

## State of Siege: Mexico's Criminal Insurgency

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Mexico is under siege, and the barbarians are dangerously close to breaching the castle walls. Responding to President Felipe Calderon's latest drug crackdown, an army of drug cartels has launched a vicious criminal insurgency against the Mexican state. So far, the conflict has killed over 1,400 Mexicans, 500 of them law enforcement officers.<sup>1</sup> No longer fearing retaliation, cartel gunmen assault soldier and high-ranking *federale* alike. The criminal threat is not only a threat to public order but to the state. A top-ranking Mexican intelligence official has noted in interview that criminal gangs pose a national security threat to the integrity of the state. Cartels are even trying to take over the Mexican Congress by funding political campaigns, CISEN director Guillero Valdes alleged.<sup>2</sup> Should Mexico's gangs cement their hold further, Mexico could possibly become a criminal-state largely controlled by narco-gangs. This is not just a threat to Mexico, however.

As the intensity of the violence grows, so does the possibility that Tijuana and Juarez's high-intensity street warfare will migrate north. Recent cartel warfare in Arizona indicates that America has become a battleground for drug cartels clashing over territory, putting American citizens and law enforcement at risk. But the northward migration of cartel warfare is not the worst consequence of Mexico's criminal insurgency. A lawless Mexico will be a perfect staging ground for terrorists seeking to operate in North America. American policymakers must act to protect our southern flank.

### The Criminal State

Paradoxically, Mexico is a weak state troubled by a history of authoritarian domination. A deeply stratified nation with high unemployment, low real wages, systematic corruption, and extensive racial discrimination against its large Amerindian minority, Mexico has seen numerous revolutions and changes of government---often resulting in great bloodshed. Mexican historian Enrique Krauze argues that Mexico's current troubles

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<sup>1</sup> "Factbox--Mexican President Calderon's War on Drug Gangs," Reuters, March 16, 2008, <<http://uk.reuters.com/article/latestCrisis/idUKN1644494820080616>> Accessed 17 June 2008.

<sup>2</sup> "Mexican Cartels 'Threaten State,'" BBC, July 14, 2008, <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/7506581.stm>> Accessed August 5, 2008.

stem from the rule of authoritarian strongmen.<sup>3</sup> Close to seventy years of one-party rule by the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) and a socialist command economy have created a governmental culture of bribery, injustice, and impunity, particularly among internal security forces. Free trade, political reform, and the breaking of the PRI's oligarchic power have made Mexico more dynamic, but wealth and political power remain concentrated in the hands of a few.

Unfortunately, Mexico's corruption also has retarded the growth of its civil society. Without a strong and impartial law enforcement apparatus to protect them, journalists and honest civil servants have paid the ultimate price. 25 Mexican journalists have died under suspicious circumstances over the last 15 years,<sup>4</sup> and scores of judges, prosecutors, and politicians have been killed.<sup>5</sup> The culprits are depressingly familiar: cartel gunmen, rogue police, and other armed malcontents who see the free press and a strong judiciary as a threat to their interests.

Despite the centralization of political and economic power, the state is weak in Mexico's hinterlands, particularly the border regions. Corruption and the rise of criminal kingpins have feudalized Mexico, disrupting state power and the monopoly of force. As generations of American teenagers have discovered, the border regions in particular are temporary autonomous zones where one can do as he pleases without the threat of punishment. Border towns such as Tijuana are waypoints for massive amounts of commerce and contraband both supplied and demanded by globalization. While today's Mexico is not the veritable Wild West of Pancho Villa's time, there is an unmistakable continuity between the rule of the *bandito* and that of the cartel assassin. Command of the shadow economy guarantees riches and political influence.

One manifestation of the Mexican state's weakness is its burgeoning private security industry. At the turn of the millennium, Mexico's guns for hire contained an estimated 10,000 firms totaling at least 153,885 personnel, only 20% of which were registered. As in Russia, these private security forces have become private armies for the powerful, and implicated in the country's criminal violence. In some border regions of Mexico, private security firms decisively outnumber uniformed police officers and probably are better armed.<sup>6</sup>

Mexico's state weakness makes it an ideal transit point for drug smuggling into the United States. With enhanced security impeding the Florida drug smuggling route, 90% of cocaine sold in the United States passes through Mexico. Drug syndicates also supply

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<sup>3</sup> See Enrique Krauze, *Mexico, Biography of Power: A History of Modern Mexico 1810-1996* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1998).

