

Family fortunes

Calabrian mafia extends international reach

The 'Ndrangheta mafia organisation has spread its influence beyond Europe through a complex network of alliances and bloodlines. **Anna Sergi** explores the group's internationalisation and the challenges of detecting its underworld criminal operations.

Key points

- The Calabrian 'Ndrangheta is the most internationalised of the Italian mafia, with drugs – particularly cocaine – providing a major source of revenue.
- Using three maritime routes into the port of Gioia Tauro, the 'Ndrangheta trades on close contacts with South American drug producers and traffickers to bring cocaine into Europe on a 'rolling contract'.
- The 'Ndrangheta's ability to infiltrate markets using a complex network of contacts and its bloodline requirement for affiliation means that it often passes undetected by foreign law enforcement authorities.

The Calabrian 'Ndrangheta – formed of a consortium of clans from the south of the country and one of Italy's three principal mafia organisations alongside the Neapolitan Camorra and the Sicilian Cosa Nostra – continues to demonstrate its international reach. On 29 June, an ABC Four Corners/Fairfax investigation revealed the extent of infiltration of members of the group into Australian politics. This infiltration was linked to the reputation and wealth of Calabrian clans in the drug markets in Australia, and uncovered a number of suspicious donations to the Liberal Party made throughout the years by figures linked to Calabrian families.

The donations were allegedly meant to influence a decision to grant an Australian visa to Francesco Madafferi. Madafferi, who had a criminal record for mafia affiliation in Italy, had been living in Australia and was married to an Australian citizen. He was arrested in 2008 and sentenced to 10 years' imprisonment in December 2014 for trafficking 4.4 tonnes of MDMA (ecstasy). The ABC/Fairfax investigation showed how certain families had acquired wealth and power in Melbourne through a domination of the fruit and vegetable market, and the exploitation of Calabrian links to secure the drug trade.

Earlier, on 7 May 2015, international media reported on a joint effort between the Italian police and the US Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) in an anti-mafia operation dubbed Operation Columbus against the 'Ndrangheta. At least 13 people were arrested in raids in Italy, according to the reports. The authorities focused on a restaurant run by a Calabrian in the Queens borough of New York, from where police claim an international drug trafficking ring operated across Italy, the United States, and Latin America. Three members of the family that ran the restaurant were arrested earlier in 2015, one of whom entered a plea of innocent. Legal proceedings were ongoing in Italy and the US at the time of publication.

The US operation revealed old and new alliances between traditional mafia families in New York, while also confirming the supremacy of the 'Ndrangheta families in the international drug trade. While this

supremacy has been confirmed on multiple occasions by Italian anti-mafia authorities, the growing internationalisation of the 'Ndrangheta poses challenges to both Italian and foreign authorities in the fight against drug trafficking.

'Men of valour'

The name 'Ndrangheta derives from the Greek *andrangatheia* and means 'society of valorous men'. It refers to one of the Italian mafias that has its base in Calabria, at the toe of the Italian peninsula, opposite Sicily. This mafia, of uncertain origins, has a complicated structure and an even more complex network of illegal activities.

Indeed, the families of the 'Ndrangheta are autonomous in their criminal activities, while the risks and the profits are often shared among many families in the consortium. The families are often very different from each other, but they have certain common traits: for example, membership can only be acquired through blood ties; and the rituals of affiliation are based on symbolism, which draws on traditional values and religious references to strengthen the ties among members.

Furthermore, the 'Ndrangheta clans are able to infiltrate local politics, through endemic corruption and tight control of their territory. Their strength is in the 'local', in Calabria, where their activities affect every business and every aspect of community life. The Calabrian region is plagued by underdevelopment, poverty, and often detachment

from the central Italian government: according to the Italian National Statistics Office, the region in 2013 had an unemployment rate of 12.7% compared with the national average of 8.4%. It is ideally suited for a mafia culture to grow and to exploit clientelism and patronage, tight political networks, and a lack of diversity in investments and business.

Beyond Calabria, the clans have confirmed their influence over drug markets in Italy, the rest of Europe, and around the world. They have bought and acquired trafficking routes that once belonged to the Cosa Nostra in the US, as stated by anti-mafia prosecutor Nicola Gratteri (who reported the findings of Operation New Bridge in February 2014), and are constantly exploring new routes. Drugs, in particular cocaine, are their main sources of income.

