UNODC

Topic Brief 2

Addressing the Rise of Organized Criminal Governance in Post-Conflict and Fragile States.

Topic overview

In large parts of the world, especially those recovering from conflict or plagued by weak institutions, organized criminal networks have become de facto governing forces - a phenomenon analysts have called "organized criminal governance." In these post-conflict and fragile states, the collapse or erosion of state authority has created power vacuums that are gladly occupied by criminal networks. Instead of simply smuggling illicit goods under the cloak of night, some drug cartels, militias, or mafia-type groups are openly taking on roles long monopolized by governments: providing security, jobs, social services, and dispensing justice (often brutal) in their zones of influence.

This blurs the line between governance and crime. For example, during Afghanistan's decades of conflict, local warlords and drug traffickers not only dominated the trade in opium but also ruled provinces, adjudicated disputes, and sponsored public works - in short, they behaved like quasi-governments. In Colombia's civil war, guerrillas (like the FARC) and paramilitary groups sponsored themselves through narcotics and extortion, sometimes substituting for the state by governing rural areas and provisioning locals. Across West Africa, a region notorious for fragile governments, cocaine-trafficking gangs insinuated themselves into the highest offices - Guinea-Bissau earned the distinction of Africa's first "narco-state" when drug cartels bribed politicians and dictated national policy while the formal state apparatus collapsed under corruption and coup attempts.

The rise of criminal governance is both symptomatic and causal of state weakness. Fragile states are characterized by a government's inability to deliver basic public goods - security, rule of law, and economic opportunity - to its citizens . Organized crime thrives in such conditions of poverty, unemployment, and weak rule of law. Using profits from criminal activities (drugs, smuggling, illegal mining, etc.), criminal networks can afford to pay fighters and bribe officials, establishing themselves as alternative power bases. They expand their role during war: war and chaos offer lucrative opportunities like pillaging natural resources, weapons smuggling, or smuggling goods through porous borders.

Specifically, war zones like Mali and Afghanistan saw insurgents and smugglers cooperate, funding firepower and purchasing local allegiances with drug or cigarette trafficking profitsprojeksiyonlar. After formal hostilities have ended, weak peace allows criminal entrepreneurs and former combatants to continue with such criminal activities, derailing peacebuilding. It has been warned by the United Nations that in post-conflict situations, "former combatants may attempt to exploit criminal networks…undermining peace building efforts". Criminalized power networks that develop during wartime may evolve into mafia-style networks that penetrate the state in peacetime.

One extreme outcome is the rise of "dual sovereignties" - the legal government on one side, and criminal bosses or warlords on the other, both vying for legitimacy in the eyes of the population. In some urban ghettos in Latin America (for instance, in some areas of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil's favelas or El Salvador's barrios), gangs or drug factions hold real power: they impose "taxes", resolve disputes, and enforce order (albeit through violence and fear) in areas that the state has effectively relinquished. Inhabitants of such neighborhoods may turn to the gang leader rather than the courts or police for protection and needs. This essentially undermines the state's legitimacy - citizens no longer see the government as the guarantor of their security and well-being. It also has a perverse cycle impact: the more credibility and capacity the state loses, the harder it is for it to reassert itself, and the more established criminal governance becomes.

Organized criminal governance assumes numerous various forms globally: In war-torn regions of Central Africa (e.g., eastern Democratic Republic of Congo), militias engaged in mineral smuggling have taken on administrative roles - taxing miners, running courts, and ruling villages. Their profit from conflict minerals enables them to outgun weak governments and continue to function as local governments.

In Somalia, during its prolonged disintegration as a state, warlords and, subsequently, al-Shabaab (an insurgency with criminal agendas) provided some order and services in areas under their control, while the official government was unable to expand its reach.

In conflict zones in Iraq and Syria, smuggling rings dealing in oil, trafficking in antiquities, or kidnapping for ransom have aligned with militias and militarized groups. Some militias assumed municipal functions (providing aid, patrolling districts) underwritten by illicit revenue at certain points.

In Latin America, Mexican drug cartels, like in Guerrero or Michoacán states, have infiltrated the police and local governments and in effect ruled through them. They sometimes build roads or schools to gain over the population, even as they resort to violent intimidation. Similarly, in south Italy, the Italian Mafia had long implanted itself in government, and continues to influence businesses and elections discreetly today - a reminder that criminal governance is not confined to poorer regions alone.

