

Organised Crime and Terrorism: A Strife 4-Part Series

The entries forming this series are all reprinted, in a lightly edited form, from the Strife blog (at strifeblog.org) where they were published in February 2016. All web references were last accessed on 27 February 2017, unless otherwise stated.

Part I: Godfathers and Bombs: Organised Crime and Terrorist Tactics

Andrea Varsori, Guest Editor, *Strife*

The general understanding of how criminal organisations work implies that the leaders of those groups are mostly discreet, business-minded folks.¹ After all, criminal organisations have one, big task that influences their entire agenda: they want to make money. They are criminal because they use illicit means, like coercion or bribes, or because they deal in illegal goods, or both. According to this view, most of the time profit is their major objective. Rivalries and fights may start when there are misgivings on who gains the most from a deal, or when rivals start to use coercive means to gain control of greater shares of the market. Still, according to this view, the most reasonable Dons know that indiscriminate violence is a tool to be used only in very peculiar occasions. Normally, it is at best useless, or at worst outright dangerous.

Nonetheless, violence is fundamental for mafias and gangs in most cases. Criminal organisations use it to extort money from legitimate firms; to safeguard the secrecy of important information; to punish those who do not fall in line. They can also sell violence, to create 'protection rings'² or to assert monopolies.

¹ The outmost example of this perspective is the economic analysis of organized crime, whereas the criminal organisation is analysed as a particular type of firm. See Gianluca Fiorentini & Sam Peltzman (eds.), *The Economics of Organized Crime* (Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 87-108. A view of criminal organisations as risk-averse groups that prefer to hide or corrupt rather than fight is also used in political science. See Benjamin Lessing, 'Logics of Violence in Criminal War', in *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 59, No. 8 (2015), p. 1497.

² Diego Gambetta, *The Sicilian Mafia: the Business of Private Protection* (Harvard University Press, 1993).

Most importantly, they can play a leading role in limiting potential violence: that is, they structure a widespread, individual, anomic violence into something more organised, more ready to exploit economies of scale, and definitely more dangerous. At their best, mafias can mimic the state or rule where the latter does not arrive, establishing their own practices and rituals. Thus, an efficient criminal group learns to administer violence to impose a set of rules: it sets itself as judge, jury, and executioner; it masters violence, so that only the threat of action is enough to quell any opposition.

To the wise godfather, then, terrorism is arguably the nemesis. In its most brutal, spectacular form, which nowadays has taken the form of the threat of Daesh, it is a double-edged knife for a criminal organisation. This knife, however, has the sharper edge facing its own user. A criminal group stands to lose from the use of terrorist tactics: terrorism forces the state to focus all attention on the authors, as it constitutes the ultimate danger to a state's authority and legitimacy. Also, indiscriminate violence often generates a huge backlash from the civil society: thus, criminal organisations, which thrive and prosper in an underworld of secrecy and corruption, may be crushed by the reaction to a terrorist event.

This does not mean that terror and crime can never be partners. More often than not, terrorist organisations adopt ways and techniques from the criminal world. The most obvious application is for financing:³ terrorist

³ For the broader issue of the financing of terrorist organizations, see Maya Ehrmann (ed.), 'Financing Terror: A Strife 4-part Series', in *Strife Journal*, Issue 5 (May/June 2015), pp. 29-39.

groups have long been dealing in extortion and blackmail (as for the IRA in Northern Ireland)⁴, or in illicit trade (as for the FARC in Colombia,⁵ or the Taliban in Afghanistan)⁶, in order to get the money to further their political activities. Seeing it happen the other way around, however, is quite rarer.

This series will focus on this latter type of the crime/terror nexus. Why should a criminal organisation use dangerous terrorist tactics? Which kind of objective is it pursuing? Is this an entirely new phenomenon? We will deal with these questions all along the three parts of our Series. First, Martin Stein will explore the bombings of 1992-93 in Italy and their role in the struggle between the Sicilian Mafia and the Italian State; then, the Bombay bombings of March 1993 will be covered, and how one of the most famous Indian dons, Dawood Ibrahim, was part of the plot to hit India; finally, Joe Atkins will review the cases of mass killings and 'disappearances' in Mexico, exploring how terror is widely used as a tool to assert control on a frightened population. The varied scope of these articles will highlight different aspects of the link between criminal organisations and the use of terror. In Italy, bombings were part of a precise strategy to intimidate the Italian state; in India, the attacks were motivated by religious reasons and by Ibrahim's intent to appear still as the protector of Bombay Muslims; in Mexico, terror seems to constitute a 'normal' part of 'cartel justice', thus delivering worrying parallels between 'narco-warriors' and fundamentalists.

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Part II: Letters from Dubai: 'D-Company' and the '93 Mumbai terror attacks

Andrea Varsori, Guest Editor, *Strife*

Rags-to-riches criminal overlords do not normally lack ambition; yet, most of them do not aim to claim the title of 'Protectors of the

⁴ J. Burns, 'Dealing in the Business of Fear', in *Financial Times* (7 January 1992), p. 10.

