

# The Crime-Conflict Nexus: Connecting Cause and Effect

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2019/06/27/the-crime-conflict-nexus-connecting-cause-and-effect/>

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Evidence of the important role which organised crime plays in civil war can be seen in conflicts ranging from Serbia to Sierra Leone. Despite this, there remains significant debate around the precise nature of the relationship between criminal activities and a range of conflict outcomes. This essay will set out the key causal mechanisms by which criminal activities can affect the duration, severity and resolution of civil conflict. It will then illustrate these mechanisms through one positive and one negative case study: the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and Mexico's Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN) respectively. Following the logic of a Most-Similar Systems Design (Levy, 2008, p.10), these cases are suitable for comparison as they are both long-running, leftist, non-state armed groups (NSAGs) which hold territory and are situated in Latin America. However, they differ in their involvement in crime, allowing for a counterfactual comparison. The selection of the EZLN further fits with the "possibility principle" (Mahoney and Goertz, 2004), as they operate in a geographic area suitable for narcotics production but have avoided moving into crime. These cases can therefore illustrate the effects of two different approaches to illicit activities within the context of civil conflict, with the caveat that differences other than criminality may also contribute to divergent outcomes.

### The Effects of Crime on Conflict Processes

Organised criminal networks have been identified by some scholars as a potential enabling factor in the outbreak of conflict. For example, Andreas (2004, pp.33–35) points to the role of the illegal arms trade in facilitating the outbreak of the Bosnian War, as well as the use of criminal networks as recruiting grounds for combatants. However, others have questioned any general relationship between the outbreak of civil conflict and criminality, with Cornell and Jonsson (2014, pp.3–4) arguing that the mere presence of criminal opportunities do not cause war. Instead, they focus on how criminal fundraising lengthen conflict by altering the incentive structures available to combatants. Even after the conflict has formally terminated violence can transform and continue as rebels become criminals in the post-conflict period (De Boer and Bosetti, 2015, pp.12–13; Collier, 1994).

This process of shifting incentives and motivations arising from engagement with illicit activities can also increase the severity of the conflict, particularly as it relates to predatory behaviour and the targeting of civilians (Kalyvas, 2015, pp.1530–1531; McMullin, 2009, p.84). Violence can also increase between and within criminalised groups, as they fight for control of criminal rents. Such a dynamic can be seen in the pre- and post-peace agreement behaviour of Colombia's paramilitary AUC, which fragmented into a series of competing criminal bands as rival leaders fought for control of local narcotics profits (Cornell and Jonsson, 2014, p.11; Porch and Rasmussen, 2008, pp.530–531). Illicit activities therefore not only lengthen the conflict and create severe barriers to peace-building but may also increase violence against civilians and between rival groups.

### Causal Mechanisms

While the dynamic between criminality and civil conflict is different in each case there are some key causal mechanisms which commonly link illicit activities to negative conflict outcomes. The first causal mechanism is the shift in incentive structures and motivations mentioned above. This process occurs at the societal, group and

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individual level. Kaldor (2012) argues that the use of crime to fund war reshapes a country's economic system in such a way as to incentivise the continuation of the conflict. While the conflict is bad for the economy as a whole, the shared benefits to those groups directly involved in the "war economy" mean that they have incentives to prolong the conflict (Kaldor, 2012, pp.94–95). The same logic applies at the group level, where an organisation's goals change as they become more invested in criminal profiteering, disincentivising serious attempts at peace (Steenkamp, 2017, p.11). At the individual level "professionals" and "mercenaries" (Kalyvas, 2015, p.12) with the skills and motivations to engage in crime enter the conflict, similarly contributing to the transformation of the conflict's underlying dynamics (Dishman, 2005, pp.245–246; De Boer and Bosetti, 2015, p.10; Makarenko, 2004, p.138).

In addition to prolonging conflict, the participation of profit-focused individuals can increase civilian victimisation as discipline breaks down and exploitation takes precedence over the original political goals (Makarenko, 2004, p.137). This may take the form of ill-disciplined individuals engaging in predatory behaviour, or entire organisations changing their relationship towards the civilian population. This is exacerbated by the fact that as a group comes to rely on criminal funding it is less beholden to the local population for taxes and support (Von Einsiedel et al., 2017, p.5). The growing tendency of NSAGs to engage in crime has gone hand in hand with a move from hierarchical organisational structures towards decentralisation (Dishman, 2005). This can potentially deepen issues around discipline as ideological leaders have less oversight (Von Einsiedel et al., 2017, pp.4–5) and principal-agent problems come into play (Cornell and Jonsson, 2014, pp.11–12). Decentralisation and the development of isolated "fiefdoms" (Makarenko, 2004, p.139) also encourage fragmentation and in-fighting (Barnes, 2017, p.969), which could, in turn, lead to an increase in violence associated with "outbidding" (Pearlman and Cunningham, 2012, p.6; Kydd and Walter, 2006, p.76). Factionalised conflicts featuring decentralised actors will also present challenges for conflict termination as such groups are both more resistant to attack (Dishman, 2005, pp.248–249) and harder to engage in peace-building (Bosetti, De Boer and Cockayne, 2016, pp.4–5).

