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Why do ethnopolitical organisations turn to crime?

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This paper empirically analyses the involvement of ethnopolitical organisations in criminal behaviour across time in two regions of the world – the Middle East and Eastern Europe. Drawing on the data from the Minorities at Risk Organizational Behavior data set, it contributes important insights to a literature on organisational crime that is dominated by case studies and small-N analysis, as well as reinvigorating the study of ethnopolitical organisations as actors in the analysis of organised crime. Our findings reveal that in both regions groups that engage in violence of some form were significantly more likely to engage in many kinds of criminal activity. Our analysis also finds that ideological orientation has a marginal impact, while economic grievances and diaspora connections were significant predictors of criminal activity for groups in the Middle East (but not Eastern Europe). In sum, this analysis suggests that the decision to engage in criminal activity is primarily dependent on the organisation’s internal attributes and external influences.

Keywords: organised crime; ethnic politics; transnational crime; political crime

On 13 December 2011, the New York Times published an in-depth study of an international money laundering and crime ring tied to Hezbollah, the Shi’ite militant group in Lebanon that has been designated by the United States as a foreign terrorist organisation.\textsuperscript{1}

The article fleshed out a wide-ranging and ongoing series of criminal conspiracies that involved drug smuggling in Latin America, diamond smuggling in West Africa, money laundering in Europe and Lebanon, and numerous other criminal activities. What the article showed was that in addition to its numerous other activities – social service provision, parliamentary politics, non-state militancy and sometimes terrorism – Hezbollah had in recent years taken on many of the functions of a mafia family or other organised crime enterprise.

Hezbollah represents one of several instances in which an ethnopolitical organisation has turned to crime, a phenomenon that has received only limited attention in the literature on organised crime and the literature on ethnopolitical organisation and mobilisation. Most studies of this topic have come in the form of case studies that examine illicit finances and how a political organisation is drawn into the world of organised crime, in the process transforming into more of a hybrid (and necessarily clandestine) organisation. The most common themes in this body of literature are that (1) an organisation makes choices, to include choosing whether or not to engage in criminal activities, and (2) there are environmental factors that push and/or pull an organisation towards criminality. Linking these two themes together is an important research question: Among

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organisations driven by ethnicity, ideology and other deep belief systems, what common factors influence their choice to engage in criminal behaviour?

The research literature addresses this question in two inter-related levels of analysis: the organisational and the environmental. Following a review of the extant literature in both of these areas, we examine data on political organisations in the Middle East and Eastern Europe to determine what attributes of an ethnopolitical organisation and/or elements of their operating environment may have a meaningful effect on that organisation’s choice to engage in criminal activity. Then we conclude the article with observations on the implications of this analysis for further research on why and how ethnopolitical organisations turn to crime.

**Political crime**

The study of political organisations, and of criminal organisations and activities, are both long-term endeavours of the social sciences, and both have storied histories dating back to ancient times. Often, research has illustrated various intersections of criminal and political activities. Examples include analyses of the US and European experience with the ‘Barbary pirates’, who were probably more accurately corsairs or privateers; research on the birth and evolution of La Cosa Nostra, the Camorra and N’Dragheta in Italy; and more recently, studies of the current power struggles between numerous Mexican drug cartels, the state and civil society. In each of these examples, organisations that were criminal, political or sometimes both, vied for power and influence, sometimes against state power, and other times as part of state power. While some dimensions of the interaction between the criminal and the political have been well researched, others are fairly new. For example, there is a nascent literature on ‘political crime’, described as crime that is inspired by political ideology rather than by material or economic gain. This body of literature has grown quickly since 2001 amid a significant expansion of research on terrorism and transnational security issues in general.

**Organisational crime**

Organisations can be described as living systems, subject to a range of internal and external influences that shape the perceptions and behaviour of its members. The organisation is an important level of analysis for studies of political and criminal activity. Historically, in both realms, case studies and theoretical work have been the rule, and empirical, large-N, statistical analysis the exception. As noted later, this is one area in which the analysis presented in this article contributes to the research literature.

Dwight Smith argues that in understanding organisational crime there needs to be a ‘focus on organizational behavior’, echoing sociologist Mary McIntosh who observed that ‘the study of organizational crime requires organizational concepts’. However, organisational crime has often been analysed using theories developed to explain individual criminal activity, or using general sociological theories that do not offer meaningful insight into the determinants of such criminality at the organisational level of analysis. Recently, some organisational theories of criminal activity have been offered, though they have tended to focus on business firms and white-collar crime rather than political organisations.

There have also been studies related to why organisations engage in criminal activity, though these have been heavily skewed towards focusing on businesses and organised crime enterprises, with little mention of the criminal activities of political organisations.
However, research on the involvement of business firms in criminal activity has illustrated some important explanations for why organisations might become involved in criminal activity; typically, these have applied criminological theories, created at the individual level of analysis, to organisations. For example, Albanese outlines several authors’ explanations for business organisations (and to a much lesser extent, political organisations) becoming involved in crime. Meanwhile, Edwin Sutherland in his book *White Collar Crime* makes an argument about criminal activity as a learned behaviour, that is, criminal behaviour is learned through ‘differential association’. He defines differential association as a situation in which ‘criminal behavior is learned in association with those who define such behavior favorably, and in isolation from those who define it unfavorably’. This cultural view (based on organisational or industry culture) can be contrasted with explanations based on rational choice perspectives.