The international community has come to understand that organized crime is not just an issue of law and order - it is a threat to development, security, and governance. A United Nations high-level panel in 2004 already concluded that "transnational organized crime is a menace to States and societies, eroding human security and the fundamental obligation of States to provide for law and order". When criminal networks provide what states are not able to - whether jobs in illicit economies or security (even protection rackets) - they achieve a degree of public tolerance or at least acceptance. For a fragile state in the process of reconstruction, such parallel power structures represent severe obstacles to entrenching the rule of law and lasting peace. They drain billions from the legitimate economy, breed corruption ("state capture" by criminal forces), and can reignite fresh violence if challenged. Indeed, in certain countries, attempts to clamp down on powerful crime bosses or dismantle their fiefdoms have resulted in violent backlash, threatening fragile peace. A tragic example is post-civil war Guatemala: criminal networks with some roots in military and intelligence services plotted assassinations and corruption that plagued the country's democratic transition.

Despite all of these, there are solutions to organized criminal governance. Successful strategies generally pair security measures with strengthening state institutions and offering alternative livelihoods. In post-conflict zones, this means DDR programs (disarmament, demobilization, reintegration) for

ex-fighters must account for criminal economies - otherwise, fighters excluded from peace dividends may join criminal gangs. Strengthening police and justice systems is crucial, but so is purging them of corruption so they can confront crime credibly. On the socio-economic level, governments and international donors aim to "extend governance" by introducing services and infrastructure to previously neglected areas, challenging criminals' claim to be monopolistic providers. When Colombia built roads, schools, and police stations in formerly rebel-held territories after its 2016 peace accord, for instance, it was an effort to replace the FARC's shadow governance with legitimate state presence. Another approach is community protection and participation: involving local communities in anti-crime initiatives so that citizens do not feel reliant on or intimidated into allegiance to criminal gangs. This has been attempted through programs like gang truces and community policing in Central America with mixed results.

At the global level, organizations like UNODC and the World Bank have started to emphasize the nexus of organized crime and fragility. There is growing consensus that traditional law enforcement (military crackdowns or mass arrests) is not sufficient and even counterproductive unless it tackles underlying factors. Thuggish raids may scatter criminal gangs temporarily, but without better governance, they tend to reform - or violence spikes as smaller, fragmented gangs compete for turf. There needs to be a more integrated response, fighting corruption, building the justice sector, and advancing economic opportunities that are competitive with illicit markets. That the Sustainable Development Goals contain a specific target (16.4) to fight illicit financial and arms flows and organized crime is reflective of this new thinking, organized crime as a development challenge indivisible from peace and justice.

Put briefly, criminal governance in weak states is a perilous mixing of politics and crime. It is a denial of state-building, a menace to regional stability (criminal networks do not tend to respect borders), and a cause of suffering for ordinary citizens who are too often trapped in crossfire or preyed upon. Delegates will have to grapple with tough questions: How can the global community help weak states reclaim control from criminal elements?

What is the important function of peacekeeping or even selective sanctions on criminal spoilers of peace? Can we encourage local populations to abandon criminal patrons by rapidly strengthening legitimate governance and livelihoods? The answers will likely require cooperation across the peace, development, and security communities - breaking silos to handle what is in fact a hybrid threat. It is only by reconstructing both the effectiveness and legitimacy of the state - making it effective and equitable in the eyes of citizens - that the tide of criminal governance can recede in these fragile societies.

Timeline:

1990s: The end of the Cold War was marked by a proliferation of wars and hence fragile states, and a boom in global illicit markets. Warlords and organized criminals exploited chaos to seize wealth and power from West Africa to the Balkans. During Sierra Leone's civil war (1991-2002), for example, insurgent groups like the RUF controlled diamond-rich terrain and traded "blood diamonds" for arms, essentially operating a rebel state funded by crime.

2000: Signature of the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime (UNTOC), also known as the Palermo Convention. This treaty (and its protocols on human trafficking, migrant smuggling, and firearms) was the first globally legally-binding instrument against organized crime. It acknowledged the transnational nature of the threat and aimed at fostering cooperation on extradition, law enforcement, and legal reforms. By 2025, almost all UN Member States are parties to UNTOC, reflecting broad commitment to combating organized crime - though implementation in fragile contexts still remains challenging.

2003-2006: The aftermath of large-scale conflicts proved fertile terrain for criminal syndicates. In Iraq after 2003, the collapse of state power witnessed widespread looting and the development of smuggling chains dealing in oil, antiquities, and arms. Similarly, the fall of Taliban rule in Afghanistan in 2001 saw local warlords (some with ties to the new government) boost opium poppy cultivation to historical levels by 2006, making Afghanistan the origin of over 90% of the world's illicit opiates.

