

# THREAT ANALYSIS:

## Organized Crime and Narco-Terrorism in Northern Mexico

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PHOTO: The United Mexican States access control point in Tijuana, Baja California, Mexico from the adjacent United States city of San Diego, California. (courtesy of author)

**O**RGANIZED CRIME SYNDICATES are modern enemies of democracy that relentlessly engage in kidnapping and assassination of political figures, and traffic not only in addictive and lethal substances, but also increasingly in human beings. To create an environment conducive to success in their criminal interests, they engage in heinous acts intended to instill fear, promote corruption, and undermine democratic governance by undercutting confidence in government. They assassinate or intimidate political figures and pollute democratic processes through bribes and graft in cities along both sides of the U.S.-Mexican border. In the long term, such actions erode individual civil liberties in America and Mexico by undermining both governments' abilities to maintain societies in which the full exercise of civil liberties is possible. This danger is ominously evident on the Mexican side of the border, where 86 percent of those responding to a poll in Mexico City in 2004 said they would support government restrictions of their civil rights in order to dismantle organized crime, and another 67 percent said militarizing the police force would be the only way to accomplish this.<sup>1</sup> These views suggest that an extremely unhealthy sociopolitical environment is evolving at America's very doorstep. We should see this not as a collateral issue associated with the War on Terrorism, but as a national security issue deserving of the same level of interest, concern, and resourcing as the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

This article provides an ethnographic analysis of narco-terrorism, narco-corruption, and human trafficking in the northern states of Mexico, and an overview of Mexican organized crime and its destabilizing effect on Mexico's attempts to create a functioning, uncorrupt democracy.

### The Legacy of Spanish Conquest and Revolution

Mexico's territorial confines were the site of advanced Native American civilizations dating from well before the beginning of what archeologists now refer to as the Common Era. "Mexico" itself comes from the Aztec word *mejica*. The Aztecs were a relatively late-developing indigenous civilization that came to dominate the key central region of the area. From the late 15th century they aggressively expanded their territory through military conquest until the arrival of a Spanish military contingent in 1530. Almost immediately after the arrival of the Spanish, the Aztec's hegemony in the region collapsed. Disease, dissatisfaction among the Aztecs with their monarchy, and superstitions regarding the arrival of white Europeans (seen

as returning gods) combined to undermine Aztec religious and political authority. In an astonishingly short time, the conquerors became the conquered, succumbing to the technologically superior Spanish forces led by Hernando Cortez. Shortly thereafter, Spain absorbed Mexico into the Spanish empire, and Mexico remained under Spanish rule for nearly three centuries. Although Spanish became the national language and Roman Catholicism the virtual national religion, Mexican culture evolved as a liberal mix of Spanish practices, indigenous customs, and native religious traditions.<sup>2</sup>

Inspired by the Enlightenment ideals behind the American and French revolutions, Mexico declared independence from Spanish colonial rule at the end of the 18th century, and in 1810, it won its autonomy. However, political stability proved difficult to achieve, and Mexico underwent a series of revolutions, rigged elections, and other political misadventures.<sup>3</sup> The nation was victimized by a war of expansion waged by the U.S. in 1848 and lost a significant amount of territory. French forces then occupied and annexed Mexico in 1863, holding dominion until they were thrown out in 1867. The Mexican people once more attempted to establish an independent state ruled by a pluralistic democracy, but suffered another setback when Porfirio Diaz came to power in 1876. This strongman assumed dictatorial powers and ruled for 35 years.

In 1910, Diaz was finally overthrown by a bloody revolution, one that saw the emergence of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), a political power that would finally stabilize Mexico.<sup>4</sup> The PRI dominated Mexican politics for the next 70 years without any true opposition. Unfortunately, although it began with a lofty nationalist vision, the PRI quickly degenerated into an autocratic oligarchy. One-party rule led to an authoritarian regime in which Mexico's elite used the institutions of government to consolidate power and wealth into their own hands. The PRI especially employed the police forces at federal, state, and local levels to help maintain rigid socioeconomic inequities. The Mexican majority, who remained hopelessly mired in poverty, effectively became the helots of the PRI.