⁵ Peter Chalk, *The Latin American Drug Trade* (Rand Corp., 2011), pp. 15-18.

⁶ Antonio Giustozzi (ed.), *Decoding the New Taliban: Insights from the Afghan Field* (Hurst Publishers, 2009), pp. 7-22, 150.

Faith'. Their daily worries are mostly concerned with assuring that their network of businesses runs smoothly, that officials are sufficiently bribed or intimidated, and that all their underlings actually remain loyal. However, even the most business-minded criminal bosses can develop a sense of allegiance to their own community, be it ethnic or religious. In times of sectarian violence, these overlords may decide to act to defend their people. This decision may be completely at odds with the logic of the criminal enterprise: it entails a potential backlash from the authorities and the larger public. During sectarian conflicts, however, their reputation is at stake: inaction may spark doubts about a boss' ability to project his own power, thus encouraging rivals to try to take over his networks. The boss' community may also feel betrayed, and may begin to sabotage the boss' illicit trade and favour someone else. There is no simple way to solve this problem.

Dawood Ibrahim probably never had this kind of thoughts before December 1992. At that time, Ibrahim was one of the most powerful citizens of Mumbai, although he was no longer a resident. He was born in the southern part of the city in 1955, the eldest son in a low-income family of ten. After dropping out of school, he gradually resorted to extortions and robbing, eventually ending up smuggling goods in local markets. The major boost to his career arrived while in jail: there, in fact, he managed to earn the trust of Haji Mastan and Yusuf Patel, two of the most important smugglers of the city.⁷ Having understood Dawood's ambition, they entrusted him with their business before retiring. By the time Dawood was free again, he had thus gained access to Mastan's and Patel's resources. Starting from there, he used both ruthless violence and cunning to profit from the weaknesses of the most important gang in Mumbai, led by Pathans from Afghanistan. By 1982, he had managed to kill the new leader of this gang; however, the Mumbai police was often able to prove his complicity in most of his gang's crimes, and he was visiting prison quite often. On 4 May 1984, he jumped bail and fled to Dubai.⁸

⁷ S. Hussain Zaidi, *Black Friday: The True Story of the Bombay Bomb Blasts* (Penguin Books, 2002), pp. 21-23.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

In Dubai, then a major haven for smugglers, he managed to build a massive network of illegal and legal businesses. This network included both Muslims and Hindus, as it had often been the case in earlier criminal gangs of Mumbai. What became known as 'D-Company' -- from the first letter of Dawood -- smuggled in gold, silver, electronic goods, and textiles; it extorted protection from businessmen and occasionally solved disputes between them.⁹ In Dubai, Ibrahim built for himself a luxurious mansion, where he organised lavish parties, inviting Mumbai's most famous celebrities, cricketers, and politicians. His story was that of a boy from Dongri who had successfully taken control of entire criminal enterprises and who had silenced rival Hindu dons: in Mumbai, Muslims in the slums started to see him as an empowering model, as a vindicator of the Islamic minority. He could not return to his own city, however, as he knew that the police was waiting for him. This constraint became a problem for him and his associates when the Mumbai riots began in December 1992.

It all started in Ayodhya, 1,460km northeast of Mumbai. In this region, Hindu mythology claimed that Ram, one of the avatars of Vishnu, was born; a temple stood on the exact place of Ram's birth. In 1523, Mahmud of Ghazni, commander of an army of Muslim invaders from Central Asia, conquered the area and destroyed the temple of Ram. In its place, he built the Babri Masjid, or Babur's Mosque, in honour of the first Moghul Emperor. The memory of these events contributed to embittered relations between Hindus and Muslims in the area. In the 1980s, the Hindu Sangh Parivar (HSP), an umbrella organisation including several Hindu nationalist groups, aimed to revive the dispute. The members of its various branches claimed that the mosque had to be closed and destroyed, in order to build a new, bigger temple to Ram. The victory of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), itself a part of HSP, at the local state elections in 1991 decided the fate of the mosque. One year later, the government transferred the property of the land on which the Masjid stood to a Hindu organisation charged with constructing a new temple; volunteers destroyed all buildings

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 26-27.

surrounding the mosque.¹⁰ On 6 December 1992, a crowd of 150,000 Hindu nationalist militants summoned by the main leaders managed to overcome a weak police presence and razed to the ground the Babri Masjid.¹¹

This was an insult for many Indian Muslims. The destruction of the mosque in Ayodhya was followed by six days of intense riots. In Mumbai, Muslim mobs started targeting temples; the police, in a desperate attempt to control the violence, fired on looters, while Hindus retaliated on mosques.¹² This cycle of riots in Mumbai left 227 dead: around two-thirds of the victims were Muslims, while only 15% of the whole city population at that time was Islamic.¹³ In January 1993, a new sequence of riots occurred: this time, the troubles lasted for ten days, and caused 557 dead and more than 2,000 injured.¹⁴ As in the December riots, the Islamic population had been disproportionately hit by the violence.