Indeed, according to Roberto di Palma, anti-mafia prosecutor for Reggio Calabria, the market for cocaine is almost entirely dominated by the 'Ndrangheta clans that manage most of the European and African routes. In

South America, these clans have contacts with brokers, insurgent groups, paramilitary squads, and other local criminals.

Investigations carried out in 2014 as part of Operation Buongustaio and Operation New Bridge in Calabria showed that Calabrians were directly or indirectly involved in at least 80% of cocaine trafficking from Colombia. According to Gratteri, they have rolling agreements with producers based on verbal agreements, as their reputation means that they do not need to arrange ad hoc agreements.

These investigations span five continents – Africa, Australia, Europe, North America, and South America – for both the transport and the destination of the drugs. They shed light on the involvement of Calabrian families in the cocaine market and in the wider drug trade in general, which also involves the trade in heroin, methamphetamine, amphetamine, and cannabis.

In the US, the 'Ndrangheta has been recognised as a threat to security since 2008, when

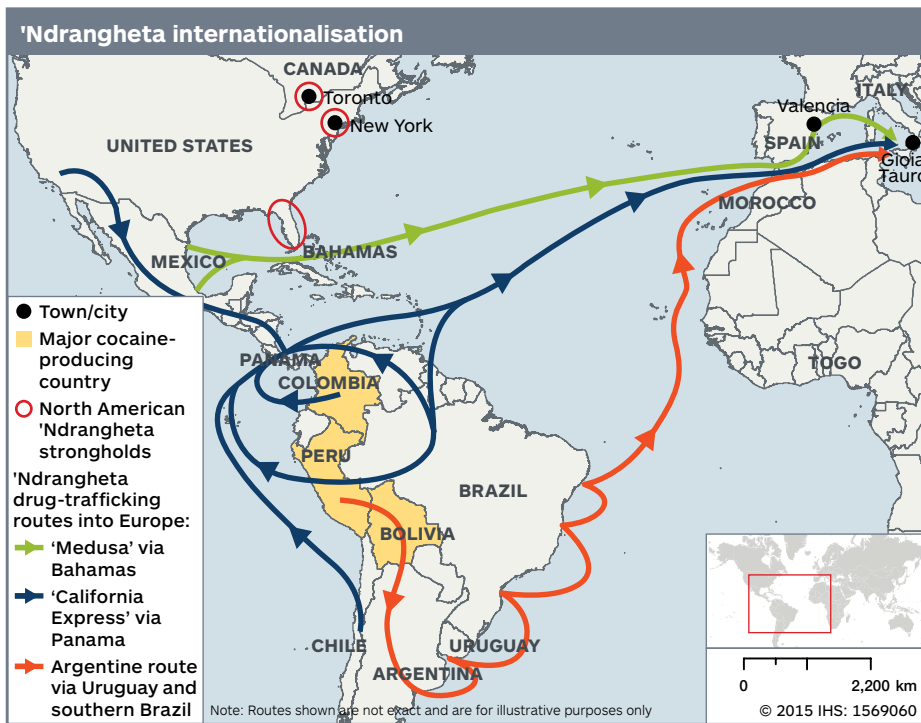
the administration of then president George W Bush listed the group in an update to the Foreign Narcotics Kingpin Designation Act 1999 (the 'Kingpin Act').

In September 2008, Operation Reckoning revealed links between Calabrian families and the Gulf Cartel based in northeastern Mexico. This investigation lasted 18 months as part of a multilateral effort between the Italian authorities, the US Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), the FBI, and the US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). The link between the Gulf Cartel and the 'Ndrangheta families was described as a joint venture for the transport of 16,000 kg of cocaine, 1,039 kg of methamphetamine, 19 kg of heroin, 51,258 kg of cannabis, 176 vehicles, and 167 weapons, mainly through the Calabrian port of Gioia Tauro.

At the same time in 2008, in the port of Melbourne, Australia, authorities seized 4.4 tonnes of MDMA coming from Calabria in cans of tomatoes. Described as the world's largest drugs seizure, the 2008 Australian



Italian police officers outside a suspect's house during an operation conducted with US FBI agents, in Sinopoli, southern Italy. The operation was connected to an international drug-trafficking ring whose base was a Calabrian-run restaurant in the Queens borough of New York. PA: 1634610



operation led to members of the large Italian-Australian community in Melbourne being arrested for drug trafficking under Operation Bootham, with 11 convictions secured.

