

Criminal planning: the role of traffickers, mafias, and militants in developing world cities

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When we think about urban planning, the images that come readily to mind are of academically trained professionals mapping neighborhoods, conducting surveys, meeting with the public, designing infrastructure—all under the aegis of a government or private agency. People immersed in planning literature will probably think of a wider variety of practitioners and practices, but will not immediately imagine Islamist militants, mafiosos, or Kalashnikov-toting teenage boys. However, in many areas of the world, criminal or illicit non-state groups plan, manage, and implement services traditionally provided by government: water, electricity, education, housing, security, and administration.

In the developing world and unstable regions, illicit actors often become involved in city planning activities such as providing basic services and utilities, managing land use, and administering the real estate market. This paper will look at the conversations surrounding criminal groups engaged in service provision, and suggest a more focused approach to studying their planning strategies. The first section of the paper will explain the rationale for treating criminal groups as planners, and conduct a literature review of existing scholarship on criminal groups in the context of planning; this also a more generalized review of writing on organized crime, because of the paucity of material. As this literature review shows, there is a serious dearth of scholarship on criminals from a city planning perspective, as writing on crime tends to focus on issues of violence, marginalization, and corruption. The second section will propose a typology of illicit non-state actors based on their structure, planning involvement, and relationships with the formal government, finding commonality among these disparate groups. It will discuss three broad types of criminal planners—traffickers, mafias, and militant groups—using the examples of Rio de Janeiro

trafficking gangs and militias, the Medellin cartel under Pablo Escobar, Mumbai mafias, ISIS/ISIL, and Hezbollah (note: I use the term “criminal” as a catchall because it clearly applies to trafficking and racketeering groups; however, readers should keep in mind that Hezbollah is a political party—albeit a militant one with a paramilitary wing—not a criminal group. On the other extreme, ISIS/ISIL’s actions are closer to war crimes or terrorism than the other groups). The third section will characterize two forms of criminal involvement in planning: first, as a replacement for an absent government, and second, as an obstacle to government planning. Both are designed to assert and maintain the criminal group’s territorial and social control, and they rarely exist independently of each other. In fact, they are usually intertwined, creating complex symbiotic relationships between official and unofficial authority.

As the typology developed for this paper demonstrates, criminal planning groups play a handful of different roles vis-à-vis the formal government. In situations where the State is absent, failed, or unwilling to provide services, criminal planners fill a desperate need and benefit underserved populations, usually the poor and racial minorities. In other cases, criminal planners use violence and intimidation to interfere with legitimate State activities, maintaining the lack of official services by force. These two types of relationships are rarely distinct, and most criminal planners both fill in for and hinder the State, creating a symbiotic system in which the State tacitly allows the actor to continue providing services in order to shirk its own responsibilities (or justify its absentee behavior), saving money and effort. This creates a clientelist dynamic and furthers the criminal group’s goal of gaining popular loyalty and securing territorial control in order to continue making a profit (whether from trafficking, racketeering, or construction) or advancing an ideological agenda.

The complexity and interconnectedness of criminal groups’ planning activities necessitates further study and classification. Urban informality dominates large areas of the globe, and criminal planning flourishes in informality, making it a significant factor in city planning policy decisions. Conducting research on criminal groups is made challenging by their violent and secretive tendencies, but it is crucial to understanding their operations. Without thorough knowledge of the services criminal groups provide, government planners risk disrupting existing systems and creating further hardships

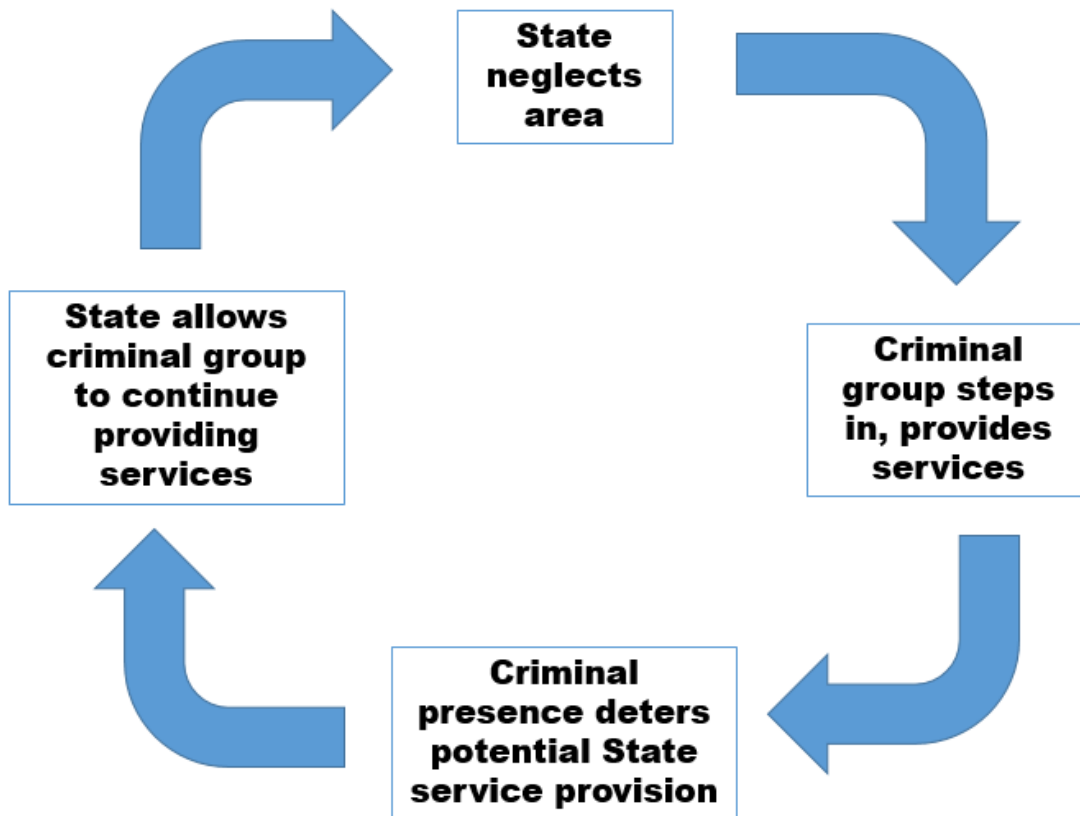
for the poor. For example, the police takeover of a large favela in Rio in 2011 led to widespread water shortages, because traffickers had been overseeing system maintenance. Policy makers required a profound understanding of criminal groups in order to make sound decisions about the areas they occupy; thus this paper argues these groups must be treated as planners as well as criminals.

Figure 1: A typology of criminal planners

	Traffickers		Mafias		Militants	
	Rio de Janeiro gangs	Medellin Cartel	Rio de Janeiro militias	Mumbai mafias	ISIS/ISIL	Hezbollah
Law enforcement (public security, judicial remedies, conflict mediation)						
Utilities (water, electricity, gas, sewage, physical infrastructure)						
Educational/ recreational/ cultural facilities and activities						
Housing						

Administrative services (real estate documents, taxes, loans)						
Health care services						

Figure 2: The complex relationship of criminal planners to the State



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