
Partisans, Profiteers, and Criminals: Syria's Illicit Economy

MATT HERBERT

"Borders are thought of as official outlets ... but the definition is completely different for smugglers who see borders as fluid and overlapping, with thousands of routes that are only known to the people on both sides ..."

– KURDISH SMUGGLER¹

Syria's civil war continues with no end in sight. Three years of conflict have killed over 100,000 people and left another 8.7 million as refugees.² Non-combat-related economic activity has largely ground to a halt as factories have been destroyed, workers forced to flee, and trade routes closed off due to the fighting. However, illicit economic activity is flourishing in Syria. Insurgent fighters need weapons, refugees are willing to pay handsomely for safety, and poorly paid government soldiers are easily corrupted. Well-organized smuggling networks and conflict entrepreneurs have met these needs by leveraging chaos from conflict and selling Syrian resources on the global market.

The smuggling groups active in Syria are not new. Rather, they represent the latest incarnation of a longstanding illicit economy that has permeated Syria's borderlands. The tribes and criminal organizations that engage in smuggling have alternately been ignored and exploited by the Syrian government. Now, the withdrawal of the government from the borderlands

Matt Herbert is a Ph.D. candidate in International Security Studies at The Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, Tufts University. This text was developed from ideas initially explored by the author in *The Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime's* monthly *Analyzing Organized Crime* brief.

has empowered these networks as the demands of Syria's insurgents and refugees have made them rich.

Eventually, even the most intractable wars end, but the economic systems that enable conflict or profit from the chaos are far more durable. The smugglers and conflict entrepreneurs of yesteryear are transformed into the business moguls and global traders of tomorrow. More dangerously, they are often able to leverage their economic resources into political influence, shaping

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the post-conflict trajectory of their state. The shape of Syria's post-conflict future is far from clear. However, lessons from other conflicts highlight the danger of allowing these groups to influence the future government.

The first step towards mitigating the future impact of organized crime in Syria is to understand the current and historic situation. While Syria's shadow economy has always been extensive—with some estimates pegging it at 24 percent of official GDP—this article will mainly focus on illicit activity that is occurring along Syria's borders.³

Criminal organizations in these areas primarily engage in smuggling, moving commodities into or out of Syria for profit. The commodities these gangs deal in involve either goods that are illegal (drugs and weapons), goods that are subject to high tariffs (tobacco and consumer goods), or illicit services (human trafficking/smuggling and prostitution).⁴ This article has three arguments: first, that the Syrian government has long benefitted from the nation's position as a smuggling node in the Middle East; second, that over the last three years the government has ceded dominance over the illicit sector to insurgent organizations and smuggling groups; and third, that this evolution in control will prolong the civil war and complicate the inevitable post-conflict transition.

SMUGGLING AND SYRIA

The territory comprising modern Syria has long been a key trade corridor. Together with Iraq it forms a land bridge, linking Turkey with the broader Middle East, and the Persian Gulf with the Mediterranean. Alongside licit commerce, criminal organizations have long leveraged

Syria's geographic position to move all manner of illicit products such as illegal drugs, weapons, and untaxed luxury goods. The smuggling groups that operate within this corridor are largely apolitical, profit-oriented networks, composed of businessmen and border residents. However, the networks both impact and are impacted by the Syrian government. When controlled and channeled by the state, they present a lucrative fount of rents for the political elite.

This section will explore the history of illicit trading along Syria's borders, as well as the government's involvement.

Smuggling networks have operated in Syria since the creation of the state. The French and British division of Ottoman territory after World War I created a new political landscape in the Middle East, as Syria and Lebanon came under French rule while its Arab neighbors were governed by Great Britain. This new system of "mandates" did little to alter pre-existent trade patterns and commercial networks. Economic webs that had once operated solely within the Ottoman Empire were spread across a number of new states. Tribes and villages were arbitrarily divided, creating natural, trust-based smuggling conduits.⁵ Smuggling surged during the mandate period, as "networks of trade, trust, and transport" sought to circumvent the often-high customs duties imposed at the borders between British and French-controlled territories.⁶ Traffickers, usually local entrepreneurs, leveraged their superior knowledge of routes and terrain to outwit and evade police and military patrols. The large towns and cities of the region—Damascus, Beirut, and Aleppo—functioned as the key nodes in this regional network.

