

Maras in Central America

National Security Implications of Gang Activity South of the Border

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The strategic nature of conflict and violence, in addition to the definition of insurgent, is in a state of rapid change in both the defense and intelligence community. In the post September 11, 2001 world the United States is compelled to take a 360 degree view of the world in its efforts to “observe, orient, decide and act” against potential threats to vital national interests.¹

The challenge facing today’s defense establishment is an asymmetrical enemy that most Western militaries are ill equipped to challenge and defeat in a manner that is acceptable to the civilian population. If Iraq has taught us anything it is that even the best publicly supported military plan can turn sour, and that support can wane, if the operation morphs into a perceived tar pit. It is imperative that the public’s discernment of the events that will lead to ultimate victory be molded in an honest and realistic manner. This is increasingly essential in our pursuit of terrorists.

In the months following the unthinkable acts of 9/11, many terrorism experts specializing in violent conflict began to ponder the expanded dimensions of the new face of terror as it might apply toward the United States. Soon after, when President Bush introduced the American public to the “War Against Terrorism,” many of these same individuals turned their attention on the obvious avenues of Middle Eastern and Islamic Fundamentalist centric terrorism.

In the past several years the United States has pursued the “War Against Terrorism” on a number of fronts. In one, fighting in a conventional manner, territory has been the central issue with military forces seeking and then taking control of entire countries (Afghanistan and Iraq). In another scenario, Special Operation cells have worked with the military forces of concerned regimes in order to restrict the use of territory by terrorists seeking to establish training camps in countries such as Algeria and Mali.²

¹ Observe, orient, decide, act (OODA) is an operational warfare turn first introduced by United States Air Force officer Col. John Boyd.

² “U.S. Search for Qaeda Turns to Algeria,” *The Boston Globe*, March 11, 2004, accessed on January 6, 2006 at http://www.boston.com/news/world/articles/2004/03/11/us_search_for_qaeda_turns_to_algeria/

With so many issues confronting the National Security interests of the United States it is easy to overlook one particular unprotected, and often ignored, flank – the maras (gangs) of Latin America.

Background

In many circles the existence of maras can be viewed as the failure of the state to provide some service deemed to be essential. In the United States maras can be viewed as the result of a lack of adequate training programs, or youth services, designed to move disadvantaged teens onto a path with a prosperous future. It isn't that these services are not available, but they are not available in such quantity as to absorb all of the available young men and women requiring assistance.

Popular culture in the United States, which strongly influences national attitudes and opinions, has romanticized the gang phenomena since the early eighties. Music, clothing and movies have glorified social rebellion to the point that most Americans have become desensitized. In a post September 11, 2001 world, the revering of anti-social elements in America has forced many in law enforcement and government to reevaluate this growing potential danger and significance of maras in the United States, Central America and South America.

The growing maras issue in Central America is a concern with a different set of cause and effects than those involving maras in the United States. As virtually all mara activity is the result of disproportionate resource allocation, a good first step in a study might be to follow the money trail in our global society. At the head of the table is the West (North America and Europe) with a whopping 63% of the world's money flowing through the hands of citizens, companies and government. Next comes South and East Asia with 21% of the monetary resources and virtually all of that cash moving through Japan, China and India. After the East you have Latin America which attracts a respectable 9%, but the majority of these funds are found in Argentina, Brazil, Venezuela and Mexico – leaving Central America and much of South America with a tiny share of the global marketplace that is far below what its population might be expected to command.³

The lack of real capital in this “gap” of countries between Mexico and Brazil is one catalyst for mara creation. Another is the urbanization of the local populations. Latin America is fast becoming the most urbanized region in the world as virtually the entire rural youth appears to be moving toward the cities. Into this fertile ground for mara creation come the waves of expelled, undocumented, Latino citizens from the United States who first came to Los Angeles, Houston, Phoenix and other cities as children with their parents. They are individuals in their teens and early twenties who have little or no ties to the countries of their birth. In this displaced state they obviously hold more allegiance to their “brothers and sisters” in the maras.

