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Why the Frankfurt Terrorist Shooting is Taking Our Eye Off the Ball in Albania

By Matt Kavgian and Amela Kraja

On March 2, 2011, a young man stormed aboard an American military transfer bus parked outside a Frankfurt International airport terminal and opened fire, reportedly shouting "Allah Akbar, Allah Akbar, Jihad, Jihad!"¹ Two airmen were killed and two others wounded before ever reaching their destination on the Afghan battlefields. The gunman, 21 year-old Arid Uka, a Kosovar Albanian Muslim now residing legally in Germany, claims to have been self-radicalized in recent months in reaction to his anger over American military actions in Afghanistan. Naturally, this tragic incident has set off a flurry of commentary in the press and among security professionals about Islamic radicalization within Kosovo and Albania, most pointedly in Arid Uka's hometown of Mitrovica. Murmurings about uprooting what must surely be a 'hotbed of terrorists and radical elements' amongst its population have begun to surface.²

While not being dismissive of Wahhabi Islamic terrorist elements that have operated in and around the region, and their potential for generating harm, we offer a different assessment of the greater threat posed by Uka's hometown of Kosovska Mitrovica and its environs. It is not an increase in terrorist activity that is likely to threaten the interests of the United States and her allies so much as the threat posed by the truly staggering level of transnational organized crime (TOC) that is based in Mitrovica.

Events such as the Frankfurt shooting, though sickening and senseless, do tend to take analysts' and security professionals' eyes off the ball. The result can be lending undue attention to a lesser threat presence (a lone-wolf radical) at the expense of a greater, though less visible, one. We contend that criminality at the scope and scale seen in the Mitrovica region is more destabilizing than terrorism at this point in time and thus deserves the lion's share of the attention.

¹ Schwartz, Stephen. "Kosovar Albanian in Frankfurt Terror Attack." *The Weekly Standard Blog*, March 3, 2011.

² Ibid, 2011.

Mitrovica: Microcosm of Balkan “Bads”

The common problems that plague the town in relation to these illegal activities are in effect representative of the common “bads” and problems in Kosovo, and the Balkan region as a whole. Mitrovica is well known amongst regional analysts and heavily documented in the media going back to the end of the Balkan conflicts in 1999. The city is generally considered the last major holdout of division and conflict in Kosovo, primarily due to its large Serb population, and still maintains a United Nations Mission in Kosovo peacekeeping presence (UNMIK).³

Mitrovica’s unemployment levels, affecting nearly 70% of the population, only begin to illustrate the room that exists for narcotics and other goods to be traded and flow through the area illegally. In the most northern parts of the city, nearly 100% of the population is without work. These figures represent even higher levels than the unemployment for Kosovo as a whole, which remains around 40-44%. Kosovo is considered to be one of the most economically depressed areas in Europe.⁴ “According to the United Nations Security Resolution 1244 (UNSCR 1244), there is no “legal economy” in Kosovo right now except insofar as it functions under the only internationally legal entity in Kosovo: UNMIK.”⁵ Thus, for many, turning to illegal or black market trade is seen as a necessity for survival. These effects take hold of the entire Balkan region as narcotics and other illegal goods are transported through the southern leg of the “Balkan Route,” originating in Afghanistan, then flowing through Pakistan or Iran, into Turkey, Bulgaria, Macedonia, then into Kosovo or Albania, and finally into Italy and the heart of Europe.⁶

Illegal narcotics remains the largest flow of criminal activity to be found in Mitrovica and the region, with heroin being the main traded drug. The city, as well as the majority of Kosovo, is effectively controlled by the Albanian mafia who is said to control close to 40%-75% of the European market for heroin and control production and transportation of the drug moving through the region at all times. The heroin trade is estimated at \$7 billion annually.⁷ For the majority of unemployed workers still distraught by the lack of economic and social opportunities after the wars of the 1990s, such opportunities for profit seem like feasible and very tempting options where there are few others present.

The Greater Threat: Transnational Organized Crime

Mitrovica’s key problems stem from TOC groups and the flow of narcotics through the region. In addition to narcotics, the Albanian mafia has a firm hold on the region’s black market trade in alcohol, cigarettes, gas and petrol, weapons, and consumer goods—automobiles being a

³ <http://www.unmikonline.org/> (accessed April 1, 2011)

⁴ “Bridging Kosovo’s Mitrovica Divide.” Report for the *International Crisis Group*, September 13, 2005.