Unchallenged one-party rule also engendered widespread official corruption and political scandals. Poorly paid members of the police began accepting bribes and committing graft to

supplement their incomes. As a result, the nation's domestic security forces became dependent on institutional bribery in exchange for services and party loyalty.<sup>5</sup> This ingrained tradition persists today as an accepted convention in some quarters of Mexican law enforcement.

Born in a struggle to overthrow a vicious dictator for lofty social and political objectives, the PRI became little more than a tool successive presidents and party leaders used to protect the property and privileges of the ruling class at the expense of the Mexican masses, mainly persons of indigenous or mestizo descent.<sup>6</sup>

During the PRI's long period of dominance, the methods it used for maintaining its power remained somewhat obscured from international public view. However, its ruthlessness in dealing with perceived threats to its power emerged with special ferocity during the Plaza de Tlatelolco massacre in October 1968. In a government operation coordinated by the PRI and executed mainly by presidential police death squads and the Mexican military, hundreds of student protestors from the University of Mexico were assaulted, abducted, and murdered in cold blood. The massacre permanently undercut the PRI's international standing and legitimacy. Even today, lingering public bitterness, suspicion, and resentment over this event undermines public confidence in Mexico's security forces.

## Changing Political Currents

The PRI tolerated token political opposition for years in Mexico, mainly to maintain the illusion of pluralistic democracy. For decades it employed an assortment of tactics to ensure that real political opposition never coalesced. However, the PRI-dominated, one-party system grip on Mexican politics loosened with the forced devaluation of the Mexican peso in late 1994. That crisis generated popular discontent with the government and plunged the country into economic turmoil by triggering the nation's worst recession in more than 50 years. Recession resulted in demands for reform backed by a real threat of domestic violence that the PRI feared it could not control.<sup>7</sup> The party also faced international condemnation for massive corruption, economic mismanagement, and the peso's collapse—a collapse that adversely affected the global economy through worldwide money markets.



AFP

Armored vehicles and soldiers patrol the streets of the Tlatelolco section of Mexico City three days after the “Tlatelolco Massacre,” in which 200 to 300 students protesting heavy-handed police actions were killed by police fire, 5 October 1968.

To make matters worse for the PRI, many linked the peso’s collapse to the 1994 assassination of presidential candidate Luis Donaldo Colosio, who had run on a political platform vowing to reform the PRI. Although the authorities jailed a reputed trigger-man for this crime, they never satisfactorily explained his links to those who were working to defeat Colosio and his plan for reform.

All this bad news led to the 2000 election of Vicente Fox of the National Action Party (PAN). His election marked the first time since the Mexican Revolution of 1910 that an opposition party defeated the incumbent political party in a free and fair election. President Fox became Mexico’s first chief executive to take the reins of government power in a peaceful transition from one political party to another.<sup>8</sup>

Unfortunately, enthusiasm for Fox was short-lived. He proved unable to deal with a sagging

economy or to obtain the political cooperation necessary to govern effectively. The people blamed Fox for continuing high unemployment, economic stagnation, and continuing widespread corruption in the government. Moreover, his lack of success in persuading the United States to liberalize restrictions against “illegal aliens” crossing the border to find work resulted in public accusations that Fox was “licking the boots” of the Bush administration. Fox left office widely viewed as having presided over a failed presidency. Mexico’s seemingly intractable and growing problems of poverty and de facto disenfranchisement of large segments of the population through low wages, massive unemployment, and class-based inequities exacerbated tensions with the United States over trade agreements and immigration issues.

In summary, due to a long legacy of historical, social, cultural, political, and economic challenges,



Mexico's current sociopolitical and economic environment is fertile ground for organized criminal activities and revolutionary social movements. Both have taken root and are thriving. Exploitation of Mexico's plight by more overt enemies of the U.S. Government and people is both possible and conceivable.