<sup>4</sup> *Attacks on the Press in 2007*, Committee to Protect Journalists (New York: CPJ, 2008).

<sup>5</sup> Jeremy Schwartz, "Judges Latest Target in Mexico Drug War," Cox News Service, February 2, 2008.

<sup>6</sup> Graham Hall Turbeville Jr., "Outlaw Private Security Firms: Criminal and Terrorist Agendas Outnumber Private Security Alternatives," in *Criminal-States and Criminal Soldiers*, (ed) Robert J. Bunker, (New York: Routledge, 2008, p. 243).

the US market with ecstasy and methamphetamine.<sup>7</sup> However, Mexico also produces drugs of its own—in large quantities. In 2005, Mexico cultivated 3,300 hectares of opium poppy with a potential yield of 8 metric tons of pure heroin and 17 metric tons of “black tar heroin. In the same year, drug producers also cultivated 5,600 hectares of marijuana with a potential production yield of 10,100 metric tons.<sup>8</sup> Many experts put drug profits at \$40 billion, 20% of Mexican exports to the United States.<sup>9</sup>

Not surprisingly, the spoils of this massive underground economy are concentrated in the hands of a select few.<sup>10</sup> Mexico’s drug trade can be categorized as “black globalization,” a shadow economy that squashes legitimate enterprise, corrupts civil society, and fatally undermines the rule of law.<sup>11</sup> “Black globalization” also creates a neo-feudal power structure in which power flows to non-state forces controlling large slums. These fortresses of criminal influence are no-go areas for law enforcement and act as channeling points for the global illicit economy. Utilizing temporary autonomous zones in urban and rural centers, criminal can tap into a \$2.5 trillion global illicit economy growing at 7 times the rate of growth in the legal economy.<sup>12</sup> This economy has created a massive criminal infrastructure to support it, with a complex network of sub-contracted specialists to handle virtually every task necessary to ensure that the clandestine goods reach their destination.<sup>13</sup> Needless to say, terrorists often exploit “black globalization” to create logistical networks and secure bases.

### **Coca Commanders**

The Colombian Cali and Medellin cartels have traditionally dominated the drug economy in the Americas. However, their brazen challenges to state authority provoked the Colombian government’s wrath. With the help of the United States, Colombian internal security forces successfully decapitated Cali and Medellin in the 1990s.<sup>14</sup> Hobbled by their brittle organizational structures, the Colombians could not regain their once

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<sup>7</sup> “CIA World Factbook—Mexico,” Central Intelligence Agency, June 10, 2008, <<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/mx.html>> accessed 15 June 2008.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> George Friedman, “Mexico: On the Road to a Failed State?” Stratfor, May 13, 2008.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> For an example of “black globalization” in action see John Robb, “The Pull of Black Globalization in Afghanistan,” *Global Guerrillas*, 20 December 2005, <[http://globalguerrillas.typepad.com/globalguerrillas/2005/12/journal\\_the\\_pul.html](http://globalguerrillas.typepad.com/globalguerrillas/2005/12/journal_the_pul.html)> Accessed June 17 2008.

<sup>12</sup> Moises Naim, *Illicit: How Smugglers, Traffickers, and Copycats Are Hijacking the Global Economy* (New York: Doubleday, 2005), quoted in John Robb, “Nation-States, Market-States, and Virtual-States,” Robert J. Bunker (ed), *Criminal-States and Criminal Soldiers* (New York: Routledge, 2008, p. 31).