³ Thomas P.M. Barnett, *The Pentagon's New Map* (New York: Berkley, 2004), p. 229.

In Central America the maras with the strongest ties to the United States are the “18th Street” gang (also known as M-18), and their main rival, the *Mara Salvatrucha* (MS-13). M-18 was created in the 1960’s by immigrants from Mexico who lived in the Rampart community of Los Angeles. Many of these youths were not being accepted into the established Latino maras because of where they lived, so they formed their own; and unlike their peer organizations, M-18 took the step of accepting members from all cultural groups (Latino, Caucasian, Black and Asian). M-18 also took the step of diversifying its bases into surrounding states, so today it can be found in most of the contiguous lower 48 states.

MS-13 is a by-product of the civil war in El Salvador. It was created during the 1980s by displaced Salvadorans who fled into the Los Angeles area to escape the conflict in their country. Following the pattern pioneered by M-18 the mara currently has between 8,000 to 10,000 members in Washington D.C. and in about 33 states. Although the FBI has described MS-13 as a “loosely structured street gang,” the group has taken seriously its goal to expand geographically. The principle aim behind this strategy of growth is to rival its larger cousin M-18. As one reviews the actions of both of these groups, particularly as many of their members move between the United States and Central America, there may very well exist an increased national and regional security threat as they become more organized and sophisticated.⁴

The maras in many Latin American countries are creating serious crime issues in the region. The largest and ultimately most violent of these maras operate from El Salvador north to Mexico. Many in national security, including the Central Intelligence Agency and Federal Bureau of Investigation, are convinced that the maras particularly threaten the national integrity of the United States of America.⁵ This concept may not be far from the truth as today most of the logistics used to supply the United States’ \$65 billion drug trade is now controlled by maras based in Mexico with strong ties to both M-18 and MS-13.⁶ Also, with some of the world’s highest murder rates, the countries of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras are in the eye of the hurricane in this emerging maras emergency.⁷ The murder rate in 2004, per 100,000 people, was in Guatemala (34.7%) and in El Salvador (41.2%). In Honduras the murder rate was 45.9% juxtaposed with the United States at 5.7%.

The police in El Salvador have reported that approximately 60% of the 2,576 murders, committed in the country during 2004, were mara related.⁸ The United States Southern Command, after conducting an investigation of criminal activity in the region, has

⁴ Arian Campos-Flores, “The Most Dangerous Gang in America,” *Newsweek*, March 28, 2005

⁵ “National Security Strategy of the United States of America,” September 2002, accessed on December 2, 2005, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/nsc/nss.html>

⁶ “Mexican Drug Lords Reign Supreme,” *The New Mexican*, November 7, 2005, accessed on January 7, 2006 at <http://www.freewmexican.com/news/34689.html>

⁷ “A Threat on a Regional Scale,” *Houston Chronicle*, April 24, 2005

⁸ “2,576 Homicidios en el 2004 en El Salvador,” *Agence France Presse*, January 5, 2004

determined that approximately 70,000 individuals are members of maras.⁹ Maras are becoming increasingly involved in the trafficking of narcotics, weapons, and smuggling of human beings between Latin America and their U.S. based branches. They are also involved in auto theft, and the kidnapping of business leaders. In Mexico, through the implementation of a program designed to respond to rising trends in urban crime and violence, the government has detained over 1,100 mara members. Most of these youths were employed by the maras to shake down migrant workers as they pass through territory “controlled” by their members, or were being “loaned” to several Mexican drug cartels to assist with the smuggling of narcotics into the United States. Latin American and United States authorities began to notice a rise in mara drug trafficking in the late 1990s – a trend that has increased in recent years.