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### **Key Terrain Conducive to Illegal Activity**

Six of Mexico's 32 states share a 2,000-mile border with the United States. Although the border is long, the terrain it crosses is very rugged. Rough and treacherous mountains, large desert areas virtually devoid of water, unpredictable weather conditions, and extreme high and low temperatures limit the number of practical overland routes that cross-border travelers, including criminals, can use routinely. Environmental and topographical conditions tend to channel most organized criminal traffic through a handful of areas. Not surprisingly, those areas tend to be cities that face each other across the border in relatively close proximity. United States and Mexican authorities have identified three such urban areas that are major points of entry for cross-border drug and human trafficking: Tijuana, Baja California (northwestern Mexico), which faces San Diego, California; Naco, Sonora (north-central Mexico), which faces Douglas, Arizona; and Juarez, Chihuahua (northeastern Mexico), which faces El Paso, Texas.

Operating from these locations, transnational drug syndicates coordinate the cross-border transport of illegal drugs, undocumented workers, counterfeit money, and other forms of contraband.<sup>9</sup> Additionally, the criminal organizations involved in the drug trade have moved beyond merely arranging cross-border drug transport: they cultivate, produce,

distribute, and transship drugs; launder money; and make legitimate economic investments using illegally obtained funds.<sup>10</sup>

By cooperating in law-enforcement and military drug-interdiction operations, Mexico and the United States have created substantial difficulties for traffickers. However, organized crime has responded with great resourcefulness. It has developed sophisticated smuggling and concealment techniques for use on commercial air, land, and sea transport; purchased light aircraft and built clandestine airfields; acquired advanced, military-grade encrypted wireless telecommunication systems; and constructed vast and elaborate tunnel networks.<sup>11</sup>

**Narco-trafficking crime groups.** Evidence of the success drug traffickers have had in circumventing law-enforcement efforts is apparent in the emergence of several powerful criminal organizations that have established themselves as virtual governments within some regions of Mexico. As early as 1995, about a half-dozen *patrones* (bosses) dominated Mexican drug trafficking. These cartel leaders were sometimes allied, sometimes at war with each other, but always competitive and active.<sup>12</sup> Currently, the most prominent Mexican groups fueling drug trafficking into the United States are headed by Arellano-Felix, Vicente Carrillo-Fuentes, Armando Valencia, Miguel Caro-Quintero, and Osiel Cardenas-Guillen.<sup>13</sup> Named for the senior leaders who organize and run them, these five organizations are responsible for the majority of cocaine, heroin, marijuana, and, increasingly, methamphetamine smuggled illegally into the United States.

### **The Family Cartel's Infrastructure**

Modern criminal enterprise, especially in the world of narco-trafficking, takes the form of cartels. English-speakers know the word "cartel" from its wide use in the 1960s to describe the Organization of Petroleum-Exporting Countries (OPEC), an alliance formed by a group of oil-producing nations to control the production and distribution of petroleum products, in effect creating a powerful cooperative monopoly over the world's oil supply. Subsequently, the word entered Spanish in the late 1970s when it was applied to family-based drug trafficking rings in Colombia, most



courtesy of author

**A migrant worker waits for his opportunity to cross under a barrier along the Mexican-United States border area. The presence of a United States Border Patrol vehicle in the distance does not appear to deter him.**

notably in the cities of Medellin and Cali. These cartels cooperated with each other in a relatively organized way to avoid strife, resolve differences, and monopolize drug trafficking, principally to the United States and to a lesser extent Europe. The Academy Dictionary of the Spanish Language has since accepted cartel and its “organized criminal enterprise” definition.<sup>14</sup> This definition does not, however, recognize the importance blood ties have in establishing such syndicates in Latin America.

The Latin American notion of cartel is informed by the idea that social status, money, and power are best located, distributed, and maintained within families of blood-relatives. Family ties allow for economy of effort; they minimize friction within and between criminal groups. Of course, the concept of a criminal family cartel is neither new nor unique to Latin American crime syndicates, as the history of the Italian Mafia and many similar organizations suggest.

