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From the TBA to the USA: Barbarians at the Gate

by Marilyn Stern

On October 10, 2010, an illegal Mexican immigrant was found beheaded in Phoenix, Arizona as a result of the Mexican drug wars. On October 27, 2010, drug gangs attacked the headquarters of the Los Ramones, Mexico, police department with grenades and the police force quit en masse the next day. The following research provides pertinent background to the increasing chaos at the U.S. southwest border that the federal government continues to ignore.

*In *The Choice: Global Domination or Global Leadership*, Zbigniew Brzezinski, advisor to U.S. Presidents Kennedy, Johnson, Carter, and Bush, Sr., wrote in 2004,*

For America, the linkage between state sovereignty and national security was traditionally even more symbiotic than for most other states. . . . The linkage was reinforced by the awareness that geography made America a sanctuary. With two huge oceans providing extraordinary security buffers and with much weaker neighbors to the north and south, Americans considered their nation's sovereignty to be both a natural right as well as a natural consequence of peerless national security (emphasis added). Even when America was drawn into two world wars, it was the Americans who crossed the oceans to combat others in distant lands. Americans went to war, but war did not come to America.¹

Today, America's geographical boundaries no longer provide that sense of security. In fact, there is a war being waged just beyond America's southwestern border. Mexican drug cartels, ruthless in their lawlessness, are in a bloody competition for superiority. Since January 2007, the narcocartels have killed 6,836 people.² The potential strategic threat has markedly increased due to an inadequate U.S. policy to address the escalating levels of violence unleashed by the cartels in Mexico. The instability in Mexico is one symptom of the looming crisis beyond the U.S. border. The research will show that the nexus between criminal activity, drug trafficking and Islamist terror is one that poses an increasing security challenge to the U.S.

Insidiously, Mexican drug traffickers, called *narcotraficantes*,³ have infiltrated our southern border and spread throughout the U.S. As of 2008, the cartels were present in 230 U.S. cities.⁴ According to a 2008 National Drug Intelligence Center report, U.S. cities infected with the narcotics scourge included Anchorage, Seattle, San Diego, Minneapolis, and Buffalo, N.Y.⁵

¹ Zbigniew Brzezinski, *The Choice: Global Domination or Global Leadership*, (New York: Basic Books, 2004), 8.

² John Sullivan, "Criminal Netwarriors in Mexico's Drug Wars," *GroupIntel*, December 22, 2008, <http://www.groupintel.com/2008/12/22/criminal-netwarriors-in-mexico%e2%80%99s-drug-wars/> (accessed March 11, 2009). (Author's update November 7, 2010: According to *The Los Angeles Times* "Mexico Under Siege: the drug war at our doorstep," the current number of drug-war related deaths stands at 28,228. <http://projects.latimes.com/mexico-drug-war/#/its-a-war>).

³ Jesse Bogan et al., "The Next Disaster," *Forbes Magazine*, December 22, 2008, 73.

⁴ Diane Rehm, "Drug Wars In Mexico," *Diane Rehm Show, WAMU*, talk radio panel participant Shaun Waterman, Homeland and National Security Editor for UPI, February 26, 2009 (accessed February 28, 2009).

The extent of drug cartel activity is widespread to the point of bearing the signature of organized crime, with cells operating throughout the U.S.⁶

Atlanta, Georgia, is now known as the cartel's narcotics processing center supplying U.S. drug demand.⁷ Situated with access to key interstate highways and a major international airport hub, Atlanta has become a prime location exploited by the cartels. Distribution and transportation cells move narcotics, primarily cocaine, throughout the U.S. The cash generated is quickly turned around and transported via hidden traps in tractor trailers to the southwestern border.⁸

Phoenix, Arizona, now has the unenviable distinction of being the "kidnapping capital of the United States."⁹ Mexican smuggling rings sneak illegal immigrants across the border in vans and hand them off to *coyotes*, or *polleros*,¹⁰ criminals who hold them hostage in abandoned homes referred to as "drop houses."¹¹ The illegals, threatened with death and subject to assault, are released when a family member pays a ransom. Due to their illegal status, those kidnapped are rarely reported to law enforcement.¹²

Unlike the *polleros*, drug-traffickers kidnap primarily within their own circle to collect on drug debts, although recently this trend has shifted. Within the last year the FBI has reported an increase in the number of cross-border abductions of U.S. citizens by the suspected Arellano Felix drug cartel. Weakened by rival gangs, the cartel has turned to targeting wealthy dual-nationality Mexicans who live in San Diego and Texas, abducting them in broad daylight and holding them for ransom in Mexico.¹³

Competing cartels have formed organized crime empires that have shown the impotence of conventional military and law enforcement in maintaining the rule of law in a weakened civil society. Martin van Creveld, a military historian, warned of the rise of this phenomenon in his 1991 book, *The Transformation of War*: "In the future, war will not be waged by armies, but by groups whom today we call terrorists, guerillas, bandits and robbers, but who will undoubtedly hit upon more formal titles to describe themselves."¹⁴

John Waters, director of the White House Office of National Drug Control Policy in 2008, said this about Mexico, "The consequences for both our countries in the near future and the not-so-near future could not be greater. The consequences if President Calderon fails and the institutions of government, at least in the northern part of his country, become controlled by

⁵ Sam Quinones and Richard A. Serrano, "Mexican Drug Wars Spill Across the Border," *Los Angeles Times*, November 16, 2008, www.latimes.com/news/nationworld/nation/la-ma-cartels162008nov16.0,1692616.story:page=1 (accessed February 2, 2009).