2005: The UN Secretary-General's High-Level Panel on Threats issued a landmark report ("In Larger Freedom") noting that transnational organized crime had become a fundamental threat to security. It highlighted the ways in which organized crime can destabilize fragile states and even peace processes. This put the issue on the UN Security Council and peacekeeping operations' agenda.

2007-2009: The "narco-state" label began to be applied to Guinea-Bissau as it became evident that Latin American cocaine cartels were using the tiny West African country as a hub to smuggle into Europe. A series of political assassinations and coups around 2009 was attributed to drug smugglers paying off military officers. The head of Guinea-Bissau's navy was arrested in 2008 with hundreds of kilograms of cocaine, but due to state fragility, kingpins enjoyed impunity. The period drew international attention to the ways in which organized crime could capture a fragile state from the inside.

2011: The World Bank's World Development Report 2011 on Conflict, Security, and Development emphasized the "crime-conflict nexus." It noted that trafficking and organized crime extend or reopen numerous conflicts because they fuel violence and corruption. It infamously described conflict zones as "criminogenic" - violence begets crime and vice versa. The release of the report coincided with tumults like the Libyan civil war (2011) that flooded the Sahel with looted weapons, empowering traffickers and Mali-based and other jihadist groups.

2012-2013: Mali descended into chaos as jihadists and separatists (some backed by kidnapping ransoms and drug smuggling) took over the country's north. Traffickers had long used Mali’s remote deserts for moving cocaine and hashish; during the chaos of war, these criminal enterprises expanded. In 2013, a UN peacekeeping mission (MINUSMA) was deployed to Mali - one of the first mandated to help a state extend authority in areas affected by both rebellion and organized crime. This marked a more direct engagement of peacekeepers with organized crime issues.

2015: The United Nations adopted the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). SDG 16 (Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions) included targets to combat illicit financial flows, organized crime, and corruption - an acknowledgment that tackling organized crime is integral to promoting peaceful and resilient societies. Soon after, the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime was set up by experts to monitor and counter such threats, an indicator of growing civil society interest.

2016: The peace agreement was signed by the Colombian government and FARC guerrillas. It marked the end of a 52-year insurgency but also presented the immediate question of who would control the FARC's very lucrative illegal economies (cocaine trafficking, illegal gold mining) in former conflict zones. The state launched programs to substitute coca crops and reintegrate ex-combatants, but "criminal bands" (Bandas Criminales or BACRIM - often comprised of former paramilitaries) vied to take over illegal businesses. The Colombian case became an experiment in whether a state could consolidate governance in long-time lawless areas faster than organized crime could fill the void.

2017-2018: The collapse of ISIS in Iraq and Syria removed a pseudo-state that had funded itself partly through organized crime (oil smuggling, antiquities trafficking). However, in the vacuum, various militias and remaining networks fought over territory, indicating that unless governance and reconstruction kept up, criminal violence could continue under a new guise. The UN Security Council discussed in 2018 the link between global peace and transnational organized crime, with particular reference to drug trafficking in West Africa and the Sahel (UNSC Resolution 2388 (2017) for example addressed human trafficking and transnational crime in conflict).

2020: The COVID-19 pandemic hit fragile states with intensity, at times empowering structured criminal groups. In some countries like Mexico and South Africa, gangs stepped in to enforce lockdowns or provide relief in poor districts, trying to boost legitimacy. In parts of conflict zones, truces or shifts in criminal activity were observed. The pandemic underscored the ways that non-state armed actors can exploit crises to gain sway, and how important state capacity is to maintain order and services.

2023: Continuing instability in regions such as the Sahel (Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger coups) created new opportunities for organized crime amidst weak governance. Illegal mining and smuggling spread as control weakened. Regional and international processes such as the African Union's Initiative on Silencing the Guns included organized crime as a significant factor to be addressed in restoring stability. By mid-decade, UNODC and partners are increasingly integrating anti-crime measures into peacebuilding efforts - for example, deploying anti-corruption experts to post-conflict governments and boosting border security technologies. The timeline thus reveals a progression: from nascent awareness of the crime-governance problem in the 2000s, to a 2020s where confronting organized criminal governance is now seen as part and parcel of sustaining peace and development.

Key Terms

Fragile State: A state with a poor capacity to govern and extreme legitimacy deficits, where the central authority struggles to carry out basic functions for its citizens. In fragile states, government institutions are not capable of providing enough security, justice, or essential services, and are often not capable of exercising control over the whole territory . These are typically marked by political instability, conflict or post-conflict reconstruction, intense corruption, and economic underdevelopment. Examples include Somalia during its civil war, Haiti in the wake of the 2010 earthquake, or the Central African Republic amid successive coups - all cases where the state's weakness provided opportunities for warlords and criminal elements.