With their solid family foundations, it is no accident that Hispanic cartels have exhibited enduring strength and great resiliency. While there are many differences between the various Latin American nationalities, Latin Americans in general tend to live in extended families in close proximity to each other and have frequent social contact, unlike in the United States. Thus, when criminal enterprise takes root as a family business in Latin America, it benefits from the stability of a ready-made culture of loyalty and obligation among extended families that tend to be large in number and whose members are on close personal terms.

Family loyalty, a value instilled in Latin American families from childhood on, often forbids betrayal of another family member, no matter what the reason. Similarly, each family member has an obligation to support other family members, whatever the circumstances, and must react violently towards any family member who betrays

the family by such actions as cooperating with law-enforcement authorities, especially if the cooperation resulted in a family member's imprisonment or execution. As a result, Hispanic drug lords' most trusted partners and henchmen are usually members of their own families.

The mores that establish the rules for family structure in Hispanic society also help mitigate competition among family members. In Mexico, powerful traditions define who is in charge of extended families, establish succession rights, and define the role of each individual in the family. Thus, the eldest son has guaranteed leadership rights to the family cartel, unless he proves incompetent or is arrested by police and jailed. In either event, tradition calls for him to cede his power to another sibling, and the business goes on. So strong is the respect for family in Latin America that competing drug cartels, in so far as they cooperate, do so in large measure because they identify with and approve of the manner in which their competitors choose their leaders.

Within the cartel, family conventions shape perceptions of what constitutes a threat to the business and what justifies retaliation. For example, the entire family has an obligation to avenge a fellow member who has become a "victim" of the law. It is not unusual for anyone who goes to the law or whom the families believe has used the law to dishonor, disrespect, or threaten a family member to become the target of retaliation. The family considers affronts to its members to be affronts to the entire family and views them as justification even for killing police authorities.<sup>15</sup>

At the top of cartels, senior leaders maintain close relationships. At the operational level, however, the cartels compartmentalize narco-trafficking among cells that have relatively little direct contact with each other. Because of this decentralized structure, it is difficult for one cartel cell to compromise another should police infiltrate or take down the first cell. Such cells cultivate the product, smuggle it across borders, and distribute it at destination points. Other cells specialize in promoting and exploiting corruption; counterintelligence; security; and even assassination.<sup>16</sup>

The decentralized organizational structure of drug trafficking organizations below the senior leadership has also proven to be a key factor in

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"Wanted Fugitives" of the United States Drug Enforcement Administration posted at [www.dea.gov](http://www.dea.gov). These Internet postings are published and updated in both English and Spanish.

facilitating the cartels' survival since the cells can function autonomously regardless of who is at the top of the cartel structure. If senior cartel leaders are incarcerated, removed for incompetence, or killed, the cartel can continue operations relatively unaffected until it settles the question of succession.<sup>17</sup> For this reason, arrests of key leaders often end up being irrelevant or even counterproductive to defeating the cartel because its new leader quickly takes effective measures to avoid the mistakes that resulted in his predecessor's demise. In many cases, supposedly successful raids only prompt drug-trafficking gangs to compartmentalize and decentralize even further, making future efforts to track, identify, infiltrate, and dismember them more difficult.

## Narco-Terrorism, Narco-Corruption, and Drug Money

Drug cartels have the power to undermine popular trust and confidence in the government and even



the sovereignty of the government itself. This effect is precisely what narco-traffickers aim to accomplish in order to reduce or eliminate official pressure against their activities. To do this, they generally pursue two lines of operation: narco-terrorism and narco-corruption. Effective use of these two functions may bring an entire community or region under the de facto control of a drug cartel.<sup>18</sup>

**Narco-terrorism.** Basic terrorism is best understood as raw violence—sometimes applied precisely and other times arbitrarily—aimed not only at killing adversaries but also at intimidating the population into permitting the terrorists to operate unopposed. Terrorist groups commonly use kidnapping, murder, bombings, stylized execution—even such gruesome acts as public disfigurement and desecration of bodies—to achieve their objectives.