The survival of North American criminal street gangs and maras in Latin America is a testimony to their ability to incorporate emerging new technologies and their ability to successfully evade the changing tactics of law enforcement. These two factors make the rising presence of this phenomenon a genuine threat to National Security. If left unchecked, the possibility exists that the crime and instability that they foster is only symptomatic of the real danger. An affiliation with international terrorists implies a marriage of evil that threatens our freedom domestically and internationally.

Typically, terrorist insurgency is thought of as a military activity and gangs are viewed primarily as a law enforcement problem. However, some analysts believe terrorists and many maras are engaged in a highly complex political act known as political war.¹⁰ Some analysts in National Security unwittingly mischaracterize the activities of terrorist organizations and maras. Often ignored is a higher purpose of their activities, a surreptitious effort to take control of a country or that portion where they have the greatest influence.¹¹

Illustrations of the links between organized crime groups (including maras) and terrorism are presented in the following observations:¹²

- Terrorists engage in organized crime activity to support themselves financially
- Organized crime groups and terrorists often operate on network structures and these structures and these structures sometimes intersect, terrorist can hide themselves among transnational criminal organizations
- Organized crime groups and terrorists operate in areas with little governmental controls, weak enforcement of laws and open borders
- Both organized crime groups and terrorists corrupt officials to achieve their objectives

⁹ Testimony of General Bantz J. Craddock, Commander, United States Southern Command, before the Senate Armed Services Committee, March 15, 2005

¹⁰ “Street Gangs: The New Urban Insurgency”, Max G. Manwaring, ISBN 1-58487-191-1, accessed on September 19, 2006 at <http://www.strategicstudiesinstitute.army.mil/pubs/display.cfm?pubID=597>

¹¹ Ibid

¹² “The Nexus of Organized International Criminals and Terrorism, Luoise I. Shelley

- Organized crime groups and terrorists use similar means to communicate – exploiting modern technology
- Organized crime groups and terrorists launder their money, often using the same methods and operators to move their funds

Other factors attributed to the mara and terrorism phenomena, which those entities might find beneficial, include their lack of status as organized legal entities. Therefore, group leaders have the ability to operate in different environments using dissimilar kinds of authority to accomplish their goals. Both terrorist groups and maras are often self-identified such that their identity and legitimacy are self-proclaimed. Membership in both maras and terrorist organizations is done through an act of choice.¹³

Although maras and terror insurgents differ in terms of motives and operational procedures, there is a presumption of similarity that exists to show that maras are another form of urban insurgency. In other words, terrorists and maras have positioned themselves to seize the political power that guarantees them the freedom of movement, action, and the commercial environment they desire. The ultimate aspiration that links maras and terrorism together is the deposition or significant compromise of military and law enforcement capabilities of the governments targeted. Achieving such allows the freedom of movement and control that is necessary to flourish.¹⁴

Outside of M-18 and MS-13, there are numerous other maras that operate in the United States, Mexico, South America, Canada and Europe. Virtually all of the Central American maras have flourished under the protection and mercenary income provided by “mara-narco” alliances that are credited with the transshipment of up to 75 percent of the cocaine that enters the United States. Likewise, terrorists in Central Asia, like the Taliban and Al Qaeda, are credited with the transshipment of up to 95 percent of all heroin exported from Afghanistan that enters Europe and Russia. In 2004, Afghanistan provided 75 percent of the world’s heroin.¹⁵

Through these efforts, Latin American maras have developed into more professional organizations with broad markets and very sophisticated alliances with transnational criminal organizations. Some analysts believe that these terrorist factions seek to take control of ungoverned territory within a country and begin to acquire political power or influence in poor regions within a country – as Hezbollah has done in much of Lebanon.¹⁶ Mexico, Honduras, El Salvador, Guatemala, Afghanistan, Sri Lanka, Southern Philippines, Russian Far East, parts of Indonesia, the notorious Golden Triangle

¹³ “Terrorist Organizations and Criminal Street Gangs: An Argument for an Analogy” Jessica G. Turley and Julienne Smrcka, accessed on September 19, 2006 at www.sandia.gov/ACG/documents/sandreports/SAND2004-1104P.pdf

