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Criminal Insurgency in the Americas

John P. Sullivan

Transnational criminal organizations and gangs are threatening state institutions throughout the Americas. In extreme circumstances, cartels, gangs or *maras*, drug trafficking organizations, and their paramilitary enforcers are waging *de facto* criminal insurgencies to free themselves from the influence of the state.

A wide variety of criminal gangs are waging war amongst themselves and against the state. Rampant criminal violence enabled by corruption and weak state institutions has allowed some criminal enterprises to develop virtual or parallel states. These contested or “temporary autonomous” zones create what theorist John Robb calls “hollow states” with areas where the legitimacy of the state is severely challenged. These fragile, sometimes lawless zones (or criminal enclaves) cover territory ranging from individual neighborhoods, *favelas* or *colonias* to entire cities—such as Ciudad Juárez—to large segments of exurban terrain in Guatemala’s Petén province, and sparsely policed areas on the Atlantic Coast of Nicaragua.

As a consequence, the Americas are increasingly besieged by the violence and corrupting influences of criminal actors exploiting stateless territories (criminal enclaves and mafia-dominated municipalities) linked to the global criminal economy to build economic muscle and, potentially, political might.

Criminal Insurgencies

Criminal insurgency is different from classic terrorism and insurgency because the criminal insurgents’ overarching political motive is to gain autonomous economic control over territory. As Professor Steven Metz noted in his monograph *Rethinking Insurgency*, not all insurgencies conform to the classic Leninist or Maoist models. Not all insurgents seek to take over the government or have an ideological foundation. Some seek a free-range to develop parallel structures for profit and power. Nevertheless, they have a political dimension, using political maneuvering and instrumental violence to accomplish their economic goals. As such they are insurgents—albeit of a criminal variety.

Mexico is a case in point. Imploding in a series of interlocking ‘criminal insurgencies’ culminating in a virtual civil war, kidnappings, assassinations, beheadings, and shoot-outs are commonplace. Since 2006 over 16,000 murders have been attributed to the drug war. Chihuahua, Sinaloa, Guerrero, Baja California, Michoacan, Sonora, Durango, Nueva Leon, and Tamaulipas are the states hardest hit. In Chihuahua, the violence continues to surge despite the

presence of 7,500 military and 1,000 federal police. In some cases, the cartel gangs, like La Familia Michoacana, are embracing a social and political agenda to further their reach.

La Familia is engaged in combat with the Gulf cartel, Los Zetas, the police, and the Mexican state itself. In coordinated attacks against police conducted from 11 to 15 July 2009 La Familia demonstrated its resolve. La Familia dramatically emerged on the public scene in September 2006 when 20 masked gangsters stormed the Sol y Sombra nightclub in Uruapan, firing shots into the air and tossing 6 bloody and severed heads onto the dance floor. The intruders then left a cardboard placard or *narcomanta* elaborating their ethos, “The family doesn’t kill for money. It doesn’t kill for women. It doesn’t kill innocent people, only those who deserve to die. Know that this is divine justice.”

Combining religious fervor, propaganda and the mantle of “social bandit,” La Familia has capitalized on both reputation and myth to secure power and reach. It is a regional poly-drug/poly-crime organization with its fingers in methamphetamine, marijuana, and cocaine trafficking, kidnapping for ransom, and pirated CDs and DVDs—not to mention co-opting politicians and nurturing political control and influence. Their banditry and violence are tools for inspiring support and sympathy from a community that feels abandoned and powerless.

One of their rivals, Los Zetas, is formed from a core of former Mexican special forces soldiers. Initially aligned with the Gulf Cartel, they have morphed into a cartel in their own right. Los Zetas operate across Mexico’s northern and southern frontiers, aligning themselves with various gangs and private armies. Similar to La Familia, they evoke religious, cult symbolism—in this case the cult of Santa Muerte—to forge social bonds and cohesion. Like La Familia, they also use extreme violence, beheadings and brutality to secure their reign. Other cartels including the powerful Sinaloa cartel, and the Beltran-Leyva organization complete the vicious circle, competing for control of Mexico’s lucrative transshipment “plazas” and trafficking corridors.