Differences among terrorist groups lie in their objectives, not their techniques. Political terrorists select targets that support a political agenda, while narco-terrorists select targets to further a profit-making agenda. Consequently, narco-terrorists choose their targets to establish or enforce drug-trafficking boundaries between competing groups, to eliminate competition from rival criminal organizations altogether, or to neutralize key witnesses or government authorities that pose obstacles to their illegal business.

*Narco-terrorism* is best understood as the organized employment of violence against the local populace, the security forces, and the government to intimidate anyone contemplating resistance to drug trafficking. These actions include assassination of governmental officials who attempt to dismantle drug trafficking organizations. Narco-terrorism often aims to force the government to change policies or counter official activities that adversely affect its businesses. For example, narco-terrorists attempt to frighten government officials into denying other countries' or states' requests to extradite detained drug traffickers for criminal prosecution.

Narco-trafficking violence is often sustained, public, and spectacular. In 2004, Mexico ranked second in Latin America for kidnappings, which reached an epidemic level of 3,000 incidents.<sup>19</sup> (This was behind only Colombia, which reported 4000 kidnappings.) Such kidnappings often involve demands for large ransom or rescue fees from family members. In 2004, kidnappers prob-

ably grossed almost \$1 billion from their crimes.<sup>20</sup> Demands often accompany packages containing the victim's body parts. This brutality is meant to terrorize the family into cooperating, expediting payment of the ransom demands, and forgoing contact with the police.

Drug-related kidnappings and murders often involve singularly horrific acts of torture in which the bodies are severely beaten, severed into several parts, or burned in ways intended to serve as a signature of a specific organized crime group. For example, drug dealers in Mexico developed a trademark execution called *entambados*, which consists of placing the victim, sometimes alive, into an industrial barrel and filling it with fresh cement. When the cement hardens, the drug dealers dump the barrel on a roadway near the victim's residence. The authorities must chisel the concrete away to identify the victim.<sup>21</sup>

Brazen attacks against law-enforcement officials continue to be closely associated with organized drug trafficking. For example, the U.S. Consulate in Nuevo Laredo reported drug traffickers murdered, kidnapped, or wounded 18 police officers in the Mexican state of Tamaulipas alone during 2003.<sup>22</sup> Narco-terrorists targeted a top state prosecutor and his bodyguard in 2004 and shot them dead in a popular nightclub in Tijuana. The executioners scattered unspent ammunition cartridges around his body to signal, "There is plenty of lead waiting for any followers."<sup>23</sup>

Journalists who produce unfavorable media coverage of organized crime syndicates are also at great risk of being killed. Francisco Ortiz Franco, founding editor of the *Zeta* weekly, routinely published articles exposing the activities of the Arellano-Felix drug cartel. In retaliation, hooded gunman executed Franco in front of his children as he picked them up from school in June 2004. The murder occurred within 300 yards of the Tijuana police ministry's and attorney general's offices.<sup>24</sup>

**Narco-corruption.** In contrast to narco-terrorism, which aims to intimidate and instill fear, narco-corruption aims to change the nature of the government by creating covert ties, dependencies, and even bonds of loyalty through subterranean social support networks that come to favor and protect the criminal organization embedded among the targeted population. Through bribes, substantial



The deputy director of the weekly newspaper *Zeta*, Francisco Ortiz Franco, lies dead inside his car after he was ambushed and killed by gunmen in the border city of Tijuana, Mexico, 22 June 2004.

monetary contributions to political candidates, and gifts or infrastructure improvements to communities such as roads or schools, it entices government officials and community members to adopt neutral or sympathetic attitudes toward drug-traffickers.