Post-Conflict State: A state or territory emerging from a war or widespread violent conflict, in the process of rebuilding governance, infrastructure, and social trust. Post-conflict situations are inherently unstable, with the legacies of war (displaced people, ex-combatants, ruined economy) lingering and institutions most often weak. The risk of backsliding into violence or of alternative power structures (like militias or criminal networks) reproducing wartime illicit economies is very real. Peacekeeping missions, peace agreements, and reconstruction are characteristic of post-conflict situations - e.g., Liberia since 2003, Bosnia & Herzegovina since 1995, or Afghanistan since 2001 (though Afghanistan returned to insurgency).

Organized Crime: Criminal activity by organized groups generally motivated by power and profit. Organized criminal groups are characterized as having a hierarchical or networked structure of three or more members, durability, and engagement in serious criminal activities such as drug trafficking, human trafficking, arms smuggling, illegal mining, extortion, and money laundering. The UN Convention (UNTOC) has utilized to explain an "organized criminal group" as a structured group of three or more persons, existing for some duration and acting in concert with the aim of committing serious crimes for financial or material benefit. A few illustrations of organized crime groups include the Mafia (Cosa Nostra) of Italy, drug cartels like Mexico's Sinaloa Cartel, or multinational networks like the Russian Eurasian organized crime groups.

Criminal Governance: Where organized criminal groups assume governance functions and political authority in a community or territory. Criminal governance can involve providing services (security, conflict resolution, even welfare) and enforcing rules or norms, effectively acting as a state or local government. This is usual where the state is absent or weak - the criminal group fills the gap by establishing its own order. The phenomenon includes, for example, gangs governing neighborhoods, warlords governing provinces, or cartels governing border areas. This type of governance is backed by a mixture of coercion (violence, intimidation) and co-optation (bribery, patronage, providing livelihoods). The result is a parallel power structure: e.g., when a cartel in Mexico enforces curfews or mediates local disputes, or Hezbollah (which has criminal wings) provides social services in Lebanon - both examples of governance by non-state actors.

Warlord: An individual who exercises military, economic, and political influence over a subnational territory because he possesses armed supporters, especially in the absence or weakness of central authority. Warlords typically emerge in state collapses or civil wars and may fund their militias by criminal means (e.g., Charles Taylor in Liberia trading timber and diamonds for arms, or various Afghan warlords profiting from opium). Not a technical term per se, "warlord" is used to describe those who combine the qualities of rebel, underworld don, and provincial governor.

They tend to have their own fiefs where they are the law. Warlordism is also connected to criminal governance in the sense that warlords engage in and protect criminal activities as a means of sustaining their power.

State Capture: A form of systemic political corruption where private actors (typically criminal or business elites) exert significant influence over a state's decision-making to their own advantage, through illicit and non-transparent methods. In state capture, criminal networks may bribe legislators, fund election campaigns, or place their representatives in key government positions so that legislation, policy, and enforcement support their operations (e.g., deregulating, securing lucrative contracts, or ensuring impunity from prosecution). A dramatic instance is the infiltration of drug cartels into some Latin American governments and police forces, effectively "capturing" parts of the state apparatus to disregard trafficking. State capture is both a method and a result of organized criminal governance, as it legitimizes the authority of criminals over formal state institutions.

Transnational Organized Crime (TOC): Organized crime controlled across national borders. TOC networks operate in multiple countries, exploiting differences in law and enforcement. They traffic people and goods across borders - for instance, a syndicate might source drugs in one location, smuggle them through another, and launder money in a third. Fragile states are often hubs or waystations for transnational crime because of their lack of control (e.g., West African states in cocaine trafficking, or Balkan states in people-trafficking). Transnational organized crime is a problem for post-conflict governance because even when a state is consolidated against crime, networks can move operations to a different weak point, and the illicit flows (drugs, arms, money) continue to destabilize the region. Fighting TOC requires international cooperation like exchange of intelligence, joint investigations, and mutual legal assistance.

Peacebuilding: A broad set of activities aimed at avoiding the risk of returning to conflict by strengthening national capacities for conflict management and constructing the pillars of lasting peace. Peacebuilding in fragile and conflict-affected states includes the rebuilding of government institutions

(security sector reform, judicial reform), economic recovery, reconciling fractured societies, and expanding the rule of law. In cases of criminal governance by organized crime, peacebuilding will require additional steps that directly address organized crime - such as vetting ex-combatants for criminal links, offering jobs in licit economies to lure individuals away from criminal livelihoods, and establishing robust anti-corruption institutions. Successful peacebuilding addresses grievances and governance gaps that criminals often exploit.

