

Gangs, Drugs, Terrorism—and Information-sharing

By GREG GARDNER and ROBERT KILLEBREW

The conflict in Mexico between the government and criminal drug cartels has been in the news lately, particularly because of the horrific levels of violence and its proximity to our border. The U.S. Government is increasingly concerned, and President Barack Obama has turned to the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff for options to provide timely support to Mexico. But the “cartel war” in Mexico, which is increasingly spilling into the United States, is just the latest, most

visible indicator of steadily deteriorating civil order south of the border.

Farther south, the anti-U.S. government of Hugo Chavez in Venezuela openly supports Hizballah, which has a growing presence in the “southern cone” of South American states and along the Andean Ridge. Circumstantial evidence is growing of mutual support between the more serious

transnational gangs operating throughout the Americas and the United States and members of state-sponsored terrorist organizations. Throughout the Southern Hemisphere, terrorist organizations and drug gangs are merging into quasi-irregular forces such as the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and other movements challenging local governments. This is no longer

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Airman and military working dog at Soto Cano Air Base support counternarcotics operations in Central America

only a crime problem. Left unchecked, the potential “threat stream” of narcotraffickers and fellow-traveling terrorist organizations will soon constitute an immediate threat to national and local security.

Domestic Insurgency?

The United States has long been interested in the defeat of South American terrorist gangs and has for decades supported the government of Colombia against the FARC movement. As the grim news from Mexico continues, and violence increasingly spills over the border into American cities and towns, concern in the U.S. Government will grow. The Defense and State Departments can expect to be called on to provide more low-key assistance to Latin American governments to beef up their security services in the face of more FARC-type challenges. On one end of the scale, security cooperation may extend to small military missions inside a U.S. Embassy; on the other, American advisors may be committed on the scale of U.S. support to Colombia, which is emerging as a template for successful collaboration with a Latin American ally. U.S. military and intelligence agency assistance can also be applied regionally, in particular against widespread lawlessness along the Andean Ridge corridor, provided that we act in support of local governments that have requested assistance. U.S. Southern Command has been involved with countries in the region and would lead any U.S. effort.

Inside the United States, however, a growing body of evidence indicates that criminal gangs are taking on the characteristics of domestic insurgents. Efforts to counter the effects of such groups are becoming similar to the wars going on in Mexico against drug gangs or against insurgents in Iraq and Afghanistan. These gangs are wresting control of territory from other drug gangs, intimidating witnesses, targeting law enforcement officials, and committing other hostile acts. Given this sort of dialectical movement toward cooperation between transnational gangs and state-sponsored terrorists, both in the United States and in the criminal and terrorist stew outside our borders, U.S. anticrime efforts must assume that criminal activity—particularly narcogangs operating inside American cities—will eventually become an enabler for terrorist activity either directly or by establishing urban or suburban

“ungoverned spaces” that often result from gang activity.

A key operational point is that the violent transnational gangs of Latin America, including the Mexican cartels, operate with little regard for national borders. Since national sovereignty stops at the border, countering their activities will require, among other things, near-seamless integration of foreign and domestic intelligence programs operated by a wide variety of allied states with American Federal, state, and local agencies. Finding and sealing the seams between U.S.

United States, and Canada. Its leadership operates internationally, sending leaders to the United States to supervise both discipline and businesses, which include drug distribution, prostitution, protection, larceny, and murder. MS-13 exploits the Latin American diaspora to the United States and Canada by integrating itself into the immigrant population and by imposing a brutal discipline, incorporating unspeakable punishments for informing or trying to leave the gang. In Fairfax, Virginia, for example, one law enforcement official

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and allied security programs outside our borders—particularly in the intelligence and information-exchange fields—are our most pressing over-the-horizon challenges. In fact, as President Obama and the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Admiral Michael Mullen, have indicated, this mission may well fall to the joint military forces of the United States in close collaboration with coalition partners.

estimates that all Latino immigrants below a certain age join MS-13, even as informal fellow travelers, as a matter of survival.