¹⁴ “Street Gangs: The New Urban Insurgency”, Max G. Manwaring

¹⁵ Record Poppy Crop Mocks Afghanistan’s Opium ‘Jihad’, author: Nick Jackson, accessed on October 21, 2006 at <http://portland.indymedia.org/en/2004/04/286160.shtml>

¹⁶ “Gangs, “Coups D’ Streets,” and the New War in Central America”, Max Manwaring, accessed on September 19, 2006 at www.strategicstudiesinstitute.army.mil/pdffiles/pub679.pdf

and many other countries and/or regions like them all have one thing in common. All have weak government and political control.¹⁷

There has been some speculation that the maras have been approached by Al-Queda to assist in the smuggling of its members into the United States or to become more actively involved in the movement to destabilize the region. So far The Federal Bureau of Investigation has found no direct evidence if such a connection exists in Central America, but it is becoming clear that such a connection might be present between Hezbollah and some of the maras in Brazil and other parts of the region.¹⁸

Factors Contributing to the Mara Problem

For many years, analysts saw the progression of growing threats to national security from Latin American maras and international terrorists. Regional governments have ignored the mounting evidence of these alliances. With United States involvement in both the War on Terror and an eclectic range of national interests, the gang problems of Latin America have been perceived to be more law enforcement issues than anything else. Analysts believe that because of the poor economic conditions in Latin America, these governments tend to be too weak and too compromised to act effectively against the mara problem. Most of these governments have not prepared to mobilize against the various insurgencies that challenge their national and regional power. As a consequence, the effective sovereignty of the Central American countries is being reduced every day and the maras' commercial motives are becoming not just an economic opportunity but a political agenda as well.

The weakening of Latin American governments has evolved via corruption, communist political influence, lack of access or the inability to compete in the international market. Distinct opportunity to seize vulnerable operational area is all that is needed to set in motion an effort of mutually beneficial cooperation. Although maras and terrorists may differ in terms of motives and modes of operation, both of these non-state actors must eventually depose or control an incumbent government in order to survive as Hamas did in Gaza.¹⁹

In these terms, one should keep in mind that maras and their control of borders, territory and people are both national and transnational obstacles. Due to the nature of the global economy and interconnectivity of cultures and nations via the Internet, analysts believe that these emerging transnational problems will require the utilization of powerful resources to expedite transnational solutions. Police and soldiers cannot manage these threats alone. Maras must be eliminated using a combination of political-psychological, socio-economic, law enforcement, military, intelligence, and diplomatic capabilities. All of these factors must be integrated to form a cogent strategy that will aggressively attack the maras' strategy rather than the mara and its individual members.²⁰

¹⁷ "The Nexus of Organized International Criminals and Terrorism", Louise I. Shelley, PhD

¹⁸ "Roving Gangs Show No Signs of a Link to Terrorist Activity," *The Miami Herald*, February 25, 2005

¹⁹ "Gangs, "Coups D' Streets," and the New War in Central America", Max Manwaring

²⁰ Ibid

One factor that continues to be a contributor to the proliferation of the Latin American maras and the terrorism nexus is the current worldwide economic distribution. Over the past sixty years, the cumulative flow of foreign direct investment throughout the world has been estimated at \$7 trillion dollars. What is interesting to note is the actual percentage spread of the money and which regions that have benefited from these investments. Also noteworthy is the question of why some areas have received a disproportionate amount. Evaluation of where money has been distributed over the decades reveals the following. Primarily, funds have flowed to regions like North America (24 percent), Europe (39 percent), and South/East Asia (21 percent). These regions have attracted over four-fifths of all long term investment juxtaposed with the Middle East and Africa (2 percent) and Latin America (9 percent). Because of the lack of integration or “connection” with Middle Eastern, African and Latin American nations, analysts have strongly speculated that this is the prevailing context that fuels the mara-terrorism nexus. To restate, approximately one third of the worlds’ population has had access to only one-twentieth of the money made available by the global economy for long-term investment.¹³