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> John P. Sullivan and Robert J. Bunker, “Drug Cartels, Street Gangs, and Warlords” in Robert J. Bunker (ed) *Non State Threats and Future Wars* (London: Frank Cass, 2003, p. 44).

fearsome power. But nature abhors a vacuum, and the Mexican cartels wasted no time in filling it.<sup>15</sup>

Seven Mexican cartels fight over the drug market. The Gulf, Sinaloa, and Juarez cartels are the largest. The Gulf cartel paired with the much smaller Tijuana cartel, and Juarez, Sinaloa, and Valencia have cooperated in the past.<sup>16</sup> However, alliances within the cartel system are constantly shifting and are based on convenience rather than personal or ideological ties. What was once an alliance today means nothing tomorrow, as each cartel's goal is to maximize its own advantage at the expense of its rivals. Any fixed taxonomy of alliances and networks should be viewed as suspect. So far, the latest round of murderous competition between the Gulf, Sinaloa, and resurgent Juarez cartels has killed over 4,000 Mexicans.<sup>17</sup>

Cartel managers don't do the dealing and killing themselves—they outsource to distributor gangs and freelance guns for hire called *sicarios*. While there are many gangs and sub-gangs carrying out this work, we will briefly look at how two such contractors—MS-13 and the Zetas—exemplify cartel operations.

MS-13 is a networked, “third generation” street gang operating in both the United States and Central America.<sup>18</sup> The product of unresolved turmoil from the Latin American civil wars of the 1980s, MS-13 commands 70,000 members south of the border.<sup>19</sup> The *Maras* are the Mexican cartels' retail salesmen, buying their methamphetamine and selling it in the United States.<sup>20</sup> Some have alleged that the cartels control MS-13, but the relationship between the two is purely business. MS-13 gets “street cred” and a potent product to sell, and the cartels get wide distribution.

Los Zetas are the elite soldiers of the drug war. One of many enforcer gangs servicing the cartels, the Zetas are a ruthless group of former Mexican special forces operators from the military and internal security services who sought a more financially rewarding profession. With their military expertise, the Gulf Cartel can carry out complex paramilitary operations against rivals and the Mexican government. The other cartels

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<sup>15</sup> Colleen W. Cook, *Congressional Research Service Report for Congress: Mexico's Drug Cartels* (Washington: Library of Congress, October 16, 2007, p. 2).

<sup>16</sup> Cook, p. 4

<sup>17</sup> Manuel Roig-Franzia, “U.S. Guns Behind Cartel Killings in Mexico,” *Washington Post*, October 29, 2007, p. A01.

<sup>18</sup> Third Generation street gangs (3 GEN gangs) operate across a wide spatial range, have a high level of sophistication, and have developed political aims (including the co-option or weakening of structures of governance. See John P. Sullivan, “Maras Morphing: Revisiting Third Generation Gangs,” *Global Crime*, Vol. 7, No. 3-4, August-November 2006, pp. 487-504 and John P. Sullivan, “Transnational gangs: The Impact of Third generation Gangs in Central America,” *Air & Space Power Journal—Spanish Edition*, Second Trimester 2008.

<sup>19</sup> See Adam Elkus, “Gangs, Terrorists, and Trade,” *Foreign Policy in Focus*, April 12 2007, <http://www.fpif.org/fpiftxt/4144>.

<sup>20</sup> Cook, p. 9

have developed their own enforcer gangs to counter the Zetas' Special Forces capabilities.

We largely supply the weapons. As many as 2,000 American weapons enter Mexico each day, helped by corrupt customs officials on both ends of the border.<sup>21</sup> The guns are smuggled by a swarm of "ant trails," small groups carrying one to two weapons each. Cartel arsenals brim with AK-47s, sniper scopes, grenade launchers, and "cop-killer" penetrative ammunition.<sup>22</sup> This firepower gives even the lowliest cartel gunman a tactical advantage over his police counterpart.

Worse yet, Mexico's cartels have surpassed their infamous Colombian antecedents. They have evolved into "Third-Phase Cartels," criminal-states that can pose a strategic threat to the nation-state.<sup>23</sup> Massive corruption has enabled the cartels to attach themselves to the Mexican state like parasites, slowly criminalizing it. Substantial chunks of Mexican infrastructure—police, judiciary, and public administration—are either weak or controlled by the cartels.<sup>24</sup> Police and local officials regularly protect cartel drug traffic and even carry out hits on behalf of cartel bosses.<sup>25</sup> As cartel influence grows within the government and Mexico's economy becomes more and more propped up by narco-dollars, cartel co-option of the military becomes a frightening possibility. Perhaps this was why Mexican President Felipe Calderon decided to use force against the cartels, triggering the cartel campaign of terror.