U.S. law enforcement reaction to the increasing presence of MS-13 and other Latin American gangs inside the United States is likewise transforming. In response to the geographical growth and mobility of the gangs, new Federal, state, and local

Airman works with Colombian officer during counterdrug mission in South America



National Guard Bureau (Cheryl Hackley)

As an example, one of the leading transnational criminal gangs in the United States is *Mara Salvatrucha*, or MS-13. Originally formed in Los Angeles, then deported to El Salvador, MS-13 now has “branch offices” throughout Central America, the

police cooperative structures are increasingly emerging to link police with their counterparts both nationally and worldwide. For example, Federal Bureau of Investigation agents are now permanently based in San Salvador to work directly alongside

investigators and analysts from El Salvador's *Policia Nacional Civil*. Throughout the United States, though, the daily frontline against gangs is overwhelmingly manned by local police departments. Some forces, particularly the New York Police Department, have professional and well-financed antigang and antiterrorist programs that even extend overseas.

But most frontline forces are not so fortunate, particularly in a struggling economy when cash-strapped municipalities have to choose between cops, schools, and fire departments. Because of the strains in local tax bases, police technology needed to track gangs and exchange information with other jurisdictions is sadly outdated. In one highly regarded antigang force in the Washington, DC, area, for example, data files are endangered because the force's antiquated electronic equipment is subject to both breakdown and hacking. Sharing information with other local forces or task forces nationwide is therefore slower and more problematic.

Gangs, on the other hand, enjoy considerable mobility, and effective law enforcement in one jurisdiction means that gangs simply move to a less contested area, often in a rural

setting where police forces are less robust. As one veteran police officer put it, "When we chased them out of New York, the murder rate went up in New Jersey." Communication and data-sharing among a wide number of Federal, state, and local agencies, from global military and intelligence agency channels to local cops, are key in defeating international gangs, and the results thus far are decidedly a mixed bag.

Fusion Center Concept

Until the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, local law enforcement priorities did not rise to the level of a national security concern. However, the 9/11 Commission identified a breakdown in information-sharing as a key factor in the failure to prevent the attacks. In response to the commission's recommendations, Congress passed and the President signed the Intelligence Reform and Terrorism Prevention Act of 2004. Section 1016 of the law called for the creation of an *information-sharing environment* (ISE) and defined it as "an approach that facilitates the sharing of terrorism information." The law required the President to designate a program manager for the ISE and establish the Information Sharing Council (ISC) to advise the President and program manager.

The implementation plan for the ISE sets forth the following vision:

A trusted partnership among all levels of government in the United States, the private sector, and our foreign partners, in order to detect, prevent, disrupt, preempt, and mitigate the effects of terrorism against the territory, people, and interests of the United States by the effective and efficient sharing of terrorism and homeland security information.

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After the attacks, then, the law enforcement community gained the additional mission of detection, deterrence, and prevention of future terrorist strikes. As a result, local police must deal with not only the day-to-day issues of crime and the fear of crime, but also the once-in-a-career terrorist attack. The ISC developed a concept of intel-



Colombian soldiers demonstrate counterdrug tactics at U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration in Bogotá

DOD (Kevin J. Gruenwald)

ligence “fusion centers” sponsored by the Department of Homeland Security. Fusion centers tie together all agencies necessary to integrate information about terrorist suspects, locations, and equipment that could be used in the planning or commission of a crime or terrorist act. To date, 58 regional, state, and city centers have been established at a cost of \$254 million supplied to state and local governments to support the centers. While some fusion centers, notably in New York, Los Angeles, and the Dallas region, are highly developed, most are still works in progress.