After evaluation of the data, some analysts believe that the economic disparity worldwide creates fertile opportunity for maras and terrorists to partner for one another’s benefit or to exploit the resources in their own area of influence and provide their services to the highest bidder. This potential collaboration reveals an emerging relationship and cooperation between Latin American maras and transnational terrorism. Terrorism and organized crime, though different, have overlapping networks and cooperate in several enterprises. Accordingly, the phenomena of the synergy of terrorism, organized crime and maras is growing because these conditions give rise to all three, especially because they all use similar approaches to promote their operations.²¹

Many analysts argue that the current immigration policies of the United States have significantly contributed to the mara upsurge in Latin America. As the debate intensifies in Washington, little has been done to significantly reduce the flow of immigrants across the United States border. According to some it opens a door of “opportunity” for many Latin Americans to embrace the “American Dream”. While many illegal immigrants are genuinely aspiring to a better life for themselves and their families, worldwide human trafficking routes which are controlled by the maras provide opportunity for those individuals seeking a life encompassing transnational criminal operations. These routes keep the nexus alive and provide an avenue whereby all three organizations can enter the United States.²²

The rise of violence in Central America that is attributed to the maras can bring to mind a number of factors. Academics and analysts point to the equity gap between the areas rich

²¹ “Could Al Qaeda Team With the Mob?” accessed on October 15, 2006 at www.theadventuresofchester.com/archives/2006/10/could_al_qaeda.html

²² “Latin America: Terrorism Issues”, Mark P. Sullivan, accessed on October 15, 2006 at leahy.senate.gov/issues/foreign%20policy/PDFS/LatinAmericaTerrorism

and poor and this income inequality as the strongest predictor of violent crime rates.²³ With the exception of Costa Rica, a country that has developed a more extensive and robust middle class than its peer states, Central American countries have some of the highest income disparity indices in the global market.

Additional trends in the region that make the issue of mara driven violence worse in many of these countries include the rising level of urbanization. As a whole, the region was 49% urbanized in 1960 and this increased to 73% by 1992.²⁴ The region is expected to be 80% urbanized by 2030 – the highest in the world.²⁵

Central America also has to deal with a growing youth population who, as they mature, face extreme poverty as a result of stagnant job markets and the absence of the political will to fight crime and poverty in a strategic manner. Many believe it will fall to the United States to provide the means and financial support to combat the region's poverty. It will also, most likely, require the United States to enter the region militarily to support the local countries in their efforts to combat growing drug cartels as they battle each other and eventually the state – as is happening in Columbia. This possibility was addressed in the 2002 National Security Strategy of the United States:

“Parts of Latin America confront regional conflict, especially arising from the violence of drug cartels and their accomplices. This conflict and unrestrained narcotics trafficking could imperil the health and security of the United States. Therefore we have developed an active strategy to help the Andean nations adjust their economies, enforce their laws, defeat terrorist organizations, and cut off the supply of drugs, while—as important—we work to reduce the demand for drugs in our own country.”

In Colombia, we recognize the link between terrorist and extremist groups that challenge the security of the state and drug trafficking activities that help finance the operations of such groups. We are working to help Colombia defend its democratic institutions and defeat illegal armed groups of both the left and right by extending effective sovereignty over the entire national territory and provide basic security to the Colombian people.”²⁶

Rightly so, many analysts have argued that the immigration policy of the United States has aggravated the mara problem in Central America. When the region's civil conflicts came to a close in the mid-1990s, the government of the United States began the systematic deportation of thousands of undocumented immigrants – many of these deportees had criminal convictions.²⁷ It is estimated that from 2000 to 2004 about

²³ D. Ledermann et al., “Determinants of Crime Rates in Latin America and the World,” *World Bank*, October 1998

²⁴ Samuel Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Touchstone, 1997), p. 86.