Donald Cressey addressed organisational criminality, again focused on business firms, using a rational approach. However, Cressey did not focus on how or why organisations became involved in crime, but rather once involved in crime how they maximised the utility of their organisation and activities. Cressey, like sociologist Mary McIntosh, looked at criminal organisations and typologised various levels of organisation, so both were dealing directly with organisational-level analysis. However, both were focused on criminal organisations, rather than looking explicitly at political organisations and their criminal behaviour.

Dwight Smith also focuses on organised crime and white-collar crime, making an important argument that both criminal and non-criminal business organisations exist on a spectrum of ‘enterprise’. He challenges the assumption that business and crime are necessarily ‘distinct categories’, an idea that has direct implications for a similar spectrum-based understanding of political organisations. Like Cressey and McIntosh, Smith examines organisational characteristics (size, ownership, etc.) as important analytical elements.

### Research on the criminal behaviour of ethnopolitical organisations

Surprisingly little is known about the criminal behaviour of ethnopolitical organisations. While case studies of such behaviour do exist, comparative and large-N analyses are almost totally lacking. Certain aspects of ethnopolitical organisational criminality have been well documented – notably terrorism, and more recently, the analysis of ethnopolitical organisations’ involvement in the drug trade and economic crime.

The continued dearth of this kind of analysis is the result of two separate problems: (1) lack of data and (2) lack of focus on the organisational level of analysis.

**Lack of data:** Most criminal activity conducted by ethnopolitical organisations (or anyone else) is illicit and typically covert or clandestine. While most analysis of criminal activity faces some hurdles in terms of data collection, cross-national analyses are particularly fraught. This problem – across the whole field of comparative criminal justice – is slowly being overcome through the laborious creation of large data sets examining criminal organisations and activities, and the adoption of new techniques for analysing such novel data.

**Lack of focus on the organisational level of analysis:** As noted earlier, the criminal behaviour of organisations with goals that are primarily social or political has not attracted much study within the field of criminal justice. The focus of the literature on organisational criminality has been organised crime groups, and the criminal behaviour of other organisations with profit motives (i.e. white-collar crime). Interestingly, the adoption of sociopolitical goals by profit-driven criminal enterprises – like Brazil’s PCC prison gang or the Mexican drug cartel La Familia Michoacana – has recently emerged as a parallel...
area of concern.\footnote{This level of analysis problem may be addressed by the increasing adoption of organisational frames of analysis, as well as the availability of new organisational-level data, like the Minorities at Risk Organizational Behavior (MAROB) data set used in this and other recent analyses.} There are some reasons to believe that ethnopoli\-tical groups may have comparative advantages that would lower the costs of engaging in criminal behaviour, notably some level of trust and solidarity. Such groups may have a reservoir of such characteristics that would be beneficial from the perspective of engaging in organised crime. As Morselli et al. observed, ‘Trust reduces the uncertainty regarding the behavior of potential accomplices to a tolerable level and thereby stimulates the willingness to co-offend. This may be enhanced by kinship and ethnic ties... giving members of close knit communities a competitive advantage in the crime business’.\footnote{According to a recent study of 300 organisations that represented ethnic and religious minorities in the Middle East and the post-Communist states, only 10% reportedly have engaged in economic crime either within their home territories or across borders over the last 30 years.} To understand why requires an exploration of the research literature on the unique attributes of ethnopoli\-tical organisations that influence the range of decisions available to them.

**Potential organisational drivers of criminality**

Despite the lack of existing analysis on the subject, there are certain concepts that are accepted about organisational behaviour in the literature on criminal organisations, as well as in the literatures on political organisations. At the simplest level, we know that organisations are made of people, and that they are usually purpose-driven and often risk-averse.\footnote{We also know that all kinds of organisations require money and other resources for survival, and that changing resource availability can drive organisations to have structural and behavioural changes.} These two factors – the need for resources and the ideological (i.e. ‘purpose-driven’) nature of organisations – present numerous potential drivers that could lead such organisations into criminality. Resource constraints could encourage a group to engage in criminality that might otherwise eschew such behaviour. Certain ideological predispositions could encourage or discourage criminal behaviour, or even risky behaviour (of which criminal behaviour is a subset). In addition, a third factor – the capability level to engage in criminal behaviour unmolested – also offers more potential explanations for the criminal behaviour of ethnopoli\-tical organisations. The capability level of a group to engage in criminal activity actually consists of a series of issues both internal (the presence of armed militias, presence of an ethnic diaspora, etc.) and external or environmental (economic and political conditions).

Figure 1 illustrates how these three factors, described below in further detail, offer insights on some of the reasons ethnopoli\-tical organisations have become involved in criminal activity. These general categories of factors are detailed below, and elements of them are later operationalised into variables to test their effect on the criminal behaviour of ethnopoli\-tical organisations.

**Resources**

All organisations need resources to survive. The resource-driven nature of organisations also holds true for political organisations, including those engaged in political crime and
violence. As James Adams observed, ‘To survive, terrorist groups need to cross an
economic divide that separates those who live a hand-to-mouth existence from those
who can actually plan ahead. All those groups which have come and gone in the last
twenty years have failed to cross that divide … . The few who remain have cooler heads
and have been able to see that good financial planning means having enough cash to buy
and keep support, to pay for arms and to build a propaganda base among the people that
the organization claims to represent’.

From this perspective, one logical explanation for
ethnopolitical groups engaging in crime is simply that they need money. While this
dynamic has been explored largely in the context of strictly criminal organisations
that are profit-driven enterprises, recent studies have also analysed this within the context of
ethnopolitical organisations’ involvement in criminal activity, specifically in the drug
trade and in terrorist activity.