The 'Ndrangheta' clans relied on heavy migration flows from Calabria to Australia, where they have established one of the organisation's foreign 'chambers of control' (a subsidiary overseas that responds as a first point of reference to the clans in Calabria), according to the June 2015 ABC/Fairfax report.

In 2014, the Italian National Anti-Mafia Directorate (Direzione Nazionale Antimafia) and the FBI again worked together in Operation New Bridge to send an agent undercover, in an attempt to understand and infiltrate the criminal network around the Gambino family in New York City and uncover its drug trafficking activities, mainly cocaine and heroin, with families of the 'Ndrangheta' settled in Calabria and in Canada. During this operation, 76 kg of cocaine were seized in Malaysia, shipped in a container transporting pineapples from French Guiana to Gioia Tauro.

According to the authorities, this operation showed how the clans were dominant in the cocaine market in New York and Florida, where they took root in the 1980s. These clans work closely with others established in Toronto, where there are nine *locali* of the 'Ndrangheta' (a consortium of approximately 50 men working for different clans).

The Italian authorities consider Canada to be the foremost 'chamber of control' abroad, as the presence of the clans is highly established, and they are involved in a multitude of criminal activities (such as drug trafficking, counterfeiting, extortion, and gambling), as well as legitimate public activities (such as rubbish collection and disposal), as Operation New Bridge revealed in 2014.

Italian operations with foreign partners, especially outside Europe, are constantly changing, revealing and confirming the links of the 'Ndrangheta's' affiliates with groups in the US, where the demand for drugs is the highest. However, the clans are also investing in Africa, through coalitions with local groups and by exploiting weaknesses in the law enforcement response of local authorities.

In Morocco, for example, the Royal Moroccan Gendarmerie (Gendarmerie Royale Marocaine) seized 1,000 kg of cocaine trafficked by Libyan groups in 2014. Of this haul, 259 kg was seized at the airport in Casablanca after arriving from Brazil in a shipment organised by clans in Gioia Tauro. Increasing numbers of clans are now investing in supplying cocaine to Morocco, since the consumption of cocaine among wealthy Moroccans has been increasing significantly, according to authorities in Rabat.

Other operations have also revealed an 'Ndrangheta' angle: in 2004, Operation Decollo discovered cocaine trafficking

from Calabria to Togo; and in 2006, Operation Ibisco revealed that 'Ndrangheta' clans together with Camorra clans were using Morocco to traffic drugs from South America towards Spain and Northern Europe. It is therefore clearly possible for 'Ndrangheta' clans to expand their business in response to an increasing demand.

Trafficking routes

One of the most useful indicators for studying the activity and presence of the 'Ndrangheta' in the global drug trade is to look at the routes to and from the port of Gioia Tauro, often dubbed the "Ndrangheta port". Gioia Tauro establishes the hegemony of the Calabrian clans in the business of drug trafficking.

According to Italian authorities and Europol, there are at least three established routes from Gioia Tauro of interest, which are repeatedly exploited by mafia clans. The first is the 'California Express' route: shipments from North America (California), through Mexico, arrive in Panama, where they collect smaller cargoes from Chile, Peru, Colombia, and northern Brazil, before leaving for Gioia Tauro.

The second route is known as 'Medusa', with shipments from ports in the Gulf of Mexico, stopping in Freeport (Bahamas), where they collect containers from South America and depart for Valencia (Spain) before the final leg towards Gioia Tauro. Shipments on the third route leave from Argentina, passing through Montevideo (Uruguay) and southern Brazil before heading to Italy.

The system used to traffic drugs along these routes is the most efficient. Neither the sender nor the recipient is aware of the cocaine in the containers: instead, the clans arrange for a trusted agent in the various ports to emplace the drugs in shipments. Multiple shipments arrive every day at Gioia Tauro, making it virtually impossible to check them all.

The longevity of certain relationships between members of clans of the 'Ndrangheta' and drug traffickers in Bolivia, Colombia, Mexico, and Peru reinforces the reputation of the 'Ndrangheta' in the drug trade in those source countries. The 'Ndrangheta' has its own well-established brokers in South America, who work for various clans at the same time and who interact closely with drug producers and traffickers.

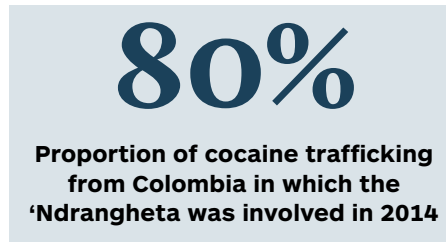
These brokerage activities were established in the 1980s, when the clans – enriched

by ransoms from kidnappings in Calabria – decided to invest in cocaine directly from source.

