two distinct groups were once thought of as separate, but are now being considered much more intertwined. Realizing the danger that these groups would pose by cooperating with each other, researchers have begun to uncover the nexus between them.

Terrorism and organized crime are two of the largest problems facing the modern world. Terrorist and criminal groups are adaptive and resilient. Since 9/11, they have found common ground in eluding law enforcement. In this thesis I examine why and how they interact with the help of classic rational choice theory.

The literature concerning the ‘nexus’ between terrorist and transnational organized criminal groups has greatly increased since the turn of the century. In depth research about each of the groups respectively has existed for quite some time, yet it is only in recent years that the publicly available literature has begun to fully embrace the existence of the nexus, and sought to explain it. Scholars like Frank Cilluffo, Louise Shelley, and others have realized that analyzing the relationship between these two
groups can help governments and defense agencies to conquer the problem of both terrorism and organized crime, problems which Shelley et. Al refer to as, “the most malignant opponents of the nation state” (Shelley, Picarelli et. Al. 2005; 5). Some go as far as to argue that both should be combated as one entity, with legislation that affects both groups. Others realize that there are varying degrees of interaction between these groups and thus realize the importance of dealing with both, similarly but separately.

Throughout the literature, there are varying definitions for each of these separate entities, but there is some consensus as to the difference between terrorist and organized criminal groups. The term ‘organized crime’ refers to any group of people that come together on a continual basis for the purpose of making illicit profits, through any number of various criminal activities (Shelley, Picarelli et. Al. 2005, Makarenko 2002, Laegreid 2004). The most popular organized crime activities include drug smuggling, human smuggling and trafficking, arms dealing, and selling counterfeit goods, but this list is not exhaustive. Organized crime groups are known for their use of violence and intimidation, corruption, and money laundering (Sanderson 2004; 53). They operate in strict secrecy and avoid publicity vis à vis their business endeavors at all costs (Sanderson 2004; 55). Many ‘kingpins’, such as those of various mafia groups, are very public figures in their towns and countries. They do not allow this publicity to enter their business lives, however. They maintain a strict form of secrecy and try to operate their illicit enterprises under the public radar, whilst their lives outside of these enterprises might actually be quite public. Terrorism refers to the “premeditated creation and exploitation of fear in a target group through violence or the threat of violence by a non-state organization striving for political, religious,” or other ideological goals (Laegreid
Certain groups within the broader terms of organized crime and terrorism fall into a category described as ‘transnational criminal groups’. These groups have two additional qualifications beyond those of the previously discussed definitions, according to the Global Action Plan Against Organized Transnational Crime for the World Ministerial Conference in 1994 in Naples (Laegreid, 2004, 11). Transnational criminal groups also have the ability to expand beyond national borders, and are known for their collaboration with other transnational criminal groups (Laegreid 2004; 11). What is more extreme about these ‘transnational criminal groups’ is not only that terrorists and organized criminal groups work together, but that transnational organized criminal groups have started to work with what would once be thought of as competition, other organized criminal groups. Transnational terrorists, on the same note, have also been known to work with other terrorists even given contrasts between their ideological motives.

The framework of the crime-terror nexus can be successfully analyzed through the use of classic rational choice theory. This paper will explore the nexus as exemplified by the most prominent terrorist group, al-Qaeda, and one of the most widespread and successful organized crime groups, the Albanian mafia. First, rational choice theory will be explained, and the paper will argue that the leaders of terrorist and organized criminal groups are both self-interested rational actors. Following, the paper will discuss the reasoning behind the creation of the nexus, along with examine the framework for the nexus as laid out by Shelley, Picarelli et. Al. (2005). The nexus will be discussed through the lens of rational choice theory, arguing that these two types of groups only form a ‘nexus’ when it increases their ability to achieve their motives, above and beyond their
independent capabilities. As background to these groups, I will explain some
historical and logistical information behind the two case study groups. Finally, I will use
al-Qaeda and the Albanian mafia to illustrate how the nexus works, and how two of the
most dangerous groups in the world have colluded to exceed their individual potential.
II. Rational Choice Theory: Rational Decisions, Rational Actors

Leaders of both transnational organized criminal groups and terrorist organizations can be regarded as rational actors. For the purpose of this paper, I will focus solely on the groups as a whole, and the decisions made solely by the leadership of these various organizations. To analyze the rationality of the members at the lower end of these groups would prove to be much more difficult, and would stray from the purpose of this paper given that these are not the decision makers within the group. Arguing that operatives who commit suicide bombings are rational actors is another defense, which has no purpose to the argument laid out here. This would require a thorough analysis of collective action rational choice theory. Members that join a group, like a terrorist organization, often have very different motives for joining the group than do the leaders running the organization. They receive different benefits from the group, and therefore it would require a separate examination to determine whether the lower members of the group are rational choice actors. For this analysis, attention will be focused on the top tier authorities within these groups, and assume that any decisions made to interact with other groups, engage in certain activities, or any decisions that affect the group as a whole were taken at the highest level within the group by the leaders, rational actors.

The mainstream variant of rational choice theory “assumes that all individuals have the rational capacity, time and emotional detachment necessary to choose a best course of action,” in a given situation (Marsh, Stoker 1995; 79). This theory assumes that
individuals, the leaders of these transnational criminal groups, are self-interested and will take any necessary actions in order to increase their benefit from a certain situation. As political scientists often argue, the do this in order to ‘maximize their utility’ from any given situation (Marsh, Stoker 1995; 79).