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Bogan et al., "The Next Disaster," 80.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Jim Cross, "Human Smuggling Makes Phoenix Kidnapping Capital of U.S.," *KTAR.com*, June 25, 2008, <http://www.ktar.com/index.php?nid=388&sid=877515> (accessed February 28, 2009).

¹⁰ Andrew Thomas, "Drop Houses," *Crime Free AZ Illegal Immigration Journal.com.AZNewsRoundup.com*, MMVII, <http://www.crimefreeaz.com/> (accessed February 28, 2009).

¹¹ Sean Holstege, "Coyotes Turning to New Tactics to Thwart Law," *The Arizona Republic*, July 13, 2008, www.azcentral.com/arizonarepublic/news/articles/2008/07/13/20080713launder-main0713.html (accessed February 28, 2009).

¹² Fred Burton and Scott Stewart, "The Long Arm of the Lawless," *Stratfor Intelligence Report*, February 25, 2009, <http://www.fride.org/publications/459/latin-americans-new-conflict-zones> (accessed March 1, 2009).

¹³ Lizbeth Diaz, "Mexican Drug Gang Turns to Kidnapping in U.S.," *Reuters*, August 12, 2008, <http://www.reuters.com/articlePrint?articleId=USN1250256620080812> (accessed March 13, 2009).

¹⁴ Martin van Creveld, *The Transformation of War*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, Inc., 1991), 197, cited in Sullivan, "Criminal Netwarriors in Mexico's Drug Wars."

terrorist mafias – well, we worry about ungoverned spaces far away from the U.S., and this is right next door.”¹⁵

Untangling the source of problems on the U.S. southern border is a complex task. The pattern of corruption and lawlessness in Mexico is not an isolated one. The South American Tri-Border Area (TBA), *La Triple Frontera*,¹⁶ links Argentina, Brazil, and Paraguay and was another center of narcoterrorism and corruption. The TBA has been part of a pipeline to the U.S., via Mexico, of narcotics, kidnapping, violence, and, potentially, terrorist infiltration.¹⁷

The tri-border region’s natural geographic features of jungle and dense forest offered concealment from the detection of any illicit activities.¹⁸ The remote location and the sparse population in the TBA lent itself to the vague borders that Paraguay’s government preferred. Rivers and forests provided natural cover for smuggling traffickers to cross between countries with unclear boundaries.¹⁹ Paraguay used this deregulated area and its natural features to further its self-interest.

The area’s many waterfalls, the most famous of which is Iguacu Falls, as well as Guaira Falls, lie along the border between Argentina and Brazil. Ciudad del Este, a city close to the Iguacu Falls, is located by the upper Parana River in Paraguay.²⁰ In order to promote development and encourage tourism to the falls, Ciudad del Este established a free-trade zone and an economic and employment center in that area. Workers from Foz do Igauçu, a Paraguayan city less than a kilometer away from Ciudad del Este, used the Friendship Bridge, the Ponte da Amizade, across the Upper Parana River, to commute to their jobs.²¹ The combination of dense jungle, the innocuous tourist draw of the falls, and the ease of movement between Paraguay and Brazil set the stage for exploits by Gen. Alfredo Stroessner, a former lieutenant colonel in the Paraguayan military and the dictator who came to power in Paraguay in 1954.²²

To secure Paraguay, Stroessner embarked on an ambitious plan to strengthen the military and police under his rule. In order to finance and consolidate his power, Stroessner instituted a steady infusion of revenue to his government through the establishment of state-sponsored smuggling.²³ The TBA was going to be the location for this grand scheme.

As a first step, Stroessner established the new city of “Puerto Stroessner,” in 1957, renamed Ciudad del Este in 1989. A sparsely populated area in the 1950s, the region where the three countries converged had been one of arbitrary borders.²⁴ Initially, Paraguay did not challenge Brazil and Argentina over declared borders in order to keep the transportation routes

¹⁵ Bogan et al., “The Next Disaster,” 75.

¹⁶ Rex Hudson, introduction to *Terrorist and Organized Crime Groups in the Tri-Border Area (TBA) of South America*, Washington, D.C., Federal Research Division, Library of Congress, July 2003, http://www.loc.gov/tr/frd/pdf_files/TerrOrgCrime_TBA.pdf (accessed February 22, 2009).

¹⁷ Amanda M. Leu, “Fighting Narcoterrorism,” *Joint Force Quarterly*, January 2008, http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_OKNN/is_48/I_M28069729, 57 (accessed March 11, 2009).

¹⁸ Harold A. Winters, *Battling the Elements Weather and Terrain In the Conduct of War* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), 97.