Typically, fusion centers consolidate resources from various participating agencies into a single primary facility, occasionally with additional satellite locations. The intent of the collocation is to support information-sharing and rapid analysis by allowing access to multiple agency sources in near real time. However, even now, information-sharing is often handicapped by stand-alone, single-agency data terminals or computers, which prevent rapid and automatic data analysis, forcing users to walk from terminal to terminal to integrate data. These challenges could easily be overcome through the employment of modern, secure, and open-architected information technologies. Whether bureaucratic politics and outdated administrative policies can be modified rapidly enough is another question. In contrast, Mexico is developing a police data sharing system called “Platform Mexico,” a nationwide integrated criminal information system to track criminal statistics and move records and intelligence among police and security forces. While the Mexican federal system differs in many ways from that of the United States, police professionals on both sides of the border recognize the value of rapid information transfer and intelligence-sharing to stay ahead of the cartels.

Getting Federal and local law enforcement communities onto common data-sharing standards is not easy. A big issue is trust between agencies—and establishing, implementing, and enforcing the policies, programs, and procedures that build trust between law enforcement and intelligence organizations throughout the U.S. Government structure, including the national intelligence agencies and the Department of Defense. Technology and common standards are key aspects of building that trust. Industry standards are commonly used outside

Strategic Questions for U.S.-Mexico Relations

By John A. Cope

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Mexico is suffering a crisis of public safety that the United States cannot minimize. Murders, organized kidnappings, and corruption rates have reached some of the highest levels in the world. Mexico’s government is locked in a violent struggle against powerful drug cartels that are also fighting each other for control of territory, resources, and manpower. The United States is the largest consumer of illegal drugs and the main source of the cartels’ high-powered weapons and kit. It also is beginning to suffer some spillover from the violence. The Bush administration accepted some shared responsibility for Mexico’s crisis and, in October 2007, jointly announced the 3-year, \$1.4-billion Mérida Initiative (including a small Central American portion) as a new kind of partnership to maximize the efforts against drug, human, and weapons trafficking.

As the level of violence along the U.S.-Mexico border has become sufficiently threatening, President Barack Obama has asked the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Admiral Michael Mullen, to review how Washington might do more to help Mexico’s forces. But by only looking south, we ignore the seeds of a future domestic problem that have been planted here. If Mexican and other Latin American narco-gangs continue to grow in scope and power within our country, they may become the next-generation irregular challenge to the joint force. The United States and Mexico must find ways to perfect cooperation in the near term and confront a shared security problem together.

Mexico’s level of violence escalated in 2008 with nearly 6,300 people killed—many of them tortured and mutilated—up from 2,700 in 2007. The bloodshed and intimidation carried out with impunity suggest that the cartels have sometimes had the upper hand, particularly in the borderlands. In the United States, the gravity of Mexico’s situation had little effect on the first tranche of the Mérida Initiative. The package of equipment, software, and technical assistance moved slowly through a reluctant U.S. Congress, where the funding request was reduced significantly and several conditions were imposed. There were few signs of urgency.

These circumstances raise several important questions. Should relations with Mexico be higher on President Obama’s foreign policy agenda? How should the administration manifest its commitment to this neighbor, which not only shares intimate ties but also harbors memories of unfair treatment? Are there more meaningful and deeper ways to cooperate in addressing a common problem? Will Washington maintain status quo commitment to Mérida while concentrating on preventing drug-related violence from spilling across the border? Will Mexico be driven to a level of national desperation that will force it to undertake long-term reforms to improve government performance and ties with the general population? (*cont.*)

the law enforcement community, as are open architectures and integrated systems that provide a common view of all data. Furthermore, the use of business intelligence tools, data cleansing, and data-mining algorithms to enhance the quality and reliability of information is common in the business world. In law enforcement communities, however, standards and information management tools/strategies are only slowly becoming more prevalent as these agencies recognize the cost savings and return on investment that industry-standard approaches provide. Convincing thousands of diverse law enforcement and local government officials to adopt compatible, common data-sharing standards remains a tremendous challenge, even assuming consistent funding for updated technology is available—a big assumption. Federal agencies also slow down integration and fusion with concerns about unvetted personnel receiving access to agency data over a nationwide or international network.