Rational Choice theory has been applied to almost all disciplines of political science, helping to explain everything from election outcomes to war declarations. “Rational choice theory, when rigorously applied, can help clarify the discipline and study of terrorism,” as well, according to Anderton and Carter (2005; 275). Both terrorist leaders and those of organized criminal groups seek to maximize their utility given the opportunities to do so, being that they are rational actors (Laegreid 2004; 15). The only way criminal and terrorist leaders are capable of exploiting the resources and opportunities available to them in the way they do is because they are highly rational and calculated actors (Williams 2006; 195). While organized crime is a “continuation of business by criminal means,” so terrorism is a “continuation of political through the use of indiscriminate violence,” in order to better achieve their various motives (Williams 2006; 195).

**Organized Crime ‘bosses’ as Rational Actors:**

Organized crime groups, and most importantly the leaders of those groups, are driven by the promise of earning illicit profits from illegal activities that exceed those possible by participating in legal business enterprises. They seek to maximize profits through the use of violence, coercion, and most undetectable, corruption (Makarenko
These ‘bosses’, being rational actors, ensure their secrecy and safety in order to successfully operate their lucrative ‘businesses’. They use these tactics to eliminate their competition in the market, in order to increase their illicit income. They use these illegal strategies to ensure their survival and reduce risk (Makarenko 2002; 4, Shelley, Picarelli et. Al. 2005; 51). Considering that bountiful profits made by the leaders of these groups can easily surpass the income possibilities from operating a legitimate business or earning an average wage, running an organized crime group can be seen as a way to ‘maximize utility’ given the income choices. In Albania, for example, the average salary in the 1990’s was equivalent to $50 (“The Outer Ring” 18). Becoming involved in illegal activities like drug and human smuggling, human trafficking, and arms dealing could earn thousands of dollars a month for the people involved, even up to $300 per AK-47 sold (Smith 1998; 16). For people who became involved in various types of smuggling in Albania at that time, a good night could bring in as much as $13,000 per person and $400,000 per cell-like unit (Cilluffo, Salmoiraghi 1999; 24). Considering that mafia units often have numerous cells, one night could easily pull in profits in the millions of dollars. With this, it is easy to see how crime and illegitimate activities can be a rational choice to the actors involved in these crimes, given that financial survival is indeed an issue.

According to Shelley and Williams, both terrorist leaders and organized crime ‘bosses’ successfully employ risk management procedures, utilize specialists to ensure secrecy, and take all other necessary steps to ensure their motives are achieved, which all proves them to be calculated, rational actors that make rational choices based on their particular motives (Shelley, Picarelli 2002, Williams 2006; 195, Laegreid 2004; 15).
Terrorists as Rational Actors:

Leaders of terrorist organizations and cells are careful, rational actors who seek to maximize utility from various endeavors both ideological and political. Where organized crime ‘bosses’ can be seen as a type of ‘entrepreneur’, albeit within the underground economy, so terrorists can be considered a type of “political entrepreneur” (Gupta 2004, 7). There have been numerous debates about the rationality of terrorists within the organizations, such as those that commit suicide bombings, and arguments about religious fundamentalism and the collective action problem, but this does not pertain to the leaders of these terrorist organizations. Gupta argues that “it is religion and ethnic nationalism that are being used by the political entrepreneurs,” to maximize utility in the form of large membership totals, thus furthering the leaders self-interested agenda (Gupta 2004; 10). Tamara Makarenko argues that terrorists have used the “veneer of Islam,” to secure their means, particularly through the ability to gain ‘operatives’, in order to achieve their motives which are often more political than religious (Makarenko 2002; 2). Ideology is a tool for these leaders to use to build up their organizations.

Terrorist actions seem random to the mass public. According to Sander and Enders, however, they are “simulated randomness,” (2004; 2). Being rational actors, terrorists make their attacks seem ‘random’ to the public in order to intimidate and terrorize the mass populous, as well as make their next attack difficult to anticipate. In fact, numerous scholars have been quick to argue the contrary, that terrorist attacks are
far from random. These attacks are both premeditated, and the targets very carefully selected in order to seek the maximum output from the attack. Whether this desired output is mass media attention, installing fear into the population, or a hefty victim count, all desired outcomes are taken into account while terrorists are developing plans for prospective attacks (Sander, Enders 2004; 2, Shelley, Picarelli et. Al. 2005, Williams 2006; 196). Osama bin Laden, as a well-known example, specifically chose the World Trade Center (WTC) in New York and the Pentagon in Washington D.C. for his terrorist attacks on 9/11. The first was a large, populated, and internationally symbolic center that he could use to establish the most terror into the American government and public by destroying, and the latter is most important building in the United States vis à vis national security and defense. Also, by using airplanes as flying bombs, he struck maximum fear into the public by making them realize that they were constantly at risk of being on ‘the next one’ while on their way to a vacation or a business meeting, rather than using a car bomb or another more isolated weapon. This, as bin Laden has stated since the attacks, was a way of vying to eliminate the United States presence in the Persian Gulf region, which has been one of bin Laden’s main publicly states motives for al-Qaeda. Choosing something like a farm, or a shopping mall, somewhere besides Manhattan, would have derived less media attention, less fear, and less attention from the target audience which are all thing al-Qaeda calculated before plotting the attack. Al-Qaeda has dissolved into a much flatter, cell-like structure for reasons of survival. The leaders of these individual cells and affiliate groups, such as that of the Abu-Sayyaf described later, are also rational actors that will make any necessary decisions to ‘maximize the utility’ of their particular cell.
Terrorists “will naturally seek the weakest link-i.e., the country with the least security,” or the least secured sector within a country to base their operations and arrange their subsequent attacks (Sander, Enders 2004; 16). Also, with regards to terrorist attacks, these same authors argue that terrorist leaders “maximize utility or expected utility derived from the basic commodities, produced from terrorist and non-terrorist activities” just like rational choice actors make decisions to maximize utility or expected utility given specific constraints, more broadly (Sander, Enders 2004; 19). Citing the same example, al-Qaeda was able to operate fairly freely under the Taliban regime in Afghanistan without fear of legal, military, or judicial conflict. Once the United States invaded Afghanistan, al-Qaeda operatives rationally moved to a ‘safer’ place in which to base operations. They fled to nearby countries and many cells branched out. They are now operating in over 100 countries including many of the countries of the European Union and the USA (“Al Qaida” 2007).
III. The Crime-Terror Nexus: Background and Reasoning