***In contrast to narco-terrorism, which aims to intimidate and instill fear, narco-corruption is an effort by drug traffickers to ingratiate themselves with the community and blend into it through well placed bribes and graft.***

Because the government pays its officials poorly, they are particularly vulnerable to such techniques. They often face the choice of either cooperating with organized crime by accepting bribes or becoming, along with their families, targets of violence. Successful narco-corruption, backed up by the threat of narco-terrorism, poses a difficult challenge to law-enforcement agencies. It makes it extremely

difficult to gather intelligence, conduct investigations, and find or arrest organized crime figures.

The life of Colombian drug lord Pablo Escobar provides an enduring example of the lasting and pernicious influence that narco-tactics can produce. Prior to his death at the hands of Colombian police in 1993, Escobar's Medellin Cartel controlled as much as 80 percent of the cocaine trafficked into the United States.<sup>25</sup> Escobar was a brutal crime boss responsible for dozens of assassinations, including those of prominent politicians and other public figures. He and his men committed innumerable other murders and frequently tortured their victims. Reputedly, Escobar popularized the "Colombian necktie," "a form of mutilation whereby victims have their tongue pulled through a slit in their throat."<sup>26</sup>

Although clearly a horrific criminal and an enemy to the Colombian and U.S. Governments, Escobar achieved a virtual cult following, becoming widely regarded as a hero by the people of Medellin, including many in law-enforcement and the government. He accomplished this by routinely using a portion of his profits to provide gifts and



housing for the poor and to fund the construction of community recreational facilities such as little league baseball stadiums. He also liberally distributed money gifts to key leaders. Similarly, Escobar ingratiated himself with Colombia's rural peasants by building schools, hospitals, and roads in some of the poorest areas of the country, which the government had long neglected. These deeds earned him the affectionate name of "Don Pablito." Few in Medellin and its surrounding area were willing to disclose information about him to the authorities. To demonstrate just how enduring narco-corruption of this kind can be, Escobar's gravesite has become a virtual shrine, visited by many members of the community and regularly adorned with candles, flowers, and incense.<sup>27</sup> Some Colombians even claim that miracles take place at his tomb.<sup>28</sup>

**Corruption versus terrorism.** Escobar's effectiveness in co-opting large numbers of people suggests that narco-corruption can be much more effective than narco-terrorism. A "business" that relies mainly on violence will eventually defeat itself. Terrorized communities will, sooner or later, withhold the support that any criminal organization depends on, leading to reduced monetary returns, reduced receptivity to narco-terrorist propaganda, fewer recruitment prospects, and unfavorable national and media coverage. They will also begin to cooperate with law-enforcement agencies.<sup>29</sup> In other words, narco-terrorism may actually establish or reinforce the perception of drug traffickers as aliens to the community, while narco-corruption tends to make the criminal enterprise an accepted and even valued part of the community in some important quarters.

## Human Trafficking and Child Slavery

As criminal enterprises expand their portfolios, a new and especially unsavory enterprise has emerged. It utilizes the same trafficking routes and supporting organizations developed by the illicit drug trade, but traffics in human beings. Increasingly, criminal enterprises in Mexico have begun diversifying by smuggling human beings across the border and by engaging in the slave trade. Although some use the terms "human smuggling" and "human trafficking" interchangeably, they are actually very different crimes. A smuggled person

pays for his journey abroad. The smuggler makes money by transporting clients across the border, where he leaves them to their devices. In contrast, human trafficking is kidnapping; it entails bondage (monetary, emotional, physical) and involuntary servitude after the victim has arrived at a destination point. Human trafficking is prevalent throughout the world, but is especially common among the Native American populations in Mexico. Extreme poverty in some areas has resulted in a relatively recent phenomenon of enormous human rights concern.