### **Criminal Insurgency**

In December 2006, Calderon launched a massive military offensive against the cartels, mobilizing 25,000 troops and federal police across the country.<sup>26</sup> This big push is not without precedent. Calderon's predecessor Vicente Fox had involved the military in counter-narcotics operations. But the scale, intensity, and commitment of Calderon's internal war dwarfs any of Fox's efforts. The Mexican government has opted for a blockhouse strategy, blanketing cartel-controlled territories with roadblocks and checkpoints to cut off cartel mobility and logistics. Military special operations units have targeted the Zetas and other enforcer gangs in sustained combat operations, raiding known cartel safe houses with overwhelming force.<sup>27</sup> Calderon has also expanded anti-corruption investigations to root out corrupt police.

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<sup>21</sup> Roig-Franzia, "U.S. Guns Behind Cartel Killings in Mexico."

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Sullivan and Bunker, p. 46.

<sup>24</sup> See Laurie Freeman, *State of Siege: Drug-Related Violence and Corruption in Mexico* (Washington, DC: Washington Office on Latin America, 2006).

<sup>25</sup> Cook, pp. 10-13.

<sup>26</sup> "Factbox--Mexican President Calderon's War on Drug Gangs," Reuters, 16 June 2008, <<http://uk.reuters.com/article/latestCrisis/idUKN1644494820080616>> Accessed June 17, 2008.

<sup>27</sup> James McKinley Jr., "Mexico Hits Drug Gangs With Full Fury of War," *New York Times*, January 22, 2008,

The Mexican government's sustained intervention is designed to destroy the cartels and expand state authority. Unfortunately, Mexico's military approach lacks significant strategic communication operations, increased community policing, or public works investment—civil affairs tools that could build public confidence in the Mexican government's ability to curtail the cartels. Given the state of the public security forces and the corruption of the Mexican civil service, this may be an unfair criticism. Mexico may be incapable of mounting a broad-based civil affairs campaign and thus prioritizes hard power.

The ability of Mexico's military to tackle the cartels is also open to question. While Mexican military's counter-guerrilla capabilities have advanced in the wake of the 1994 Zapatista rebellion,<sup>28</sup> the cartels pose a different kind of threat. While the drug kingpins may not possess a force optimized for classical Maoist protracted warfare, they are deeply rooted within the basic infrastructure of the Mexican state. The military alone cannot root them out. In fact, utilization of the military for domestic law enforcement may backfire on the government, as human rights groups have not been shy in highlighting the numerous human rights abuses that the Mexican armed forces have been accused of the course of their counter-narcotics operations.<sup>29</sup> Additionally, the more the Mexican military involves itself in the drug war, the greater the chance that cartels will subvert and corrupt it.

Not surprisingly, the cartels have not sat idly by while Calderon cracks down. If the Mexican anti-crime effort succeeds, the state's powers will grow and the cartels will lose their influence—an unacceptable outcome to the *narcos*. In response, the cartels have launched a war of attrition against the government. The goal of this criminal insurgency is to roll back government power, preserve cartel assets, and teach Calderon and his successors a lesson: the cartel is king.

In describing cartel operations as a criminal insurgency, we do not suggest that the cartel structures are operating a unified operation against the Mexican state. Far from it—even the threat of a massive government crackdown is not enough to force the warring cartels to join forces. Rather the individual cartels are fighting each other and state forces to weaken the structures of governance and rule of law to secure maneuver room for their own operations and influence. We also do not mean to suggest that the goal of the criminal insurgent, like that of both classical and modern political insurgents—is the

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<<http://www.nytimes.com/2008/01/22/world/americas/22mexico.html?sq=Mexico&st=nyt&scp=30&pagewanted=print>> accessed June 17, 2008.