**Ideology**

The internal dynamics of a particular ethnopolitical group may encourage risk taking,
especially given the confluence of prejudices, supremacist feelings and a charismatic
leader. This corresponds well with research in the criminal justice literature on how
leadership figures can affect the level of risk taking and violence of criminal
organisations. Some scholars have argued that decision-making within highly insu-
lated organisations is vulnerable to ‘groupthink’ which they suggest can produce ‘an
illusion of invulnerability’ which ‘encourages taking extreme risks’. Abrahms and
Lula found that terrorist groups often overestimate the odds of achieving their political
aims. Others in the field of organisational behaviour, like James March, have also
described how perceptions of (and orientation towards) risks influence organisational
decision-making, noting that organisations are often filled with ambiguity, confusion
and complexity.

Decision-making in political organisations – particularly those engaged in violent
actions, like terrorism crime, and insurgency – is also informed by the groups’ ideology,
its articulation of grievances and a strategy through which they can be addressed. Drake
characterises ideologies as providing ‘a motive and framework for action’, and
Crenshaw\textsuperscript{40} describes how ‘terrorist ideology, no matter how unrealistic, must be taken seriously as a guide to intentions. Coupled with analysis of capabilities it provides a basis for expectations’.\textsuperscript{41}

Weinberg offers a substantive definition of ideologies as ‘sets of ideas that 1) purport to explain general social and political conditions; which 2) perform the function of justifying or rationalizing certain actions; and consequently 3) serve to mobilize people into seizing whatever opportunities for change they may confront…’.\textsuperscript{42} Ideologies can incorporate a range of political, social and other grievances in calling for change (or in some instances, calling for preserving the status quo, as was the case among loyalists in Northern Ireland, or the racist KKK in the United States).

As such, the ideology of an organisation – whether it is a religious organisation or whether it is a leftist organisation – has the potential to play a strong role in decisions about pursuing criminal activity. One might expect that organisations driven by ideologies broader than simple ethnopolitical pride and cohesion would be less likely to engage in criminal activity because of their ideals and hesitancy to damage their ideological credibility.

\textbf{Capability to engage in criminal activity}

One potential driver of such criminality could be the internal capacity for violence. This capability (provided through the presence of an armed militia) could enable the organisations both to challenge the state (in its monopoly on the legitimate use of violence) and to challenge criminal competitors or protect its criminal operations. There is at least some empirical support to suggest that engaging in violence may be a correlate of ethnopolitical organisations engaging in criminality. For example, one recent study of Middle Eastern ethnopolitical organisations found that none of the ‘non-violent organisations’ in the database were engaged in drug trafficking.\textsuperscript{43} This finding seems to fit well with previous findings in the criminal justice literature that connect criminality (in this case, the drug trade) to violence.\textsuperscript{44}

The ability to engage in violence, or to provide ‘private protection’, is a common theme in the literature of organised crime. According to Morselli et al., ‘Private protection, however, has been the key factor pointed to by researchers of organized crime in explaining the existence and resilience of mafia groups. This has been attested to across multiple cultural settings, from Italy, the United States, Russia, Japan, and Canada’.\textsuperscript{45}

Having activists that are capable of engaging in violence – capable both because they are armed and trained, and/or because ethnic ties create the bonds that would psychologically enable such otherwise taboo behaviour – would prove invaluable to an ethnopolitical organisation with the potential to engage in criminal activity.

Of course, some armed groups are more capable than others, but those that are situated within local ‘zones of competing governance’ may provide public goods and services in exchange for acceptance of their authority.\textsuperscript{46} This ‘illicit authority’, often tied directly to a group’s control of physical territory, can facilitate a broad range of criminal activity. The control of territory would assumedly provide the ethnopolitical organisation with a refuge in which it could engage in certain criminal activities – particularly those involving large land areas (like drug cultivation and production). Indeed, Asal et al. also find that such control is an enabling factor in the involvement of Middle Eastern ethnopolitical organisations in drug trafficking.\textsuperscript{47}

While it is clear that criminal organisations are involved in crime without control of territory, much of the literature on insurgencies has pointed out the use of smuggling,
particularly drug smuggling, as a source of revenue for insurgent groups and have identified the control of territory as a key resource in these smuggling efforts. As Piazza argues, the involvement in the drug trade exploiting their resources of control:

… provides a relative strategic advantage to terrorist movements that face states unable to benefit from the drug trade due to international legal prohibitions and norms. Illegal activities, like engagement in the drug trade, enable terrorists to challenge the state’s monopoly over the projection of force and its control over territory and individuals.

There are numerous ways that the capability to use violence could be measured; however, one simple way is whether or not the organisation has a militia or armed wing that is engaged in violence. The presence of what Charles Tilly calls ‘violent specialists’ would seem likely to increase the capability for an ethnopolitical organisation to engage in the kind of coercive violence that is often involved in criminal activity.

Another capability-related factor that has the potential to affect such criminality is the presence of an ethnic diaspora (in the sense that a diaspora can be a resource that an ethnopolitical organisation may be able to call upon). For example, Byman et al. found that diaspora support is a major factor in providing financial and logistical support to other ethnopolitical groups involved in activities that are not sanctioned by the government. This dynamic has a long history of being demonstrated in the criminal justice literature. For example, Lupsha shows that ‘The traditional bounded village culture and familial blood ties provide the organizational glue for many organized criminal groups. As these groups extend their networks to countries and cities around the world, however, they remain connected to the “center” through capital, technology, access to multiple identities, rapid transportation, and cross-border mobility’. Whether a group has an ethnic diaspora is certainly a variable that has the potential to influence its ability to engage in criminal activity. A diaspora might increase the likelihood of criminal activity by providing global or regional access to contraband or illicit markets.

