

Infcous

When Mafia and jihadists team together

by Alessio Postiglione





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Business is business. We might say this is the principle all the illegal activities follow, when criminal ethics meets the spirit of capitalism, to paraphrase Max Weber. Today, a new violent cartel rules the Mediterranean; an unholy alliance between international mafia groups and jihadists, which spans from the northern to the southern flanks of the *Mare Nostrum*: human trafficking, drugs and weapons smuggling, and new criminal partnerships have developed across the sea. A mobsters' new *entente cordiale* aimed at perpetuating illicit trafficking and destabilizing the whole region. Because both jihadists and mafia groups share criminal but also political goals, including subverting

institutional politics, capturing States, turning their gangs into the ruling élites of new Mafia States.

In our recent book, "Sahara the desert of mafia and jihadists", Italian journalist Massimiliano Boccolini and I have highlighted the emergence of new unexpected ties between godfathers and jihad affiliates. Italy, located in the very centre of the Mediterranean, is obviously a main hub, thanks to its well established and influential mafia groups: Sicilian Cosa Nostra, Calabria's 'Ndrangheta, Neapolitan Camorra and Apulian Sacra Corona Unita. At any rate, this criminal partnership is an international network: from Cechenian Obishna, to the

Mexican and Colombian drug cartels, actors from all over the world are playing the game. In a moment in which States are replaced by mega-cities competing over connectivity more than borders, as to quote Parag Khanna, the most networked criminal gangs will win.

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However, the pivotal actor is Italy, due to its central geopolitical location and the straight relational-political nature of its gangs. In fact, the foremost criminal affinity between jihadists and Italian mafia groups lies in the political role the latter have always played. As jihadists aim at establishing new States, like ISIS - but also other lesser known entities such as the Caucasus Emirate -, so Italian Mafias have always done. During its existence, Cosa Nostra has dealt with “deviated” secret services; liaised with élites during Risorgimento; infiltrated a Sicilian separatist political party, whose objective was to establish an independent region; negotiated with “deviated” Italian functionaries, after the Portella della Ginestra massacre and the period of ‘92 and ‘93 manslaughters, when mafiosi murdered renowned judges Giovanni Falcone and Paolo Borsellino and several other anti-Mafia activists. In doing so, Italian mafia groups have also always relied on terrorist strat-

egies, like during the “strategy of tension” years, a period of social and political turmoil, marked by numerous acts of political terrorism. It is not by chance that the use of uploading on YouTube video of beheadings to scare the enemies was firstly started by Mexican cartels, lately imitated by jihadists, thus supporting the existence of an exchange between the two entities, not only at an economic level, but also on ethical and aesthetic grounds. A jihadist such as Mahmood Omar Khabir has been living in Mexico in recent years, working with Ismael “el Mayo” Zambada from the Sinaloa drug cartel.

Italian mafia groups have also always relied on terrorist strategies

Jihadists and mafia gangsters both share a criminal economy. From the Gulf of Guinea,

through Sahel - Mali, Niger, and then Libya -, mainly drugs and human beings are smuggled: Highway 10, the 10th parallel marine and aerial routes linking South America and West Africa, the shortest route between the two continents, has become the preferred lane used by traffickers for shipping multi-tons of cocaine from Mexico and Colombia to Europe. The furthest destinations of this route are intertwined with jihadism. Through Boko Haram’s controlled areas in the Sahel region, new illicit traffic caravanserais are flourishing. Migrants and people trafficked from all over Africa are gathered at the border between Niger and Libya and then smuggled through Fezzan, Southern Libya, towards Europe. Judiciary sources included in our book prove how mafia groups, especially Neapolitan camorra, provide vital expertise in counterfeiting documents to help migrants and also terrorists to move freely inside the EU’s Schengen area. Many victims of



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human trafficking are enlisted in Italian mafia ranks or involved in illegal activities that fund terrorist attacks in Europe. The 2004 Madrid train bombings at the Atocha Railway Station were financed by drug smuggled at Santa Maria Capua Vetere, close to Naples, with the cooperation of Camorra. Mokhtar Belmokhtar, a key leader of AQUIM - Al Qaeda in Islamic Maghreb - who started his career in Afghan and Algerian civil wars, is nicknamed Mr. Marlboro, due to his main funding activity, yet has been involved into different turmoils associated with “liberation” movements and separatism.

Western Sahara may become increasingly permeable to the interests of groups such as al-Qaida

At the present stage, we are witnessing two trends: on the one hand, there is an alliance between many subversive movements which share populist and anti Western values; on the other hand we observe a shift from secular-revolutionary ri-

ots to religious fanaticism. El-
oquently, Western Sahara may become increasingly permeable to the interests of groups such as al-Qaida. The overall poverty of youth, disillusioned with the elites establishment, accused of misspending the economic resources is triggering a sort of paradigm change: some young people seem to flee the secular values and are turning to jihadism, seduced by its political discourse. A belief is growing that jihad is a better way to ameliorate living conditions, when political leaderships are accused of corruption and marxist ideology has lost its grip on the hopes

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of the youth. Similarly, terrorist-salafi groups such as the MUJAO (Movement for Unity and Jihad in Western Africa) and Ansar Eddine, the former led by Belmokhtar and Abu Walid al Sahrawi, the latter by Iyad Ag Ghaly gained ground by exploiting disillusioned youth or fragile territories. Ag Ghaly is a billionaire who started his career with secular movements, became a Malian diplomat, led the Tuareg rebellion against his government, lastly affiliated to Nusrat al-Islam, a qaedist group formed by branches of AQUIM, some Taliban and the Macina Liberation Front. Abu Walid al Sahrawi

is an iconic narco-emir, associated with another milestone activity of the criminal economy: ransoms.

In our book, we cover the case of Italian tourist Maria Sandra Mariani, kidnapped on February the 2nd 2011 in Djanet, southern Algeria, who recounted being held hostage by *Adnan* Abu Walid al-Sahrawi and his militants, all young people purportedly from the Tindouf Camp. Having said that, there is some evidence that this tactical alliance between mafia and jihadists might include also subversive extremists leftist and

rightist groups, in Europe, which are sympathetic with the anti liberal and anti capitalist stance of Salafi terrorists.

The enemies of the open society cooperate. This implies its supporters must collaborate at any level and in any place to cope with these threats. The establishment of a common European Public Prosecutor's Office which cooperates with its homologues worldwide may be the right answer. In a connected world, networked criminals cannot be countered individually.

The author

Alessio Postiglione is a journalist and political adviser. He works as a research assistant at the European University Institute (Centre for Media Pluralism & Freedom); he teaches at several universities; he writes op-eds for newspapers (including la Repubblica) and he is a political analyst working with televisions and radios such as Radio France Internationale and Sky. His latest book, "Sahara, deserto di mafie e jihad", investigates the link between mafias and jihadists. He has lectured at the Italian and European Parliament, and at the UN Headquarter in New York.