



Illicit Markets and Violence in Afghanistan: Avenues for Understanding the Use of Targeted Violence and its Implications in Afghan Illicit Economies

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**POLICY
COMMENTARY**



ABSTRACT

Afghanistan experienced a marked rise in violent crimes, including kidnappings and armed robbery in 2021. The reported increase in targeted attacks against civilians in the country, specifically regarding women human rights defenders and media workers, had already raised concerns in the period preceding the Taliban takeover. These events and the changing nature of the killings—from widespread casualties to targeted violence—underscored the need for a nuanced examination of the different ways conflict and crime converge to create conditions that incentivise violent actors and instability. This paper looks at these issues through the lens of illicit market violence in Afghanistan. It explores its potential as a key proxy to project current and future trends of other illicit and criminal market development in the country. The paper suggests a framework for further research to examine the evolution of illicit markets in Afghanistan by using a methodologically sound proxy indicator of such violence. First, it draws on a literature review on violence related to illicit markets and presents the methodology developed by the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (GI-TOC) to research assassinations. Second, the paper undertakes a focused literature review on targeted violence in Afghanistan, focusing particularly on the 2020–2021 period. The variables taken from the GI-TOC methodology are applied to the literature review to map recent trends using targeted killings and other metrics of illicit market violence. It presents a preliminary analysis of how targeted violence could be used to inform the analysis of illicit economies and its shifts in Afghanistan.

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1. INTRODUCTION

On 5 November 2021, the body of Frozan Safi, an activist and economics lecturer, was found riddled with bullets in what may have been the first violent death of a women's rights defender since the Taliban came to power in August 2021 (Ferris-Rotman & Nader 2021). The issue of targeted attacks against civilians in Afghanistan, specifically regarding women human rights defenders and media workers, had already raised concerns about the use of violence against non-combatants in the period preceding the Taliban takeover. At the same time, there was also a marked rise in violent crimes in 2021, including kidnappings and armed robbery taking place in cities, despite no clear connection with the larger political landscape of the conflict. The changing nature of the killings—from widespread casualties to targeted violence—and the rise of violent crime underscored the need for a much closer examination of the ways in which conflict and crime converge to create conditions that incentivise actors and instability.

The relationship between violence, political economy, and illicit markets is complex, and ranges in scope and scale across country or market-specific conditions. A useful starting point is to recognise that violence is a key element of governance conducted by criminal actors or armed groups (here considered as non-state armed groups whose main goal is not material gain through criminal activity). They often engage in a broad range of illicit activities that are not exclusive to a single market and operate outside the purview of traditional justice systems, often carrying out violence to protect their political, financial, or territorial interests.

This paper looks at the issue of illicit market violence in Afghanistan and its potential use as a key proxy to project current and future trends of other illicit and criminal market developments in the country. It suggests a framework for further research, examining the evolution of illicit markets in Afghanistan by using a methodologically sound proxy indicator of violence related to such markets. First, the paper draws on a literature review on illicit markets violence and on the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (GI-TOC)'s methodology to research assassinations. This methodology was designed to better understand the assassinations market as a means of criminal governance and service provided in the context of illicit economies.

Second, the paper presents a literature review on targeted violence in Afghanistan, looking particularly at the 2020–2021 period. The literature is admittedly limited due to its reliance on western media sources and grey literature, such as human rights civil society organizations (CSOs) and United Nations (UN) reports. The variables taken from the GI-TOC methodology are applied to the literature review to map recent trends using targeted killings and other metrics of illicit market violence. It presents a preliminary analysis of how targeted violence could be factored in the analysis of illicit economies and its shifts in Afghanistan.

The paper does not offer an in-depth investigation of violence across different illicit markets in Afghanistan. Rather, this paper attempts to answer the question on whether the variables developed by GI-TOC to monitor assassinations can be used to better understand the complexities of illicit economies in Afghanistan and how to use them. Closely monitoring violence related to illicit economies aims to shed light on disputes between criminal groups, internal struggles among power brokers, and shifts in the conflict between the previous government and insurgents. The suggested analytical lens is part of a broader political economy framework for understanding the contemporary and evolving dynamics of illicit markets in the country.