¹⁹ Daniel K. Lewis, *A South American Frontier: The Tri-Border Region* (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 2006), 82.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 5.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 80.

²² *Ibid.*, 80.

²³ *Ibid.*, 81.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 78.

open to Paraguay's ranching and agricultural trade.²⁵ However, Brazil sought to develop energy sources and pressed its claim to Guaira Falls and started to build its military in that area. Stroessner realized that an agreement between the two countries would be more advantageous and agreed to Brazil's rights over the falls. Consequently, in 1966, Brazil and Paraguay signed the Ygazu Treaty, which led to a joint venture developing the Itaipu hydroelectric plant in 1975. Itaipu, located north of Ciudad del Este, is one of the largest such plants in the world.²⁶

The hydroelectric plant drew a large influx of immigrants to work there. In the late 1970s, East Asian and Middle Eastern communities grew as immigration to the region increased. Syrians and Lebanese Arabs fleeing civil war arrived in the TBA after 1975.²⁷ After Israel's 1982 invasion of Lebanon, due to lax travel restrictions in the TBA, a large influx of Muslims, approximately 30,000 more Lebanese and Palestinian Arabs, immigrated to the TBA.²⁸ Prior to their arrival, many Lebanese Christians had lived in Foz do Iguacu since before World War I, becoming merchants and traders in Ciudad del Este and settling in Foz do Iguacu and Puerto Iguazu.²⁹

Along with employment opportunities, the permissive environment enabled illegal activities to take root. Tourism was a legal industry, but freed from inspections and taxes, merchandise traffic became the main industry in the TBA. With deliberately few border guards, identity checks were infrequent, and a black market quickly flourished.³⁰ Ironically, increased smuggling was an unintended consequence of attempts by Argentina and Brazil to strengthen their economic borders via the introduction of tariffs and taxes. Varied levels of taxes on alcohol and cigarettes shipped from one country with low taxes to another country that demanded higher taxes offered an opportunity to generate larger profits. With Stroessner's approval, the Paraguayan military provided the transportation to move the goods and took a cut of the revenue stream.³¹

Given the encouragement of illicit activities, it was inevitable that the TBA became a hotbed of illegal drug smuggling, money laundering, counterfeiting, bribes, and payoffs to corrupt government officials. This network of corruption was the system that consolidated Stroessner's power during his reign from 1954 until 1989. During the 1980s, Islamist organizations, including Hezbollah, spread among the growing Muslim community in the TBA. Hezbollah clerics began a campaign of *da'wa*, proselytizing among the residents of the TBA. Soon after, Hezbollah established terror training camps hidden in the jungles of the region training operatives.³²

Since 1995, Hezbollah cells in the TBA had been active in narcotics trafficking, smuggling, and money laundering, according to the former U.S. State Department coordinator for counterterrorism, Ambassador Philip Wilcox. According to his testimony, Hezbollah conducted fundraising operations with the guidance of Iranian diplomats stationed in the TBA.

²⁵ Ibid., 82.

²⁶ Ibid., 84.

²⁷ Ed Blanche, "The Latin American Connection: The Lawless Tri-Border Region Between Brazil, Argentina and Paraguay Is Under New Scrutiny as a Haven for Arab Extremists," *The Middle East*, May 1, 2003, http://findarticles.com/articles/mi_2742/is_2003_May/ai_n25067559 (accessed March 10, 2009).

²⁸ Lewis, *A South American Frontier, The Tri-Border Region*, 95.

²⁹ Blanche, "The Latin American Connection..."

³⁰ Ibid., 5.

³¹ Ibid., 82.

³² Rachel Ehrenfeld, *Funding Evil* (Bonus Books, 2003), 146.

This resulted in Hezbollah extorting funds from the Lebanese immigrants in the area by threatening them to “donate” to the cause.³³

Culturally, corruption played an important role among the Muslim population in the TBA since this was an important structural role that had been part of their experience in Islamic countries.³⁴ In order to understand this behavior, David Pryce-Jones, the Senior Editor at National Review magazine and a contributing journalist on intelligence matters and Middle East events, was quoted in a U.S. House of Representatives Task Force on Terrorism and Unconventional Warfare, on September 4, 1991,

Force and favors, as determined among individuals through corruption, are the fundamentals of Arab and inter-Arab politics. Corruption among Arabs is nothing more nor less than a daily functioning among every one of the power challenge dialectic, and it is registering individual advances and retreats everywhere and at all times. Corruption plays a role approximating competition in a democracy. At the top of the social scale, corruption represents the power of the strong over the weak.³⁵

Since 1992, more than 1,000 Shi'ite Islamists arrived illegally in Ciudad del Este and Foz do Iguacu, according to Brazilian police.³⁶ Augusto Anibel Lima, a spokesman for the Paraguay's National Police in Ciudad del Este, said “as of September 1994, of all the Arabs in the area, only 273 are legally registered.”³⁷ Given the fundamentalist infusion entering into the perfect storm of the unregulated environment in the TBA, it was only a question of time before the Islamist cells would become active. In 1992 and 1994, the Israeli embassy and the Jewish Community Center, respectively, in Buenos Aires, Argentina were bombed.³⁸ Investigations in Latin America only escalated after September 11, 2001, when U.S. security agencies pressured the Paraguayan authorities to look more closely at businesses that were suspected of being associated with terror networks.³⁹ The TBA had been known as the “Muslim Triangle meeting zone,” but addressing activities funding terror did not take priority since the U.S. had not been previously targeted.⁴⁰