As the riots went on, Dawood Ibrahim kept receiving discomfoting news. Furious rioters were explicitly targeting Muslim men and women; after days of communal violence, angry mobs began to protest against him, shouting 'Dawood to death'.¹⁵ They felt betrayed: he seemed distant, powerless, and unable to protect them. This belief could become rapidly damaging to Dawood's reputation and business. As the riots abated, sectarian tension did not decrease: by the end of January 1993, Dawood had finally decided to exact revenge for the riots.

He ultimately did not need to do much. He helped to hold meetings in Dubai with powerful Mumbai Muslim criminals, along with representatives of the 'concerned Muslims' from the Arab world. He permitted weapons and explosives to be smuggled in India through the routes he controlled. Last, but not least, he provided the connection with the Pakistani

¹⁰ John McLeod, *The History of India* (Greenwood Publishing, 2015), p. 194.

¹¹ Burton Stein & David Arnold, *A History of India* (John Wiley & Sons, 2010), pp. 411-412.

¹² Dileep Padgaonkar (ed.), *When Bombay Burned* (UBS Publishers, 1993), pp. ix-xi.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. XVI.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 42-100.

¹⁵ Zaidi, *Black Friday*, p. 21.

secret services, the Inter Service Intelligence (ISI).

The plan to hit Mumbai proceeded. On the afternoon of Friday, 12 March 1993, a group of affiliates of Dawood's smuggling networks struck the city with the widest and most complex set of bombing ever seen in a single city and on a single day. Ten explosions rocked the city between 1.28pm and 3.35pm. The bombs targeted different core points, from the Mumbai Stock Exchange, to the Katha Bazaar, the city's largest wholesale market for grain and spice, and then to the Plaza Cinema, one of the symbols of the city's burgeoning movie industry. At the end of the day, 257 persons were dead and 713 more were injured.¹⁶

Naturally, one of the targets was also the headquarters of the Hindu nationalist Shiv Sena party, a part of the HSP. The Shiv Sena had a prominent role in advocating the destruction of the Babri Masjid and in fostering anti-Muslim propaganda. A bomb exploded near an oil pump, on the side of the main building: four people died, no members of the Shiv Sena were among them. Nonetheless, the location of the bomb made very clear what was the target and the sectarian allegiance of those who had placed it. Communal riots could have been the first logical consequence.

Fortunately, police forces managed to avert this potential outcome. Moreover, the brutality and breadth of the attacks had shocked most Mumbai citizens into terror, rather than rage. As soon as the smoke from the explosions had settled, however, the police started connecting the dots. It was apparent from the beginning that this act of terrorism required a complex organization and uncommon skills. On 15 March, the *Times of India* claimed that 'hi-tech terrorism' had arrived in India.¹⁷ At that time, this type of terrorism had several harbingers; apart from the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, most of them were Islamic fundamentalist organizations.

Right from the beginning, however, Dawood's fame turned against him: his name was the first

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 1-17.

¹⁷ 'High-tech Terrorism', in *The Times of India* (March 15, 1993).

to appear in the theories that tried to explain the attacks.¹⁸ The lack of training and discipline on the part of the terrorists also helped the police tremendously. During the bombings, in fact, some of them were reaching by van the buildings that hosted the city and the Maharashtra state administration, with the intent of murdering every BJP member they could find. As they passed near one of the target locations, however, a bomb exploded, and they abruptly decided to abort the mission.¹⁹ Therefore, they left their van behind, filled with weapons and explosives. When the police found the vehicle, it became a decisive lead for the investigators, as the van's owner was a relative of Tiger Memon.

As the Mumbai police officers soon discovered, Memon was the centrepiece of the bombing plot. The son of a part-time worker, second among six, he grew up in a decaying, crowded building in Pydhonie - a mostly Muslim zone of South Mumbai. After a failed attempt as a bank cashier, he started his criminal career as a chauffeur for local smugglers. He was quickly noticed for his recklessness and his knowledge of the city; this earned him an invitation to Dubai, where he became a gold carrier. In a few years, he took charge of all smuggling operations from Mumbai; a sumptuous wedding in 1985 and the opening of an office in the city's financial quarters definitively confirmed his rise.²⁰

Tiger Memon had been the true organiser and motivator behind the attacks. He supported from the beginning Dawood's decision to retaliate for the anti-Muslim riots. He was in charge of smuggling the weapons and he knew exactly how they could best reach Mumbai: by arriving on the coast, 250km south of the city.²¹ He profited from the same techniques, connections, and intelligence that he used when transporting gold and electronic goods. He also selected the people that could deliver the bombs: they were all members of his network. After choosing his affiliates, he organised their

¹⁸ Hypotheses about his involvement started to appear on that same Friday and right afterwards. Zaidi, *Black Friday*, p. 104; Padgaonkar, *When Bombay Burned*, p. 169.

¹⁹ Zaidi, *Black Friday*, p. 94.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 31-36.

²¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 40-52.

military training in Pakistan; he visited the training camp for some days, according to one of the participants.²² Most importantly, after giving his men a final rousing speech, the evening before the attacks, he left on a 4am flight to Dubai to join his large family.²³

Later judiciary proceedings confirmed Tiger Memon's role. The final judgement on the bombings arrived on 21 March 2013, with a sentence by the Supreme Court of India, which upheld prison sentences for most of the accused. Dawood Ibrahim and Tiger Memon, however, have not yet faced trial: they have gone into hiding, possibly in Pakistan; Dawood's new house has been traced to Karachi as late as 2006.²⁴ Still, their departure from Dubai and the greater attention on the part of the authorities have taken their toll on Ibrahim's and Memon's criminal network. The decision to help to stage the attacks has divided the 'D-Company' along religious lines: in 1996, Chhota Rajan, one of Dawood's main subordinates, formed his own gang in retaliation for the 1993 bombings. Rajan was Hindu, as most of his own affiliates: the schism caused a flare-up of gang-related homicides in Mumbai, with more than a hundred people dead.²⁵

Dawood's decision to act, then, caused permanent damages to his criminal syndicate. Sectarian division has certainly harmed 'D-Company's' activity after infighting broke out in the late 1990s. The public nature of the 1993 terrorist attack, moreover, provided too much unwanted attention for a criminal organisation. Dawood's choice can be explained by paying attention to the dual nature of his role as a 'Don': he had been both the man in charge for a criminal firm's success and the potential avenger of the Muslim minorities of Mumbai.

²² Ibid., pp. 61-62.

²³ Ibid., p. 82.

²⁴ Atir Khan, 'Tiger Memon Wanted to Bomb Plane at Sahar Airport to Avenge Mumbai Riots, Says 1993 Bomb Blasts Accused', in *India Today* (1 August 2015), online at <http://indiatoday.intoday.in/story/tiger-memon-wanted-to-bomb-plane-at-sahar-airport-to-avenge-mumbai-riots/1/455519.html>.

²⁵ Praveen Swami, 'Mumbai's Mafia Wars', in *Frontline*, Vol. 16 (March-April 1999), online at <http://www.frontline.in/static/html/fl1607/16070420.htm>.

He decided to act to fulfil the latter role, instead of the former. The fact that he is not serving a prison sentence in India shows that he had some guarantees on his own personal safety. In this perspective, a crisis of his own criminal network may have seemed as a reasonable price to pay.

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Part III: Negotiating with Bombs. The Sicilian Mafia's attempts at intimidating the Italian State

Martin Stein

In the night between 26 and 27 May 1993, a wide deflagration struck Florence, seemingly from its medieval centre. A car bomb, loaded with 277kg of explosives, had detonated in via dei Georgofili, a narrow road behind the world-known Uffizi art gallery. The bomb destroyed the *Torre dei Pulci*, a tower built during the Renaissance. There were five victims: in the *Torre*, in fact, Angela Fiume (36 years old), the warden, lived with his husband, Fabrizio Nencioni (39), and their two daughters, Nadia (9) and Caterina (2 months). The bomb also, in addition, caused a fire that killed Dario Capolicchio (22), a college student. There were 48 injured alongside heavy damages to the nearby Uffizi building. Around 25% of the paintings in the area were damaged, some of them beyond any possibility of repair.²⁶

Three other bombings occurred exactly two months after the Florence attack. Two car bombs detonated in Rome, in front of two different churches (San Giorgio al Velabro and San Giovanni in Laterano), injuring 22 people but with no casualties. A third car bomb was placed in Milan, Italy's financial centre. The blast damaged the Contemporary Art Pavillion and killed a traffic inspector, three firefighters and a Moroccan migrant. In Italy, the shock from the incidents was immediate. Most of the population were unprepared, as Italians believed that terrorism had ended in the 'Seventies', otherwise known as the 'Lead

²⁶ Frances D'Emilio, 'Car Bomb Blast Damages Florence's Uffizi Gallery; Explosion Kills 5; Glass Shields Save Most Paintings', in *Washington Post* (May 28, 1993), p. A31.

Years'.²⁷

Bloodshed, however, was not uncommon in those years. In 1992, three events stood out for importance: this time, they all happened in Sicily. On 12 March, the passenger of a passing motorbike shot the Christian Democrat politician Salvo Lima in Palermo. On 23 May, a bomb exploded under the official car of Judge Giovanni Falcone, one of the recent protagonists of the struggle against the Sicilian Mafia. The explosive device killed Falcone, his wife and his three police-officer escort. Finally, on 19 July, a car bomb placed under the house of Judge Paolo Borsellino, the other protagonist of the recent Mafia prosecutions. The blast killed the Judge and five police servicemen.

These assassinations could have been the ultimate setback for the struggle against the Mafia. It had taken decades, for Italy at large and for the Sicilian society in particular, to acknowledge openly even the existence of this criminal organisation.²⁸ Its workings and its activities were, for most of the Cold War period, secret and unnoticeable. *Mafiosi* composed local disputes, imposed their protection racket, and collected their own taxation (the *pizzo*).²⁹ Most importantly, local Families controlled a sizeable portion of votes. This meant that they were able to strike a deal with local politicians, mostly from the Christian Democrat party, to exchange electoral success for state inaction and distribution of public money.³⁰ Thus, *Mafiosi* and their political allies were often in charge of providing key public services, including hospitals and transportation. Then, even if Mafia violence sometimes exploded in savage wars for internal predominance, until the 1980s, its overarching infiltration of the local authority went largely unnoticed.