*Background to the Crime-Terror Nexus*

According to Louise Shelley and John T. Picarelli, certain organized criminal and terrorist groups both fall under the category of ‘transnational criminal groups’ (2002; 306). These groups do not solely operate in one state, nation, or region but rather they spread malignantly throughout the global arena in hopes of maximizing utility, and achieving their motives. Many experts argue that the primary enabler of this ‘transnational’ nature has been globalization, allowing these groups to take advantage of improved technologies, communications, transportation and other improved mechanisms that allow them to act on an international scale. This has allowed these groups to infiltrate, and often dominate, many non-native areas (Williams 2006, Shelley, Picarelli 2002, Shelley, Picarelli et. Al. 2005; Laegreid 2005). Thomas Sanderson argues that the transnational nature of these groups began with the collapse of the Soviet Union, and the consequent decline in state sponsorship for both black market activities, as well as terrorism (Sanderson 2004; 49-50, Dishman 2001; 43, Makarenko 2004, 129). After the collapse of the Soviet regime there were very weak state governments, a great lack of legal clout and judicial penalties, and a large influx of newly ‘available’, stolen, arms that enabled these groups to flourish and set their sights on a more international market. The large supply of weapons proved to be a very lucrative market for the criminal groups that acquired them. AK-47 rifles, of which there were plenty credit of the previous Soviet
regime, sold for over $300 a piece, with all the revenues immediately going into the hands of the criminal groups that had raided the stockpiles (Smith 1998; 16). The opening of borders coupled with the weak security forces allowed these groups to travel more freely between borders (Makarenko 2002; 5). The decline in state sponsorship forced these groups to seek their own sources of financial stability and security, prompting them to take advantage of the institutionally weak situation by infiltrating the largest territories possible in sights of lucrative profits (Sanderson 2004; 50).

These transnational criminal groups share many similarities, or what Shelley and others refer to as ‘means’ with which to achieve their separate ‘motives’. With the 9/11 attacks and the subsequent war on terror, both terrorist and organized criminal groups alike are having to work harder to achieve their means. According to numerous authors like Sanderson and Williams, the convergence between these two types of groups is on the rise. This ‘crime-terror nexus’, or the influence, cooperation, or transformation between these groups has increased in recent years due to both globalization and the simultaneous global crackdown on organized criminal and terrorist activities. Organized criminal groups and terrorist organizations “regularly engage in strategic alliances to provide goods and services,” to each other as a result of the “shift in the international security environment”, brought about in recent years (Makarenko 2002; 1). These groups have numerous reasons to form a ‘nexus’. They share structural elements, participate in the similar and often parallel types of illicit activity, require secrecy and advanced technological security measures, and often share locations for either operational bases or transit routes.


Structural Similarities

These two groups often share similar structures. Many look to the Sicilian mafia when examining structure within an organized criminal group, as they have become the canonical example of an organized crime group in recent history. This proves to be insufficient and unsuccessful however, because “among today’s organized crime groups the Sicilian mafia is more an exception than the rule” according to Shelley, Picarelli et al. (2005; 54). A majority of the prosperous transnational criminal groups throughout the globe today are hierarchical, but not in a strict sense like the Sicilian mafia. Most now have much looser, cell-like structures that are semi-autonomous from each of the other cells, yet respond to the leadership, or founders, of the organization in a loosely hierarchical way (Shelley, Picarelli et al. 2005; 54, Sanderson 2004; 54). With loose cell structures, as opposed to traditional Italian style strict hierarchical structures, these groups move easily throughout large regions, and are elusive to authorities. When one cell is caught, others continue to operate. Also, operatives within one cell do not necessarily know all of the information about the activities of other cells, and some might not even know the names of the organization’s leaders, due to lack of direct contact. This way, if a cell is uncovered by law enforcement, the group as a whole is safer, considering that the captured operatives no little more, if any, information than that concerning their own cell (Shelley, Picarelli et al. 2005; 54). Law-enforcement entities and government structures committed to fighting transnational crime and terrorism are strictly hierarchical, have a lot of red-tape, and are much less adaptive and resilient than these easily transitional, adaptable criminal cells. Both of these groups share similar structures, in this way, hence promulgating the inherent problem of catching them. Once they form a
nexus, they become increasingly more difficult to obliterate. Al-Qaeda has been forced to decentralize, since the global crackdown on terrorism, particularly that of the United States, specifically targets them (Dishman 2005; 243). Osama bin Laden has preached his desire for all individual cells to become self-sustainable, yet many of these starving cells will do anything necessary to survive, even collude with organized criminal cells (Dishman, 2005; 245). Albanian cells throughout Europe and the United States often run themselves, yet the leaders of these cells have made rational decision that have forced these cells to become the one of the largest, most dangerous umbrella organized criminal groups in the world.