Relevant Parties:
Fragile and Post-Conflict States (Affected Countries): These are at the forefront of the issue, experiencing directly the organized criminal governance. Examples are:

Afghanistan: Decades of war and institutional weakness allowed both Taliban and warlord groups to control the opium trade and exercise control over rural Afghanistan. Even after 2001, drug traffickers and government officials were identical in certain provinces, undermining state-building. Afghanistan illustrates how narcotics trafficking finances armed groups and replaces state welfare in some villages (e.g., Taliban courts did sometimes rule on local disputes where official courts were nonexistent).

Colombia: After its long war, the state is faced with "criminal bandas" and insurgent groups engaged in drug trafficking and illegal mining. These formations extort citizens and provide illegal "security" in some formerly FARC-held territories, thus challenging the state's post-conflict presence. The Colombian state - even though relatively strong - remains weak in remote jungles and borderlands where cocaine economies flourish under criminal control.

West African States: Some states such as Guinea-Bissau, Mali, and Liberia have struggled with criminal networks that are embedded within political elites. The political instability in Guinea-Bissau has been driven by cocaine traffickers in league with segments of the military, actually influencing governance from behind the scenes.

The northern areas of Mali witnessed narco-traffickers and cigarette smugglers conspiring with Tuareg rebels and terror organizations, exploiting lax border controls to operate their trades.

Somalia: During the 1990s, in the absence of a functioning central government, warlords and later Islamist militants (some of whom were engaged in piracy and charcoal smuggling) acted as local governors. The Somali case shows how, in the absence of governance, armed groups will impose order and tax trade - providing a measure of stability initially, but at the cost of institutionalizing a criminalized economy.

Mexico and Central America: Not "post-conflict" in the traditional sense, but countries like Mexico, Honduras, and El Salvador have such high rates of organized crime violence that parts of the state are fragile. Drug cartels in Mexico have, in certain regions, bribed police, dictated local elections, and even established pseudo-social programs - a de facto parallel government. In El Salvador, street gangs (maras) enforce curfews and mediate disputes in poor areas, forcing the government into uneasy truces. These states petition internationally for recognition that drug demand in more affluent states fuels their crisis and insist on shared responsibility and support (for institutional reform and development) to combat criminal governance.

National Governments and Political Elites: Different segments of affected states have varying stances. Reformist or law-and-order politicians have trouble consolidating the rule of law and instead seek external support (aid, security cooperation, UN missions). However, there are also other politicians or elites who are implicated in organized crime, benefiting from corruption and illicit profits. There are domestic contradictions - e.g., some Afghan or West African government officials collude secretly with smugglers while their state engages in fighting them. The existence of "criminalized elites" is one of the biggest obstacles to reform. Depending on who is in power, a state's inclination to fight organized crime can be significantly different. In some cases, when a top leader (like a president) decides to crackdown - like the contentious anti-gang campaign by President Bukele in El Salvador or the Philippines' approach to drug cartels - the policies can end up quite heavy-handed, with human rights concerns.

Local Communities: Civilians in weak states are both victims of and sometimes accomplices to organized criminal governance. Armed groups' violence and exploitation are despised by numerous communities but also perhaps depended on for either livelihood or security in the absence of state options. For example, farmers might grow coca or opium poppy because rebel or cartel control makes it one of the only viable incomes. Some form vigilante groups or sponsor militias to fight predatory gangs (such as the "self-defense" forces that have sprung up in parts of Mexico to drive out cartels). Some will push the government to negotiate or conclude peace deals with criminal organizations if fighting has become unacceptable. Their position is typically one of despair: whichever side (gang or state) can provide a degree of order and opportunity will get their grudging support. Winning the hearts and minds of local populations is crucial - their cooperation can provide intelligence and resilience to crime, while their alienation can turn them into a recruitment pool for organized crime.

In essence, two conflicting stances emerge: Weak affected states and societies desperately desire stability and might welcome short-term deals with devils (e.g., accepting the rule of a militia if it brings peace), whereas the international practice is to strengthen legitimate governance and undermine criminal actors. Donor nations demand anti-corruption reform but are impatient for short-term drug interdiction advances (sometimes pushing for militarized solutions). Meanwhile, behind the scenes, criminal networks seek to buy influence. The participants range from villagers in distant conflict zones to diplomats in New York, and each has a different sense of urgency, strategy, and risk. Building an effective solution will mean getting these players on board to the common goal of restoring the rule of law and public confidence in government, without provoking new conflicts in the process.