²⁷ Clare Longrigg, *Boss of Bosses. A Journey into the Heart of the Sicilian Mafia* (Thomas Dunne Books, 2009), pp. 120-121.

²⁸ Alexander Stille, 'Their Thing', in *The American Scholar*, Vol. 64, No. 2 (Spring, 1995), p. 292.

²⁹ Diego Gambetta, *The Sicilian Mafia: The Business of Private Protection* (Harvard University Press, 1993).

³⁰ Louise I. Shelley, 'Mafia and the Italian State: The Historical Roots of the Current Crisis', in *Sociological Forum*, Vol. 9, No. 4 (Dec., 1994), pp. 668-669.

This began to change in the 1970s. The Mafia Families had suffered a backlash from the State in the previous decade, due to a massacre occurred during the first Mafia war. The 'Lead Years', instead, brought a new opportunity: the heroin trade. Some *Mafiosi* had already been engaged in smuggling,³¹ but, after the start of the 'War on Drugs', prominent bosses turned their organisation to trafficking on a larger scale, also by exploiting their connections with the American *Cosa Nostra*. Important leaders like Stefano Bontate and Tano Badalamenti started making estimated millions of dollars. In the meantime, however, they ignored a dangerous menace to their domination. From the town of Corleone, near Palermo, a group of prominent killers rose up. Their first leader was Luciano Leggio, who then transmitted his power to two main associates, Totò Riina and Bernardo Provenzano. The *Corleonesi*, as they were known, started encroaching on the whole organisation, by investing money in making allies and acquiring loyalties, instead of buying luxury goods. Even if Bontate and Badalamenti were much richer, the *Corleonesi* rapidly became militarily more powerful. By 1977, they managed to expel Badalamenti from the Commission, the general ruling organ of the Mafia. In 1981, they started the second Mafia war, by directly killing Badalamenti and Bontate.³²

In the following three years, the *Corleonesi* successfully achieved the Mafia equivalent of a *coup d'état*. They showed that military power and support from the Families was more important than wealth and drug trade connections. They stepped up the number of killings, eventually murdering more than 200 affiliates to the rival families. They effectively turned a war into a slaughter, as their enemies were too astonished by the series of attacks to react in any manner. The *Corleonesi* also showed a never before seen eagerness to inflict harm and with that guiding mentality they irredeemably damaged the old Mafia tenets. *Mafiosi* from Corleone spared no

³¹ Antonino Calderone, a 'repented' member of the Mafia, writes in his memoirs of the transformation from smuggling cigarettes to dealing heroin. In Pino Arlacchi, *Men of Dishonor: Inside the Sicilian Mafia* (Morrow Pub., 1995).

³² John Dickie, *Cosa Nostra: A History of the Sicilian Mafia* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), pp. 284-289.

relative, when they carried out their assassinations. In one case, a 'man of honour' managed to escape from an assassination attempt, and they retaliated by killing 35 of his relatives.

By the end of 1983, Totò Riina, then the leader of the Corleone group, had taken over the whole organisation. The Mafia came under the dominion of this aggressive and harsh élite, which spelled its subsequent crisis. Riina, in fact, did not stop with the utter defeat of the rival Families. Soon, he started ordering killings based on suspects only, and he quickly ended up eliminating his own allies and associates. By those years, however, a new group of judges had united in Palermo, including judges Falcone and Borsellino.³³ The climate of fear established by the *Corleonesi* ultimately convinced some of the most desperate *Mafiosi* to surrender to the State, exchanging insider information for a reduced sentence. These figures were the *pentiti*, 'repented ones'. In September 1984, Tommaso Buscetta decided to turn into one of them. This decision was critical, as he became the highest-ranked *Mafioso* collaborating with justice.³⁴

Buscetta's witnessing, along with the contribution from other *pentiti*, helped the team of Judges to set a 'maxi-trial' against 474 *Mafiosi* in February 1986. This trial ended on 31 January 1992 with a judgement by the Court of Cassation. The Court upheld the sentences and, for the first time, declared the Mafia to be a single organisation, with the Commission responsible for its murders. Riina used to scorn the Italian state, as it did not support those who tried to fight organised crime.³⁵ With the maxi-trial final sentence, however, the authorities had inflicted a significant blow on his affiliates. He answered in the way that he knew best: by murder.