**Operational Mechanisms**

The two variations of transnational criminal groups share more than just structural similarities. These groups largely rely on the exact same operational mechanisms, which is one of the main reasons they have been known to converge (Shelley, Picarelli et. Al. 2005; 46-50, Laegreid 2004). These groups both operate in the underground economies of the world and thus both require things like false documentation from shipping records to passports to ‘cover-up’ documents that all cloak their illegal doings (Sanderson 2004; 53, Shelley, Picarelli et. Al. 2005; 46). From getting ‘operatives’ across borders, to hiding drug shipments and covering it all up with a ‘shadow business’, these groups are heavily reliant on false documentation of all sorts. Additionally, many criminal groups use corruption as a way to break through state borders and transport large shipments of illegal goods, and other transnational groups often turn to these other groups for
assistance, and the ability to take advantage of these already established corruption-laden relationships.

**Information Technology**

Even more important to the successful operations of both groups is information technology (IT) (Kostakos, Kostakos 2006; 7). Successful money laundering is the most vital and important function to the financial success of a transnational criminal group, and it relies heavily on IT knowledge. The IT knowledge is imperative for these groups in order to know when, how, and where to send their funds without the money being confiscated by law enforcement officials. More importantly, these groups need information on how to retrieve it once it enters an offshore account or whichever ‘tax haven’ or legally ambiguous financial location they send it to. Transnational criminal groups, both O.C. and terrorist in nature rely on IT to “minimize their electronic communication footprint,” (Sanderson 2004; 54, Shelley, Picarelli et. Al. 2005; 48-49). Information technology is also vital to the success of the groups in other ways. Both types of these groups require advanced counter-surveillance techniques to ensure their secrecy and safety. They are heavily reliant on the Internet, and sometimes hackers, to gain knowledge of law-enforcement activities such as checkpoints, stings and raids in order to avoid being caught (Shelley, Picarelli 2002; 6). For this reason, among others, terrorist and organized criminal groups employ specialists in the field of IT. Considering that expertise in ‘illegal security’ is somewhat of a rare field, it prompts these groups to either work together, or employ the same IT professionals to do work for both types of groups, thus sharing ideas and influence at the very least.
**Location and Transit**

Terrorist and organized criminal groups often inhabit the same areas. Both groups often require ‘safe havens’. Shelley suggests that these safe havens tend to be places with the least security and law enforcement (Shelley, Picarelli et. Al. 2005; 17). Considering this, it is likely that numerous groups might inhabit the same areas over certain periods of time, prompting them to work together. If not, when a specific group requires a new safe haven, they might turn to a different group for assistance, or to share their ‘turf’, particularly while smuggling as they have to cross numerous territories while making sure they take the least ‘enforced’ paths (Makarenko 2002; 8, Shelley, Picarelli et. Al. 2005; 39-41, Pontoniere 2005). Also, there is often a large amount of humanitarian aide and NGO funding that permeates conflict-ridden areas, and coupled with corruption it often provides large sums to the organized crime groups running the area.

**Money**

Since the decline in state sponsorship for terrorist and criminal activity, from the Soviet Union to the ‘collapsed’ Taliban regime in Afghanistan, transnational criminal groups have had to participate in numerous types of fundraising and profit-driven illicit activities. Not coincidentally, organized criminal and terrorist groups have turned to many of the same types of illegal enterprises for their financing, most predominantly the international drug trade (Dishman 2001; 43). The international drug trade is the biggest single financial supporter of both types of groups, accounting for an estimated $300 and $500 billion annually for organized criminal and terrorist groups, respectively (Laegreid
The drug market has become so vital to both these groups that the actual smuggling and selling of narcotics by both types of groups and the collaboration between them to get drugs on the international market has been coined ‘narco-terrorism’, and has become an actual field of both academic research and law-enforcement (Bjornehed 2004). This is not the only activity that these groups participate in simultaneously, however. Both types of groups have been known to repeatedly participate in human smuggling and trafficking, prostitution, counterfeit goods, and even the diamond trade in Africa (Sanderson 2004; 53, Shelley Picarelli et.Al. 2005; 9, Cilluffo 2000). In some places, human smuggling has become as extremely lucrative for groups. The Albanian mafia, which will be described in further detail later, makes up to $900 per person to take people across the sea to Italy, or other nearby safe-havens (Cilluffo, Salmoiraghi 1999; 22). Kimberly Thachuk, an expert in the field, argues that the gross international profits made by terrorist and organized crime groups accounts for somewhere between 2% and 5% of the world’s entire gross national profit, annually (Thachuk 2002, Laegreid 2004; 20). Both of these groups participate in other activities as well, which range from cyber-crime and white-collar fraud all the way up to high levels of governmental corruption.

**Differences**

There are many stark differences between most terrorist and organized criminal groups. Terrorist organizations revel in attention, and incite violence to attract publicity to their particular ideological cause. Organized criminal groups, on the other hand, shy away from the public eye, and incite private violence (Laegreid 2004; 39, Sanderson 2004; 55). Any publicity, to an organized crime group, could be fatal. Many terrorists are
also very religious and ideologically driven, and do not often agree with the ideologies or religions of other organized crime groups (such as an Islamic jihad group, and a Catholic mafia). Also, considering that these groups often share the same fundraising schemes, it could be thought that they would be in constant competition. All of these above things, however, have been proven insufficient in preventing the ‘nexus’ from forming between O.C. and terrorist groups. Both O.C. and terrorist groups realize that without the proper means, whether that is money or resources, their ‘motives’ are unattainable and unreachable. Being rational actors, this has prompted groups in these situations to overlook their differences, cooperate, and form a ‘nexus’. Achieving their means sometimes is more rational for their cause than working solo, regardless of their conflict of motives.
IV. Forms of Influence, Cooperation and Transformation: The Nexus Framework

Terrorist networks and organized criminal groups, or the leaders who make the decisions, form a ‘nexus’ in three main, different ways (Shelley, Picarelli et. Al. 2005; 14-18, 36-38). Terrorist and organized criminal groups form the crime-terror nexus through influence, cooperation, and transformation. Sometimes, these groups do not work together at all, yet solely adopt each other’s tactics and use ideas from other groups, which is influence. In fact, it is possible that “an overlap in transnational organized crime and terrorism can occur without any cooperation between two groups,” on the particular issue in question (Shelley, Picarelli et. Al. 2005; 14). These groups also form the nexus by forming strategic partnerships, which is cooperation. These partnerships can be just for a short period of time, sometimes indefinitely depending on the groups’ individual capacity to meet their own needs. Finally, terrorist and organized criminal groups form the nexus through convergence, or transformation. When OC and terrorist groups work together, occasionally they become one group, or they transform into the type of group they are working with, abandoning their original motives.