Though most smuggled goods were fairly benign—usually untaxed commercial goods and livestock—the region's smuggling networks also dealt in drugs. Hashish grown in Lebanon, and to a smaller extent in Syria, was smuggled overland to the large regional drug market in Cairo. The trade in narcotics was reportedly substantial, with some estimates noting that upwards of 50 percent of Lebanon's economy revolved around hashish.⁷ Opium produced in the region had a more global reach. Smuggling networks arose to move the opium from its point of production in southeastern Turkey to laboratories in Aleppo and Beirut for further refinement.⁸ The resultant drugs were then shipped out through the port of Beirut and on to the international market.⁹

The end of French control in 1946 had little impact on Syrian smuggling networks. The minimal capacity of the early Syrian state enabled smugglers to pursue their vocation without interference. If anything, this era provided a financial windfall to the smugglers, who were able to exploit the differences in trade policy and domestic pricing between the

newly independent states in the region to their advantage.¹⁰ In addition to consumer products, drugs continued to be moved throughout the region. During this era, European organized crime groups purchased much of the opium smuggled through Syria.¹¹ While individual government officials likely profited financially from the smuggling, there is little indication that the Syrian government had an institutional involvement in the illicit trade. This model changed in 1976, when Syria sent its military into Lebanon.

The Syrian intervention and subsequent twenty-nine year occupation of Lebanon led to a much more overt involvement by the Syrian government in illicit commerce. Syrian control over Lebanese roads and ports forced local smuggling networks to develop strong relations with the Syrian government—especially the military—if they wished to continue operating. The relationship between the criminals and Syrian authorities became symbiotic, with smuggling organizations supporting the political status quo through the continuous financial support of elites. This financial support was collected through both bribes and illicit taxation, with the police and military wielding the threat of arrest as a potent tool to ensure prompt delivery of each. Some estimates placed the resultant illicit trade at around \$1 billion annually, much of it reportedly benefitting relatives of President Hafez Assad.¹²

Lower level officials profited as well, with many military officers and soldiers viewing “a posting to Lebanon [as] a chance to make a fortune.”¹³ Profits came from the taxation of illicit commerce as well as direct involvement in the trade. The latter form of profiteering was on display at the

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soldiers’ souk in Damascus, where everything including “refrigerators, vans, [and] imported clothing” could be purchased from men in fatigues.¹⁴ Smuggling was pervasive enough that periodic anti-smuggling campaigns implemented by the Syrian government actually resulted in shortages of basic commodities. International companies came to depend on the booming black market, with Philip Morris holding an 18 percent share in the Syrian cigarette

market, supplied entirely by smuggling from Lebanon.¹⁵

In addition to licit consumer goods, the intervention in Lebanon entangled the Syrian government in drug trafficking. The intervention in Lebanon entangled the Syrian government in the trafficking of drugs

and licit consumer goods. Long a production point for hashish, Lebanon's Bekaa valley experienced a drug renaissance while under the de facto control of Syria. By 1982, marijuana production had expanded from 10 percent of arable land in the valley to 90 percent.¹⁶ That same year, poppies were introduced to the Bekaa; by 1990, the valley was producing an estimated \$1.4 billion worth of heroin.¹⁷ Reportedly, the Syrian military earned between \$300 million and \$1 billion from the drug trade, mainly through the taxation of trafficking groups.¹⁸ There are some hints that Syrian government officials actively engaged in drug trafficking during this period, as when two Syrian embassy officials were expelled from Spain on suspicion of heroin trafficking.¹⁹

While profitable, Syrian involvement in Lebanese narcotics production drew international disapprobation. Under intense pressure from the United States and European nations in the 1990s, the Syrian government began to crack down on narcotics production and smuggling. By 1997, the government had distanced itself enough from the narcotics trade that the United States removed Syria from its list of countries trafficking in narcotics.²⁰ Nonetheless, traffickers continued to utilize the nation as a transport hub, evidenced by high levels of cocaine, opiates, and amphetamines seized in the country throughout the 1990s and 2000s.