In addition to these ‘internal’ factors (i.e. attributes of organisations), there are also various ‘external’ factors (i.e. attributions of the local environment) that affect a group’s decisions about (and capability to engage in) violent or criminal activity. Many of these fall loosely into categories of economic or political dimensions.

**Economic dimensions**

Economic conditions, and particularly grievances about those conditions shared by the organisation and its constituencies, surely influence an organisation’s decisions about all kinds of activities. One of the most fundamental issues here involves aspirations, hopes and expectations for a better life that are met with limited opportunities to achieve that better life. From structural problems like unemployment or underemployment, to endemic cronyism and corruption, there are unfortunately a whole variety of reasons in certain countries that can prevent an individual from achieving higher socioeconomic status by merit alone. In countries with authoritarian or repressive regimes that overly control their economy, where there is a severe lack of transparency in private and public sector finance, and where the majority of resources are owned or controlled by a very small elite, ordinary citizens come to feel that they have limited or no power to enact change. Expectations are a particularly important consideration in oil-rich countries, where discontented activists rightly ask why illiteracy is so high,
why the schools and roads are so bad, why so many people are impoverished, why employment is so high, and so on.

Economic conditions, like resource constraints, can also play an important role in facilitating an organisation’s movement into criminality. In many places, a ‘shadow economy’ can provide an infrastructure in which organisations can operate, whereby financing becomes easier and detecting it becomes more difficult. A shadow economy is loosely defined as economic activities that are unregulated and untaxed by a country’s government, activities which are mainly underground, covert or illegal. They can include both monetary and non-monetary asset exchanges, including the sale of goods and services, and can provide numerous opportunities for violent non-state actors to expand their operational capabilities. Impoverished communities tend to be vulnerable to exploitation by criminal networks, militias, etc. – some of whom provide social and economic programmes that fill needs unmet by the local government. Essentially, in a country where access to resources is constrained by policy and socio-economic factors, a shadow economy can potentially ‘grease the wheels’ for an ethnopolitical organisation to engage in criminal activity.

The economic health of ethnopolitical organisations is not easy to assess comparatively; however, the extent to which an organisation is repressed by the government might serve as a proxy for lower levels of economic health. Organisations that have the apparatus of the state constraining their action are unlikely to be able to engage in all the fundraising and legitimate economic activities that might otherwise provide them with resources.

Political dimensions

Another important environmental enabler of criminal activity is state weakness. U.S. Ambassador to the UN Susan Rice and U.S. State Department Undersecretary Stewart Patrick (2008, p. 5) have described weak states as lacking ‘the capacity and/or will to perform core functions of statehood effectively’. The Bush administration highlighted this issue in the National Security Strategy of 2002 and the National Security Strategy of 2006, both of which specifically pointed to the importance of addressing both failed and failing states as a component of our effort to improve global security, and this theme is also prominent in the 2010 National Security Strategy released by the Obama administration.

A variety of factors contribute to the usefulness of failed states as bases for terror groups. First, failed states lack any semblance of law enforcement. In addition, a failed state also offers a population of ready-made recruits for an ethnopolitical organisation willing to offer them basic amenities (food, security, etc.) that the state is unable to provide. And the levels of poverty and corruption typically associated with failed states make the viability of bribes more compelling – again, allowing organisations the freedom to behave in any manner they wish.

Two ways in which the political environment could be assessed and measured are related to how permissive the environment might be for organisations to be involved in criminal activity. One way might be to examine whether a country is a democracy – a factor with a long history of being tied, in complicated ways, to the permissiveness for political violence and terrorism. A second political environmental factor of interest is whether the group is repressed in a meaningful way, as such repression could create grievances that could be exploited politically, but could also limit the flexibility of organisations to engage in open and legitimate political activity.
The external and internal factors influencing organisational criminal behaviour are wide-ranging. Finally, as in many areas of human behaviour, one of the great predictors of current and future behaviour is past behaviour. Albanese, for example, noted this when he suggested that prior criminal behaviour is a key indicator for which sectors are vulnerable to organised crime infiltration.\textsuperscript{58} Assumedly, similar logic could apply to organisations as to sectors, meaning that those with the experience of having been involved in criminality would be more likely to continue to engage in (or to re-engage in) such criminality. As such, one important variable to examine is whether an organisation was recently – say in the previous year – involved in criminal activity.

To sum up, there is ample research on the internal and external factors that contribute to the behaviour and decision-making of ethnopolitical organisations, as well as on some of their criminal counterparts. Our contribution to this literature draws from analysing data on organisations in the Middle East and Eastern Europe, focusing on the central question of why some have chosen to engage in criminal behaviour.

**Data and methodology**

Given the paucity of data sets that focus on organisations that track those organisations that use crime with a comparable set of organisations that do not, we turned to the MAROB data set\textsuperscript{59} which contains detailed information on the features and behaviour of political organisations that Minorities at Risk (MAR) groups\textsuperscript{60} in the Middle East and Eastern Europe. There are 118 organisations coded yearly for the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) for the years 1980 through 2004 and 271 organisations in Eastern Europe and Russia (EER) with yearly coding of each organisation between the years 1991 and 2006.\textsuperscript{61} While this data only covers ethnopolitical organisations of minorities, and only for these two regions, it is still one of the only data sets that allows for quantitative analysis of why some organisations use violence and some do not despite these limitations.