Transformation

The transformation of these groups can be seen as a rational choice action, taken by the leaders of the groups in question. Transformation occasionally occurs with a group when they find their original motives are no longer serving them, but the motives of the
other type of group seem to better fit their purpose. This has occurred more with terrorist organizations transforming into organized criminal groups than the other way around.

This *transformation*, a term originally derived by Chris Dishman, describes the phenomenon that occurs when terrorist and O.C. groups form a ‘nexus’, in any way, and eventually one of the groups transforms into the other type (Sanderson 2004; 50). When a terrorist groups is no longer reaping the benefits, or ‘maximizing their utility’ from their ideological motives, yet they are making large profits from funding those terrorist endeavors, they might ‘transform’ into an organized crime group by abandoning their ideological motives solely for economic, profit-driven ones. Flipping the coin, if an organized crime group realizes that there is more to gain through adopting ideological or political motives then they might transform into a terrorist organization by allowing the ideological motives to override their economic ones (Shelley, Picarelli et. Al. 2005; 36).

Dishman refers to transformation as the process that occurs when the benefits from criminal activity override the political benefits and motives, and those original motivations are ignored or abandoned for the newly found motivations, often profit-making and rent seeking (Sanderson 2004; 50). This can be seen in examples throughout the world. In Colombia the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) was once a guerilla terrorist group fighting for less interference from the government, and protecting the drug cartels. Now, the political guerilla motivations of this group have been abandoned, and FARC has transformed into an organized crime group, solely reaping economic profits and using violence for economic motives (Dishman 2001, 52).

*Cooperation and Strategic Alliances*
Cooperation between O.C. and terrorist groups is perhaps the most prevalent way that the ‘nexus’ is formed between these two groups. These groups share many of the same ‘means’, in which to reach their economic, political or religious motives. These groups often form strategic alliances, exchanging goods and services. Considering that these groups share operational mechanisms, the same types of underground fundraising activities, need for specialists, and often share the need for ‘safe-havens’, it is rational that they would occasionally work together. This strategic alliance, or cooperation, can be a temporary way for these groups to increase their benefits, or, if they alliance continues to prove increasingly beneficial than acting alone for both parties, then the alliance will continue or deepen between the groups (Shelley, Picarelli et. Al. 2005; 37). Often, terrorists look to organized criminal groups as a type of “criminal service provider,” when they require certain ‘means’ that they cannot provide for themselves (Williams 2006; 200). When these groups cannot achieve their motives alone, they act in a self-interested way and partner with the other group to assist them. The levels of interaction depend solely on the rational choices of the leadership, and what they deem most beneficial for their own group.

**Influence and Activity Appropriation**

Finally, transnational criminal groups can form a ‘nexus’ without any actual interaction, solely by adopting each other’s tactics or ‘means’, each to achieve their separate motives. They can influence each other without direct contact. This is referred to as ‘activity appropriation’ by Shelley, Picarelli et. Al (2005; 36). Terrorist groups often adapt tactics from organized crime groups, particularly in the fundraising arena. They
steal ideas vis à vis money laundering, ideas for illegal ‘businesses’, or other ideas for various organizational and operational capabilities. Organized crime groups take ideas from terrorist organizations as well. The mafia bombing of the Uffizi museum in Florence in 1993 was a staunch example of activity allocation. Although it might seem like the mafia was transforming, they were solely adopting some terrorist tactics as assistance in reaching their original economic motives (Shelley, Picarelli et. Al. 2005; 36). At this time in Italy the police were cracking down on organized criminal networks and endeavors, and the mafia was just using these terrorist tactics to eliminate their enemy. They were not, however, abandoning their original motives or adopting ideological ones. Hence, the mafia was influenced by terrorism, whilst not working directly with any terrorist organization on this issue. This self-interested act defends the argument that the convergence between OC groups and terrorists is a matter of rational choice, for the mafia committed this act to seek maximum utility, by ensuring self-preservation through eliminating their law-enforcement enemies.
V. Case Study: al-Qaeda, the Albanian mafia, and their ‘affiliates’

These case studies will highlight two of the most dangerous and widespread terrorist and organized criminal groups on the world scale. These groups are resilient, adaptive, and extremely dangerous to international security. Using rational choice theory and the nexus framework, this case study will explain how and why each of these groups is connected to numerous other transnational criminal groups, but even more importantly, to each other. Rational choice successfully explains why these groups choose to work together, and the crime-terror nexus framework exemplifies how they work together. The variation in the depth and length of the relationships between groups is dependent on the needs of the group, and the rational choice actions taken by those groups to meet their needs. Why they work together, and how they work together is somewhat understood, but the variant is completely dependent on the rational choices made by the leaders to meet their various needs. By creating a nexus and bridging the gap between the two types of groups, organizations like those presented in this case study have created a myriad of webbed relationships, thus perpetuating the threat they pose to society, and the plague upon international security in the present day.