As profits from narcotics trafficking in Lebanon diminished, a new illicit trade emerged along the Syrian-Iraqi border. The border had been officially closed since the early 1980s, when Syria supported Iran during the Iran-Iraq war. By 1995, the first sign of a thaw in relations appeared, and the border was reopened to vehicle traffic.²¹ Small-scale cross-border smuggling of textiles and food became more frequent, reportedly condoned by Syrian officials.²² Cross-border illicit activity soon blossomed as Syria assisted Iraq in bypassing the UN sanctions put in place in 1991.

The sanctions busting effort represented a strategic evolution for the Syrian government. Rather than passively collecting taxes from smugglers, the government actively developed and operated the smuggling networks. The primary commodity trafficked from Iraq was oil, moved via tanker truck, train, and ultimately pipeline to Syrian ports.²³ This shadow trade was large enough that Syria's official oil exports increased by nearly 50 percent, even while its oil production slightly declined.²⁴ The trade reportedly garnered the Syrian government nearly \$2 billion per year, or roughly 10 percent of the nation's GDP.²⁵ The Syrian government further profited through the procurement and transportation of weapons and luxury goods for the Iraqi regime. The Syrians allegedly received payments worth 20 percent of the value of the weapons systems.²⁶

While the 2003 U.S. invasion and occupation of Iraq ended Syria's direct involvement in these smuggling activities, the government continued to profit from the illicit trade. As trans-border smuggling recovered and intensified, the Syrian government reverted to taxing trafficking networks. Initially, the smuggled products revolved around subsistence items, including food and livestock.²⁷ As soon as oil production in Iraq was restarted, this too became ripe fodder for trafficking syndicates. In one three-week period in 2006, Iraqi authorities halted 1,200 trucks waiting to cross into Syria, seizing \$28 million in diverted oil.²⁸ Antiquities smuggling gangs active in Iraq also utilized Syria to smuggle looted artifacts onto the open market.²⁹ Finally, human trafficking between Iraq and Syria increased, driven by the large population displacement and chaos of Iraq's civil war. Some victims of trafficking were women from among the nearly half million Iraqi refugees in Syria. In other cases, cross-border gangs kidnapped girls and women in Iraq before smuggling them into Syria and into forced prostitution.³⁰

In the early 2000s, drug trafficking surged in Syria, propelled by new products and new routes. Cocaine and heroin continued to be trafficked through the country, with seizures of the latter averaging 80 kilograms per year between 2007 and 2011.³¹ However, an increasingly large amount of narcotics trafficking involved smuggling the amphetamine Captagon, seizures of which doubled between 2007 and 2009 to 22 million tablets.³² This surge was driven by the evolution of a booming market for the drug in Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries.³³ Initially, Captagon was produced in Southeastern Europe, Turkey, and Lebanon, leading to the development of north-south smuggling routes that transected a significant chunk of Syrian territory.³⁴ In 2006, a Captagon lab was uncovered in Syria, the first reported incidence of drug production in the country in decades.³⁵ Also during this time, a small domestic drug market emerged, concentrated in the northern city of Aleppo. State involvement in smuggling during this period seems to have been minimal. There is little indication that government officials systematically engaged with trafficking, or promoted it. Rather, the boom in trafficking via Syria seems indicative of a weakening state, increasingly challenged to prevent narcotics production and consumption within its borders, let alone halt cross-border smuggling. This decline in the ability of the Syrian government to exercise dominance over illicit trafficking along its borders would prove catastrophic as instability in Dara'a spiraled into a full-blown insurgency in March of 2011.