In the Oaxaca Mountains near the interior of Mexico, sources report that women driven to live in extreme poverty now often sell their children and ask few questions about what will become of them. Depending upon the child's complexion and the client's wealth, the cost to purchase a child can reportedly run from \$25,000 to \$45,000.<sup>30</sup> At the high end, these children are used to supply the overwhelming demand in the European and American adoption markets.<sup>31</sup> According to one source, a white man traveling in rural Mexico can often have his choice of young Indian *mestizas* to sleep with because the desperate women hope the brief union will result in bearing a child with "high value."<sup>32</sup>

To adopt a Mexican child, extensive documentation is required, including powers of attorney, birth certificates, and adoption contract agreements. But instead of hindering child trafficking, the adoption process encourages the practice by escalating the monetary reward for all those involved. Bad actors include doctors, judges, lawyers, and traffickers, all of whom require a "fee" from the buyer at each step of the process.<sup>33</sup>

Despite the sordid nature of the Mexican adoption mill, children subjected to it might be considered lucky in comparison to the darker-skinned children whom traffickers sell into a life of slavery within rich Mexican families. Even unluckier are those sold to pimps, pedophiles, Internet child pornographers, and other human traffickers.<sup>34</sup> Additionally, missionaries often comment that the major economic export in the Oaxaca region is children auctioned to handlers who exploit them as beggars. Oaxacan children, some as young as three, are routinely seen begging for money in the tourist areas of Ensenada, Rosarito, and Tijuana. On a good day, a begging child can net as much as \$100 dollars from tourists.<sup>35</sup>



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courtesy of author

Storefront flyers warning American tourists in Ensenada, Baja California, Mexico that giving money or making purchases from child beggars actually contributes to the income of malicious business owners who operate child exploitation and human trafficking rings in Northern Mexico, 1 June 2004.

While many Mexicans openly discuss the problem, there is no consensus about what to do. Recently, storefront flyers lined the street shops of Ensenada, warning tourists that money given to child beggars and peddlers goes directly into the pockets of child exploiters. The Integral Familiar Development, a Mexican Government program set up to meet community social needs, developed this plan to diminish the profits associated with child trafficking and exploitation in Mexico.

The exploitation of Mexican children does not stop at the U.S. border. A promise of legitimate labor or educational opportunities often lures young Mexican children into the United States, where they end up as servant-slaves, brothel prostitutes, or sweatshop employees.<sup>36</sup> Violence, intimidation, and starvation are used to control and manipulate these children. As early as 1997, police in New York City discovered 55 deaf-mute children brought from Mexico by a criminal organization specializing in

selling children into slavery.<sup>37</sup> Sign language interviews with the children found that they worked up to 18 hours a day and were paid nothing. Similar cases have turned up in Florida, Texas, and South Carolina. One case involved 20 women from Mexico, some as young as 14. These women traveled all across the United States, on prostitution circuits, "servicing" migrant workers in agricultural camps. The women received \$3 for each sex act performed, while their captors pocketed \$17.<sup>38</sup>

In addition, although Mexican authorities deny it, "baby farms" are said to exist along the Mexican-U.S. border.<sup>39</sup> In these places sick, weak, and abandoned children are reportedly killed for their body parts. Many believe organ trafficking to be a hoax, the stuff of urban legend, but the UN Convention against Transnational Organized Crime has issued a "trafficking in persons" protocol in which the definition of criminal exploitation includes "forced organ removal" (among prostitution, forced labor, and slavery).<sup>40</sup>

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## Insurgency and Organized Crime

Armed political movements that actively oppose the government often create the conditions for the emergence of organized crime. Among such political movements are guerrillas and terrorist groups.

Some use the term guerrilla interchangeably with the term terrorist. However, the words mean different things. Guerrilla comes from the Spanish term meaning “little war,” which described the Spanish rebellion against French troops after Napoleon’s 1808 invasion of the Iberian peninsula.<sup>41</sup> Guerrilla groups usually concentrate in rural areas and often evolve into quasi-armies or militias capable of attacking conventional police and military forces in raids and ambushes.<sup>42</sup> Guerrilla forces can evolve into large formations of combatants that begin by attacking outlying vulnerable military or economic targets in raids or ambushes but aim to overthrow the government by promoting widespread military and political action. In other words, guerrillas, if they do not engage in terror tactics, are legitimate combatants under the just-war tradition.

