

Illicit markets and Targeted violence in Afghanistan¹

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Summary

In 2012, Afghanistan experienced a marked rise in violent crimes, including kidnappings and armed robbery. The reported increase in targeted attacks against civilians, specifically of women human rights defenders and media workers, had already raised concerns in the period preceding the Taliban takeover. These events and the changing nature of the killings – from widespread casualties to targeted violence – underscored the need for a nuanced examination of the different ways conflict and crime converge to create conditions that incentivise actors and instability.

This briefing note looks at these issues through the lens of illicit market violence in Afghanistan. It explores its potential use as a key proxy to project current and future trends of the development of other illicit and criminal markets in the country. It draws on a literature review on illicit market violence, a focused literature review on targeted violence in Afghanistan looking particularly at the 2020–2021 period, and the methodology developed by the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (GI-TOC) to research assassinations. The variables taken from the GI-TOC methodology are applied to the literature review in order to map recent trends on targeted killings and other forms of violence. The briefing note suggests a structure for further research exploring the evolution of targeted violence in Afghanistan by using illicit market violence as a proxy indicator. It presents a preliminary analysis of how targeted violence could be used to inform the analysis of illicit economies and their shifts in Afghanistan, arguing that better understanding the circumstances and actors involved in these crimes, and specifically assassinations, may offer greater insights into the changing dynamics within the country.

- 1 For the full research paper, see Oliveira, A.P. (2022). *Illicit markets and targeted violence in Afghanistan*. SOC ACE Research Paper No. 13, Birmingham, UK: University of Birmingham.
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Background

There is little disagreement that illicit markets are often associated with violence, although the degree and scale of such violence might vary across and within these markets.⁴ In crime–conflict settings, violence plays an instrumental and regulatory role, being used as a means of resolving disputes, and gaining political capital. Violence can be instrumental for obtaining and maintaining territorial control, for example, and as a means of protecting vested interests within institutions.⁵ Scholarship on the ‘protection economy’ has explored how criminal groups can profit from conflict by providing protection to civilians and other actors involved in hostilities, including parties in conflict and the state, in exchange for payment.⁶ This entrepreneurial character highlights the marketable aspect of violence as a commodity.⁷

One particular way in which violence is used as a commodity is the form of contract killings. Organised criminal groups often use assassinations or contract killings to gain control of territories and of communities – frightening individuals, silencing opposition, and corroding societies and institutions. To document and better understand this type of criminal governance, the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (GI-TOC) has developed a methodology to track

cases of contract killings. The methodology consists of recording cases defined as ‘targeted contract killings’, and it includes actual, attempted and planned lethal attacks on individuals or small groups of individuals.⁸ These include cases in which a third party is involved to commit the murder in exchange for financial gain or other form of benefit, such as personal or political favours or a change in status within a criminal gang.⁹ Cases are filtered from relevant newspaper sources and recorded in a database.¹⁰ Information on perpetrators, victims, and dynamics of the killings, such as location, date, method and price tags are registered when these are available.¹¹ Cases are recorded only when individuals are targeted for personal characteristics such as identity, position, or their work, and excludes attacks on random members of groups.¹²

In its global research on assassinations, the GI-TOC’s Global Assassination Monitor found that 18% of targeted killings recorded in Asia in the period of 2019 and 2020, were concentrated in Afghanistan.¹³ The primary targets were media, including women, and members of the local community, along with activists, non-governmental organizations’ staff, doctors and community leaders.¹⁴ This finding is in line with other reports. According to the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), for example, targeted killings of civilians became the third third leading cause of civilian casualties during escalating hostilities between 2020 and 2021.¹⁵

4 Andreas, P & Wallman, J (2009). ‘Illicit markets and violence: What is the relationship?’, *Crime, Law and Social Change* 52(1): 225-29. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10611-009-9200-6>.

5 Oliveira (2022).

6 Shaw, M (2016). ‘“We pay, you pay:” Protection economies, financial flows, and violence’, in H Matfess & M Mitlaucic (eds.), *Beyond convergence: World without order*. Washington, DC: National Defense University, pp. 235-250. <http://cco.ndu.edu/News/Article/980838/11-we-pay-you-pay-protection-economies-financial-flows-and-violence/>.

7 Shaw (2016).

8 Kaysser, N & Oliveira, A.P. (2021, 17 November). *Killing in silence: Monitoring the role of organized crime in contract killings*. Global Assassination Monitor. Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, , p. 31. <https://globalinitiative.net/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/GITOC-Global-Assassination-Monitor-Report-Killing-in-Silence.pdf>.

9 Kaysser & Oliveira (2021).

10 Kaysser & Oliveira (2021).

11 Kaysser & Oliveira (2021).

12 Kaysser & Oliveira (2021).

13 Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (2020). ‘Global assassination monitor, faces of assassination, 2020’. <https://assassination.globalinitiative.net/faces-of-assassination>.