Riina and some of his followers believed that the Italian State would ultimately back down. They felt betrayed by the Christian Democrat party, their old partner for embezzlement and corruption operations. They even felt betrayed

by the Catholic Church, which had begun to denounce in earnest the Mafia's violence. They were convinced that they could coerce the Christian Democrats and the Church into submission and force them to ignore the Mafia, as it happened before. This, however, was not possible anymore. The *Corleonesi* succeeded in killing Falcone and Borsellino and in enacting the bombings in Florence, Milan, and Rome. However, the very political system that had protected them was tumbling down. The collapse of the Soviet Union spelled the end of the Communist Party; a wave of corruption scandals effectively dissolved the Christian Democracy and the Socialists. In this atmosphere of unforeseen political transformation, the tide turned against the Mafia. The years of the car bombs were the years when fundamental legal measures were approved. Among them, *pentiti* started to enjoy a witness protection scheme, a new anti-Mafia authority was established, the police were given the option to infiltrate the organisation, and tougher prison conditions were made available for high-ranking *Mafiosi*.³⁶

By the mid-1990s, the bombing campaign had largely receded. Far from intimidating the Italian state, terrorist tactics had backfired tremendously. As the Italian political system changed, the Sicilian Mafia had decided to act violently in the moment when their erstwhile protectors were disappearing. The whole organisation seemed hijacked by its *Corleonesi* core. This exercised an immense pressure on the Mafia, and many of its affiliates turned to cooperating with the state. The syndicate had lost its ancient rules and most importantly, its lost focus of its main reason to exist, - making money. After the arrest of Riina, in 1994, Bernardo Provenzano became the new 'boss of bosses' and, as he was a more cautious man, he patiently tried to regain control of the Sicilian territory. After its imprisonment, in 2006, Matteo Messina Denaro, a relatively young leader, has probably decided that preserving the protection racket and getting a share of the drug trade was more than enough. Without car bombs and targeted killings, the Mafia transformed into a wider, untraceable organisation, whose laundered money has

³³ Ibid., pp. 298-9.

³⁴ He, in fact, was one of the founders of the Commission, back in 1957. Ibid., p. 236.

³⁵ Ibid., p. 297.

³⁶ Ibid., p. 315.

reached all of Italy and the wealthiest parts of the European continent.

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Part IV: Setting Some Examples: Violence as Communication in Mexico's Cartel War

Joe Atkins

Too often, some conflicts attract attention only when something abnormally brutal happens. This occurred in Nigeria, when the terrorist group Boko Haram kidnapped 276 girls on 14 April 2014, shocking international audiences. This happened also, some months later, in Mexico. There, in the state of Guerrero, 43 students were kidnapped on 20 September 2014. Two weeks later, local police forces found a mass grave, with the charred and tortured bodies of 28 of them. Mexico's Attorney General claimed that the former mayor of the town of Iguala ordered the massacre, in cooperation with the local cartel, Guerreros Unidos. A year after the fact, however, an international committee, appointed by the Inter-American Commission for Human Rights, expressed serious concerns regarding the Attorney General's account of the event.³⁷ This sparked doubts about the reliability of this version, which affirms that members of the Guerreros Unidos killed the students, took them to a dump, and burned their bodies. Reports about the federal police's monitoring activity of the students casted a shadow on this episode of brutality.³⁸

The massacre of the 43 students of Guerrero was a particularly notorious case, even for crime-ridden Mexico. It attracted international attention, constituting a major embarrassment for President Enrique Peña Nieto's government. Outside observers, however, face

³⁷ Paulina Villegas, 'Experts Reject Official Account of How 43 Mexican Students Were Killed', in *New York Times* (6 September 2015), online at <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/09/07/world/experts-reject-official-account-of-how-43-mexican-students-vanished.html>.

³⁸ Ed Vulliamy, 'One Year Ago, 43 Mexican Students were Killed. Still, There are no Answers for Their Family', in *The Guardian* (20 September 2015), online at <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/sep/20/mexico-43-killed-students->.

a daunting task when they try to make sense of Mexico's highly intense violence, made even more difficult given the complexity of the conflict itself. It is no surprise that some commentators simply dismiss violence as devoid of any rational meaning. Actually, the intricate character of the conflict is a problem also for cartels and state authorities themselves. Blurred allegiances and conflicting attributions of blame make communication very difficult. In this context, violence has become a tool to convey information and propaganda.

The Mexico drug war has been going on since 2006 and has caused among 30 and 60 per cent of the 120.000 homicides that occurred in the country between 2006 and 2013.³⁹ During the last ten years, eight cartels have been competing with each other for the control of the trade routes for cocaine, marijuana and methamphetamine. Simultaneously, they have confronted the Mexican state, by corrupting or intimidating police and judiciary officials, by scaring local mayors, and by influencing elections. To add confusion to this already complex situation, allegiances and power relations have been very fluid. Local gangs, in fact, often switch loyalty, while some cartels have been effectively defeated, only to have rivals and offshoots rising in their place. Moreover, several anti-crime forces have been operating, including the Mexican Army and Navy, with various degrees of effectiveness and collusion. Local citizens, finally, have conjured up their own vigilante forces, which have often demonstrated as much brutality as the drug trafficking organisations.⁴⁰

In this complicated context, it is often difficult to know who is ruling in a particular area. Thus, cartels and gangs have often decided to make their presence felt by way of cruelty and terror. This already happened during the outburst of drug-related violence in the 1990s, when beheadings became a frequent method to send messages to rival cartels. The new era of 'high-

³⁹ Brianna Lee & Danielle Renwick, 'Mexico's Drug War', in *Council for Foreign Relations* (5 March 2014), online at <http://www.cfr.org/mexico/mexicos-drug-war/p13689>. (last visited 2 June 2017).