Another way in which organised crime can lengthen and worsen conflicts is by strengthening the NSAGs involved. In particular, involvement in transnational crime can strengthen groups by tying them into lucrative international networks. Cornell and Jonsson (2014, p.3) describe a "plow" effect, in which the high revenues from illicit trade drive groups to open new international trafficking routes. The development of such international alliances could bring a host of benefits to NSAGs, including greater income, arms supplies, training, foreign fighters and safe havens. This would make such a group both more durable and more mobile and therefore less likely to surrender. This fits with Bacon's (2018) argument that terror groups which form international alliance networks are more durable and dangerous. Engagement in international criminal networks allows armed groups to develop such partnerships on both ideological and economic grounds.

These strengthening effects go further than the development of international networks. Firstly, any funding which can be drawn from crime will clearly allow a group to sustain their insurgency and develop their capabilities. Although the finances of clandestine organisations are difficult to ascertain such funding can be considerable, with one report putting Hezbollah's income from crime at \$1 billion a year (Meyer, 2017). Furthermore, widespread organised crime can weaken the state by lowering taxes, reducing legitimacy and corrupting institutions (De Boer and Bosetti, 2015, pp.12–14; Miraglia, Ochoa and Briscoe, 2012, p.13), which has the further effect of weakening the government relative to non-state adversaries. Any such equalising effect on the balance of power has the potential to lengthen and possibly widen the scope of the conflict (Buhaug, Gates and Lujala, 2009). Finally, involvement in organised crime can help non-state actors develop greater legitimacy among local populations, for example by protecting illegal crops (Felbab-Brown, 2017, pp.98–99; Cornell and Jonsson, 2014, pp.14–15) or redistributing illicit profits towards social services (Steenkamp, 2017, p.11). Increased legitimacy and the institutionalisation of rebel governance systems, whether funded by crime or not, are linked to increased conflict duration (Arjona, 2014; Balcells and Kalyvas, 2014).

The causal mechanisms described above frequently overlap. However, they can be summarised as falling into two main strands. Firstly, criminal activities change the incentive structures for various actors, thereby changing their behaviour in regard to both levels of violence and conflict termination. Secondly, illicit activities can affect the relative strength of state and non-state actors. Organisational decentralisation is linked to both of these strands, as it can define the incentives available to individuals as well as the strength and durability of organisations. In this sense,

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decentralisation can be seen as a mediating factor between criminality and conflict outcomes, as organisational structure partially determines the extent and effects of involvement in crime.

## *Simplified Summary of Causal Mechanisms*

**Causal Mechanisms** **Conflict Processes** **Changed Incentives** **Strength and Capabilities** **Organisational Structure** **Outcomes** Investment in war economy International alliances Mediates other mechanisms Longer conflict Predatory behaviour Funding and equipment Less oversight Higher intensity Mercenary combatants Weakened state Greater durability Civilian victimisation Fragmentation Build legitimacy Cause and effect of criminality Post-conflict violence

While these causal mechanisms provide a strong account of how involvement in crime can affect conflict processes, there are two important caveats. Firstly, illicit activities could potentially weaken a group rather than strengthen it, either through internal corruption (Cornell and Jonsson, 2014, pp.11–12) or by bringing the attention of foreign law enforcement agencies (Dishman, 2001, p.46). Being perceived as a criminal organisation could also cause a loss of legitimacy and lower support for a group (Cornell and Jonsson, 2014, p.11; Dishman, 2001, p.46). The effects of involvement in crime are not always unidirectional and could therefore have an opposite effect on conflict processes. Secondly, this account may suffer from issues of endogeneity. For example, it is unclear whether criminality causes decentralisation and ill-discipline, or whether decentralisation and ill-discipline cause involvement in crime. This issue goes to the heart of the crime-conflict nexus, as crime “is both a consequence of the war and, at the same time, a driver of the war” (Steenkamp, 2017, p.11). The mutually reinforcing nature of these causal relationships is not necessarily problematic, with scholars such as Makarenko (2004) building a picture of how crime and conflict feed off each other. However, it does indicate the necessity of carefully considering reverse causality when designing research on this issue.

## **Case Studies**

### *Colombia and FARC*

The conflict between the Colombian Government, its proxies and FARC has been described as the world’s “longest insurgency” (Leech, 2011). This highly fragmented conflict has long been intertwined with Colombia’s narco-trafficking industry, with profits from cocaine strengthening both FARC and its right-wing opponents (Otis, 2014, p.4; Holroyd, 2011, p.68). FARC began as a Marxist guerrilla group with support from foreign communist governments but increasingly relied on criminal fundraising as Cold War state-sponsorship dried up (Cook, 2011, p.21; Eccarius-Kelly, 2012, p.236) and as the fall of the Cali and Medellín cartels created a power vacuum in the booming cocaine industry (Holroyd, 2011, p.68). Despite having an impoverished, rural base of support FARC was able to engage in a widespread conflict against the government through its lucrative taxation of coca (Ortiz, 2011, p.137). This also strengthened their legitimacy among coca producing farmers, while their involvement in organised crime allowed them to build new networks for both the acquisition of weaponry and training (Ortiz, 2011, pp.137–139). Their ideological networks were supplemented by criminal ones, as it was able to pay groups as diverse as the Tijuana cartel, ETA, the Provisional IRA and the Libyan government for guns and training using narcotics (Berti, 2009; Ortiz, 2011, pp.139–140). FARC was clearly strengthened by its involvement in the cocaine trade, strongly suggesting that illicit fundraising lengthened the conflict and probably widened the theatre of war by improving the group’s capacities.