<sup>28</sup> Kate Doyle, "Documents Reveal Pentagon's Scrutiny of Zapatistas and Mexican Military: Rebellion in Chiapas and Counterinsurgency," Interhemispheric Resource Center, April 19, 2004, <<http://americas.irc-online.org/am/1717>> Accessed June 17, 2008.

<sup>29</sup> *Military Injustice: Mexico's Failure to Punish Army Abuses* (New York: Human Rights Watch, December 2001), <<http://www.hrw.org/reports/2001/mexico/>> Accessed August 18, 2008.

removal of foreign forces, the satisfaction of discrete political demands, or regime change.

The criminal insurgent is resolutely apolitical; he challenges the will of the state because he seeks to sever its regulatory arms. If the cartel insurgent has an ideal model of a Mexican state, it is a balkanized series of urban fiefs barely ruled by a supine national government that decides national and foreign policy. However, we use the term “insurgency” because it best describes the nature of the internal war waged by cartels against the Mexican state.

### **Cartel Strategy**

Criminal insurgent strategy can be separated into three categories: attrition, psychological operations, and decapitation strikes. The criminal insurgents’ long-term goal is to intimidate Mexico’s government into quitting its anti-crime offensive. And if the federal government backs down after launching such a massive effort, public confidence and political will necessary for aggressive law enforcement will surely be lost. The target of the cartel’s efforts is the whole of the Mexican government, beat cop to high-ranking civil servant.

Cartels are waging a war of attrition against low and middle-ranking Mexican law enforcement officers, the foot troops of the drug war. These operations consist of assassinations and small-unit ambushes. Police officers are frequently killed while off-duty, in transit, or operating in urban terrain. The vast majority of targets never have time to escape or return fire. Cartel gunmen, like most guerrillas, avoid stand-up confrontations with large formations of police or military forces. Truly amorphous, they form to strike when security officers are helpless and vulnerable. However, cartels operations have steadily grown more brazen. One recent raid aimed at destroying a fortified police command center.<sup>30</sup> Cartels have also utilized bombings, though to middling effect.<sup>31</sup>

Given the growth in cartel abilities, especially in complex operations, it is not unconceivable that cartel tactical abilities will continue to advance. Cartel gunmen already outmatch the tactical capabilities of most local Mexican police. The Brazilian First Capitol Command (PCC)’s 2006 urban terrorism campaign against São Paulo provides a model of how criminals may deploy swarming capabilities in urban battles against law enforcement. As John Robb notes, “gang members razed police stations, attacked banks, rioted in prisons, and torched dozens of buses, shutting down a transportation system serving 2.9 million people a day.”<sup>32</sup> Brazilian public security

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<sup>30</sup> Roig-Franzia, “U.S. Guns Behind Cartel Killings in Mexico.”

<sup>31</sup> Laurence Iliff, “Cartel Blamed in Botched Mexico City Bombing,” *Dallas Morning News*, February 28, 2008,  
<[http://www.dallasnews.com/sharedcontent/dws/news/world/mexico/stories/DN-bombing\\_28int.ART.State.Edition1.45e8d7c.html](http://www.dallasnews.com/sharedcontent/dws/news/world/mexico/stories/DN-bombing_28int.ART.State.Edition1.45e8d7c.html)> Accessed June 17, 2008.

<sup>32</sup> John Robb, “The Coming Urban Terror,” *City Journal*, Summer 2007, Vol. 14, No. 3,  
<[http://city-journal.org/html/17\\_3\\_urban\\_terrorism.html](http://city-journal.org/html/17_3_urban_terrorism.html)> Accessed June 18, 2008.



officials were ruthlessly and systematically gunned down everywhere they could be found. Gang members killed police in their posts, neighborhood beats, and in their homes—while their families watched. The PCC operated in an emergent fashion, their violence organized by cell phone.<sup>33</sup>