Organisations in the data set need to claim to represent a MAR group and to be active at the regional or national level and to have existed for at least 3 years. Organisations that were created by governments are also not included.\textsuperscript{62} To be included on the list of organisations being coded, the organisation must not have been created by a government and must claim to represent an ethnic group, be active at least at the regional level and exist for at least 3 years. While this allows for an analysis of our question of interest, it is important to reiterate that the disadvantage of using this data is that our results are limited to only the areas of MENA and EER and only to ethnopolitical organisations.\textsuperscript{63} Despite this, the important advantage of this data is it allows us to compare across regions and to examine in a yearly fashion the choices of both violent and non-violent organisations – the only data set that we are aware of that allows us to do this in relation to the criminal activity of political organisations.\textsuperscript{64}

As noted previously, this set of questions has been underexplored, especially in the large-N quantitative sense. It is possible to ask why that is the case (perhaps it is many of the typical culprits at work – lack of reliable or available data sets, problems with comparison, etc.); however, the availability and relevancy of the MAROB data set should help to address this. What does this data allow for analytically? While many of the existing work on this focuses on individual cases and micro-causal analysis, MAROB allows for a broader analysis of structural and organisational effects – the ‘effects of causes’ approach described by Mahoney.
Leading statisticians distinguish between approaches that seek to estimate the average effect of particular independent variables (that is, effects of causes) from those that attempt to explain why specific cases have particular outcomes (that is, causes of effects). Experiments and regression-oriented techniques – the models on which KKV [King, Keohane and Verba] draw – employ the effects-of-causes approach; they are designed to estimate the average effects of independent variables.\textsuperscript{63}

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics for each variable for each region as well as giving a brief description of the variables in question. We coded the democracy for each country by making a binary variable for each country based on polityIV and each country was coded as a democracy if it scored a 6 or higher on the Polity2 scale.\textsuperscript{66} We recoded the variable for repression from MAROB because we felt that it was not an ordered variable. The variable in our analysis was coded using the STORG variable as a base and an organisation was coded as a 0 if the organisation was not repressed, a 1 if the organisation was illegal but tolerated, a 2 if it suffered from periodic repression and a 3 if it suffered from ongoing repression. To capture the synergy we were looking for in terms of organisations that have a militia as well as capturing the effect of those groups using that capability, we created a variable that was 0 if an organisation did not have a militia (using the MILITIAFORM variable) and was coded as a 1 if it did have a militia but was not using violence (using the ORGLOCV variable to determine if it was using violence) and a 2 if it had a militia and was also using violence. (For a longer description of the other variables, please see http://www.cidcm.umd.edu/mar/data.asp.)

### Table 1. Variables and descriptive statistics.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Data for EER</th>
<th>Obs.</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Minimum</th>
<th>Maximum</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>crime</td>
<td>Are they engaged in crime?</td>
<td>2547</td>
<td>0.0310</td>
<td>0.1734</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td>democracy</td>
<td>Is the country a democracy?</td>
<td>2579</td>
<td>0.5048</td>
<td>0.5001</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>religorg</td>
<td>Is it a religious organisation?</td>
<td>2571</td>
<td>0.0591</td>
<td>0.2359</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>leftorg</td>
<td>Is it a leftist organisation?</td>
<td>2502</td>
<td>0.0631</td>
<td>0.2433</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SHOOTING</td>
<td>Does the organisation have a militia and is it using violence?</td>
<td>2579</td>
<td>0.1640</td>
<td>0.5119</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>REO</td>
<td>How intensively was the organisation repressed (recoded)?</td>
<td>2434</td>
<td>0.4067</td>
<td>0.7009</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diasup</td>
<td>Does the organisation get diaspora support?</td>
<td>2530</td>
<td>0.0285</td>
<td>0.1663</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lagcrime</td>
<td>Were they engaged in crime the year before?</td>
<td>2278</td>
<td>0.0338</td>
<td>0.1808</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
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<table>
<thead>
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<th>Variable</th>
<th>Data for MENA</th>
<th>Obs.</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Minimum</th>
<th>Maximum</th>
</tr>
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<td>Crime</td>
<td>Are they engaged in crime?</td>
<td>2351</td>
<td>0.0451</td>
<td>0.2075</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td>democracy</td>
<td>Is the country a democracy?</td>
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<td>0.2900</td>
<td>0.4538</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
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<td>Relorg</td>
<td>Is it a religious organisation?</td>
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<td>0.2661</td>
<td>0.4420</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
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<td>Leftorg</td>
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<td>0.4472</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
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<td>Does the organisation have a militia and is it using violence?</td>
<td>2360</td>
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<td>0.8495</td>
<td>0.9407</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
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<td>Diasup</td>
<td>Does the organisation get diaspora support?</td>
<td>2373</td>
<td>0.0565</td>
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<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lagcrime</td>
<td>Were they engaged in crime the year before?</td>
<td>2208</td>
<td>0.0466</td>
<td>0.2109</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
As suggested by the descriptive statistics, crime is not a common activity on the part of these organisations. Only 3.10% of the total organisational years in the EER region are coded as a group being involved in crime while only 4.51% of the total organisational years in the MENA region are coded that an organisation was involved in crime in that year. Because of the rare nature of this behaviour and the fact that our dependent variable is binary, we have decided to use rare event logistic regression analysis when analysing the data in Stata and to use King and Zeng’s relogitq command that also allows for the generation of probabilities from the coefficients. To control for temporal issues, we included a lag of the dependent variable and we also clustered on an organisational ID. In addition, we checked for potential problems with collinearity between the independent variables using a variance inflation factor approach and we did not detect any problems in that respect. Table 2 presents our results (note that relogit analysis does not provide pseudo $R^2$ or $\chi^2$ measures). As one can see from Table 2, the two regions are distinctly different in some ways when it comes to what is related to criminal activity but they are strikingly similar in other key ways. This is further underlined if we examine the probabilities in Table 3.