On September 14, 2001, Paraguayan police raided businesses in Ciudad del Este. Among the businessman they arrested was one Assad Ahmad Barakat who owned the Apollo electronics store in the seedy shopping center there, Galeria Page.⁴¹ Barakat was identified by Paraguayan police as “the Hezbollah military chief in the TBA” who raised \$50 million for Hezbollah since 1995.⁴² The poster boy for Hezbollah corruption, Barakat had engaged in money laundering, counterfeiting and blackmailing Lebanese immigrants to amass a fortune for Hezbollah.

³³ Ibid., 147.

³⁴ Ibid., 4.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Blanche, “The Latin American Connection...”

³⁷ Ehrenfeld, *Funding Evil*, 56.

³⁸ Lewis, *A South American Frontier: The Tri-Border Region*, 102.

³⁹ Ehrenfeld, *Funding Evil*, 149.

⁴⁰ Leu, “Fighting Narcoterrorism,” 57.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

Argentinian police claimed Barakat participated in the 1994 Jewish Community Center bombing in Buenos Aires, but did not arrest him due to “lack of evidence.”⁴³

Barakat was not arrested on charges of funding terror organizations “because in Paraguay that’s legal.”⁴⁴ Barakat was, instead, charged with tax evasion and in 2003 sentenced to six and a half years in a prison in Paraguay.⁴⁵ Paraguayan police said that Barakat was one of many Arab merchants in the TBA whose businesses were fronts for terror funding.⁴⁶ After the raid in 2001, Paraguayan prosecutor Carlos Calcenás asserted that Barakat’s associates were underwriting terror funding through CD piracy. Calcenás also agreed that many Arab businesses in the TBA were fronts for terror-relating funding.⁴⁷ Given that Paraguay’s economy would be adversely affected by investigations into a community that provided a source of commercial revenue as well as the community’s link to political powers, it was not surprising that they were afforded “extra-legal” status.⁴⁸

Evidence based on intelligence dossiers and interviews with trusted prosecutors supports the contention that the Barakat clan sent millions of dollars to Hezbollah from drug trafficking and pirated goods, according to a RAND report recently released March 3, 2009.⁴⁹ Barakat provided much of the \$20 million that Hezbollah received annually from the TBA. It is alleged that, while Barakat serves his sentence, his associates continue to support Hezbollah until the present day.⁵⁰ In an interview given with the release of the RAND study, Greg Treverton, the lead author, stated that the profit margin from film piracy is higher than the profit from drug trafficking and as such has become a draw for organized crime. Although the terrorist connection to film piracy is not in evidence now, given the history of Barakat’s involvement with Hezbollah in the TBA, profits to organized crime from film piracy may possibly fund terrorism.⁵¹

The TBA’s history of corruption, drug trafficking, and smuggling is presently seen in Mexico, now convulsed in drug wars that are being fueled by similar illicit activities. Admiral Mike Mullen, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, has expressed concerns that the routes of “drugs and people smuggling enterprises” will be used by terrorists “to pass weapons and personnel into the United States.”⁵² In 2005, Mexican police raided illegal DVD labs by the Tepito Bazaar that could have produced more than 4,400,000 pirated DVDs in a year.⁵³ The more obvious offender is the eighty to ninety percent of illicit drugs entering the U.S. from

⁴³ Ibid., 150.

⁴⁴ John Kreiser, *CBS Evening News: South America’s Terror Connection*. Transcript March 7, 2006, <http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2006/03/07/eveningnews/main1380141.shtml> (accessed March 12, 2009).

⁴⁵ Lewis, *A South American Frontier: The Tri-Border Region*, 103.

⁴⁶ Greta Van Susteren, *CNN The Point with Greta Van Susteren: Tracking the Terrorists’ Financial Trail*, November 7, 2001, <http://www.transcripts.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/0111/07/tpt.00.html> (accessed March 12, 2009).

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ivan Briscoe, “Trouble on the Borders: Latin America’s New Conflict Zones,” *FRIDE*, July 2008, <http://www.fride.org/publication/459/latin-americans-new-conflict-zones> (accessed March 7, 2009).

⁴⁹ Greg Treverton et al., *Film Piracy, Organized Crime, and Terrorism*. (California: RAND Corporation monograph, March 3, 2009), 75.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 77.

⁵¹ RAND Corporation News Release, “*Organized Crime Is Increasingly Active in Film Piracy; Three Cases Link to Piracy Profits*,” March 3, 2009, <http://www.rand.org/news/press/2009/03/03/> (accessed March 13, 2009).

⁵² Jamie Glazov, “If Mexico Falls,” *FrontPageMagazine.com*, October 29, 2010, <http://frontpagemag.com/2010/10/29/if-mexico-falls/> (November 1, 2010).