The analysis suggests that understanding the motives of the perpetrators of these crimes, and specifically assassinations, can offer greater insights into the country's shifting socio-political and socio-economic landscape. In this sense, monitoring targeted acts of violence is a useful proxy for mapping the evolving dynamics of illicit economies and criminal actors operating at a national scale.

2. VIOLENCE AS A PROXY TO UNDERSTAND ILLICIT MARKETS

When discussing whether illicit markets are inherently more violent than licit markets, many scholars default to a combination of responses that Naylor summarises as 'maybe, but it depends' (2009: 231–242). Generally, criminal actors who are involved in illicit activities or markets cannot rely on traditional protections offered by contract enforcement or the justice system (Chimeli & Soares 2017: 30–32). Therefore, they resort to violence as a means to enforce contracts and, in many ways, to shape and regulate illicit markets.

This concept underpins the majority of studies that seek to explain the relationship between violence and illicit economies. Alternative explanations usually point to deteriorating state capacities and poor rule of law, which lead to instances of chronic violence or evidence of illicit markets occurring at the same time—but with no clear causal relationship between the two (Chimeli & Soares 2017).

Illicit markets are often associated with violence, the degree and scale of which vary across and within all markets (Andreas & Wallman 2009: 225–229). In this regard, the literature has highlighted the importance of distinguishing between ‘organized criminal activities in which violence or the threat of violence (coercion) is inherent and organized criminal activities in which violence is attendant or supportive but not essential to the activities themselves’ (Williams, 2009: 323–336).

Drugs-related markets generally display the highest levels of violence among illicit economies, but there is also variation—for example, cocaine markets have been found to be more violent than cannabis markets.¹ Further, country-specific conditions may influence levels of violence within the same drug market—causing high levels in one country and none in another (Naylor, 2009: 231–242). Moreover, even within countries and localities, the levels of violence vary significantly. For example, recent studies on the relationship between high opium prices and violence in Afghanistan concluded that the rise in prices of the illicit commodity had little effect on levels of violence; conversely, however, higher levels of violence were found to increase drug prices (Bove & Elia 2013; Gehring et al. 2018).

Generally, transactions between or within criminal organisations, as opposed to individual actors, are arguably be less violent, since these are likely to form part of ‘longer-term relationships’ and thereby enable or depend upon trust (Reuter, 2009, pp. 275–284). Conversely, violence often stem from competition, whether territorial (such as turf disputes or trafficking routes), over market share or strategically based on (access to) corruption.

Perhaps a key feature is that violence is a central element of governance conducted by criminal actors or armed groups. It is broadly recognised that crime and conflict converge in various ways, mutually reinforcing and sustaining one another. Scholars have examined how armed groups often see criminal activity as a strategic instrument to exploit conflict (Ruggiero 2019). Conflict-affected settings create a demand for illicit goods, such as firearms, and other services. On the other hand, criminal groups will seek to profit from their relationship with other actors engaging in conflict. These interactions propel the emergence of violent entrepreneurs, a label used by Shaw and Mahadevan to identify the ‘spectrum of actors that operate along the continuum of crime and terror’ and that ‘use the tools of illicit violence, economy, and political ideology to achieve social, financial or political ends’ (2018).

Violence, then, plays a particular role in crime–conflict settings, as a means of regulating these markets, resolving disputes, and gaining political capital. The literature using the framework of the ‘protection economy’ highlights how organised criminal groups can provide protection services to civilians and other actors, including parties in conflict and the state, in exchange for payment. Along a spectrum of actors involved, criminals may also provide protection to those in power by supplying violent actors to eliminate rivals and critics. This entrepreneurial character highlights the marketable aspect of violence as a commodity (Shaw 2016).