Table 2. Rare event logistic regression results for crime for Eastern Europe and the Middle East.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable name</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Eastern Europe</th>
<th>Middle East</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Coeff.</td>
<td>SE</td>
<td>Coeff.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>democracyo~e</td>
<td>Is the country a democracy?</td>
<td>-1.834** 0.629</td>
<td>-0.068 0.606</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relorg</td>
<td>Is it a religious organisation?</td>
<td>-0.572 0.521</td>
<td>0.168 0.476</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leftorg</td>
<td>Is it a leftist organisation?</td>
<td>-1.390* 0.704</td>
<td>-0.117 0.486</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SHOOTING</td>
<td>Does the organisation have a militia and is it using violence?</td>
<td>0.780* 0.340</td>
<td>2.000** 0.577</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>REO</td>
<td>How intensively was the organisation repressed (recoded)?</td>
<td>0.529* 0.251</td>
<td>-0.248 0.220</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diasup</td>
<td>Does the organisation get diaspora support?</td>
<td>1.620* 0.773</td>
<td>1.651* 0.681</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lagcrime</td>
<td>Were they engaged in crime the year before?</td>
<td>5.180*** 0.997</td>
<td>5.465*** 0.721</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>_cons</td>
<td></td>
<td>-5.079*** 0.380</td>
<td>-7.532*** 1.130</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: ***Significant at $p < .001$ using a two-tailed test; **significant at $p < .005$ using a two-tailed test; *significant at $p < .05$ using a two-tailed test.

Table 3. Probabilities of an organisation being involved in crime using the relogitq command by variable.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Probability Eastern Europe</th>
<th>Probability Middle East</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>When all variables at minimum</td>
<td>0.62%</td>
<td>0.05%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All variables at minimum except variable in question (including the lag variable for all variables but the lag)</td>
<td>NS</td>
<td>NS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is the country a democracy?</td>
<td>0.09%</td>
<td>NS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is it a leftist organisation?</td>
<td>0.15%</td>
<td>NS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Does the organisation have a militia and is it using violence?</td>
<td>2.94%</td>
<td>2.70%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How intensively was the organisation repressed (recoded)?</td>
<td>2.95%</td>
<td>NS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Does the organisation get diaspora support?</td>
<td>3.10%</td>
<td>0.25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Were they engaged in crime the year before?</td>
<td>52.48%</td>
<td>10.83%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Unsurprisingly, the variable that was having the biggest effect was if the organisation was involved in crime the year before. Nonetheless, other variables appear to be having an important effect in both regions. One key difference between the regions is that all the variables are having a positive and significant effect in the EER region, but in the MENA region only having a militia and getting diaspora support is having a positive and significant effect. In the EER region, the democratic nature of the country, a leftist ideology, is having an effect but it is less than 1% while state repression is having a much larger effect with a 2.7% change in probability (note the impact of each variables change in probabilities should be interpreted with the knowledge that these probabilities are generated with a lag for the dependent variable in the regression and that the lag was set to zero). Surprisingly for us, none of these variables had an impact in the MENA region and we were perhaps most surprised by the fact that repression did not have a significant and a positive relationship with crime. Both regions were affected though by a militia and if that militia was using violence as well as if the organisation was receiving diaspora support. Leaving aside the lagged variable, having a militia was having the biggest impact in the MENA region and getting diaspora support was having the biggest impact in the EER region. Table 4 examines what the joint effect on the likelihood of being involved in crime is for organisations in EER. When an organisation has not been involved in crime before but has a shooting militia and being repressed by the government (a violence cycle if you will), the likelihood that they will engage in crime rises to over 12%, and if they were engaged in violence the year before, the probability rises to over 80%. Interestingly if they are also getting diaspora support, the probability rises to over 42% even if they were not involved in crime the year before and a whopping 95% if they were engaged in crime the year before. In the MENA region, we examined the joint impact on the likelihood of being involved in crime for organisations that had diaspora support and had an active militia. If the organisation was not involved in crime the year before the probability changed by 13.06% and if the organisation was involved in crime the year before, the probability rose to 97.22%. Clearly in both regions, operating a violent militia and getting diaspora support are key elements in leading an ethnopolitical organisation towards crime (Tables 4 and 5).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 4. Impact of combined variables in Eastern Europe and Russia.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Violence cycle (no crime year before) militia and repression max all else min</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Violence cycle (crime year before) militia and repression max all else min</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Violence cycle (no crime year before) militia and repression and diaspora support max all else min</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Violence cycle (crime year before) militia and repression and diaspora support max all else min</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 5. Impact of combined variables in Middle East.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>If organisation gets diaspora support and has a militia (no crime year before)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If organisation gets diaspora support and has a militia (crime year before)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Findings

Returning now to the original intent of our study – determining what attributes of an ethnopolitical organisation and/or elements of their operating environment may have a meaningful impact on that organisation’s choice to engage in criminal activity – this analysis of the data yields some interesting results.

Intersections of crime and violence

First, at the organisational level, only one pattern appears to be significantly common among the Middle Eastern and Eastern European groups included in this data set: political violence and criminality are inextricably linked. In terms of predicting a group’s propensity for criminal activity, involvement in political violence was the most prominent factor. This leads us to suggest that the decisions an organisation makes about criminality are inter-related with their decisions about political violence. Further, it may be the case that crossing a certain threshold of violence or criminality reduces the aforementioned constraints on organisational behaviour, thus making either violence or criminality more likely. There may also be a temporal cause-and-effect sequence here in terms of the dynamic trajectory of ethnopolitical organisations included in our analysis. We offer a dual-path illustration of this ‘slippery slope’ theory in Figure 2.