Collectively, these cartels and their enforcer gangs—which amount to virtual private armies—threaten the stability of the state. A top-ranking Mexican intelligence official, CISEN director Guillero Valdes noted that criminal gangs pose a national security threat to the integrity of the state. Cartels have co-opted police, local mayors and politicians, and have even tried to take over or co-opt the Mexican Congress by funding political campaigns.

Cartels and Gangs in Central and South America

The impact of such high intensity violence becomes more than a localized criminal issue. Transnational gangs and crime have hemispheric and global potentials. Criminal insurgents are incubators of instability that leverage globalization. As a consequence transnational or global crime is changing the nature of war and politics throughout the Americas. Guatemala and Honduras, Panama and Costa Rica, indeed all Central America, are currently at risk of being caught in the “cross-fire” of the region’s drug wars. The cartels are joined by a variety of gangs in the quest to dominate this global criminal opportunity space. Third generation gangs—like Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13) and Brazil’s urban drug gangs that have transcended operating on localized turf with a simple market focus to challenge political structures—are both partners and foot soldiers for the dominant cartels. In addition, traditional insurgents like the Revolutionary

Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) engage in criminal enterprise to fuel their activities and make alliances of convenience with other gangsters.

Some states like Costa Rica, Panama, and Nicaragua are not only shifting from drug transit to processing territories, they are becoming drug-consuming nations themselves. Drug gangs are a consequence, in turn stimulating a rise in crime and violence. In Guatemala, Mexican drug gangs are exploiting proximity, weak law enforcement and deep-rooted corruption to expand their reach. For example, the Zetas have carved a bloody trail across Guatemala's northern and eastern provinces over the past year and a half.

Guatemala under the Gun

More than 6,000 people were slain in Guatemala in 2008. Police say most of the killings were linked to the drug trade. An analysis from the North American Congress on Latin America assesses the military threat to Guatemala from Los Zetas. According to the report, "vast parts of the country are under Zeta control." Carlos Menocal, a top security adviser to President Colom, believes that the Zeta bases discovered in Guatemala were created not just to aid in smuggling, but to be used to defend their territories militarily. These Zeta bases are believed to use Kaibiles to train a range of gangsters including *mareros* from MS-13. The *Latin American Herald Tribune* reports that Guatemala has suffered 2,953 murders during the first nine months of 2009. An additional 1,179 people were injured in violent incidents during the same period.

Brazil's Feudal Favelas

Over 5,000 people were murdered in Rio de Janeiro last year, in a battle between rival drugs gangs and militias. Rio's parallel gang state co-exists with the legitimate government. For example the Terceiro Comando Puro (Pure Third Command) essentially governs the *favela* of Parque Royal, deploying its own cadre of community organizers to mediate conflicts and dole out favor. Alfredo Sirkis, a prominent Rio politician, noted in a recent media interview that "Rio is one of the very few cities in the world where you have whole areas controlled by armed forces that are not of the state." In Rio's *favelas*, the state is almost completely absent. The drug gangs impose their own systems of justice, law and order, and taxation enforced through force of arms. Military-issue machine guns and anti-aircraft weapons, semi-automatic assault rifles and hand grenades are increasingly commonplace. According to Sirkus, "It [is] like a Middle Ages phenomenon, feudalism and warlordism without any purpose other than living day to day...It's a low-intensity, non-ideological insurgency."

Conclusion: Impact and Response

The globalization of economic processes has empowered a new class of "global criminals" including criminal insurgents. These "criminal netwarriors" are a serious impediment to democratic governance and a free market economy. Efforts to control the scope and reach of high intensity criminal violence and "criminal insurgency" are necessary to sustain stable communities and democracy. State security forces, primarily the police supported by the military and intelligence services, must work together to contain the violence while empowering

legitimate political processes. This coordination and interoperation must cross borders and leverage regional security cooperation and reform throughout the Americas.

***John P. Sullivan** is a career police officer. He currently serves as a lieutenant with the Los Angeles Sheriff's Department. He is also a Senior Research Fellow at the Center for Advanced Studies on Terrorism (CAST). He is co-editor of *Countering Terrorism and WMD: Creating a Global Counter-Terrorism Network* (Routledge, 2006) and *Global Biosecurity: Threats and Responses* (Routledge, 2010).*

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