Enforcer gangs such as the Zetas are the main element in cartel attrition operations, though local distributor gangs have also participated. These operations, however, would be impossible without the assistance of corrupt police and military officials.<sup>34</sup> Paid police assets and a network of spies provide cartels with intelligence on law enforcement operations, allowing cartels to escape dragnets and gain the tactical advantage against police.<sup>35</sup> The cartels even succeeded in placing a spy in the President's office.<sup>36</sup>

Cartels followed up their murder campaigns with psychological operations urging police and the army to desert or become cartel gunmen. Recruiting banners are prominently displayed in Mexican cities, death lists are strewn throughout cemeteries, and police radios are hacked so cartels can personally deliver threats to officers.<sup>37</sup> Some police officers have even been beheaded, Al Qaeda-style.<sup>38</sup> These terror campaigns have taken their toll on police morale. Municipal police officers are increasingly asking themselves whether it is worth it to go up against the cartels—and their own corrupt colleagues. Entire small towns have seen their police forces quit, surrendering to the cartel onslaught.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> William Landwiesche, "City of Fear," *Vanity Fair*, April 2007.

<<http://www.vanityfair.com/politics/features/2007/04/langewiesche200704>> Accessed June 18, 2008.

<sup>34</sup> James McKinley Jr., "Mexico's War on Drugs Kills Its Police," *New York Times*, May 28, 2008.

<<http://www.nytimes.com/2008/05/26/world/americas/26mexico.html?ref=world&pagewanted=print>> Accessed June 17, 2008.

<sup>35</sup> McKinley Jr., "Mexico Hits Drug Gangs With Full Fury of War."

<sup>36</sup> --"Mexico Says Drug Cartel Had Spy in the President's Office," *New York Times*, February 7, 2005,

<<http://www.nytimes.com/2005/02/07/international/americas/07aide.html?scp=5&sq=Mexico+Cartel&st=nyt>> Accessed June 22, 2008.

<sup>37</sup> "Drug Lords Go After Mexican Police," *New York Daily News*, May 19, 2008,

<[http://www.nydailynews.com/news/us\\_world/2008/05/19/2008-05-19\\_drug\\_lords\\_go\\_after\\_mexican\\_police\\_.html?print=1&page=all](http://www.nydailynews.com/news/us_world/2008/05/19/2008-05-19_drug_lords_go_after_mexican_police_.html?print=1&page=all)> Accessed June 18, 2008.

<sup>38</sup> James McKinley Jr., "With Beheadings and Attacks, Drug Gangs Terrorize Mexico," *The New York Times*, October 26, 2006,

<[http://www.nytimes.com/2006/10/26/world/americas/26mexico.html?\\_r=1&oref=slogin](http://www.nytimes.com/2006/10/26/world/americas/26mexico.html?_r=1&oref=slogin)> Accessed June 22, 2008.

<sup>39</sup> "Mexico Town's Entire Police Force Quits in Fear of Assassination," Fox News, May 23, 2008, <<http://www.foxnews.com/story/0,2933,357761,00.html>> Accessed June 22, 2008.



With the collusion of assets in high places, cartels have systematically targeted high-ranking Mexican criminal justice officials. Police chiefs, prosecutors, and judges are all wantonly targeted by cartel hitmen. In May, Edgar Millan Gomez and Robert Velasco Bravo, Mexico's two highest counter-narcotics officers, were shot dead.<sup>40</sup> In America, Gomez's rank was equivalent to head of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI). The kills, as well as numerous disrupted paramilitary cells within Mexico City, show that the cartels are increasingly active in Mexico City and are capable of mounting operations against high-profile politicians.

### **Forward Defense In The Drug War**

Mexico stands at a crossroads. A possibility exists that Mexico could very well become a criminal-state, with centralized criminal activity dominating the Mexican polity. Cartel power could become so deeply rooted within the Mexican state that uprooting it would mean civil war. Such an outcome would prove disastrous for American interests.