Territory control also plays a vital role in propelling violence. Organised criminal groups and other non-state armed actors often use violence to gain or maintain territorial control. Studies have pointed to the importance of territory in relation to strategic routes for trafficking or cultivation of illicit goods (Idler 2020a). Where contracts are not legally enforceable and disputes over property rights or territory have no set process for resolving them, actors can opt to engage in acts of extortion, intimidation, threat, and physical violence to protect illicit revenue or taxation schemes.

Finally, actors in conflicts who have interests in criminal markets, political institutions and financial gain, may resort to violence and conflict in order to protect these interests (Idler 2020a: 5). They would deploy assassination to intimidate, silence, or eliminate their opposition as a way to demonstrate power and control over territory, people, and communities (Shaw & Reitano 2017). The use of symbolic killing has been a feature both in criminal and conflict-related settings.

1 See, for example, Pacula et al. (2013) on improving the measurement of drug-related crime.

2.1 THE GI-TOC APPROACH TO TRACK ASSASSINATIONS AND CONTRACT KILLINGS: METHODOLOGY AND DEFINITIONS

Most of the literature on assassinations specially refers to the targeted killing of political figures, commonly referred to as ‘political assassinations’ (Kaysser & Oliveira 2021: 91). There is little literature on contract killings at the global scale and most existing studies on the topic focus on the issue of contract killings and the role of hitmen in a specific geographical region. There has been significant interest in understanding the figure of the hitman in the literature, as it is part of the nature of contract killing—that is to say, a third party, usually a ‘hitman’ of varying levels of proficiency, is paid to do the work.²

Commissioning contract killings remains a common way of achieving political, economic, and personal gains and represents the commercialisation of targeted violence. This is because the illicit economy behind such assassinations can generate a resource pool for those who want to pursue a contract killing (Shaw & Thomas, 2016a). Thus, based on the existing literature and previous research on contract killings, the GI-TOC developed a methodology to track cases of such killings around the world.³

The GI-TOC research on assassination focuses on cases that are defined as ‘targeted contract killings’, which include actual, attempted and planned lethal attacks on individuals or small groups of individuals (Kaysser & Oliveira, 2021: 31). This includes cases in which a third party is engaged to commit the murder in exchange for financial gain or other form of benefit (such as personal favours, political favours, or a change in status in a criminal gang). The aim of the killing is to transform the status quo by eliminating the victim considered to be an ‘obstacle’ for the perpetrator’s or contractor’s political, economic, personal, or organised-crime-related interest. For the purposes of this study, the terms ‘assassination’, ‘hit’, ‘targeted killing’, and ‘contract killing’ are used interchangeably.

By using a dedicated search string and selected newspaper sources, cases are filtered from the Lexis Nexis platform and included in a database. The research team records information on perpetrators, victims, and dynamics of the killings, such as location, date, method, and price tags. An overview of the variables included under each specific category can be found in the figure below.⁴