⁵³ MPAA, “Mexico Police Shut Down Huge Illegal DVD Lab Operation...,” October 20, 2005, http://www.mpa.org/press_releases/2005-10-20.pdf (accessed March 13, 2009).

Mexico.⁵⁴ Latin America is the major drug supplier to the U.S. and Mexico is their route of entry.⁵⁵

According to Col. Robert Killebrew, USA (Ret.), who served more than 30 years as an Army War College instructor, “The TBA, Central America and Mexico are checkpoints on routes for drugs, arms and human traffic moving north toward the U.S. border.” Killebrew advocated the need for immigration reform since it is connected to the international gang culture. Additionally, he recommended prison reform to address overcrowded prisons, which Killebrew referred to as “gang incubators.”⁵⁶

A 2005 Drug Enforcement Administration document reported that Islamic extremists posing as Hispanic nationals in the U.S. are in league with Mexican drug traffickers to finance Middle East terror networks. Individuals in the report were specified to be Spanish-speaking Arabic drug traffickers located in the U.S. southwest.⁵⁷

Charles Allen, undersecretary for intelligence and analysis at the Department of Homeland Security, said that although feasible, it is unlikely that terror organizations would seek the cooperation of Mexican drug traffickers, since their priority is to profit from the narcotics trade. Allen conceded, however, that cartels squeezed by competing gangs or the Mexican government crackdown may act in desperation to survive by cooperating with terror groups.⁵⁸

Michael Braun, Drug Enforcement Agency chief of operations, however, found there to be a stronger link between terrorism and drug trafficking. Specifying the link between the two was based on evidence, not only intelligence, he stated that Middle East terror organizations profit from global narcotics trade. Braun stressed that interrupting connections between the two groups was critical.⁵⁹

Although there is not a direct link between Mexican drug trafficking organizations and terrorist organizations in Mexico due to different goals, both use organized crime as a *modus operandi*. Due to a similar methodology, it is logical to expect that there would be collaboration.⁶⁰ An even more disturbing trend exhibited by Mexican drug cartels has been their method of dispatching rivals. Beheadings have become a publicized method used to intimidate the competition. This brutal form of mutilation is a method that has been more routinely associated with Middle Eastern jihadis.⁶¹

Previously, the cartels would torture their victims to send their message. Organized crime groups would have their own calling card signature method of brutalization to instill fear. The Italian mafia sent warnings by cutting off a victim's ear or finger. The Columbian cartels would use the gruesome "Colombian necktie," where a murdered victims tongue would

⁵⁴ Leu, “Fighting Narcoterrorism,” 57.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Col. Robert Killebrew, USA (Ret.), “Terror at the Border,” *Armed Forces Journal*, December 2008, <http://www.armedforcesjournal.com/2008/12/3801379> (accessed February 22, 2009).

⁵⁷ Sara Carter, “Hearing Sought on Islamic Mexican Ties,” *The Washington Times*, August 9, 2007, <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2007/aug/09/hearing-sought-on-islamic-mexican-ties/> (accessed March 13, 2009).

⁵⁸ Rita Boland, “Narcotics and Terrorism are Linked, Pose Threats to Hemisphere,” *SIGNAL Online AFCEA*, December 2008, <http://afcea.org/signal/articles/anmviewer.asp?a=1782> (accessed February 22, 2009).

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Leu, “Fighting Narcoterrorism,” 57.

⁶¹ Dane Schiller, “Mexican Drug Cartels’ New Scare Tactic: Beheadings,” *San Antonio Express-News*, September 26, 2006, <http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?file/c/a/2006/09/26/MNGJELCP391.DTL> (accessed March 16, 2009).

be pulled through their sliced throat.⁶² The Mexican cartels increased more brutal methods of intimidation as the government pressure on the cartels increased.

The "narco-decapitations" first began to be more publicized in 2006. These messages of intimidation have escalated as rival drug gangs have increased the pressure along with Calderon's clampdown, causing the cartels to resort to more brutal methods to maintain their control. Consider the message sent by the discovery of decapitated bodies of gang members in August of 2008. They were found in the same place that a significant counter-drug cartel initiative had been launched - Merida, Mexico.⁶³

In an interview with Dr. Nancy Hartevelt Kobrin, a counterterrorism expert, she expressed her views on this phenomenon exhibited by both Mexican cartels and Middle Eastern jihadis. Dr. Kobrin is a psychoanalyst by training who specializes in somatics, the symbolism of terrorist acts and their implications regarding deterrence. Dr. Kobrin referenced the term "mass-mediated terrorism" coined by Brigitte Nacos in Nacos' 2002 book, *Mass-Mediated Terrorism: The Central Role of Media in Terrorism and Counterterrorism*.

Nacos' book deals with how terrorists and criminals exploit the global media to further their ends. Dr. Kobrin pointed out that jihadis behead using an ideological justification, whereas the drug cartels use it as a tactic of intimidation. "The 'mass-mediated terrorism' has helped to globalize the commonality of beheading. It is known across shame/honor cultures. These templates carry a symbolic communication that connects the culture of terror. The media inadvertently promotes copycat events among groups who use violence to control and terrify."⁶⁴ Mexican cartels have no hesitation learning from the startling jihadi method of terror as a tactic to suit their ends. Given the lawless environment in Mexico due to drug gang wars, there is a fertile environment for exploitation by terrorist organizations as well.