Background to al-Qaeda
Al-Qaeda is an Islamic fundamentalist group, supposedly still run by the infamous Osama bin Laden. Not a terribly large amount of public information was available about this group prior to their 9/11 attack on the World Trade Center, but more research has been done in recent years to better understand this group in hopes of decreasing the threat they present to international security. Bin Laden founded this organization with political and religious motivation. Originally, he wanted to fight against the Soviet Union, and when that collapsed he began to focus attention onto the ‘Christian’, Western, presence in the Middle East, and particularly to the presence of the United States, its former ‘ally’ vis à vis the Soviet Union (Gupta 2004; 12, Laegreid 2004; 29). He developed the group’s platform around anti-Zionistic and anti-Christian beliefs, and the hopes of one day creating a pan-Islamic world, at the very least throughout the Middle East (Williams 2006; 195, Pontoniere 2005). Bin Laden’s organization (although some argue that the organization is also run by highly trained operatives from Egypt, Sudan and Iran) has trained thousands of operatives from around the world. There are supposedly cells in over 100 countries, including most countries of the European Union and throughout the United States (“Al-Qaeda” 2007).

As previously argued, rational terrorist and organized criminal actors seek the countries with the least anti-criminal activity to operate within. Osama bin Laden, and the mobile headquarters of al-Qaeda have been no exception. They worked in Sudan from 1991-1996, under the Taliban regime in Afghanistan until 2001, and then after the United States invasion at the end of 2001, al-Qaeda fled to other areas. Bin Laden is believed to have fled to Iran, and is now thought to be basing operations in a “lawless tribal” region of Pakistan (“Al-Qaeda” 2007).
Osama bin Laden inherited billions from his fathers contracting industry, but he also lead his organization into a plethora of illicit business endeavors in attempts to finance the increasing number of operatives and capacitate their motives. They worked closely with the Taliban in heroin production and distribution. An estimate from 2004 argues that $2.3 billion out of the total $500 million to $1.5 trillion annual narcotics trade value falls into the hands of al-Qaeda (Bjornehed 2004; 310).

**Background to the Albanian Mafia:**

Organized crime in Albania has existed for decades, particularly with regards to drug and arms smuggling activities. Beginning in the early 1990’s the Albanian government, in attempt to transition to a democratic government from the previous communist regime, created programs to initiate economic reform, most important of these being the infamous pyramid-schemes. These were created, it is argued, to create the “illusion of economic prosperity”, and some argue also for the corrupt government officials and their organized crime counterparts to reap large benefits at the expense of the Albanian citizens (Gjoni 2002; 34, Smith 1998; 15). The pyramid schemes collapsed in 1997, taking the state institutions and the economy with them. The judiciary, legislature, and political parties were severely weakened from this financial crisis and the formidable civil unrest that came with it (Gjoni 2002; 34, Smith 1998; 15). One group that benefited from this crisis was the Albanian mafia. The ‘mafia’ as it is referred to consists of a large number of small cells, but run by 15 major criminal families, called fis, or fares (Mutschke 2000; 3). These 15 clans, concerned with both Balkan political issues
as well as their own survival, decided to work together rather than compete for such a small territory. These *fares* also officially endorsed the Kosovo Liberation Army, which is an ethnic-Albanian separatist terrorist movement in Kosovo. By funding this militia to incite violence and keep Kosovo unstable and lawless, the 15 families of the Albanian mafia ensured their success, securing economic prosperity by using Kosovo as an international hub for illegal activity and trade (Mincheva, Gurr 2006; 12, Cilluffo, Salmoiraghi 1999; 24). These families chose to support a terrorist organization in order to ‘maximize utility’ and achieve their motives, financial prosperity, beyond what they were capable of doing on their own. With this, the Albanian mafia was able to participate in a large number of activities from drug smuggling, to human trafficking and smuggling, to arms deals which became one of the most lucrative businesses during this time since they were able to raid stockpiles throughout that area. With their quick rise to fortune, the Albanian mafia expanded transnationally, and has now become one of the most dangerous and prevalent organized crime groups in all of Europe, and much of the eastern United States as well.

*Transformation:*

Terrorist groups tend to transform into organized criminal groups, much more so than the other way around. Occasionally, when the political motivations of a group are no longer relevant to the situation, or the cause they were fighting for expires, terrorist groups will retain their daily operations, but solely for the promise of cash (Dishman 2005). When the group can ‘maximize utility’ by allowing their ideological motivations
to disintegrate into economic ones, they are making the rational choice to transform. According to Gupta, “large sums of money can truly change the character of a political movement”, as seen below (Gupta 2004; 7).

This has been the case with some of al-Qaeda’s affiliate groups and cells, particularly that of Abu-Sayyaf in Malaysia. This was a terrorist organization, under the umbrella of al-Qaeda and Osama bin Laden. This group was trained by al-Qaeda operatives, and taught how to gain large financial support for themselves through kidnapping, extortion, and the drug trade (Williams 2006; 201). Eventually this group realized that they were receiving little to no benefit from affiliating with al-Qaeda, and committing acts in the name of jihad. They abandoned these ideological motivations altogether, and continued with their illicit activities solely for economic profit (Gupta 2004; 8, Makarenko 2004; 137). Without receiving the benefits from al-Qaeda’s terrorist actions, such as public attention or political clout, this group sought to maximize their utility through by transitioning to an organized criminal group. Their financial incentives overrode the original political motivations, and the group made the rational choice to abandon their ideological platform.