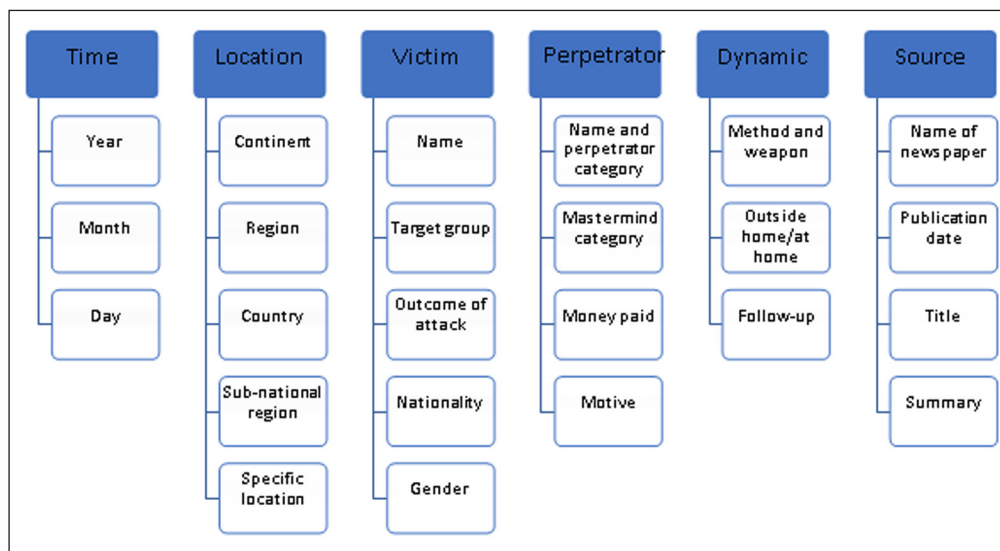


Figure 1 Methodology Overview of Assassinations.

Cases are recorded and analysed when individuals are targeted for their personal characteristics such as identity, position, or their work, and does not include attacks on random members of

² The GI-TOC has published extensively on targeted killings in African countries. See, for example, Thomas (2018, 2021) and Matfess (2018) or for other contexts, see MacIntyre et al. (2014), and Venditto & Mouzos (2003).

³ See Matfess (2018), Thomas (2021), Shaw & Skywalker (2016), Shaw & Thomas (2016), Cameron (2014), and Brolan et al. (2016).

⁴ Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime. 2021. Methodology. Global Assassination Monitor. <https://assassination.globalinitiative.net/wp-content/themes/assassination/downloads/methodology.pdf>.

groups. Assassinations perpetrated by armed groups are included in the database if they meet the conditions established in the methodology, thus random attacks on civilians are excluded. Unsurprisingly, these assassinations embody the symbiotic relationship between crime and conflict: methods and motives used by different types of armed groups are very similar to those deployed by more classical mafia-style groups. Assassinations are strategically instrumental, for example, in the context of extortion and with the aim of spreading silence and fear.

Assassinations or contract killings are one of many ways organised criminal groups gain control of local communities—frightening the population, silencing opposition, and eroding the social fabric of the areas where they operate. By leveraging control through targeted killings, criminal networks seek to achieve a range of socio-economic and socio-political goals—they expand into profitable trades or markets, gain footholds into public institutions, or aim to preserve the status quo. For example, specific research on assassinations conducted by the GI-TOC in South Africa showed that disturbing rates of contract killings were rooted in political motives, power struggles, and turf disputes throughout the taxi industry (Thomas 2021).

As the literature on violence in crime-conflict settings and assassination shows, the use of targeted violence in Afghanistan as means of governance—using a political economy framework—deserves more attention. The following sections aim to shed some light on this under-researched topic.

2.2 RECENT WAVE OF TARGETED KILLINGS AND VIOLENCE IN AFGHANISTAN: TRENDS AND FIGURES

In Afghanistan, illicit markets underpin a significant sector of the economy, which generates both positive and negative outcomes. The illicit drug economy has provided rural populations with a reliable source of income through opium cultivation, while also compounding corruption at all levels of governance (Felbab-Brown 2017). Nationally and to some extent regionally, the Taliban has used illicit markets as a way of consolidating control by taxing illicit activities (such as opium cultivation, drug trafficking and smuggling, and extraction of minerals) and diversifying their assets to consolidate their influence (Felbab-Brown 2021).

Felbab-Brown (2021) argues that the extent of violence in illicit economies in Afghanistan depends on several factors—the state of the overall economy, the character of the illicit economy, the presence or absence of independent traffickers, and the government’s response to the illicit economy. The relationship between state-suppression efforts, both under the Taliban and NATO forces that supported the former Afghan national government, proved complicated at best, with unclear lines between licit and illicit actors and the drug economy more broadly. Far from weakening, let alone solving, the reliance on the drug economy, it has become more embedded in the country’s political economy following the overthrow of the Taliban in 2001—despite vast state efforts and resources being spent to tackle it.