From the 1950s through 2010, smuggling through Syria's borderlands followed a fairly consistent pattern. The smugglers were often members

of cross-border communities whose operations were conducted at a local level.³⁶ In turn, these border groups were linked to fixers, the financiers and organizers who maintained business relations with regional and international networks. While Syrian government capacity in its borderlands oscillated throughout this time period, it was able to exercise a strong, though not absolute degree of control over illicit commerce transiting its borders.

Government involvement in smuggling either involved direct facilitation or direct taxation. Syrian facilitation of smuggling, in which state officials acted directly as fixers, was prevalent in smuggling along the Lebanese border in the 1980s, and the border with Iraq in the 1990s. Such large-scale involvement in illicit commerce brought large financial rewards for the government, at times comprising a sizable percentage of Syria's GDP. At lower, and far more prevalent levels, state officials engaged in the taxation of illicit commerce. These institutionalized bribes were fairly low—often 10 to 30 percent of the smuggled goods' value—but they provided an additional income stream for low level government officials, solidifying their allegiance to the government.³⁷

WAR-MAKING AND THE ILLICIT ECONOMY

Syria's civil war is propelled by grievances; however, smuggling enables it. By 2011, decades of trafficking in drugs, weapons, people, and other commodities had given birth to networks of illicit entrepreneurs in Syria, Lebanon, Turkey, Iraq, and Jordan who knew and trusted each other, and who understood how to surreptitiously move goods between countries. The networks became vital conduits of weapons and ammunition for insurgent groups, as well as a means of funding their struggle. Civilians trapped in Syria were no less dependent on smugglers for food, aid, and opportunities to escape the conflict zone. In turn, the networks benefitted greatly from the chaos, both by supplying the demand for weapons and humanitarian aid, and by leveraging the chaos of war to systematically appropriate and loot key sectors of the economy. The increase in smuggling was enabled by a sharp decline in Syrian government power in the borderlands, a trend accelerated by the military success of rebel groups in those areas. The government's loss of these areas is one of their major strategic setbacks of the last three years, one that has strengthened the martial capacity of the insurgents and quite possibly lengthened the duration of the conflict.

The first and most central role that smuggling networks have played in the Syrian civil war has been in delivering the materials necessary for

war-making to insurgent organizations. As protests in Dara'a morphed into armed rebellion in the spring of 2011, insurgents faced an armaments problem. While many of the countries surrounding Syria were awash in weapons, in Syria itself few arms were in civilian hands.³⁸ While some weapons could be purchased or captured from the Syrian military, the demand for weapons far exceeded the supply.³⁹ Sensing an opportunity, the smuggling networks along Syria's border soon became involved.⁴⁰

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At first, these groups operated on a small-scale, almost ad hoc basis and were generally apolitical.⁴¹ Fixers operated regionally, sourcing weapons from both legal weapons sellers and black market entrepreneurs in Lebanon, Iraq, and Turkey.⁴² Insurgent demand for weapons outstripped the available supply, leading to a nearly four-fold increase in prices for AK-47s, sniper rifles, and handguns in Iraq.⁴³ Regional sources were able to provide a host of weapons, including AK-47s, M-16s, shotguns, sniper rifles, rocket-propelled grenade launchers, anti-tank missiles, and Katyusha rockets. Once the weapons were procured, established smuggling networks were contracted to move the weapons across the border itself. The corruptibility of security forces on the border and the

absence of security forces in some areas of the border enabled the movement of weapons. One Lebanese smuggler noted, "There were many ways to smuggle weapons inside Syria, especially at the beginning when areas close to the northern border were free of army presence."⁴⁴

The developing trade in weapons led the government to boost their forces in Syria's border regions and lay minefields. These efforts achieved some degree of success, with one smuggler on the Turkish border saying, "Smuggling has totally stopped ... how are you supposed to bring cows over the border with all the security forces present?"⁴⁵ These successes were both fleeting and counterproductive. Borderland villages long ignored by the central government saw an important aspect of their livelihoods vanish,

turning many against the regime.⁴⁶ The expanding insurgency led to the withdrawal or retreat of much of the Syrian military's force along the Iraqi and Turkish borders. Buttressed by allied militias in Lebanon, the Syrian military exerted some degree of control over smuggling pathways along those borders, though weapons and ammunition continued to be ferried through the northern part of the country.⁴⁷