Transformation has also taken place with organized crime groups transitioning to terrorism, although this is much less common than the previous scenario. A radical Islamic cell, most likely under the umbrella of al-Qaeda or a jihadist partner, specifically recruited a member of the Neapolitan Camorra while he was imprisoned in Naples. Seeking refuge in radical Islam, this former member of the Catholic Camorra became heavily involved in radical Islamic fundamentalism. Once freed, this man “served as a bridge between” the Neapolitan mafia and his terrorist cell (Shelley, Picarelli et. Al.}

27
This fundamentalist Islamic faction, acting in self-interest, used the ‘veneer of Islam’ to recruit this man, not for the purpose of religion, but primarily as a valuable networking tool.

The al-Qaeda cell responsible for carrying out the Madrid bombings of 2004 was also a ‘transformed’ group. The leader of this former drug smuggling ring, Jamal Ahmidan, was directly recruited by al-Qaeda. After converting, he then transformed his entire organized crime cell into a terrorist faction that proceeded to enact the bombings (Williams 2006; 200, Shelley, Picarelli et. Al. 2005; 40). By convincing Ahmidan that there were greater benefits available than those currently being received through smuggling drugs, al-Qaeda successfully convinced this group to transform through the rational belief that there was more to offer becoming a faction of a terrorist group.

Some smaller groups within the Albanian mafia have become a type of ‘hybrid’ group. They have not completely transformed, yet converged into a single group, with dual motives. While the leaders of the mafia and the KLA retain their original motives while fighting to de-stabilize Kosovo and remain separate groups, some factions of each group have become involved with the other. There are now factions that have both political, pan-Albanian motives as well as economic ones. Chris Dishman refers to these hybrid groups as “chameleons-criminal by day, terrorist by night” (Dishman 2005; 247).

Cooperation and Alliances

Alliances, whether ad hoc or long-term, are the most prominent ways that terrorist and organized criminal groups form a nexus. As rational actors, given the choice to act
alone or to receive more benefit from working with another group, many organizations have come together over specific issues.

Al-Qaeda has formed numerous alliances with groups all over the world. Considering their loose cell structure, they have created a great need for modes of transport, safe havens, and other forms of fundraising and operational rationale. Two of the most prominent alliances that al-Qaeda has made in recent years are with the Italian Camorra in Naples, and the Albanian Mafia.

Al-Qaeda leaders have colluded with the Camorra in exchange for particular goods and services. This Neapolitan mafia specializes in illicit activities that range from drug smuggling to gambling and prostitution rings. The mafia, in this arrangement, “forged documents and weapons,” for al-Qaeda as well as provided a “maze of safe-houses” for their operatives traversing through Naples, in exchange for al-Qaeda supplying the mafia with large shipments of narcotics, mostly heroin (Pontoniere 2005; 1). DIGOS, Italy’s main crime unit has estimated that over 1,000 al-Qaeda have been smuggled through Naples with direct assistance from the Camorra mafia (Pontoniere 2005; 1). The leaders of al-Qaeda run their organization and their cells based on the desire to end the ‘Christian era’ and forge ahead in the creation of a pan-Islamic state, yet they have chosen to partner with the Camorra, a heavily Catholic organization. The leadership of this terrorist group has realized that in order to best achieve their means and maximize their utility, this systematic alliance is absolutely necessary and a rational choice, regardless of the Camorra’s ideology (Pontoniere 2005; 1).

The Albanian mafia has formed a long-term, somewhat symbiotic partnership with the Kosovo Liberation Army, an Albanian ethno-nationalistic separatist movement
across the border from Albania, in the Kosovo region of Serbia. This terrorist group was founded on the desire to force the separation of Kosovo from Serbia, and ideally to incorporate Kosovo into Albania (Mincheva, Gurr 2006; 11-12). Many have called this a ‘hybrid’ organization and argued that the KLA and the Albanian mafia have become one. This, however, is largely false given that they have both maintained their original motives. The Albanian mafia funds the KLA, and they work together on de-stabilizing Kosovo, and retaining the ineffective nature of the failed state. These groups do share a ‘mutual desire’ for a lawless Kosovo, but for very different reasons. This partnership, however, benefits each group more so than working alone. For the KLA, keeping Kosovo ‘lawless’ provides them with large amounts of funding from the Albanian mafia for which they would not be able to fully fund all of their various endeavors, and allows them to continue the fight for a pan-Albanian state in the region. For the mafia, having the KLA control Kosovo promises them continuous lucrative influxes of drugs, arms and other illegal forms of ‘business’ without fear of any legitimate law enforcement. The majority of human trafficking victims come from the east, as well as the drugs and arms following the east-west route all go through Kosovo, ever since the Balkan crisis blocked the route through that area (Mutschke 2000; 2, Varouhakis 2007, Bardos 2005; 20, 29). Kosovo has not only been lucrative as a transit route for trafficking. The Albanian mafia has charged large sums to smuggle people out of Kosovo, particularly Albanians. The racial violence coupled with the lawlessness created a very profitable market for smuggling people out of that area, to a safe-haven. After the KLA took unofficial power in Kosovo, even the Serbian ‘enemies’ were willing to pay the Albanian mafia up to $900 dollars per person to smuggle them out of their own territory for fear of anti-Serbian
violence (Cilluffo, Salmoiraghi 1999; 22). Also, the KLA became the net arms exporter to sub-groups of the Albanian mafia around the world after the collapse of the Albanian government (Smith 1998; 17). Kosovo has become a hub for international underground trading, shipping, and transporting, which without the partnership might never be possible. As rational actors, the leaders of these groups realized the lucrative possibilities of working together, and they exacerbated those of working alone. Given the current success of the mafia, it is easy to see that the choices the leaders made were indeed rational.