14 Kaysser & Oliveira (2021), p. 58.

15 United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (2021, 26 July). ‘Afghanistan protection of civilians in armed conflict midyear update’, Analysis. <https://reliefweb.int/report/afghanistan/afghanistan-protection-civilians-armed-conflict-midyear-update-1-january-30-june>.

Although this phenomenon is not new in the context of the country's ongoing conflict, the changing nature of the killings perpetrated in the period preceding the 2021 Taliban takeover merits attention. First, it is worth noting that these were premeditated, planned attacks against civil society members and did not take place in the context of mass casualties.¹⁶ The use of improvised explosive devices (IEDs) attached to the victims' vehicles as well as the use of shootings by unknown gunmen exemplifies the fact that these attacks targeted specific individuals as opposed to a random group of victims. The targeted nature of the attacks is also highlighted by the profile of their victims. There was a noticeable shift towards members of civil society groups, such as media workers, human rights defenders, community leaders, health workers, off-duty security officers, judges, prosecutors, and religious figures.¹⁷

The perpetrators of these assassinations were largely unknown, although media reports and articles on such killings consistently referred to the Taliban potentially orchestrating many of them.¹⁸ A suggested motive for that was what Sampaio and Jackson call 'psychological warfare', which centred on expanding territorial control by silencing members of civil society and eradicating those who would be most likely to voice any opposition.¹⁹

Reports on these killings also highlighted, however, that a range of actors might use the climate of fear as a cover-up, such as political factions, drug smugglers, land grabbers, and corrupt officials.²⁰ The media also reported on instances of the commercialisation of violence. An article published in *Foreign Policy* in October 2021, for example, claimed that sources in Kabul had said that 'Taliban foot soldiers would kill on contract to earn cash as they are not being paid', and that prices ranged from 5,000 dollars to kill and 2,000 dollars to kidnap.²¹

Kidnapping for ransom and other forms of violent crimes, including muggings and armed robberies appeared to have raised at that time.²² Media reports suggest that over 40 kidnappings of businessmen took place during the first two months of the Taliban takeover. Crimes seem to have occurred across different cities, particularly in Kabul, with experts suggesting how cities became a locus for competition among various actors, including politicians, warlords, businessmen, and criminal networks.²³ One area of special concern is the acquisition of land, which has long been a source of violent crimes throughout Afghanistan's history. A UNAMA report, for example, stated that over 70% of all serious crimes, including homicide, were caused by land disputes in Afghanistan.²⁴

16 United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (2020, 27 July). 'Afghanistan: Protection of civilians in armed conflict, annual report 2020'. <https://reliefweb.int/report/afghanistan/afghanistan-protection-civilians-armed-conflict-midyear-report-1-january-30-june>.

17 Abed, F & Gibbons-Neff, T (2021, 2 January). 'Targeted killings are terrorizing Afghans. And no one is claiming them', *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/02/world/asia/afghanistan-targeted-killings.html>.

18 Sampaio, A & Jackson, A. (2021, 9 April). 'Afghan cities become key battlegrounds', *War on the Rocks*. <https://warontherocks.com/2021/04/afghan-cities-become-key-battlegrounds/>.

19 Sampaio & Jackson (2021).

20 Sampaio & Jackson (2021).

21 O'Donnell, L (2021, 29 October). 'Afghan crime wave adds to Taliban dystopia', *Foreign Policy* (blog). <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/10/29/afghanistan-crime-poverty-taliban-economic-collapse-humanitarian-crisis/>.

22 O'Donnell (2021).

23 Sampaio & Jackson (2021).

24 United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (2015, 31 March). 'The stolen lands of Afghanistan and its people: The state land distribution system - Afghanistan'. <https://reliefweb.int/report/afghanistan/stolen-lands-afghanistan-and-its-people-state-land-distribution-system>

Key Findings

1. Change in the nature of assassination and victims' profile: The apparently changing nature of killings – from widespread to targeted – and the targeting of civilian actors as opposed to high-ranking military officers helps shed some light on actors' different aims in perpetrating violence. The targeting of civilian actors, in particular media workers and women involved in public life, illustrates the use of assassinations to enforce silence and spread fear among local community actors.²⁵ Disputes over criminal markets and for political control can lead to the killing not only of the parties engaged in conflict but also of those who voice opposition to criminal activities, which can increase the impact of conflict on civil society and the wider community.²⁶

2. Methods: GI-TOC's research on assassination indicates that its methodology can help in mapping and understanding trends in illicit markets. In Afghanistan, the change in the use of targeted assassinations of civilians was largely supported by the change in the method: the use of IEDs and firearms for perpetrating the assassinations. This could potentially suggest an increase demand for firearms. In some contexts, for example, the use of firearms and levels violent crime might be linked to the widespread availability of such weapons.²⁷ Moreover, GI-TOC's research has also pointed to the illicit arms trade as a key contributor to armed violence in conflict–crime dynamics.²⁸ This assessment may be particularly relevant in the case of Afghanistan as the illicit firearms are among the most pervasive markets in the country according to the Global Organized Crime Index.²⁹