⁴⁰ George W. Grayson, *Threat Posed by Mounting Vigilantism in Mexico* (U.S. Army War College/ Strategic Studies Institute, 2011).

intensity crime', however, has renewed and expanded this function of violence.

Now, messages conveyed by violence reach multiple audiences. Politicians are the recipients, as well as police officers, journalists, the armed forces, and the public at large.⁴¹ Violence has become a major communication tool, and its effect is different depending on the receiver. Cartels target members of particular categories to push them to cooperate or to make them neutral; violence, however, hits common citizens as well, sowing confusion among them and paralysing any attempt to revert the drug traffickers' grip on society. Moreover, violence has become so widespread that it is actually possible to identify different types of violence, each of which conveys a particular message from drug trafficking organisations.

Mass killings are one of these types. If we look deeper into Mexico's most dangerous states we can find other massacres like the one in Iguala. In most of them, survivor reports, CCTV videos, or victims' reports pointed out at the Los Zetas cartel, formed by ex-members of Mexico's Special Forces. In 2010, in San Fernando, Tamaulipas state, Los Zetas affiliates killed 72 immigrants from Central and South America, after their refusal to join the cartel or pay extra fees to enter the United States.⁴² In 2011, in the same area, Zetas hijacked several passenger buses, raping the women and forcing the able-bodied men to fight among themselves, awarding the survivors with cartel membership;⁴³ in total, 193 people died. Only some months later, in Monterrey, Nuevo León state, a Los Zetas commando fired indiscriminately on customers in a casino, and then started a fire that destroyed the building,

⁴¹ Howard. Campbell, 'Narco-Propaganda in the Mexican "Drug War". An Anthropological Perspective', in *Latin American Perspectives*, Vol. 41, No. 2 (March 2014), p. 64.

⁴² Randal C. Archibold, 'Victims of Massacre in Mexico Said to be Migrants', in *New York Times* (25 August 2010), online at <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/08/26/world/americas/26mexico.html>.

⁴³ Adam Clark Estes, 'Mexico's Tales of Bus Passengers Forced to Fight to Death', in *The Wire* (14 June 2011), online at <http://www.thewire.com/global/2011/06/gladiator-death-fights-mexico-drug-war/38812>.

killing 52 people in total.⁴⁴ In the same area, the year later, 49 bodies were found dumped by a roadside on the Mexican Federal Highway 40.⁴⁵ The Los Zetas cartel seems to be responsible for all the mass killings above. The heightened rivalry between Zetas and the Sinaloa cartel over cocaine routes in North-Eastern Mexico is the most likely explanation of this series of indiscriminate violence. Massacres, however, are also a means to maintain the Zetas' reputation as cold-blooded murderers with a taste for bloodshed.⁴⁶ It is a tool of psychological warfare. In an environment where violence is everywhere, the need to make its effect felt is even more pressing.

Violence as a communication tool, then, is the by-product of the rivalry among several cartels. This rivalry engenders a 'competitive escalation of increasingly extreme and creatively violent acts'.⁴⁷ Most of this escalation, for now, resulted in the murder of single persons or of little groups. At its core, the murder in itself is always a message, as its perpetrators usually present it as a punishment, an act of justice. Since the beginning of the conflict, however, it has lost its symbolic strength, simply because there are too many of them.⁴⁸ Beheadings were an early method to convey a more forceful message and stun the audience, by showing that cartel members were capable of anything.⁴⁹ Even decapitations, however, have become increasingly commonplace, since a group of members of La Familia Michoacana threw five severed heads on a nightclub dancefloor to

⁴⁴ Simon Rogers, 'Mexico's Drug War Visualized', in *The Guardian* (31 January 2012), online at <http://www.theguardian.com/news/datablog/graphic/2012/jan/31/mexico-drug-war-visualised>.

⁴⁵ 'Mexico Violence: Monterrey Police Find 49 Bodies', in *BBC News* (13 May 2012), online at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-latin-america-18052540>.

⁴⁶ Ioan Grillo, 'Special Report – Mexico's Zetas Rewrite Drug War in Blood', in *Reuters* (23 May 2012), online at <http://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-mexico-drugs-zetas-idUKBRE84M0MF20120523>.

⁴⁷ Campbell, 'Narco-Propaganda', p. 64.

⁴⁸ A facilitating condition of the increase in cartel-related deaths has been the diminishing costs of killers-to-hire. Estimates of a killer's pay for a single murder in 2001 were in the range of \$12,000; in 2011, cartels paid from \$500 to \$650 per month for indeterminate killings and other acts of violence. Paul Rexton Kan, *Cartels at War* (Potomac Books, 2012), p. 26.