Some progress has been made. The Homeland Security Data Network (HSDN), which allows the Federal Government to move information and intelligence to the states at the secret level, is deployed to 19 of 58 fusion centers. Through HSDN, fusion center staff can access the National Counterterrorism Center and exchange the most recent terrorism intelligence. A Global Justice

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Extensible Markup Language data model provides standardized information exchange protocol packages that enhance regional information-sharing. This model has recently become the core foundation for a National Information Exchange Model, designed to develop, disseminate, and support enterprise-wide information, exchange standards, and processes. Still, the extent to which these largely incomplete systems can assist law enforcement officials at the lowest levels—where the action is—varies widely. There is also a question whether the fusion centers, the HSDN, and other initiatives are being applied to criminal gangs as well as potential

The crisis has deep roots. In the 1980s and 1990s, successive governments tended to pursue a “live and let live” response to lucrative, brutal, and well-organized regional cartels. Because they provoked violence, jeopardizing public safety, direct confrontations were minimized. With the demise of Colombia’s main syndicates in the mid-1990s, Mexican “families,” which had worked for the Colombians, took control of domestic drug trafficking. By the end of the decade, higher cocaine flows from Colombia led President Ernesto Zedillo of the Institutional Revolutionary Party to collaborate more aggressively with the United States.

The historic presidential victory of Vicente Fox and his center-right National Action Party (PAN) coincided with dramatic increases in narcotics-related violence. During his administration, drug cartels added profitable methamphetamine and heroin to the more traditional cocaine and marijuana they smuggled in bulk into the United States. New markets appeared in Europe and Mexico itself. The expanding narcotics trade encountered stronger U.S. resistance in the post-9/11 era. Washington’s focus on securing the country from terrorists and illegal immigrants resulted in the construction of barriers along the 2,000-mile border with Mexico and more technology and law enforcement personnel to secure it.

Difficulty moving their product into the United States led to a vicious war within and among cartels for control of corridors and local domination of Mexican markets. This clash introduced ruthless militarized gunmen such as Los Zetas, manned with former members of the Mexican and Guatemalan army. President Fox tried unsuccessfully over 6 years to purge and reorganize federal police forces and rein in organized crime, extraditing captured kingpins to the United States. Urban and rural instability escalated sharply, and a general climate of lawlessness encouraged more kidnappings and other types of criminal enterprise.

Felipe Calderón, also from the PAN, succeeded Fox in 2006. Although Mexican military units lacked the necessary training, President Calderón declared war on drug traffickers by committing the loyal armed forces—using more than 45,000 soldiers—in a series of large-scale operations intended initially to restore public order in murder-wracked Ciudad Juárez, Tijuana, and other cities in northern Mexico. It quickly became apparent that the president actually was fighting to reassert state control over cartel-dominated areas. His ability to sustain government presence will be crucial until programs to improve military capabilities and reform the police at all levels can be accomplished.

The Calderón administration faces formidable obstacles to ending Mexico’s fragmented sovereignty and regaining public confidence. The extent of drug-related corruption across government, especially in local police forces, far exceeds even pessimistic expectations. The sophistication of the criminal groups with their state-of-the-art military weapons and equipment—much of it smuggled from the United States—often outclasses the Mexican military. Furthermore, the cartels use kidnapping, brutality, and other forms of psychological intimidation effectively. Some community political and business leaders have left their positions or moved their families to the United States.

The seriousness of Mexico’s insecurity was captured in the February 2009 State Department travel advisory for Mexico:

Some recent Mexican army and police confrontations with drug cartels have resembled small-unit combat, with cartels employing automatic weapons and grenades. Large

firefights have taken place in many towns and cities across Mexico, but most recently in northern Mexico. . . . During some of these incidents, U.S. citizens have been trapped.