In contrast, terrorists are criminals. They typically function in urban areas and conduct covert operations in relatively small groups or cells that target civilians to undermine confidence in the government. Such groups normally target property (such as airplanes or ships) or unarmed civilians (as in the attacks on the World Trade Center). They aim to exploit a government’s vulnerabilities by promoting possible overreaction in the form of inhumane, harsh, or oppressive retaliation, and to expose the government’s inability to secure the people against attacks on its public transportation or infrastructures.<sup>43</sup> Both guerrilla and terrorist actions promote conditions of instability conducive to organized criminal enterprise.

## Defeating the Cartels

Initially the authorities thought that public cooperation was the key to success in areas afflicted by narco-terrorism. Accordingly, they sought the assistance of locals by placing bilingual reward posters on both sides of the U.S.-Mexican border with names and photos of notorious cartel leaders. Posters offering rewards of up to \$5 million are visible at major transportation centers, border entry points, bus stations, and airports throughout northern Mexico. This aggressive campaign has resulted in numerous arrests, many occurring without violence. Unfortunately, for reasons already discussed above, these arrests appear to have had little or no long-term effect in slowing the flow of illegal drugs from Mexico into the United States.<sup>44</sup>

The most effective method for attacking a drug-trafficking organization is not decapitating its leadership but attacking its operational infrastructure and the key components that impact on its profits. In other words, the key is to take away a cartel’s means of making money. Doing so weakens the cartel enormously and could even cause it to collapse. In contrast to the traditional law-enforcement strategy that attacks such organizations from the top down, the better method is to defeat cartels from the bottom up via the “source-control” approach, by targeting and destroying the drug crops and manufacturing facilities that sustain the cartels and by eliminating the need for local officials to solicit bribes and engage in other corrupt actions.

For example, Mexico is now the leading source of “black tar” heroin, which has gained a major foothold in the American drug market.<sup>45</sup> The opium fields most important to the production of this drug are concentrated in remote areas in the northern Mexican states of Durango, Sinaloa, Chihuahua, and Sonora. Estimates suggest the illegal cultivation of opium in these states is seven to nine metric tons annually.<sup>46</sup> *Acaparadores* (or gatherers) purchase harvested opium gum and then transport it to clandestine laboratories for refinement.<sup>47</sup> Three days later, *burreros* (agents) transport the refined heroin through points of entry along America’s southern border. The drug lords pushing black tar take shrewd, calculated risks: they export a high volume of heroin knowing that law-enforcement officials will interdict some of it, but betting that the majority will get through and more than compensate for any losses.



This strategy has been working. In addition to flooding the U.S. with black tar, it has had the secondary effect of overwhelming U.S. law-enforcement and overloading the court system. The government now must choose between sending thousands of minor participants in the drug trade to overcrowded, expensive prisons or releasing them back into society to rejoin the army of couriers moving small amounts of drugs across the border.<sup>48</sup>

Again, a better method for dealing with this strategy would be to attack the drug trade not in transit, but at its agricultural source, while simultaneously providing legal jobs to people in drug-producing areas, extra money to law-enforcement officers (to steel them against bribes and graft), and security for those who refuse to cooperate with drug traffickers.

The above noted, what needs to be done versus what can be done are two very different things, especially given perceived infringements on cultural sovereignty, migrant worker issues, and

historical territorial grudges. Any effective strategy for dealing with the problem at its source will require the U.S. to cultivate greater political ties with Mexico, offer increased economic aid, and provide military trainers and advisors to Mexican law-enforcement agencies (as is done in Colombia, Peru, and Bolivia). However, such arrangements may not be possible because the Mexican community is generally suspicious of U.S. intentions.

## Conclusion

As America continues to grapple with the multiple threats to democracy emerging in the War on Terrorism, it should not ignore the situation in Mexico. The United States must aggressively, but respectfully, cultivate Mexico as a key partner in the war. In the absence of such priority interest, Mexico could become an even more dangerous staging area for elements that regularly enter the U.S. for malevolent purposes. **MR**

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