Besides the drug trade, the evidence of violence in other illicit markets in Afghanistan is similarly blurred, characterised by a patchwork of ‘powerful groups’ whose coercive actions have been seen in sectors as diverse as human trafficking, commodity smuggling, and illegal mining (Felbab-Brown 2020). These areas often converge, with instances of targeted violence reported during territorial disputes over areas of poppy cultivation, mining territories (United Nations Development Programme 2020: 59) or to monopolise control of other areas of illicit activities. Similarly, threats of both real and perceived violence are often waged against victims of human trafficking and their families (International Organization for Migration 2008: 21).

Furthermore, during escalating hostilities between 2020 and 2021, the country experienced a spike in targeted killings, which became the third leading cause of civilian casualties according to the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA). Civilian casualties increased by 47% from the first half of 2020—the highest levels since 2018. A total of 5,183 civilian casualties (1,659 killed and 3,524 injured) were recorded within the first six months of 2021 (United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan 2021b).

Certainly, the high death tolls of the conflict suggests how target killings are not the only violent method used in Afghanistan. It also showcases how the then government was unable to control violence within the country and protect the civilians, hence contributing to its delegitimization. However, the analysis of the analysis of targeted violence as method of by actors involved in

illicit economies sheds light in particular in the profile of the most vulnerable victims and switch in method used. This relates to the third and fifth categories of the methodology developed by the GI-TOC: the identification of the target group and the dynamics of the killings.

The GI-TOC's Global Assassination Monitor found that 18% of targeted killings recorded in Asia in 2019 and 2020 were in Afghanistan ([Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime 2020](#)). The primary targets were media, including women, community leaders and members, and along with activists, the staff of non-government organisations (NGOs), and doctors or health professionals ([Kaysser & Oliveira 2021: 58](#)). In fact, Afghanistan was widely viewed as one of the world's most dangerous places for exercising fundamental freedoms ([Reporters Without Borders 2021](#)).

The issue of attacks against civilians, specifically human rights defenders and media workers, is not new in the country's ongoing conflict, but the changing nature in which these attacks were being perpetrated in the lead-up to the 2021 Taliban takeover raises significant cause for concern. First, it is important to note that these attacks were not carried out in the context of mass casualties—they were premeditated, planned attacks against civilians. UNAMA documented an increase of 45% of targeted killings defined as an 'intentional, premeditated and deliberated targeting of individuals with perpetrators remaining anonymous' ([UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan 2020](#)).

The profile of victims of targeted killings in the country represented a 'shift from targeted assaults on high-profile officials by the Taliban and other groups operating in the country toward civil society's rank-and-file and security forces' ([Abed & Gibbons-Neff 2021](#)). Not only did media workers and human rights defenders risk becoming targets, but also community leaders, health workers, off-duty security personnel, judges, prosecutors, and religious figures—a type of violence that some alleged to be reminiscent of the killings and disappearances of Afghans in Peshawar, Pakistan, that eventually led to a civil war in the 1990s. The identification of the profile of victims of targeted killings also demonstrate the symbolic nature of assassinating civil society members to achieve political, economic and/or criminal aims.

The second aspect, which relates to the dynamics of the killings, is the change of pattern in the method used: the increased use of improvised explosive devices (IEDs) attached to the victims' vehicles (same method used by insurgents targeting US or Afghan government forces during the war) as well as the use of shootings by unknown gunmen demonstrate this trend. For example, between September 2020 and January 2021, six journalists were killed by firearms, while two other media workers were killed in attacks using IEDs attached to vehicles ([UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan 2021a](#)). Such attacks usually involve planning and surveillance of the victim, and the method focuses on inflicting damage on a specific victim rather than indiscriminate killing.

Perhaps a key advantage in disaggregating the data on targeted killings relates to the perpetrators category. While responsibility for these targeted attacks was largely unclaimed, there was a broad understanding that the Taliban bore responsibility for many of them. The Head of the National Directorate of Security suggested in 2021 that 270 Taliban members were part of a special unit which orchestrated the killings ([Abed & Gibbons-Neff 2021](#)). This use of targeted killings by the Taliban was reminiscent of what Sampaio and Jackson called 'psychological warfare', which centred on expanding territorial control by silencing members of civil society and eradicating those who would be most likely to be vocal in their opposition ([Sampaio & Jackson 2021](#)).