⁴⁹ Kan, *Cartels*, p. 29.

publicise their 'divine justice'.⁵⁰ With time, then, a whole set of forms of drug-related killing and treatment of corpses has formed, with its own lexicon. These words are quite common among different Mexican cartels and in the media coverage of the drug war. For example, *enteipados* are bodies wrapped in duct tape; *descuartizados* are bodies that have been quartered (as the victims of the 2012 Nuevo Leon massacre); *encajuelados* are bodies left in the trunk of a car; *entambados* are bodies crammed in barrels; *encobijados* are bodies wrapped in blankets. In addition, cutting off fingers means that the dead person was a snitch; cutting hands means that the dead was a thief; cutting the tongue means the dead was a police or rival cartel informer, while cutting the foot means the dead was a defector.⁵¹ Finally, bodies are generally left on roadsides, usually half or wholly naked. This happens most often for women, as a means to deprive them of their honour, but also for men, in an attempt to demote their manhood.⁵² In Mexico, drug-related murders are seldom a hidden act. On the contrary, *narcos* leave the bodies in public places, where everyone can see and read the messages on the corpse.

Actual violence, then, has evolved from simple murder, by differentiating into different types, according to quantity, treatment of the body, and ritualized display of it. Another dimension, however, is particularly important in the current inter-cartel war: the broadcasting of violence. Brutal acts committed by cartel members, in fact, are not only important as a local display of strength. With the diffusion of Internet, in fact, their reproduction has become as much a tool of psychological warfare as an integral part of the *narcocultura*. In the past, cartels had also profited from traditional channels, by devoting attention to timing to guarantee that specific time slots of local television news cover the murders.⁵³ The online presence of drug trafficking organisations, however, is increasingly important. The Internet has

⁵⁰ 'Human Heads Dumped in Mexico Bar', in BBC News (7 September 2006), online at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/5322160.stm>.

⁵¹ A. Y. Guevara, 'Propaganda in Mexico's Drug War', in *Journal of Strategic Security*, Vol. 6, No. 3 (2013), p. 138.

⁵² Campbell, *Narco-Propaganda*, pp. 65-66.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 65.

become a major battlefield in the information war, with its own offensives and counter-offensives,⁵⁴ and cartels and vigilante groups have become its major actors, with the Mexican state present in a lesser degree.⁵⁵

Cartels, however, still do not have a vertically organised propaganda strategy, with a coherent graphic style, formalised structures and technical sophistication.⁵⁶ Most of the output consists in self-proclaimed cartel members and, in large part, in young men attracted by drug trafficking myths. Cartel online presence, then, is scattered, grassroots, and spontaneous. It is, thus, also more difficult to tackle. This is particularly true for social networks, with reports of cartel activity on Myspace, Youtube⁵⁷ and Facebook.⁵⁸ Cartel members have used all these online channels to convey threats of violence or pictures and videos of murders and massacres. Apart from mainstream social networks and media sites, moreover, cartel-specific news sites have sprung up, to avoid the self-imposed censorship of local newspapers and to capitalise on *narcocultura's* increasing success. The foremost example is *blogdelnarco.com*, which, since its inception in 2010, has become one of Mexico's most visited sites. *Blog del Narco* broadcasts gruesome pictures of murders and, most famously, videos of interrogations, usually featuring the torture and homicide of the hostage.⁵⁹ In this way, cartel members humiliate the victim, as well as the rival cartels; they spread fear among their affiliates and show how the government is weak, if the victim is a police officer.

Outside commentators often define violence in the Mexican cartel war as 'meaningless'. This assertion, as we have seen, is hardly true. Violence, first, serves as a way of settling disputes and punishing. This is not its only

⁵⁴ Robert J. Bunker, 'The Growing Mexican Cartel and Vigilante War in Cyberspace', in *Small Wars Journal*, Nov. 2011, pp. 1-4.

⁵⁵ Guevara, 'Propaganda', p. 150.

⁵⁶ Sarah Womer & Robert J. Bunker, 'Sureños Gangs and Mexican Cartel Use of Social Networking Sites', in *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, Vol. 21, No. 1 (2010), pp. 91-92.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 86-89.

⁵⁸ J.-C. Castillo, *The Mexican Cartels' Employment of Inform and Influence Activities (IIA) as Tools of Asymmetrical Warfare* (University of Kwazulu-Natal, 2014), p. 4.

⁵⁹ Campbell, 'Narco-Propaganda', pp. 68-70.

function, though. From the cartel's perspective, violence is most effective when rival cartels, government forces, and the local population get to know that cartel justice has stricken. The communication of violence, thus, is an essential part of the act of kidnapping, torturing, or killing. As drug trafficking organisations lack the communication strategy and hierarchy that terrorist groups retain, every affiliate or group of affiliates participates in the larger information war, by acting, by leaving messages, and by broadcasting them via television or the Internet. The combined effect of this phenomenon is to sow confusion among those who fight the cartels and to establish a climate of constant, ever-lasting fear among a paralysed population.