²⁵ George Martine and Jose Miguel Guzman, “Population, Poverty, and Vulnerability: Mitigating the Effects of Natural Disasters,” *Environmental Change and Security Project Report Number 8*, Summer 2002

²⁶ “National Security Strategy of the United States of America,” September 2002, accessed on December 2, 2005, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/nsc/nss.html>

²⁷ Ana Arana, “How the Street Gangs Took Central America,” *Foreign Affairs*, May/June 2005

20,000 immigrants with criminal records were returned to their countries in Central America.

In the case of El Salvador, the high tolerance toward violence and the widespread proliferation of firearms occurred during and since the country's civil conflict of the 1980s. This has contributed to the growing mara problem as materials for violence are easily obtained.²⁸ In El Salvador there is an average of five gang related deaths a day.²⁹ Still many NGOs (Non-Government Organizations) working with the members of the maras assert that social exclusion and a lack of educational and job opportunities for the regions youth are perpetuating the mara problem. They assert that the two paramount issues are criminals returning to society, and former mara members, especially native English speaking deportees returning from the United States, having difficulty finding gainful employment.

The Emerging Mara -Terrorism Nexus and Political Solution

Over the years, the United States has become aware of the emerging threats to and coming from Latin America. Terrorist groups have attempted to influence or overthrow elected governments throughout the region. While Latin America has not been the focal point in the war on terrorism, countries in the region have struggled with domestic terrorism for decades and international terrorist groups have used the region as a staging area to advance their causes. The State Department annual report (actually written in 2004, but issued in April 2005) on international terrorism re-titled "Country Reports on Terrorism", emphasized United States concerns about terrorist threats around the world, including Latin America.

Earlier reports state that although the international terrorist threat in the Western Hemisphere has remained low compared to other regions of the world, terrorists have been seeking safe-haven, financing, recruiting, illegal travel documentation, or access to the United States from the region and pose serious threats.³⁰ The focus of the report describes various terrorist activities throughout the region, most notably in Columbia, Peru and the tri-border area (TBA) of Argentina, Brazil and Paraguay. It should be noted that most of the insurgencies are communist in their orientation and the motivation for their goals lies more with their ideology than any personal theological proclivities.

Columbia and Peru have experienced aggressive insurgency efforts due to their history with drug cartels and their geographical features which make it easy for such groups to maintain operations virtually unopposed. Though Columbia has made significant progress in dealing with Marxists organizations like the Revolutionary Forces of Columbia (FARC), National Liberation Front (ELN) and a paramilitary group known as the United Self-Defense Forces of Columbia (AUC) and Peru has had recent success in

²⁸ Joaquin Chavez, "An Anatomy of Violence in El Salvador," *North American Congress on Latin America Report on the Americas*, May/June 2004

²⁹ Chris Kraul, "El Salvador Comes to Grips with Gangs," *Los Angeles Times*, December 13, 2004

³⁰ "Latin America: Terrorism Issues", Mark P. Sullivan

its protracted conflict with Shining Path (Sendero Luminoso or SL), these insurgent forces have been more interested in bringing their communist political agendas to fruition rather than extending diplomacy to Islamic insurgents. However, it is the activity in the TBA region and Venezuela that has cause for alarm.

Every potential conflict in Latin America differs in some way from its predecessor and yet none are ever truly unique. The outcomes of the emerging low intensity conflicts in Latin America that are brought about by transnational organized crime, maras and terrorists, are not and can not be determined based on battlefield outcomes. The control of these conflicts will be determined by how those governments engaged in them frame them politically from their start to finish. In order to effectively manage these conflicts, leadership and political partnership is fundamental to maintain unity of effort in these growing military conflicts other than war. These issues are the foundation for success against the mara – terrorism nexus and transnational leadership must develop the strategic clarity and implement it as soon as possible.

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