What is less clear, however, is the extent to which FARC’s involvement in the cocaine trade affected the incentives for either civilian victimisation or the continuation of the conflict. While some have described the FARC as a criminalised group (Makarenko, 2004, p.137) there is strong evidence to suggest that they maintained many of their political goals (Dishman, 2001, p.50; Eccarius-Kelly, 2012, pp.242–243), with their attacks consistently being directed against military targets (Saab and Taylor, 2009, p.460). FARC has targeted civilians, primarily through kidnapping for ransom (Eccarius-Kelly, 2012, p.240), however this has been a tactic since its inception and was more of a supplement to their repertoire of criminal activities than a consequence of them. Most tellingly, FARC

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attempted to embrace electoral politics with the formation of a quickly suppressed political party in the 1980s (Gomez-Suarez, 2007), and again following the most recent peace deal. The incentives arising from organised crime did not prevent the eventual termination of the conflict while the group has maintained its principal goal of political change, including through elections. This resistance to the transforming effects of criminality may lie in the organisational structure of the group, as FARC maintained some level of hierarchical ideological control (Saab and Taylor, 2009, pp.459–460; Eccarius-Kelly, 2012, pp.237–239) as well as in the fact that it has had more success in taxing than directly trafficking drugs (Saab and Taylor, 2009, pp.465–466). This can be contrasted with the rival AUC, which was more directly involved in narco-trafficking, attacked civilians more frequently and was more decentralised (Saab and Taylor, 2009, pp.461–463). Unlike FARC, the AUC devolved into a series of competing drug cartels following their peace deal with the government, conforming more to the expectations around changed incentives (Cornell and Jonsson, 2014, p.11; Porch and Rasmussen, 2008, pp.530–531).

## *Mexico's EZLN*

EZLN stands out against the backdrop of Mexico's brutal drug war as they have avoided the violence and criminality associated with other actors in the country. While the Mexican Drug War has seen spiralling violence due to fragmentation (Kalyvas, 2015, p.1530; Phillips, 2015, p.326) and outbidding (Flanigan, 2012, p.289) EZLN has remained unified around its political goals, with subsequently low levels of violence following a quick ceasefire and long informal peace between it and the government (Ramsey, 2012). The fact that EZLN made a clear choice to avoid becoming embroiled in organized crime, despite favourable conditions to do so (Dishman, 2001, pp.42–47), creates a strong argument that non-involvement in crime has facilitated this lower intensity conflict. It is possible to reason counter-factually that if EZLN was involved in crime it would have seen a change of goals as the leadership became more reliant on criminal rents, as well as the recruitment of less disciplined combatants. It could also have expanded the conflict beyond the relatively limited geographical scope. This could have led to group to decentralize or fragment, potentially increasing the duration of conflict and level of violence.

There are several factors underlying the EZLN's non-involvement in crime and the subsequent conflict trajectory. Firstly, while the EZLN's political ideology emphasizes autonomous and democratic local decision-making, they did have a top-down ideological leadership which strongly and successfully mandated against both criminality and violence against civilians (Cunningham and Corona, 1996, pp.17–18; Ramsey, 2012). Secondly, it was largely focused on land rights and local autonomy for indigenous groups (Cunningham and Corona, 1996, pp.17–18; Godelmann, 2014). This narrower focus means that, unlike FARC, it did not have to sustain a nationwide campaign against the state and could instead survive on taxation. Furthermore, EZLN effectively utilised online networking methods which, combined with their credible claims to non-criminality, allowed them to develop into a grassroots political organisation by drawing donations from foreign NGOs (Dishman, 2001, p.47; Cunningham and Corona, 1996, pp.13–14). While EZLN may have had the geopolitical opportunities to engage in organised crime, there was not the same necessity.

These cases illustrate the causal mechanisms which link involvement in criminal activities to longer conflicts and higher levels of violence. These mechanisms primarily relate to either changes to the incentives acting upon various groups or the strengthening of non-state groups relative to the state. This argument is sharpened by the fact that non-involvement in crime appears to have allowed EZLN to avoid these outcomes. However, there are clearly other factors which mediate the effects of involvement in crime. The organisational structure of a group can affect whether motivational transformation occurs or how criminality affects discipline and cohesion, while political aspirations can define the level of involvement in crime. It is also difficult to ascertain the direction of the causal relationship between crime and conflict outcomes, with various overlapping and mutually reinforcing relationships. Scholars should therefore be cautious in uniformly applying this understanding of the crime-conflict nexus across varied cases and conflicts.

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*Date written: March 2019*