By 2012, low-level smuggling had given way to highly organized networks able to source and transport large quantities of weapons into Syria. Some of these networks were outgrowths of traditional cross-border groups, such as tribes. One Syrian National Council member claimed that roughly 20 percent of the weapons smuggled to the insurgents came from tribes along the Lebanese, Jordanian, and Turkish borders.⁴⁸ Other networks emerged directly out of the insurgency itself, as representatives of the Free Syrian Army made contact with weapons dealers in Eastern Europe, the Black Sea region, and Libya.⁴⁹ The Libyan connection proved to be particularly important, as militia groups in the weapons-rich country proved eager to help the Syrian insurgents' cause.

Brokers in Libya procured weapons that had either been donated by sympathetic groups or purchased from the well-stocked black market. Once sufficient quantities had been stockpiled, the weapons were shipped by sea or air to Syria's neighbors.⁵⁰ After the Lebanese government seized 60,000 rounds of ammunition being shipped through the northern port of Tripoli, the Libyan groups mainly transported their weaponry via Turkey, and in a small number of cases via Jordan.⁵¹ While the exact amount of weaponry smuggled through this channel is unclear, some smugglers claimed that over 28 metric tons have been delivered by air alone.⁵² Much of the financing for the privately purchased weaponry came from donors in the Gulf, though some insurgent groups raised the necessary funds by taxing or participating in criminal activity.⁵³

Smuggling networks also become a key supplier of food for Syrian civilians trapped in war-torn areas. By 2013, the intensity of the fighting had led to food shortages, as farmers found themselves unable to plant or harvest their crops.⁵⁴ This resulted in widespread hunger in both government and insurgent-controlled areas. It has also created a vibrant black market in food, much of it routed through Turkey and Lebanon.⁵⁵ Ironically, even as wheat was smuggled in, livestock were being smuggled out of the country; fears about the vulnerability of livestock to the combat environment have prompted Syrian herders to seek out buyers in neighboring countries.⁵⁶ Few of the herders are profiting financially, receiving on average just one-third of the legal market value for their herds.⁵⁷

Additionally, smuggling networks became intimately involved in smuggling refugees both out of Syria and out of the refugee camps that ring Syria's borders. As of late 2013, over 2 million Syrians had registered as refugees in neighboring countries. Vast camps of displaced persons have been erected in Jordan and Turkey, while in Lebanon over 800,000 refugees have crowded into the nation's villages and cities. The demand to escape Syria, as well as the refugee camps in Syria's neighboring countries, has driven a boom in human trafficking. The refugees are forced to pay at every point, for example: \$700 to escape from a Jordanian refugee camp, \$3,400 to be smuggled from Egypt across the Mediterranean, and \$5,500 to get all the way to Denmark.⁵⁸

The Syrian civil war has not simply presented an opportunity for goods to be smuggled in or out of the country, it has also created a massive opportunity for entrepreneurs to seize and sell productive assets within Syria. Syria's infrastructure has been systematically looted by insurgents, regime supporters, and criminal gangs. Industrial machinery—in some cases entire factories—has been disassembled and smuggled into Turkey.⁵⁹

While Syria has long been a source country for illicit antiquities, the civil

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war has enabled criminal gangs and insurgent groups to loot museums and dig archeological sites with near impunity.⁶⁰ However, the most profitable of these lootable commodities is oil. Fuel smuggling has reportedly become endemic along the Syrian-Turkish border, with thousands of barrels

smuggled across daily.⁶¹ Turkish government forces engage in frequent encounters with large smuggling groups moving cheap Syrian oil into Turkey.⁶² Fuel smugglers operating between Syria and Turkey earn profits in excess of 100 percent.⁶³ Some have grown powerful enough to maintain militias.⁶⁴ The trade in oil has been driven by the seizure of Syria's oil fields in Deir al-Zor by local tribes and insurgent groups, including the Salafist Al-Nusrah Front.⁶⁵ While much of the oil smuggled out of Syria is unrefined, some enterprising businessmen have employed mobile refineries, enabling them to transform the oil into fuel and other petrol products.⁶⁶