Any attempts by Islamists to infiltrate the southern U.S. border by using the Hispanic illegal immigrants as a cover is difficult to determine due to insufficient data. Rachel Ehrenfeld, author of *Funding Evil*, explained that there is no official U.S. policy to identify or investigate the religion of illegal and legal immigrants. Without official data, it is easy to claim that this is not a problem. When arrests are made and a name sounds Spanish, they are classified as Latin American. The question remains how this information would be verifiable without burdening the Border Patrol system even further than it has been in addressing the flood of illegal immigrants coming across the border. Yet, to date, the U.S. policy does not take this into account. However, Islam is the fastest growing religion in Latin America, and the U.S. the main target of radical Islam.⁶⁵

A U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration official stated. "Terrorist groups have discovered what cartels have known all along: the border is the back door into the U.S."⁶⁶

Established routes of entry for smuggling illegal immigrants and drug shipments into the U.S. are the numerous tunnels that have been dug along the U.S.-Mexican border.⁶⁷ A

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ken Ellingswood and Cecilia Sanchez, "12 Decapitated Bodies Found in Mexico's Yucatan Peninsula." *Los Angeles Times*, August 29, 2008, <http://www.latimes.com/news/nationworld/world/la-fg-behead29-2008aug29,0,1675298.story>, (accessed March 16, 2009).

⁶⁴ Nancy Hartevelt Kobrin, Phone interview by author. March 16, 2009.

⁶⁵ Rachel Ehrenfeld, Email interview by author, February 22, 2009.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

discovered tunnel leading from Mexico was less than 65 yards from the U.S. border. This tunnel was relatively sophisticated with ventilation, air-conditioning and hydraulic pulleys. Since the 1990s, there have been 75 tunnels discovered along the U.S.-Mexican border, 63 of them since 9-11.⁶⁸

Drug traffickers have upped the ante in their efforts to infiltrate the U.S. using semi-sub, “self-propelled semi-submersibles,” which can hold up to 12 tons of cargo.⁶⁹

The U.S. Coast Guard anticipates apprehending as many as 100 semi-sub during 2009. Recent statistics have shown the success rate for the semi-sub has been estimated at as high as 80%.⁷⁰ These \$2 million, 40 x 80 foot long semi-sub are built in the cover of the jungle in South America, equipped with satellite communication and capable of carrying up to \$200 million of cocaine per shipment.⁷¹ Interceptions have occurred in the eastern Pacific between South and Central America.⁷²

Adm. James Stavridis,* USN, commander of U.S. Southern Command (SOUTHCOM), declared in December 2008, “This is clearly the next big thing.” Although no evidence exists today, Adm. Stavridis expressed concern about the potential for smuggling undetected WMDs in a semi-sub.⁷³ Given that semi-sub are difficult to intercept now, future designs of the submarines will likely be totally submersible and pose an even greater threat.⁷⁴

Different solutions have been proposed and discussed to address the border crisis. A meeting between former President Bush and President Calderon in March of 2007 in Merida, Mexico, put forth a plan to expand a joint U.S. and Mexican initiative against criminal organizations and drug trafficking cartels. Called the Merida Initiative, the three-year, \$1.4 billion plan would provide U.S. security equipment and weaponry to Mexico and Central American countries. Additional communication and intelligence-gathering equipment for the Mexican police would assist the U.S. in detection to thwart possible infiltration by criminals or terrorists.⁷⁵ Previously, Mexico received \$40 million in U.S. aid, but as part of a supplemental budget request to the U.S. Congress, an initial \$500 million would be allotted to Mexico as part of the “new security relationship” between the two countries.⁷⁶

⁶⁷ Catherine Elsworth, “Air-Conditioned Drugs Smuggling Tunnel Discovered on US-Mexico Border,” *UK Telegraph*, September 4, 2008, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/.../mexico/2676766/Air-conditioned-drugs-smuggling-tunnel-discovered-on-US-Mexico-border.ht> (accessed March 5, 2009).

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Gordon Lubold, “New Challenges in Drug War: Semi-Subs,” *Christian Science Monitor*, August 25, 2008, <http://www.csmonitor.com/2008/0825/p03s03-usmi.html> (accessed March 1, 2009).

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Boland, “Narcotics and Terrorism are Linked, Pose Threats to Hemisphere.”

⁷² Ibid.

* Author’s note November 4, 2010: Currently, Admiral Stavridis serves as Commander, U.S. European Command (USEUCOM) and NATO’s Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR). Admiral Stavridis assumed these duties in the summer of 2009. U.S. Navy Biographies – ADMIRAL JAMES G. STAVRIDIS, November 2, 2010, <http://www.navy.mil/navydata/bios/navybio.asp?bioID=270> (accessed November 4, 2010).