This conceptual approach leads us to a central question: what influences a group’s trajectory along either of these pathways? While there is ample research on the decision-making of violent non-state actors, no major study has uncovered patterns in decision-making towards or away from criminality that transcend multiple groups and contexts. More research in this area is certainly needed, although authentic data are hard to obtain. There are, however, numerous case studies in which we can see this slippery slope model in action. The move from engaging in political violence to engaging in criminality is described extensively in research on the FARC in Colombia (the cocaine trade), the Taliban in Afghanistan (the heroin trade) and certain factions of both Republican and Loyalist militants in Northern Ireland (the arms and drugs trade). Some organisations (e.g. in Northern Ireland) moved into criminality when their political raison d’etre went away and dried up their local political support, while others had leadership who initially saw criminality as a funding mechanism and subsequently became dependent on the funds that criminality produced (the Taliban). Finally, some groups transitioned in whole or in part into criminal enterprises, largely neglecting their motivating political ideologies (e.g. the FARC). These and other examples can offer us important insights on group decision-making.

Meanwhile, examples of organisations that engaged in criminal activity and progressed to political violence are even fewer in number but they exist. The criminal organisation run by Dawood Ibrahim in India is one unique example. Ibrahim was long a kingpin in the Mumbai underground with involvement in the drug trade and other illicit businesses. However, it appears that following ethnic riots in India during the early 1990s, Ibrahim’s latent ethno-religious ties became more salient and he began working with Lashkar e Taiba and other Islamic militant groups to conduct terrorist attacks in India. This is a unique case, as D-Company (as Ibrahim’s organisation is known) was not viewed as an ethnopolitical organisation per se, but rather a criminal one whose ethnopolitical identity was ‘activated’ as a result of developments in political violence in the region.

Certainly, engaging in either violence or crime can be expected to have an effect on any organisation, as it forces members to protect the secrets of bad or clandestine behaviour from public scrutiny or law enforcement. From our analysis, it would seem
that once a group has become involved in violent behaviour, it changes the spectrum of decisions that the organisation has to make. Not only are there potentially fewer constraints on criminal behaviour, it may in fact become a necessity for financial survival.

This thesis is supported to some degree by existing research. For example, Simmel (1950) noted that as organisations ‘go deeper underground’ group decision-making can become an increasingly closed, rigid and inward-looking process. McCormick elaborates further by explaining how ‘as a group moved deeper into the shadows, its remaining societal connections are gradually abandoned and replaced by stronger interpersonal bonds within the group itself’. 72 Then, over time, ‘the need to preserve the group can actually begin to supplant its political mission altogether … [and] the survival of the group is no longer a means to an end but an end in itself’. 73 Further, there is ample

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Figure 2. Illustration of the ‘slippery slope’ thesis.
research to illustrate how groups respond to constraints that affect their strategic opportunities.\textsuperscript{74} Often, the groups are directly responsible for the constraints they face – for example, as Abrahms notes, a group’s attacks on civilians often make it harder for governments to compromise.\textsuperscript{75} These observations in the scholarly literature are corroborated by this analysis of the data on ethnopolitical groups in the Middle East and Eastern Europe.

While the link between crime and political violence was seen in both the Middle East and in Eastern Europe, we found interesting variations. For example, in both regions groups that attacked government security forces were much more likely to engage in criminal activity. In the Middle East, groups that engaged in this type of violence were 10\% more likely than other groups to be engaged in criminal enterprises, while in Eastern Europe the significance and direction of the effect were similar, though the effect was about half of what was seen among groups in the Middle East. Of course, regional categorical variables mask key contextual differences. However, perhaps the more interesting finding is that engaging in terrorism – defined as attacks on civilians rather than security forces – had a significant impact on criminal behaviour only in Eastern Europe. In this region, ethnopolitical organisations that engaged in terrorism were 10\% more likely to engage in criminal activity, while in the Middle East engaging in terrorist violence was not a significant predictor of organisational criminality. This finding is a very interesting one that could have various cultural, structural or strategic explanations, and should be explored in future research.

It is intuitive to suggest that organisations with well-functioning militias and a propensity to engage in political violence would be likely engaged in criminal activity. The use of violence already could suggest a lack of concern about ‘fairness’, norms of liberal societal engagement and a general disregard for some of the constraints that inhibit ‘bad behaviour’ whether it be violence or criminality. Even more so, as noted earlier in our discussion of organisational capabilities, the presence of armed and trained cadres – whom Tilly calls ‘violent entrepreneurs’\textsuperscript{76} – would create a capability to engage in criminality that, independent of the intent to do so, would lower the hurdles to such behaviour.

Part of the intuitive explanation here appears to be apt. Violence is indeed an important explanatory variable for understanding which organisations are involved in criminal behaviour. That being said, it is important in a less straightforward way than might be thought. When examining two varieties of violent behaviour, terrorism (targeting civilians for violence) and insurgency (targeting government security forces), we begin to recognise an entire spectrum of violent organisational behaviour, and an equally diverse spectrum of criminal behaviour. This diversity underscores the immense difficulty of trying to simplify the characterisation of group behaviour along either spectrum, as well as the influences of a group’s decision-making or the impacts of those decisions.