3. Perpetrators: GI-TOC's methodology also identifies the profile of the perpetrators, which gives an insight into the monitoring of illicit markets, specifically those for violence. The use of 'gunmen' and reports of Taliban foot soldiers being used to carry out murders and kidnappings raises concerns about the potential consolidation of the use of violence as a commodity,³⁰ or in other words, the commercialisation of violence.³¹ As the literature on contract killings suggests, 'conventionally violent occupations such as the military can be fertile recruiting grounds for hitmen'³² and that the presence of illicit and violent economies can create a pool of hitmen, as seen in the case of South Africa.³³

4. Motive: GI-TOC research on assassinations highlights the importance of investigating the motive behind targeted killings in order to effectively address the root causes and impunity, particularly as economic conditions worsen. Shedding a light on the motives may enable a better understanding of the social and political ecosystems that lead to targeted killings, which may also serve to illustrate the actors involved and the interests motivating their behaviour. Greater knowledge of the circumstances surrounding targeted killings may demonstrate the state of play in illicit economies – outlining links between criminal markets and groups, vested interests in political structures, and in illicit markets.

5. Geographical shifts: Changes in the levels of violence may also suggest a shift or expansion of operations to consolidate territorial control. The surge of criminality could point to the creation or consolidation of violent hotspots. Examples here might include business extortion, land grabbing

25 Oliveira (2022).

26 Oliveira (2022).

27 Oliveira (2022).

28 Walker, S & Botero Restrepo, M (2022). 'illicit economies and armed conflict: Ten dynamics that drive instability', *Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime*, p. 74.

29 Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (2021). 'Criminality in Afghanistan – The Organized Crime Index. <https://ocindex.net/>.

30 Oliveira (2022).

31 Shaw, M & Thomas, K (2017). 'The commercialization of assassination: "Hits" and contract killing in South Africa, 2000–2015', *African Affairs*, 116(465): 597-620. <https://doi.org/10.1093/afraf/adw050>.

32 Macintyre, D, Wilson, D, Yardley, E & Brolan, L (2014). 'The British Hitman: 1974–2013'. *The Howard Journal of Criminal Justice*, 53(4): 325-340. <https://doi.org/10.1111/hojo.12063>.

33 Shaw & Thomas (2017).

and the mineral sector, among others.³⁴ As GI-TOC's research on assassinations shows, 'the phenomenon of contract killings commonly takes place in clusters, often linked to the existence of criminal markets or the potential of creating one. This, in combination with the presence of vulnerable target groups—mostly people opposing, uncovering, investigating, or standing in the way of illicit activities'.³⁵

Implications

Understanding and unveiling illicit markets is particularly challenging given their covert nature. However, delving into questions concerning the victims' profile, the context in which the violent acts took place, and where these continue to take place might help to reveal the evolving criminal dynamics in a given territory.

It might be useful to understand actors' use of violence both as a commodity and as an instrument. Targeted violence, in this case, can be used as a proxy to detect patterns within illicit markets and investigate how they may shift in territory, demand and means of governance over a period of time. The research has the potential to support the development of metrics for conflict and crime dynamics, and better understand the structures of illicit economies that motivate and support the use of violence. It might also prove a useful means to identify the role and involvement of different actors, including state-embedded actors, in targeted violence.³⁶

The GI-TOC methodology on assassinations can serve as a first step to create indicators of illicit market violence that can be tailored to the context of Afghanistan.³⁷ Indicators could be used to examine past cases of targeted killings

and other violent acts, such as kidnappings. The findings could help illustrate evolving trends, and closely monitor the situation of targeted killings in the country as a means to improve evaluations. The implications of violence following the Taliban takeover in 2021 may be detrimental to communities living in contested areas, which have borne the brunt of the heightened violence deriving from criminal governance. Instability allows for illicit economies to increase their grip over communities by exploiting basic needs and increasing levels of violence, victimisation, and insecurity.³⁸

There might potentially be some shortcomings in this research arising from the difficulty in gathering information, given the likely scarcity of reporting and the inherent difficulties concerning crime–conflict situations, such as in differentiating between political and criminal violence.³⁹ The methodology may be revised and expanded to include expert consultations and interviews with relevant actors (such as former officials, journalists, community members and policy-makers). Despite any drawbacks, a systematic and data-oriented analysis will certainly assist in mapping the shifting paradigms of illicit economies.⁴⁰ After all, effectively combatting crime depends on having a better understanding and assessment of the ecosystem that enabled criminal markets to appear and flourish. In turn, this approach and methodology may also support the creation of policies and tools geared towards promoting a safer space for civil society actors and contribute to eventual efforts to achieve stabilisation and development – including those that seek to strengthen community resilience, security, transparency and oversight of political processes, and use evidence-based practices to hold the government, businesses and other actors accountable.⁴¹

34 Oliveira (2022).

35 Kaysser & Oliveira (2021), p. 17.

36 Oliveira (2022).

37 Oliveira (2022).

38 Walker & Botrero Restrepo (2022).

39 Oliveira (2022).

40 Oliveira (2022).

41 Kaysser & Oliveira (2021), p. 43.

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