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Adam Housley, “The Merida Plan (and why you should care),” *Fox News Blogs*, December 4, 2007, <http://www.onthescene.blogs.foxnews.com/2007/12/40/the-merida-plan-why-you-should-care/> (accessed March 1, 2009).

⁷⁶ Laurence Iliff, “Bush Announces \$1.4 billion drug plan for Mexico,” *The Dallas Morning News*, November 2, 2007, http://www.dallasnews.com/sharedcontent/dws/news/world/mexico/stories/DN-plan-mexico_23int.ART.State.Edition1.4273cfd.ht (accessed March 24, 2009).

The Merida Initiative also stipulates that the U.S. would provide Mexico with the training and equipment to prevent illegal weapons entering Mexico from the U.S. This is particularly ironic given the fact that most of the guns used in the drug wars come from the U.S.⁷⁷ Guns are difficult to purchase in Mexico, but as many as 2,000 guns a day make their way across the U.S. border. The smuggled guns are used by the cartels against each other as well as against the Mexican government forces.⁷⁸ Mexican gangs have developed different strategies to exploit America's lax gun laws. One of those strategies has been to smuggle guns in the many trucks used in commercial traffic between Mexico and the U.S. through bribes or threats.⁷⁹

Nonetheless, the Merida Initiative was reluctantly approved by the U.S. Congress in 2008. This reluctance was expressed by Congressman Ted Poe (R-TX). "The money is going to the wrong side of the border. With the infiltration of law enforcement and so many corrupt officials in Mexico, we don't want that equipment used against us."⁸⁰ Congress likely passed the plan because the U.S. wanted to counter Mexico seeking aid from countries at odds with America. Hugo Chavez of Venezuela had already been making his presence known regionally using Venezuela's oil wealth to undermine the U.S.⁸¹ More significantly, a little-publicized meeting held in December of 2007 between President Calderon and former Iranian President Mohamed Khatami took place in Mexico City at Los Pinos, Calderon's official presidential residence. This was a message the U.S. could not afford to ignore.⁸² Reported as a meeting to forge closer cultural ties between the two countries, Khatami's audience with Calderon was an unlikely coincidence coming on the heels of the March 2007 meeting between Bush and Calderon at Merida. Perhaps this was Calderon's way of making certain the U.S. understood that if aid was not forthcoming, there were others interested in assisting Mexico, including Iran. Needless to say, the U.S. would find it difficult to tolerate an Iranian presence in such close geographic proximity to the U.S. border.

Yet Congressman Poe's skepticism towards the Merida Initiative was not without merit. Local police forces in Mexico are riddled with corruption. In June 2005, 730 members of the police force of Nuevo Laredo were arrested. As recent as last year, President Calderon fired 284 senior federal police officers.⁸³ Having largely replaced the crumbling security forces with Mexican army troops, President Calderon's attorney general, Eduardo Medina Mora, insists that the solution is to remove the drug cartel's ability to undermine legal institutions.⁸⁴

In a recent panel discussion on the topic of Mexico's drug wars, Foreign Policy fellow at the Brookings Institution in Washington, D.C., and adjunct professor at Georgetown University's School of Foreign Service, Vanda Felbab-Brown, pointed to the fact that violence escalated due to corruption between authorities and the drug cartels in the 1980s and 1990s. Today, the

⁷⁷ James Verini, "Arming the Drug Wars," *Conde Nast 'Portfolio'*, July 2008 issue, <http://www.portfolio.com/in-this-issue-jul-2008> (accessed March 24, 2009).

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Bogan et al., "The Next Disaster," 78.

⁸¹ James C. McKinley, Jr., "From Mexico Also, the Message to Bush is Immigration," *The New York Times*, March 14, 2007, http://www.nytimes.com/2007/03/14/world/americas/14prexy.html?_r=1&pagewanted=print (accessed March 24, 2009).

⁸² Jerome R. Corsi, "Iran-Mexico Meeting Deepens Ties to Islam," *WorldNetDaily*, December 7, 2007, http://www.worldnetdaily.com/news/article.asp?ARTICLE_ID=59098 (accessed March 24, 2009).

⁸³ Briscoe, "Trouble on the Borders: Latin America's New Conflict Zone," 3.

⁸⁴ The Economist, "How to Stop the Drug Wars," March 5, 2009, 30.

situation has so deteriorated that police reform is a necessity to counter the pressures from drug cartels on police to, “take the bullet, or take the bribe.”⁸⁵

Suggestions have been floated to rethink U.S. policy regarding strategies dealing with both the supply and demand side of the drug problem by legalizing “soft” drugs, like marijuana, to reduce the power of drug cartels. Felbab-Brown dismissed this idea by saying legalization would likely increase demand and devastate communities. “These cartels want power and will resort to other areas of crime.”⁸⁶

A fellow panelist, Jose Diaz Briseno, Washington correspondent for the Mexico daily newspaper, *Reforma*, outlined his following proposals:⁸⁷

- Media attention should be placed on the need to overhaul the Mexican criminal justice system;
- U.S. law schools should partner with Mexican law schools to prepare prosecutors;
- Forensic labs in Mexico should be fostered via donations;
- U.S. foundations should form criminal watchdog groups in Mexico;
- More civic engagement should be encouraged.