The Taliban was not, however, likely to be the only actor involved in this wave of lethal and targeted violence. There were several media reports suggesting killings were perpetrated by political factions willing to take advantage of the chaos in the country to cover up the settling of scores. Moreover, the Islamic State affiliate operating in the country had its own logic for engaging in targeted killings ([Abed & Gibbons-Neff 2021](#)). One Afghan general and military analyst suggested that 'drug smugglers, land grabbers, corrupt officials, and those against government reform plans are also behind these attacks' as they would benefit from chaos and war. An October 2021 article published in *Foreign Policy* claimed that sources in Kabul said that 'Taliban foot soldiers would kill on contract to earn cash as they are not being paid', and that prices ranged from 5,000 dollars to kill and 2,000 dollars to kidnap ([O'Donnell 2021](#)).

Fourth, and in addition to killings, the same categorization can be used to monitor forms of violence and compare the preferred use of violence by the actors involved in illicit economies. For example, negotiations for the withdrawal of US troops and the subsequent Taliban takeover in 2021 led to a notable increase in other forms of violent crimes, including muggings, armed robberies and kidnappings for ransom (O'Donnell 2021). Media reports suggest that over 40 kidnappings of businessmen took place during the first two months of the Taliban takeover. Moreover, public displays of violence against alleged criminals seem widespread. Reports show that the Taliban publicly displayed the bodies of victims in the city of Herat.

Fifthly, the methodology enables to find geographic hotspots for violence related to specific illicit economies. Reports from 2020 and 2021 reinforce this assumption. The crime wave that primarily affected Kabul—but also spread to other cities—demonstrated that urban areas have become a stage for competition between various actors, including politicians, warlords, businessmen, and criminal networks (Sampaio & Jackson 2021). Much of the phenomenon is linked to widespread corruption, which permeates the country's institutions and private sector. An estimated 40% of public officials working in the investigation and prosecution of criminal offences are allegedly involved with the drugs trade. Another example derives from the pandemic. In 2020, Human Rights Watch highlighted cases of harassment of media workers who were reporting on the misuse of COVID-19 supplies. In one case, 32 ventilators meant for the treatment of COVID-19 patients were stolen and sold by corrupt government officials (Human Rights Watch 2020).

One area of special concern is the acquisition of land, which has historically been a source of violent crimes in Afghanistan. UNAMA, for example, has stated that over 70% of all serious crimes, including homicide, were caused by land disputes in Afghanistan, stemming from the inability of authorities to address land-grabbing and enforce land rights, leading to informal forms of dispute resolution (United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan 2015).

Other forms of violence and human rights abuses were widely documented by human rights groups and international bodies.⁵ In January 2022, the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) issued a press released condemning the Taliban for attempting to 'steadily erase women and girls from the public life' (United Nations 2022). It states that measures taken by the Taliban government, including the closure of service providers charged with responding to gender-based violence, has exposed women and girls across different sectors of society to increased risks of trafficking for the purposes of sexual exploitation, forced marriage and forced labour.

2.3 THE ADDED VALUE IN MONITORING VIOLENCE RELATED TO ILLICIT ECONOMIES IN THE CASE OF AFGHANISTAN

As mentioned before, the recent trend of targeted killings, along with the rise of violent crime in Afghanistan, raise concerns about the country's future. It also sheds light on how monitoring violent acts, in particular target violence and assassinations, can be used as a proxy to better understand existing and emerging illicit markets, as well as the criminal behaviour of actors operating in the country. As illustrated in the previous section, cases of targeted killings can illustrate the landscape of the illicit economy by identifying power brokers, criminal actors, their opposition, and the political or economic motivations propelling such violence. The existing research indicates that criminogenic environments—where power struggles, corruption, violence, and organised crime are present—are conducive to high concentrations of targeted killings (Kaysser & Oliveira 2021). This is particularly relevant for settings where there is evidence of illicit markets, armed conflict and organised crime, which seems to be the case in Afghanistan.