The Al-Nusrah Front has not only established a degree of control over oil production points, but also increasingly sought to tax oil smuggling in the area under its control. In at least one location, the group installed a series of three tents at a border crossing well known for its fuel smuggling activities. The group then demanded 500 Syrian lira for every barrel trans-

ported through that crossing.⁶⁷ Given the high levels of oil smuggling along the border, this tactic is likely highly profitable. It is also reminiscent of the way in which the Syrian government has long engaged with smuggling along its borders.

Finally, the chaos in Syria has been exploited by criminal organizations to set up narcotics production facilities. In 2013, amphetamine labs were uncovered in Homs and in areas along the Turkish border.⁶⁸ While it is unclear which groups are involved in the production and smuggling of the drug, it is likely that both the Syrian regime and at least some of the rebel organizations are among the financial beneficiaries. The patchwork territorial control along traditional smuggling routes likely forces traffickers to pay tolls or bribes to both sides. One apparent benefit for the traffickers is that the dire economic straits of Syria's law enforcement and military personnel have apparently made bribery, and thus smuggling, far easier.⁶⁹ There is less information on how the conflict has impacted the smuggling of heroin and hashish, though the long-standing transport of both types of drugs through Syria heightens the likelihood that such a trade is ongoing.

Over the last three years, the civil war has broken down and reordered long-standing economic relationships in Syria. Smuggling networks that traditionally were linked to, and in some cases controlled by, the Syrian government have now emerged
 as powerful autonomous actors. The demands of the war economy have created a whole new set of opportunities for these groups, and forced them to source weapons from and thus forge connections with illicit entrepreneurs in North Africa and Europe. Criminal groups, government forces, and the insurgents are also exploiting
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the conflict to their financial benefit, through systematic looting, artifact theft, and the seizure of Syria's oil fields. Finally, some insurgent groups have begun to generate funding through taxes levied on the illicit economy, appropriating a tactic long used by the Syrian government.

SMUGGLING NETWORKS AND THE EVOLUTION OF THE CIVIL WAR

The increasing scope of Syria's smuggling networks has both an immediate and long-term impact on the trajectory of the civil war. New opportunities for financing and enrichment now exist for smuggling networks and

the insurgents, while the government's financial options seem increasingly constrained. By taxing the smuggling networks, Syrian insurgent groups are becoming progressively more financially self-sufficient. Self-sufficiency will complicate efforts of international actors to utilize financial aid as a means of pressure and steering insurgent groups. In the long term, the growing autonomy of the smuggling networks creates spoilers who have a stake in the war economy, and a reason to pre-empt the emergence of a strong, post-conflict Syrian state. Their power may well complicate the inevitable post-conflict transition.

For much of the civil war, Syrian insurgent groups have largely been financed by donations from friendly governments, the Syrian diaspora, and private citizens in the Middle East. The growing power of extreme Salafist groups like the Al-Nusrah Front has started to imperil both the sources of external funding and the mechanism through which it can be transferred to the insurgent groups. In turn, pressure on insurgent groups, and especially Salafist insurgent groups, to self-fund their conflict is increasing. Syria's major commodity, oil, represents one potential funding source, with most of the eastern oil fields currently in local tribal and rebel hands. However, insurgents are reliant on smuggling networks to both move the oil and connect with buyers outside of Syria. Apart from oil, Syria has a dearth of lootable high-value commodities—those that are “easily appropriated by individuals or small groups of unskilled workers.”⁷⁰ Efforts to corral, coerce, and tax smugglers represents one possible means of generating funding. Drugs, either Captagon produced in laboratories or opiates grown in the rural areas of the country, may well offer another. Self-financing makes insurgent groups far less dependent on international sponsorship, decreasing the influence that donor nations have on them. This in turn may complicate efforts to cajole the fractious rebels to engage in peace negotiations, or honor a peace accord.