Clearly, there are numerous strategies being debated in hopes of finding a way to alleviate the mounting crisis on our southern border. In order to construct effective strategies, the paradigm shift that has occurred within porous border regions, such as in the TBA and Mexico, needs further examination. In both circumstances, political institutions and the rule of law have deteriorated. State power is challenged by terrorism, drug trafficking and crime. Traditionally, the central state is depended upon to guarantee the security of its citizens. Unable to deliver, it is replaced by a “shadow transborder economy”⁸⁸ where criminality and violence spreads.

Here is an example where central states that govern large areas exist as a bureaucracy with ineffective legal mechanisms that lose control of their border regions. In these corroded circumstances, “frontier economies” emerge creating a “borderland economic system.”⁸⁹ The shadow economy is run by an alternative authority structure -- in these cases criminal organizations. Locals become complicit in accepting illegitimate trade with legitimate, as the price of being able to do business in the absence of reliance on failing state institutions.⁹⁰

The transformation of society due to information technology has contributed to a shift in global politics. The nature of crime and conflict is such that non-state actors challenge the greater powers of the nation-state. These non-state challenges are adaptable in that they can, in the words of John P. Sullivan, a lieutenant with the Los Angeles Sheriff’s Department and a Senior Research Fellow at the Center for Advanced Studies on Terrorism, “display a remarkable capacity to transcend borders and flow around legal or geographic boundaries.”⁹¹

Sullivan categorizes the corrosive impact of these groups on the neighborhood level. When the political and legal structures succumb to corruption, personal safety of the individual is at risk,

⁸⁵ Diane Rehm, “Drug Wars in Mexico,” WAMU talk radio interview. February 26, 2009.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Briscoe, “Trouble on the Borders: Latin America’s New Conflict Zone,” 6.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 5.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ John P. Sullivan, “Terrorism, Crime and Private Armies,” *Low Intensity Conflict and Law Enforcement*, Vol. 11, No. 2/3 (Winter 2002), (accessed March 11, 2009), 242.

and “failed communities” are a microcosmic representation of a “failed state.”⁹² In the case of Mexico, Sullivan refers to the shadow economy that emerges as “black globalization.”⁹³ It undermines civil society and creates a “neo-feudal”⁹⁴ power structure that sets up shop in the impoverished urban and remote rural areas outside the control of the central state. These become areas that even law enforcement avoids in the drug cartels ruthless “war of attrition against the government.”⁹⁵ The alternative shadow economy mirrors the mechanisms of free trade and transforms the social structure of transparency and good governance to one that is defined as a “new medievalism” run by non-state actors.⁹⁶

The impact on national security is that the instability caused by criminal networks creates a threat to sovereign borders.⁹⁷ Confusion regarding state to state cooperation increases as chaos escalates and geographic borders become less of a barrier to securing states. If Mexico manages to suppress crime, it could surge in the U.S. Thus, a deteriorating situation in a weakened or failed state next door increases the potential for terrorists to exploit any advantage. Sullivan sums up the connection between crime and terror in these words, “It is in America’s national interest to ensure that Mexico does not become a large version of Ciudad del Este in the South American tri-border region, where all manner of criminals and terrorists have taken up residence. Mexican gangs already smuggle hundreds of thousands of foreigners across the border, there is an increasing likelihood that some of them will be terrorists.”⁹⁸

Due to the demand for drugs, it is unlikely that the U.S. and Mexico can eliminate drug trafficking. The way that the U.S. can assist Mexico is to help restore the rule of law to strengthen civil society. In doing so, the drug cartel’s grip on the state can be fragmented to a point where it can be managed and contained.⁹⁹ It is a tall order that the U.S. faces in its efforts to assist Mexico and other weakened states as part of U.S. policy established by former President Bush. The “National Strategy for Combating Terrorism” states that the U.S. will assist to strengthen a state to the point where it “can look after its own people – and control its borders.”¹⁰⁰

Given the fact that the U.S. is so vast, it’s easy to ignore the reality that our fortunes can be affected by bordering countries to our north and south that we accept as benign. We open our newspapers and read about wars afflicting countries an ocean away but reassure ourselves that it could never happen here. There is no ocean to keep this problem at arm’s length, and our southern border states have become the front line in the war waged by drug cartels. The dire consequences for our country as a result of the Mexican government under siege are an alarming reminder of not only their vulnerability, but the utter failure of our own leadership to stop the barbarians at the gate.

⁹² Ibid., 243.

⁹³ John P. Sullivan and Adam Elkus, “State of Siege: Mexico’s Criminal Insurgency,” *Small Wars Journal*, 2008, <http://smallwarsjournal.com/mag/docs-temp/84-sullivan.pdf> (accessed March 11, 2009).

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Briscoe, “Trouble on the Borders: Latin America’s New Conflict Zone,” 6.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 8.

⁹⁸ John P. Sullivan and Adam Elkus, “State of Siege: Mexico’s Criminal Insurgency.”

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ “National Strategy for Combating Terrorism,” *US Department of State*, February 2003, <http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/60172.pdf> (accessed March 13, 2009).

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