Based on GI-TOC's experience in researching assassinations and the findings of the Global Assassination Monitor, there is substantive indication that justify the monitoring of target killings related to illicit economies in Afghanistan. The literature review also suggests a need

⁵ Human Rights Watch (2021) released a report on the summary execution or enforced disappearance of former Afghan officials, specifically in the provinces of Ghanzi, Helmand, Kandahar, and Kundu. In some instances, personal rivalries and grievances have played into some killings. Others were reportedly ordered by the Taliban units. In early 2022, the organisation documented violence against the LGBT community (Human Rights Watch 2022).

to extend the monitoring to other violent acts, including killings, kidnappings, threats, and harassment, in a closed and systematic fashion.

First, the profile of the victims illustrates the aims of violent actors in perpetrating violence. The data available on the GI-TOC's Global Assassination Monitor applies the different categories of the methodology against the reported incidents of targeted killings in Afghanistan in international media sources from 2019 and 2020.⁶ The findings suggest that in almost half of the cases the victim belonged to civil society. In 16% of the cases the victim belonged to the media (which is above the global average according to the Monitor) and 11% of the victims were female (also above the global average).

As reinforced by the literature review, the overwhelming trend of targeting of civilian actors, in particular media workers, and increasingly women, displays a change in tactics used by the actors involved and a shift towards the use of assassinations to enforce silence and spread fear among local community actors. A study that analysed the logic behind the killings of journalists by armed groups found that both ISIS and ETA (the terrorist Basque separatist organisation) would target journalists for 'collaborating with enemies' and 'disseminating false information' (Lopez 2016). Disputes over criminal markets and for political control can lead to the killing of those who vocally oppose criminal activities or actors who are engaging in conflict. This exacerbates the impact of conflict on civil society and communities.

Second, relevant indicators proposed by GI-TOC's studies on assassination, such as the monitoring of methods and perpetrators of targeted killings, shed light on shifts in illicit and emerging markets. In the case of Afghanistan, the findings of the Global Monitor suggest the predominant use of firearms in target contract killings. In 58% of the cases, the method used was a firearm.

Despite below the global average (71%) the analysis goes in line with what the literature says, that the rise of targeted killings was accompanied by a change in method—supported by the use of gunmen and firearms for perpetrating the killings. Needless to say, the firearms market should not be overlooked. In some contexts, the use of firearms for violent crime can be linked to the widespread availability of these weapons, which is particularly relevant in the case of Afghanistan. According to the Global Organized Crime Index, illicit firearms are one of the most pervasive markets in the country (Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime 2021). GI-TOC research has also found that the illicit arms trade serves to accelerate armed violence in conflict–crime dynamics (Walker & Restrepo 2022).

The proposed method also affords insights on the type of perpetrators—the use of 'gunmen' and reports of Taliban foot soldiers being used to commit murders and kidnappings. This raises further concerns about the consolidation of the use of violence as a commodity, effectively its commercialisation (Shaw & Thomas 2016a). The concept of violent entrepreneurs as a label for such actors can be useful in research on Afghanistan. The literature also suggests that 'conventionally violent occupations such as the military can be fertile recruiting grounds for hitmen' (Macintyre et al. 2014) and that the presence of illicit and violent economies can create a pool of hired assassins, as seen in the case of South Africa (Shaw & Thomas 2016a).

Finally, the motivation for target contract killings in the case of Afghanistan is largely political (87% of the cases, above the global average), which should be understood in more detail (in particular its connections with illicit economies). The GI-TOC research on assassinations highlights the importance of investigating the motives behind targeted killings to effectively address the root causes and impunity, particularly as the underlying economic conditions worsen. Delving deeper in investigating the motives allows for better understandings of the social and political eco-systems that lead to targeted killings; this may illustrate the actors involved and the interests that motivated their behaviour. Greater knowledge of the circumstances surrounding targeted killings can demonstrate the state of play in illicit economies—outlining links between criminal markets and groups, vested interests in political structures, and in illicit markets.