The Syrian government also faces a funding conundrum. The major pillars of the economy have now either disappeared, as with tourism, been disrupted, as with agriculture and industry, or been seized by the rebels, as with oil. The nation's currency reserves have dwindled from \$18 billion to \$5 billion, while the Syrian lira has collapsed in value.⁷¹ This has impacted

the government's ability to procure material for war and pay soldiers' salaries. There is no indication that the Syrian government has reengaged with smuggling networks at a systematic level, though some reports do indicate that low-level soldiers and officials have become increasingly susceptible to bribery.⁷² This trend is likely to accelerate as the government's finances dwindle and its ability to regularly pay its military dissipates.

Eventually, Syria's civil war will end. The increasing power of smuggling networks promises to complicate the transition to peace. Over the last three years, the networks have increased their connections to a range of political actors, and have expanded the scope of their activities. In other post-conflict states, smuggling networks have endured after the conflict, leveraging their connections and wealth to shape the emergent political and regulatory environment to their benefit.⁷³ The dearth of state capacity and justice institutions during the transition period between war and peace often allows the networks to operate and expand with little fear of putative sanction.⁷⁴ Even when international actors intervene directly in a post-conflict zone—such as with peacekeepers—there is rarely a focus on spotting and impeding smuggling groups. However, the continued operations of smuggling groups often pose serious challenges to the emerging order by distorting the economy, exercising undue sway over the political process, and increasing corruption.⁷⁵ Often, the net result is the disintegration of the citizenry's confidence in the post-conflict state. These challenges are all too salient in Syria. The smuggling networks that have exploited the conflict to increase their power are unlikely to easily surrender it. Their relationship with the post-conflict government of Syria is likely to be far different than the subservient relationship that had predominated throughout the nation's history.

Syria's smuggling networks present a complex challenge to the international community. In the near term it is operationally difficult to eliminate the groups, given their ability to avoid arrest and interdiction by seeking refuge in the uncontrolled space along Syria's borders. It is also politically unpalatable for many of the country's neighbors, who have supported the insurgent groups and generally turned a blind eye to groups smuggling weapons to them. However, the international community should begin planning now for how to mitigate the challenge of organized crime in post-conflict Syria. The first step towards mitigation is a comprehensive analysis of smuggling networks in Syria, an understanding of how they are connected to other power structures—tribes, insurgents, government security bureaus—and the support they enjoy in the local context. Working off this analysis, Syria's neighbors and applicable international actors should

actively seek to incorporate counter-smuggling programming into their activities. This is especially salient for programmatic activities of any future peacekeeping force for the country. Finally, there should be a recognition among countries supplying arms to Syrian rebels that such official pipelines have in the past been expropriated by criminal groups after the conflict ends.⁷⁶ Explicit efforts should be made to prevent this from occurring in Syria.

Smuggling networks have a long standing history along Syria's borders, and a complicated relationship with the government. Kept in a subservient place throughout the history of the modern state of Syria, over the last three years these groups have slipped from government control. The collapse of the Syrian economy, staggering needs of refugees, and the withdrawal of the military from borderlands have driven an expansion in illicit cross-border trade in everything from wheat and oil to antiquities. While the trade in arms and ammunition enables the civil war, the development of these robust, illicit networks that may well lay the groundwork for post-conflict instability. As one observer explained, "Smuggling and criminality has always been an issue there, but now for the first time the smugglers and criminals are in a position to exert real control on both sides of the border."⁷⁷ It is likely that these conflict entrepreneurs will complicate efforts to establish a strong, post-conflict Syrian government. International actors should attempt to mitigate these potential spoilers, while striving more broadly to bring peace to Syria. *f*

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