

*Webs of Corruption: Trafficking and Terrorism in Central Asia*. By Mariya Y. Omelicheva and Lawrence P. Markowitz. New York: Columbia University Press, 2019. 232 pp. (ISBN: 9780231188548). doi: 10.22679/avs.2021.6.1.012

Based on a formidable research project funded by the US Government, Omelicheva and Markowitz's *Webs of Corruption* is an innovative study bringing together a strong theoretical foundation, a variety of methodological approaches, and a wealth of meticulously collected empirical data and analysis.

*Webs of Corruption* consists of four substantial parts. In the first section of the book, Omelicheva and Markowitz map the trafficking-terrorism nexus through a solid theoretical conceptualisation and a thorough empirical groundwork. The authors explore the four types of relationships between terrorism and trafficking: coexistence, operational, alliance, and convergence. In addition, they build a theoretical framework explaining how and when the trafficking-terrorism nexus emerges and functions. The second part of the book provides a historical, security, and socio-political background to the formation of the trafficking-terrorism nexus in the region of Central Asia. The next two sections discuss the peculiarities of the trafficking-terrorism nexus, as well as the nature and the role of the state within each Central Asian country.

Omelicheva and Markowitz's key contribution is to provide much-needed and well-argued insight into the role of the state in the crime-terror nexus. While a given for local, on-the-ground observers, such a research strategy is a much-needed innovation among global, largely Euro-centric approaches to regional studies. Their research is important for two reasons. First, there is obvious academic merit in making sure theories meet reality on the ground. Second, Omelicheva and Markowitz can highlight the role of the state in that nexus, a topic perhaps too sensitive for many local researchers to safely discuss. It is laudable that they chose to step in and fill in this gap in Central Asian studies.

Located on an important drug trafficking route exporting opiates from Afghanistan to Russia and Europe, Central Asia also contains the latent potential for the spread of extremist ideas and terrorism, and the state in most Central Asian countries is corrupt and authoritarian. The authors provide a carefully researched, cautionary tale, showing how several contributing factors have informed the state's entanglement with the crime-terror nexus. At the same time, Omelicheva and Markowitz convincingly argue that this entanglement may mitigate the extreme violence that usually accompanies the crime-terror nexus.

One more strength is the book's ability to build a bigger picture through the innovative use of a variety of research methods, quantitative data, analysis, and maps. Given the transboundary complexity of the subject and the frequent misconceptions

and misinterpretations of the Central Asian region, the use of quantitative and qualitative methods along with geographic information system mapping (GIS) is a smart approach, allowing for a more nuanced local context.

Omelicheva and Markowitz (and their respective research assistants) have very thoroughly and meticulously collected and employed an impressive collection of primary and secondary sources to support their key argument. However, certain shortcomings should be noted pertaining to the data, which is key to the book's research findings. The authors rely on the Global Terrorism Database (GTD), an open-source online database supported by the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism. While the GTD provides extensive information on acts of terrorism and criminal violence in the world, it may not be equipped to provide accurate and undisputable motivations for each of these acts.

A random cross-check of GTD entries on Kyrgyzstan against Kyrgyz information agencies in local languages (Kyrgyz and Russian) reveals an inaccuracy in the first GTD entry covering the case of a fatal ISIL attack on a Kyrgyz policeman.<sup>1</sup> The Kyrgyz National News Agency, *Kabar*, reported this case as an arrest gone wrong.<sup>2</sup> Two more large local media outlets noted that the perpetrator attacked a policeman who caught him trying to break into parked cars. Both media reports quoted the Ministry of Interior's official report,<sup>3</sup> with one emphasizing that the perpetrator's ISIL affiliation was misinformation spread by Russian online media outlets.<sup>4</sup>

While the authors certainly cannot verify every single piece of information on the GTD website or other sources, it should be acknowledged that this data might be biased and inaccurate for various reasons, be it the subjective US-centric definition of terrorism or intentionally or unintentionally flawed local reporting. National law enforcement agencies in Central Asia are not considered beacons of transparency when it comes to reporting. Neither are national governments when they provide data on such sensitive issues as unemployment or crime.

<sup>1</sup> Global Terrorism Database, Incident no. 201710280036, October 27, 2017. Available at <https://www.start.umd.edu/gtd/search/IncidentSummary.aspx?gtdid=201710280036>

<sup>2</sup> "The Police Solved the case of Lieutenant Ularbek Mairambekov's Murder," *Kabar - Kyrgyz National News Agency*, October 28, 2017. Available in Russian at <http://kabar.kg/news/militicia-raskryla-ubiustvo-leitenanta-ularbeka-mairambekova/>

<sup>3</sup> "On-duty Policeman's Murder: The Court Issued Indictment," *Kaktus Media Agency*, December 6, 2018. Available in Russian at [https://kaktus.media/doc/383527\\_ybiystvo\\_milicionera\\_pri\\_ispolnenii\\_sydvynes\\_prigovor\\_po\\_dely.html](https://kaktus.media/doc/383527_ybiystvo_milicionera_pri_ispolnenii_sydvynes_prigovor_po_dely.html)

<sup>4</sup> "The Suspect in the Policeman's Murder Case was a Gambling Addict, not an Extremist," *Večernij Bishkek* (Evening Bishkek), October 29, 2017. Available in Russian at [https://www.vb.kg/doc/368786\\_podozrevaemy\\_v\\_ybiystve\\_milicionera\\_byl\\_igromanom\\_a\\_ne\\_ekstremistom\\_ig.html](https://www.vb.kg/doc/368786_podozrevaemy_v_ybiystve_milicionera_byl_igromanom_a_ne_ekstremistom_ig.html)

Another minor shortcoming is the book's tendency to use small, almost invisible tweaks in language. For an expert, this poses a dilemma: Are these tweaks unintentional, or do they say something about the sources or analysis presented in this book? For example, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation is said to expand its objectives "to the fight against the 'three evils' of terrorism, Islamism, and separatism" (p. 58). Meanwhile, it is clear from the title of the SCO Shanghai Convention on Combating Terrorism, Separatism, and Extremism that Islamism is never mentioned because it would be a sensitive issue for the majority-Muslim SCO members.

Apart from these minor shortcomings, *Webs of Corruption* is a fascinating, well-researched, and well-written book that introduces important theoretical insights, as well as provides a very detailed empirical account of the Central Asian state-crime-terrorism nexus. The book would be of interest to students, academics, and policy-makers alike, given they are interested in terrorism studies, organized crime, rule of law, security sector reform, and general Central Asian studies. Presented in a captivating and dynamic style, *Webs of Corruption* would also be an interesting non-fiction read for any lay reader interested in security issues.

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