As a way forward, the methodology created can be tailored to the context of Afghanistan. This could include (but not only): the creation of a dedicated search string using specific nomenclature adjusted to the Afghanistan context, the use of local media sources, and

6 <https://assassination.globalinitiative.net/analysis/geographic/country/afghanistan>.

additional follow-up on the cases through conducting interviews with relevant stakeholders. The focus in cities, such as Kabul, or geographic hotspots where data is available can also contribute to a more granular and detailed analysis.

After all, changes in the levels of violence could also suggest a shift in operations geographically or expansion of operations to consolidate power over a territory. The surge of criminality in 2021 could encourage new markets and new hotspots of violence. Examples here could be expanded to include—albeit not exclusively—the extortion of business, land grabbing, and the mineral sector. As GI-TOC's research on assassinations shows, 'the phenomenon of contract killings commonly takes place in clusters, often linked to the existence of criminal markets or the potential of creating one. This, in combination with the presence of vulnerable target groups—mostly people opposing, uncovering, investigating, or standing in the way of illicit activities' (Kaysser & Oliveira 2021: 17).

3. CONCLUSION

Although there is no simple solution for addressing illicit market violence in the context of instability and conflict, creating better evidence-based practice to understand violence as a commodity and instrument that actors use can help in creating tailored policy and legal responses. Targeted violence, in this case, is a proxy to gauge the dynamics within illicit markets and illustrate how they may shift in terms of geography, commodities, and governance. It enables us to measure the dynamics of conflict and crime, understand the structure of illicit economies that incentivise and drive the use of violence, and identify the significance, as well as the involvement, of different actors (that is, state-embedded actors) in targeted violence.

The GI-TOC methodology on assassinations can serve as a framework to create indicators of illicit market violence that are particularly applicable to Afghanistan. Indicators should be used to examine previous cases of targeted killings, illustrate evolving trends, and closely monitor the current situation of assassinations in the country. Other violent acts, such as kidnappings, could supplement the monitoring of targeted killings to improve evaluations.

Admittedly, there are several limitations to the proposed methodology. Gathering information can be difficult as there is relatively little reporting (our preliminary findings in monitoring assassinations in 2021 suggest an initial drop following the Taliban takeover, which does not necessarily reflect the reality). Moreover, crime–conflict situations are characterised by inherent difficulties, such as in differentiating between political and criminal violence. The methodology will need to be revised and expanded to include expert consultations and interviews with relevant actors (such as former officials, journalists, community members, and policy-makers) to develop a truly comprehensive understanding of present and evolving circumstances in Afghanistan.

Despite these shortcomings, a systematic and data-oriented analysis will certainly help in mapping the shifting paradigms of illicit economies. Effectively combatting crime hinges on the comprehensive understanding of the ecosystem which underpins criminal markets. In turn, this approach could support the creation of a mechanism geared towards promoting a safer environment for civil society actors and ultimately contribute to efforts to achieve stabilisation and development. Moreover, a mechanism informed by this methodology could support the creation of policies that seek to strengthen community resilience, for example, improving approaches that are gender and ethnically sensitive, based on the findings of the most targeted groups; creating tools for safely reporting on threats that help to identify illicit markets and organised crime groups of concern, and so on. This methodology supported mechanism could also help with security, transparency and oversight of political processes, and use evidence-based practices to hold the government, private companies, and other actors accountable (Kaysser & Oliveira 2021: 43).

The implications of violence following the 2021 Taliban takeover may be detrimental to communities. As highlighted by GI-TOC, the communities that live in contested areas have borne the highest toll of violence deriving from criminal governance (Walker & Restrepo 2022: 74). Instability allows for illicit economies to increase their grip over communities—exploiting basic needs and increasing levels of violence, victimisation, and insecurity. Hence, there is a need to identify the victims of targeted killings, what they were opposing or working on, the

context in which the violent acts took place, and where these violent acts continue to happen. Delving into these questions can help to shed light on the current and developing criminal ecosystems in the country.

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