⁵ Gallucci, Jerry. “Kosovo: Beware ‘Wolves’ Baying at the Moon.” <http://outsidewalls.blogspot.com/2011/01/kosovo-beware-wolves-baying-at-moon.html>.

⁶ “UNODC—Crime and its impact on the Balkans and Effected Countries.” http://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/Balkan_study.pdf.

⁷ “UNODC: Kosovo Albanian Drug-Trafficking Acquired Alarming Proportions.” March 27, 2008. <http://www.kosovocompromise.com/cms/item/latestnews/en.html?view=story&id=743§ionId=1>.

particular favorite of many crime lords.⁸ Adding to the nightmare of Mitrovica are mafia activities in human trafficking and organ harvesting, with children being the most common victims.⁹

TOC operations in Mitrovica have managed to circumvent the age-old ethnic violence prevalent in the region by developing criminal alliances with their otherwise contentious neighbors. It is ironic that TOC organizations have been able to foster “productive” relationships between ethnic Serbs and Albanians, inter-ethnic relations in which even the savviest of international diplomats have failed. Affirming this is the recent statement of former UNMIK Representative in Mitrovica, Jerry Gallucci: “Interestingly, the one area in which Serbs and Albanians have always been able to cooperate fully is organized crime.”¹⁰ Regional cooperation between crime groups has allowed them to learn valuable lessons they are now using to forge alliances on a global level. The Kosovar-Albanian mafia has now established international connections with every known narco-cartel in Europe, the Middle East, Far East, and Central America, feeding all the corridors that lead to the heart of the United States.¹¹

Mitrovica remains the hub of regional and international criminal cooperation, as it sits on the porous border of Kosovo and Serbia. The lack of adequate border patrol has been noted as a key element to allow drugs, arms, and other contraband to flow through the region.¹² Enabling this flow of illicit goods is an endemic culture of corruption at the government level, ranging from local levels to Kosovo’s now former Prime Minister Hashim Thaci, considered by many to be the head of the Albanian mafia, arrested in November 2010.¹³ This type of wide-spread corruption threatens to allow for the gray economy to continue undermining the stabilization the region so desperately needs.

Impact on the United States

The gray economy intertwined with corruption and insecure borders makes Mitrovica representative of the problems produced by the region as a whole. By allowing TOC operations to go on unaddressed, it undermines the development of fragile states, the stability of which is in the United States’ best interest.

However, the United States needs to re-conceive its notion of what constitutes true stability. American resources have been drawn into regional affairs on multiple occasions, which have been costly, bloody, and largely ineffectual. Certainly, some security related victories have been

⁹ Gec, Jovana. “Prosecutor Investigating Reports of Trafficking Organs of Missing Kosovo Serbs.” *Associated Press*, March 21, 2008.

¹⁰ Gallucci, Jerry. “Kosovo: A Final Solution?” <http://outsidewalls.blogspot.com/2009/08/kosovo-final-solution.html>.

¹¹ “UNODC: Kosovo Albanian Drug-Trafficking Acquired Alarming Proportions.” March 27, 2008. <http://www.kosovocompromise.com/cms/item/latestnews/en.html?view=story&if=743§ionId=1>.

¹² Khakee & Florquin. “Kosovo’s Mafia: Assassinations and intimidation.” *Global Post*, March 27, 2011.

¹³ McAllester, Matt. “Kosovo’s Mafia: Assassinations and intimidation.” *Global Post*, March 27, 2011

achieved, but they are largely symbolic in nature (i.e., arrests of a few war criminals). But these symbolic victories come at the expense of stemming the tide of more fundamental issues in the region, such as the entrenchment of TOC organizations and corrupt governance. A recent three-month investigation by *GlobalPost* has found that “concerns about criminality among Kosovo’s ruling political class went largely ignored by the United States, NATO and the United Nations over the past 11 years—and in some cases U.S. and UN officials thwarted criminal investigations into former senior KLA figures.”¹⁴

Allowing TOC groups and corrupt authorities to further drag places like Mitrovica into the criminal and corruptive abyss poses an ongoing threat to American interests. The Balkan region is simply too important to be ceded to the control of thugs and criminals.

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¹⁴ Ibid, 2011.