Forming one of the most dangerous alliances, al-Qaeda formed a partnership with the Albanian mafia and their KLA affiliates. This partnership began before the collapse of the Taliban regime and the US invasion of Afghanistan, yet many argue that this relationship still exists (Bardos 2005; 27). Under the Taliban regime al-Qaeda was able to take control of the booming heroin market in Afghanistan, and they turned the Albanian mafia into one of the most prominent buyers (Bardos 2005; 29, Mutschke 2000; 4). Al-Qaeda has been present in the Kosovo region for over a decade according to some experts, and many argue that the relationship is ongoing (Bardos 2002; 44). Since the Albanian mafia has a stronghold on Kosovo, thanks to its partnership with the KLA, al-Qaeda also decided to partner with the mafia to share the ‘turf’, considering this ‘turf’ is the main smuggling route into the European market. Regardless of the motives of these different criminal syndicates, they shared the same means and required the same resources to carry out their individual activities. Bin Laden set up training camps throughout Northern Albania, and in return brought KLA operatives to Afghanistan for training (Bardos 2005; 27-28). With the KLA becoming highly trained, the insecurity of
Kosovo would be guaranteed, and the Albanian mafia and al-Qaeda would both greatly benefit with regards to smuggling routes for goods and operatives. For al-Qaeda this was a rational decision that would help increase their number of operatives, find stable buyers for the heroin they exported, and have safe locations to set up training camps. The mafia was receiving large drug shipments, and getting paid to smuggle operatives through their area. The KLA became more highly trained, and had another terrorist group to back its endeavors in Kosovo. For all three parties, the rational choice to work together helped them to ‘maximize utility’, and achieve their means beyond what they were all capable of separately.

Adding to all of these scenarios, the Albanian mafia has also formed partnerships with numerous other transnational criminal groups. They work with the Sicilian ‘Cosa Nostra’ mafia, Calabria’s ‘Ndragheta’, and the Pugliese ‘Sacra Corona Unita’ mafia in drug trafficking, human trafficking, human smuggling, and arms trafficking (Mutschke 2000; 3). Frank Cilluffo even argues that, “it is an open secret that the Italian mafia relocated in Vlore,” during the ‘mani pulite’, or ‘clean hands’, campaign in Italy (Cilluffo, Salmoiraghi 1999; 23). While colluding with al-Qaeda over certain ‘means’ the Albanian mafia made relationships with other organized crime groups for the same reason. To achieve all the ‘means’ necessary to achieve motives, all of these transnational criminal groups both terrorist and O.C. have come to the realization that alliances can be vital to the future success of their groups. Depending on the rational choices made by the parties in charge, some groups might choose to work together, if it ‘maximizes utility’ more so than working alone. Sometimes, as these alliances have shown, rational choices lead groups into a detailed, complex web of international crime.
Influence and Activity Appropriation:

Terrorist organizations and organized criminal groups occasionally adopt tactics and ideas from each other and implement them without ever working together. Terrorist groups adopt fundraising ideas and other criminal tactics, while organized crime groups use violent terrorist ideas to ensure their own security. The mafia Uffizi bombing of 1993 was not transformation, as it would seem on the surface, but rather a form of activity appropriation where the mafia borrowed a tactic typical to terrorist groups, and used it to help secure their economic activities. Al-Qaeda has also been taken ideas and tactics from organized crime groups.

Osama bin Laden was born into a billionaire family, but realized early on into founding al-Qaeda that he needed other financial activities to fund his organization. Now, al-Qaeda has grown to dominate a large share of the global heroin trade, a trade typical of organized criminality. Also, al-Qaeda mimicked their O. C. counterparts by establishing numerous false charities throughout the diaspora communities in the Middle East that closely resemble the function of an organized criminal false chain of business, like the infamous mafia Pizza Connection in the United States (Makarenko 2004; 130, Williams 2006; 201). With these false front-businesses, al-Qaeda was able to hide its lucrative endeavors behind a seemingly legitimate, and much less suspicious wall.

Al-Qaeda was forced to decentralize with the US-Afghanistan invasion of 2001, and the simultaneous global ‘war on terror’. As individual cells dispersed throughout the globe bin Laden preached the importance of cell self-sufficiency, arguing that all cells should be completely self-reliant while fulfilling their missions. After the 2004 Madrid
bombings and the police raid on the al-Qaeda bunker, it became apparent that the operatives relied on credit card fraud to finance their livelihoods while plotting the bombing (Shelley, Picarelli 2002; 314). This form of crime, typical of many organized crime groups, was adopted by al-Qaeda as an easy and highly beneficial way to fund their operations in Spain.
VI. Conclusion

Rational choice theory successfully explains the actions taken by both transnational terrorist leaders and organized crime kingpins. Arguing they are rational actors, one can assume that both types of group leaders make decisions based upon what they believe will be to their greatest benefit in achieving their motives, given a particular set of choices. The nexus between organized crime and terrorism, which refers to transformation, cooperation and influence can be seen as a set of rational decisions made by both groups, depending on their individual situations and constraints. The variable with regards to the depth and level of interaction between these groups is dependent on the needs of the groups, and whether they can more fully ‘maximize utility’ alone, or by working together. If working together or adopting each other’s tactics will not help the various groups then they will not enter the nexus, since rational choice actors act in self-interest. If there is a benefit to entering the nexus, the leader of the group will choose the highest-yielding situation within the nexus to interact with the other group.

The Albanian mafia and al-Qaeda are two of the most prevalent, dangerous, and successful transnational criminal groups in the current global criminal arena. These groups have entered into the crime-terror nexus not only with each other, but with numerous other groups as well at all three different levels of the nexus. They have proven that organized criminals and terrorists are gaining more by working together in the current time than working alone. The global ‘war on terror’ has hindered these groups’
ability to operate as they used to, globalization has increased the possibilities to break into new markets, and in order to best achieve their motives, the leaders of these groups have rationally chosen to create a crime-terror nexus.
Works Cited