Of course, the employment of violent means by any of these groups is itself a form of criminality; while pro-government vigilante groups in Nigeria, Colombia or Northern Ireland may enjoy some level of tacit acquiescence from members of the local government, their violence is still deemed illegal by truly objective courts of law. But the bottom line here may be that once a group crosses a certain threshold of either violent or criminal activity it becomes harder for the group’s leaders to impose internal constraints on the behaviour of its members based on moral, strategic or practical reasons that constrained it earlier, before crossing that threshold. Further, a variety of other organisational and environmental factors – described below – may act as a sort
of gravitational force that makes it harder to slow or reverse the slide down the ‘slippery slope.’

**Ethnic diaspora networks**

This analysis of the data also found that the strength of a group’s support networks can have an impact on its likelihood to engage in criminal behaviour. Specifically, members of a diaspora – individuals from one country who have migrated to another (typically a wealthier, industrialised Western country) – often send money back home to friends and family, and offer a global or regional network of moral and political (and sometimes financial) support for an ethnopolitical organisation; it can also offer support for organisational criminality. In fact, the impact of diaspora support was indeed the single strongest effect observed in this data set. However, this effect was not uniform across regions – in the Middle East, organisations that receive diaspora support were a full 15% more likely to be engaged in criminal activity, while in Eastern Europe this diaspora support factor was not even statistically significant.

This link between criminality and diaspora support is interesting in light of the recent work of Gurr and Mincheva, who note that financial contributions from ‘ethnic kindred’ enable a group to be more durable and likely to succeed than those without this kind of support. Further, a ‘shared identity is the connective tissue of their networks’ – this means that trust is more easily established and criminal actions carried out based on more than narrow self-interest. There may be “no honor among thieves” but there is usually mutual obligation among ethnic and other communal militants. It is also likely that strong diaspora connections can increase a group’s opportunities to engage in criminal activity because of the personal connections or attributes of the diaspora’s members, particularly if there are members who are specialists in document forgery, counterfeiting, weapons trafficking or other areas that can expand the group’s capabilities.

The fact that the effect of diaspora networks was significant for groups in one region but not in the other raises the question of whether studying organisational criminality might well be an endeavour best undertaken at the regional level. Indeed, there may be fundamental differences between Eastern European diasporas and Middle Eastern diasporas. Further research will be needed to address these questions.

**Environmental dimensions**

Beyond organisational attributes, the data also illustrate the relevance of local environmental factors in understanding a group’s propensity towards criminality. For example, one surprising finding in this analysis is that there is a notable effect based on whether the home country of the ethnopolitical group (its base of operations) is a democracy, at least in Eastern Europe. Democratic government in the country decreases the likelihood a group will engage in criminal activity, though the effect is not a major one. It is a statistically significant difference, but only decreases the likelihood by a small amount. There are several potential explanations for this. One is that democratic polities offer these organisations more opportunities to engage in traditional politics or to fundraise, decreasing the incentives to engage in risky and democratically ‘illegitimate’ criminal behaviour. Another possibility is that something about Eastern European democratic politics mitigates the likelihood that organisations will turn to crime, whether because of the potential for harsh punishments or an environment that does not encourage such behaviour.

Interestingly, this same finding did not hold for the Middle East, which perhaps makes intuitive sense because democracies in this region are much younger (and fewer) than in Eastern Europe. As a result, it is likely that the constraints placed by the government on ethnopolitical organisations in the Middle East are much different than
the constraints placed on similar organisations in Eastern Europe. In future years, assuming that democratic institutions, patterns of political participation and democratic values are more established in both regions, a more accurate comparative analysis could be undertaken to determine the underlying cause of the difference seen in this analysis of the data.

Conclusion

The findings of this analysis have potential utility for both researchers and practitioners concerned with organised crime, ethnopolitical organisations and political violence. That being said, the differing outcomes of the analyses of the dynamics in the Middle East and Eastern Europe serve as a reminder about the perils of generalising the dynamics of political and criminal processes across regions to both groups.

There are a growing number of researchers focusing on international and transnational criminality, and this analysis serves as a reminder that much data that could improve criminological analysis exists in the work of political scientists and sociologists, as well as the fact that examining criminality in the absence of political factors can be problematic. By drawing together the criminal and the political, this analysis serves as a reminder that political actors can be criminal and that criminal actors can have political goals as well. In contrast, this analysis should also serve to remind those working in comparative politics and studying ethnic identity that for far too long there has been a lacunae about the role that criminality plays in ethnopolitical developments.

Aside from the broader point that researchers can benefit from the cross-disciplinary nature of this analysis, there are several findings that can inform future research. The most important finding, and the one with the most explanatory power, is that criminality and violence are strongly linked in the organisational context. That may seem intuitive; however, there has been surprisingly little empirical analysis beyond anecdotal case studies to suggest that groups and organisations that engage in criminality are more likely to engage in political violence and vice versa. Analysis of the behaviour of ethnopolitical groups across regions may well conclude that criminal behaviour is one of many organisational behaviours that varies regionally, which suggests that both criminologists and those studying ethnic politics must begin taking regional variation much more seriously.

In terms of the potential policy relevance of these findings, it would be easy to overstate them. The impact of structural and organisational factors on criminality may help understand the processes through which groups move into or out of criminal activities. However, the fact that the Middle East and Eastern European organisations appear to be affected differently means that such insights are narrow and context-specific.

The regional differences suggest that broad and generalisable rules for understanding transnational criminality and ethnopolitical violence are unlikely. Rather, disappointingly for some policymakers, the analysis suggests that regional and local context are very important for understanding the link between ethnopolitics and criminality. This may be discouraging for the small number of analysts, law enforcement officers, military officers, diplomats and NGOs that focus on such issues; it is yet another policy area in which area studies knowledge will be a key to meaningful understanding.
Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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