Ironically, the advisory appeared as Mexico's tourism industry reported that in 2008, 22.6 million foreign visitors, the majority from the United States, spent \$13.3 billion, an increase of 3.4 percent over the previous year.

As the crisis intensifies in Mexico, Americans are not immune from cartel violence and corruption. Mexican ties to U.S. organized crime groups have long been established. Major Mexican syndicates are now thought to be present in at least 230 American cities. Over the last 2 years, U.S. multiagency counternarcotics task forces have arrested more than 750 members of the Sinaloa cartel's distribution network and 500 from the Gulf cartel. Police link recent assassinations and mass graves in Arizona and New Mexico to the cartels. Phoenix is now ranked the second worst place for kidnapping globally, after Mexico City: 359 kidnappings took place there in 2008, some of them linked to trafficking. The feared spillover of Mexican narcotics-related violence has, in fact, taken place—and is getting worse. Alarm bells are ringing, but a U.S. strategic game plan has yet to emerge.

Despite a prickly past and many differences, the United States and Mexico are interdependent, and they formalized that relationship with the North American Free Trade Agreement. Our border is the historic face of this complex relationship. With its network of power plants and transmission lines, gas and oil pipelines, and linked highway and rail systems, the borderland is strikingly vibrant and productive. There is a constant flow of people and vehicles in the millions. Beyond the border, the realization of greater mutual understanding, and an enhanced and trusting relationship, is a work in slow motion.

This raises additional and substantial strategic and policy questions. What are American objectives? The Mérida Initiative can be reduced to assistance and cooperation, but to what end? How far is Washington willing to go to reduce the American demand for drugs, curtail arms smuggling south, exchange intelligence, and work with Mexico (and Central American states) to attack the cartels' supply link to South America? Is integrated sea and air control over the approaches to North America feasible? In turn, how far is Mexico City willing to go to work intimately with its neighbor to the north, from whom Mexico traditionally has sought to remain independent?

terrorists, and to what levels. Big-city departments with adequate funding—the New York and Los Angeles Police Departments, for instance—are more likely to have the resources to integrate functions and protocols in adequately staffed fusion centers than are small-town police departments.

The Homeland Security fusion centers are the most visible, but not the only, attempt to integrate intelligence and coordinate activity against criminal gangs and terrorists. Other agencies are involved in assistance to law enforcement, though their efforts are not necessarily targeted against

terrorists. The Office of National Drug Control Policy sponsors the High-Intensity Drug Trafficking Area Program, designed to support and integrate law enforcement activities in designated localities in the United States with high volumes of drug trafficking. In addition to pushing for coordination, this program can provide funding for Federal, state, and local law enforcement investments in infrastructure and initiatives to confront drug traffickers. Other programs exist on regional or local levels to encourage greater data-sharing and commonality of equipment, software, and other

data requirements. But, as is the case of the fusion centers, the results are mixed and may or may not help the cop on the beat or the state trooper at a traffic stop. Much more remains to be done.

The growth of criminal gangs, and the introduction of state-supported Islamic terrorism into the Western Hemisphere, foreshadows the practically inevitable fusion of criminal gangs and terrorists within the borders of the United States. Countering the threat will require fusion on our part, as well—close coordination among military, national intelligence, and law enforcement organizations at all levels. Even with the urgency arising from 9/11, backbone information-sharing systems are still not in place, though the fusion center concept is a sound, cost-effective beginning for making the required intelligence and information-sharing links. We must improve our overall antiterrorist and anticrime intelligence capability by creating a senior position to coordinate domestic intelligence-gathering and its integration into national systems, establishing a grant program to support thousands more state and local intelligence analysts and law officers, and increasing our capacity to share intelligence across all levels of government. With the new Obama administration in office, more attention must be given to countering this widely diffuse challenge. We must do better, and we must act now. **JFQ**

U.S. Air Force (Joe Lawry)



Virginia Fusion Center, sponsored by Department of Homeland Security, provides criminal intelligence and technical support to local, state, and Federal law enforcement agencies