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Crime and Terrorism

Robert Killebrew

The U.S. has been at war in Iraq and Afghanistan now for eight years, and a great deal of our best thinking and most focused military development has quite rightly gone into fighting those two conflicts. We have built an effective counterinsurgency doctrine, we have re-equipped and re-re-equipped our forces, and we have performed built huge bases of experience in dealing with Islamic insurgent and terror organizations. This is as it should be – Secretary of Defense Robert Gates’ admonition to “win the war you’re in” is right on target.

In those eight years, though, as we have focused on the wars we’re in, there have been some profound changes in the structure of global terrorism, particularly with regard to the relationship between terrorist movements and international crime. According to a panel of experts at a recent conference sponsored by the Center for a New American Security, terrorism and crime have now merged, to such an extent that all terrorist movements – all of them -- have become partly criminal organizations to fund their operations, expand their reach – and incidentally make the people on top extremely rich, while lower-level zealots continue to be recruited for suicide missions. In recent appearance before Congress, one field-experienced DEA veteran said:

As we witness the continued evolution of the Taliban, we must also recognize we are witnessing the evolution of 21st Century global organized crime. It is becoming more and more difficult to distinguish the terrorist from the cartel member, because they are operationally and organizationally interbreeding and morphing into one and the same. The indisputable convergence of terrorism and international drug trafficking is playing out before our very eyes in Afghanistan, and in many other places around the globe.

It is sometimes difficult for traditionally-trained military professionals and national security types to recognize crime as a national security threat – at least, it has been for me. But a glance at the drug wars in Mexico (and along our border) should

make it clear that insurgents and counterinsurgency now takes place in a criminal, as well as sometimes an ideological or political, context. Worse, the scope of the estimated 1.5 trillion dollars in illicit money being raised around the world, being infused in the global monetary stream and manipulated by criminals, threatens to undermine the stability of the international order itself, striking at financial and banking systems and undermining legal and political authority in legitimate states. Against such deterioration, terrorism is only a subset of a larger problem of illegality and aggression against the underpinnings of civil society itself, as we see in Mexico and other countries in which criminals have acquired firepower equal to the State.

How did this happen? Trafficking in illegal drugs has been a challenge worldwide for generations. But the ripple effects of the collapse of the Soviet Union in the '80s with its stockpiles of weaponry, the consequent migration of peoples, the communications revolution and easy access to transportation all came together to allow criminals to expand internationally. Although illegal drugs still comprise the most rewarding cash crop for the black economy, other criminal activity, particularly human trafficking and weapons sales, have also expanded. As a consequence, international criminal organizations have gone global; Columbia's FARC, for example, has agents in West Africa, just as Lebanon's Hezbollah operates in South America (as does the Iranian Revolutionary Guard). More ominously, some legitimate states now engage in drug production, trafficking and other illicit commerce, and protect both the trade and its perpetrators behind the state's cloak of legality and international standing— North Korea, Iran and Venezuela do so, among others. The narco-state has emerged, which vastly complicates the challenge of fighting both crime *and* terrorism.

Fortunately for us, our recent experience in Afghanistan and Iraq has begun to nudge American strategy and policy toward more integrated solutions than purely military or purely diplomatic choices, and we have begun to rebuild the civilian institutions with which we engage the world. U.S. law enforcement agencies, notably the FBI and DEA, are heavily committed globally in partnership with foreign law enforcement organizations. Domestically, the United States has fairly professional local police forces, generally incorruptible local governments, and efficient and honest courts – the civic backbone needed to resist assault by Latino gangs like MS-13 and the cartels that are presently moving across the border into the U.S. Here are some early steps that American policymakers, diplomats and security experts can take.

First, we need to recognize the scope of the problem, and see terrorism, where appropriate, as one arm of international crime. In fact, the emphasis on crimefighting is already reflected inside and outside our two combat theaters, where the leading tools in fighting criminal terrorists are legal investigations, indictments, extradition and prosecution in U.S. courts. In many ways, we are returning to pre-9/11 policies to treating terrorists as what they really are and what we ultimately want them to be seen as—criminals who should be brought to justice. Doing so not only reaffirms the relationship of international law to terrorists captured in domestic settings – a problem that has plagued the U.S. since the establishment of Guantanamo – but it also buttresses the authority of legal systems worldwide, which is a fundamental and necessary strategy in fighting a global crime wave. The United States must explicitly reaffirm its commitment to international law and the sovereignty of individual states, and adopt policies to support its position.

Second, we and our allies must continue to reinforce and police the international economic system, to include identification of “black” accounts and banks that likely support illegal or extremist activity. While the U.S. was vigorously involved in doing so in the aftermath of 9/11, the passage of time, new Administration priorities and the global financial crisis has apparently resulted in a slowdown of U.S. efforts to seek out and attack criminal misuse of the financial system.

Third, it’s apparent even without the complication of international crime that a major and consistent U.S. strategy is necessary to help our allies rebuild local security forces, police, courts and legal systems to withstand attempts by insurgents to destabilize their societies and governments. The merger of crime and terrorism means that insurgents will have access to virtually unlimited cash and that widespread attacks on the fabric of civil life – bribes, extortion, kidnapping, murder – have already become common fare in insurgencies. As the proper answer to this kind of challenge is effective civil institutions, including uncorrupted and efficient police, the U.S. must be capable of effectively and discretely helping our allies when asked, without opening our friends up to charges of “selling out” their countries’ interests to the Americans. Doing so will mean building on our successes and learning from our failures in rebuilding civil institutions in Iraq and Afghanistan; the continued rebuilding (and in some cases redesign) of our civilian arms of foreign policy, a revamping of our security assistance programs, and tighter integration of our military and diplomatic capabilities. We have the vision – we just need to do it.

Finally, the U.S., must more effectively bridge the gap between foreign and domestic security policies; criminals and extremists aren't deterred by national borders, and our own law enforcement agencies in the U.S. –especially local cops on the beat – should have at least the same capability to communicate across boundaries and within organizations as the crooks do. Reinforcing our front-line civic institutions that keep order – police, courts, local governments – has not normally been a priority for national government in our federal system, but it's necessary today as a matter of national security.

The foregoing is a first, and almost superficial, overview of developments in the “black” world in roughly the past decade. While our armed forces have been occupied with wars overseas, and our attention has properly focused on them, other developments have changed the nature of some threats to our national security. There are still plenty of more traditional challenges; Russia continues to push back against the West; the Iranians threaten to build nuclear weapons. (Both states, though, either shelter criminal activity or engage in it as state policy.) But the explosion of the illicit economy, the merger of crime and terrorism, and their reach inside our borders, have added a new and possibly more imminent challenge to our safety – not only at the national level, but on our streets.

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