According to Gratteri, “There is no need for the men of the 'Ndrangheta to go to Bolivia in person. The agreements are made on the phone, from anywhere in the world, the payments are made through foreign banks and money transfers. There are frontmen, for sure, but primarily there are brokers, based in Santa Cruz [Bolivia] and linked to Mexican or Colombian cartels.”

In June 2014, Peruvian authorities arrested Pasquale Bifulco (alias ‘Spaghetti’), affiliated to Calabrian clans, who acted as a broker for a criminal organisation based in Montenegro and also for various Brazilian, British, Irish, and Peruvian drug traffickers. His role was allegedly to ship more than 700 kg of cocaine from Peru to Calabria. At the time of publication, Bifulco’s trial was ongoing.

However, even after his arrest, authorities in Calabria seized 55 kg of pure cocaine in August 2014. According to the authorities, the clans prefer cocaine from Peru because



of its higher purity than Colombian cocaine. Moreover, Peruvian criminal gangs are less organised than their Colombian counterparts, making it easier to do business.

Consequently, cocaine travels almost on ‘a rolling contract’ to Calabria, Europe, and North America as directed by 'Ndrangheta

bosses. Seizures by the authorities, arrests, and any losses are factored into the risk model and counterbalanced by the substantial proceeds that these alliances bring. The reputation of the 'Ndrangheta clans, their funds, and their brokers, are sufficient to maintain a constant re-supply of cocaine.

The most powerful clans prefer cocaine as their primary market because it allows them to invest with a high degree of security in a highly lucrative product.

While the 'Ndrangheta clans are not the sole actor in the drug trade, especially cocaine, they definitely rank among the main actors, as their operatives work everywhere in the world. Moreover, links between unsuspecting frontmen and brokers have been traced back to Calabria on various occasions, making the name of Calabrian families well known in the criminal underworld of many countries.

Conclusion

The clans of the 'Ndrangheta are well connected, wealthy, and most of all hidden. As they manage their affairs mostly indirectly, it is difficult – particularly for ‘non-expert’ authorities abroad – to detect their presence and their involvement in the drug trade. The strength of this mafia-type organisation lies in the power it enjoys at a local level, with Calabria being its dominion and ‘safe house’.

The internationalisation of the 'Ndrangheta happens in two ways: one is the ‘colonisation’ model, where the clans maintain a Calabrian counterpart in the foreign territory. This counterpart is Calabrian in origin, linked through bloodlines to the clans.

Indeed, this model may take the form of the existence of entire groups of Calabrians that are organised to reproduce the activities of the clans abroad. This is the case in Australia, Canada, and Germany, countries that have historically received Calabrian migrants and that have *locali* of clans that systematically arrange criminal activities and survive the attentions of law enforcement.

The second model of internationalisation is the ‘delocalisation’ model, present in many other countries, according to which the clans operate indirectly,

through brokers and occasional contacts with local criminals. This is usually the case in those countries with a more established underworld, where the 'Ndrangheta become partners in crime.

The US appears to offer a fusion of these two models, having historically been the destination for many Calabrian immigrants, but where Calabrian criminals have also historically liaised with families of La Cosa Nostra, especially in New York, in their quest for power and money. New York represents a perfect platform for the clans to use their links and established trafficking routes to launch a more flexible and more efficient machine for generating revenue through the drug trade.

This strategy therefore includes both the employment of traditional contacts and the use of more covert ones. The risks of this strategy are numerous: visible contacts are easier for the authorities to trace, but they often work only as fronts for much larger operations.

Conversely, the ability of the clans to pass unnoticed, the use of brokers, and the extent of their reputation in the producer countries all make it unlikely that authorities worldwide will be able to perceive the involvement of Calabrians when dealing with ‘visible’

crimes and with seized drugs.

Indeed, the contemporary risk posed by the 'Ndrangheta – apart from the obvious harms linked to drugs – is in their chameleon-like ability to infiltrate profitable markets through a complex network of contacts. At the same time, the Calabrian clans have another characteristic – their bloodline requirement for affiliation – that makes them even stronger, and which acts as a cement to guarantee trust, longevity, and endurance. ■

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On the web

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