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ARMED NON-STATE ACTORS AND TRAFFICKING: THE GLOBAL EVOLUTION

The university that is doing the terrorism database for the US State Department is my university and my research centre. I could talk a significant length about why our data are different from the University of Maryland but let me say that our university has one of the most diverse student bodies in the United States and so we have about 15 languages represented in the people carrying out our data analysis.

With regard to this, the definitions of what we are studying “under terrorism” are not different from other studies on this same topic, but our team has the incredible capacity to do multi-language analysis in different newspaper sources and to verify them. Our centre also does a lot of work on not just the numbers of terrorism and its intersections and activities, but also on qualitative understandings and large-scale data analytics to mine and understand phenomena.

I was originally asked to talk here about Syria and Iraq and we had just finished a massive study, followed by a book published last month¹, on illicit antiquities trade out of Iraq and Syria, in which we used all kinds of advanced data analytics to trace the illicit trade of antiquities, from the region into Europe and into global markets and to see some of the connections to terrorism even when they are not readily apparent, but there are ways that analysis of social media and other types of data analytics help you understand these cases.

But then today I was asked to switch to an understanding of what is going on in Ukraine and its border regions. There are certain important lessons from the framework that we have used to understand and address the conflict and the relationship to transnational crime and terrorism that operated in Iraq and Syria, which are very useful in understanding our current crisis.

¹ *Antiquities Smuggling in the Real and Virtual World*, Layla Hashemi, Louise Shelley, Routledge, January 2022

There is a point that Mr Radu made that is absolutely essential: we are not looking at patterns that evolved yesterday or even in the last five years. Some of these networks that we are looking at smuggling out of Iraq and Syria, especially out of Iraq, emerged under Saddam Hussein when Kurds were threatened and there were well-developed smuggling networks to help move individuals to safety. In the scorched earth tactics that we have seen in the war in Syria, we have seen people willing to do anything to survive. Therefore, we need to think about why people engage in smuggling and sometimes it is their absolute survival that is at stake when the state provides no protection.

With the rise of ISIS in the Syrian Iraq, we saw the control of territory and the licensing of looting movements across borders where there is corruption: oil smuggling to neighbouring states and cigarette smuggling as Mr Radu alluded to. Many of these things other than antiquities trade have been seen in the last few years in Ukraine. A few years ago, a study tracked the illicit trade in Ukraine in regards to cigarettes and its convergence with other commodities and of course it was found the key role of Odessa, which is unfortunately under attack, and the key changes that occurred after the attacks on Donbass and the takeover of the Crimea.

All these conflicts before helped exacerbate the illicit trade that was going on, and among the things that have to be loudly mentioned are the enormous challenges that President Zelensky and his team faced in trying to combat the endemic corruption that was going on in Ukraine.

When we think about why it is so difficult to do anything about this, we must consider that these are not just local networks, but global networks. One of the things that that OCCRP (Organised Crime and Corruption Reporting), which Mr Radu do heads, has investigated is how one of the major organised crime figures in Odessa moved large amounts of money into London real estate. Therefore, we are looking at a problem that is not just regional and we need to understand the role of global facilitators and enablers that allow corruption and crime to thrive in one region and then have an impact throughout the international community.

About two weeks ago we started a project on illicit trade and one of the key hubs we are going to look at is the Ukraine-Transnistria border area, in which there has been a long-time problem of cross-border smuggling. Unfortunately, our researcher who had to start this project is now hiding due to the acute problems and threats to life that face so many Ukrainians.

One of the things that we need to think about and that Mr Radu touched on in his introduction is the presence of smugglers on the border and the enormous vulnerability of refugees as they are leaving Ukraine.

One of the things that Europol has focused on in the last few years, and the press releases of the Europol website are filled with references to Balkan smugglers, on which we need to reflect is how we can ensure that people are not doubly victimised, i.e., they are victimised at the source where they are subject to bombings, to acute misery, to scarcity of water and food and then they escape to another

situation in which they are vulnerable to the threats of organised crime.

This is a very important problem that I do not think we are focussing enough on; I am certainly hearing a huge amount about economic sanctions and our research centre had an event two days ago on how to implement economic sanctions but how do you protect refugees from the problem represented by organised crime?