

Countering Terrorism in the US: The Fallacy of Ignoring the Crime-Terror Nexus

Louise Shelley

Terrorism, Transnational Crime and Corruption Center, American University

Abstract. In her analysis of the US response to terrorism, Louise Shelley argues that the US does not pay enough attention to the crime-terror nexus, significantly undermining American efforts to counter terrorism. Since US policy makers conceptualize crime and terrorism as two separate issues, after 9/11, many resources previously devoted to fighting organized crime were shifted to fighting terrorism. Ultimately, the failure to ask the right questions has led to policy failure in Iraq, a failure to go after terror support structures in the US, and major violations of human rights. Moreover, Shelley argues that the 9/11 Commission report was flawed because it failed to address the crime-terror nexus. The problem is bipartisan since major critiques of the Bush administration have also failed to make this point. The failure to understand the nexus is particularly intense in the military, which pays little attention to crime issues and non-state actors. The US failure, for example, to crack down on weapons markets that appeared in Iraq right after the US invasion laid the foundation for many of the problems that the administration now faces in the occupation.

Before September 11th, the U.S. government had an active program to fight both transnational crime and to combat terrorism. In the aftermath of September 11th, most of the counter-crime efforts were dismantled and huge resources and large numbers of personnel within the intelligence and law enforcement communities were transferred to the fight against terrorism. This decision was motivated by a government view that crime and terrorism were separate phenomena. US policy-makers believed they could not be approached with the same methods. The priority was given to the fight against terrorism.

This dichotomy is erroneous. Criminals and terrorists intersect in many ways. Often the easiest way to detect a terrorist cell is through the criminal activities of its members. Terrorists engage in a wide range of illicit activities. Many of these are for profit, such as drug trafficking, counterfeiting and credit card fraud. But many of their illegal acts are essential to the maintenance of their organization—producing fraudulent documents, smuggling personnel and laundering money.

The United States has failed to define an effective counter-terrorism strategy. There has been an overemphasis on military approaches and hardware solutions, but not enough emphasis on addressing the conditions facilitating terrorism. The American counter-terrorism approach diverges significantly from the policies of many of our foreign allies who have long combated terrorism on their own territories. Our bureaucratic divisions, between those fighting crime and terrorism, have undermined our capacity to address the terrorism threat. Moreover, our failure to focus on prisons and diaspora communities, where terrorists and criminals can interact, is a major flaw in our counter-terrorism strategy.