America bears a substantial interest in ensuring that our southern flank is stable and secure. That is why America has often intervened in Mexican affairs. France's 1860s attempt to colonize Mexico would have put a European imperial power on our border and had to be combated through military aid to Mexican insurgents and diplomatic pressure. Revolutionary instability in the early 1900s empowered Pancho Villa to strike across the border, provoking an American military mission deep into Mexican territory. In recent years, narcotics flows into the United States have fueled a domestic drug problem and empowered violent gangs on our streets. Instability and poverty in Mexico is also the cause of a massive wave of illegal immigration that shows no sign of abating.

A Mexican criminal-state would mean the spread of Mexico's violent cartel rivalries into American soil. America's already violent gang warfare could intensify as bigger powers enter the game. Already, as the Phoenix incident demonstrates, cartels are growing more brazen in their operations on American soil. A cartel hit team, disguised as a police tactical team, assassinated an American in Phoenix, Arizona. The cartel gunmen almost killed a police SWAT team that responded on the scene.<sup>41</sup> This has not been the only case—cartel hit teams have been reported operating in other border regions. Mexican kidnapping gangs have already been reported operating against American citizens.<sup>42</sup> Additionally, the vast monetary power of the cartels could subvert low-level civil government and politics within border regions.

Worst of all, a failed state situation within Mexico would provide an ample staging area for terrorists seeking to operate in the Americas. It is in America's national interest to

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<sup>40</sup> Friedman, "Mexico: On the Road to a Failed State?"

<sup>41</sup> Fred Burton and Scott Stewart, "The Fallout from Phoenix," Stratfor, July 2, 2008.

<sup>42</sup> Lizbeth Diaz, "Mexican Drug Gang Turns to Kidnapping in U.S.," Reuters, August 12, 2008.

<<http://www.reuters.com/article/domesticNews/idUSN1250256620080812?feedType=RSS&feedName=domesticNews>> Accessed August 18, 2008.

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.

Some may be tempted to close off the border with soldiers, thinking the problem can be walled off. This is no solution. Closure of the border's lucrative trade routes would devastate both American and Mexican economies. Furthermore, firewalling porous borders from the entry of decentralized non-state groups is not a safe proposition in today's globalized world. Men, material, and capital move freely, regardless of outmoded views of national sovereignty. America must take the offensive to prevent Mexico from falling to the cartels.

The root of the problem is American demand for Mexican-supplied drugs. Barring a large-scale policy shift, this problem is not likely to change. Expanded efforts to cut demand and increase interdiction efficiency may be of small importance, and the US must certainly cut off the flow of illicit arms to Mexico can help, as American firepower is currently killing hundreds of Mexican policemen and soldiers. But with the wealth and resources of cartels, they can easily procure other weapons, although at a much greater cost. That being said, doing so will be a measure of good faith to Mexicans increasingly suspicious of the US's level of commitment in the drug war.

The only real long-term solution is a sustained intervention in Mexico's drug war approaching the scale and resources of Plan Colombia. The Merida Initiative, a recently approved \$400 million aid package, is a step in the right direction. Vermont Senator Patrick Leahy, the bill's author, has emphasized that the bill is not a blank check, and will be provided only when Mexico demonstrates compliance with transparency, human rights, and accountability standards. However, concerns have been raised about the bill's lack of coverage in crucial areas of prevention and rehabilitation, or crop conversion. Additionally, it is yet to be seen whether Mexico's famously corrupt security forces will swallow up the money.<sup>43</sup>

Unlike Plan Colombia, which focused on building up military counternarcotics efforts, America's intervention should focus on building up Mexico's law enforcement and internal security forces. American law enforcement agencies should intensify intelligence cooperation with their Mexican counterparts. Loose cooperation already exists between Mexican and American law enforcement agencies, but this cooperation must be institutionalized for it to have any real effect. American Special Forces and intelligence assets could also be deployed to garner signals intelligence—a precedent exists in the Intelligence Support Activity's use of signal intelligence assets to track down Pablo Escobar in Colombia.<sup>44</sup> Expanded cooperation on both sides of the border is necessary, as

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<sup>43</sup> Deborah Bonello, "The Merida Initiative Discussed," *Los Angeles Times*, August 5, 2008, <http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/laplaza/2008/07/draft-merida.html> Accessed August 5, 2008.

<sup>44</sup> See Mark Bowden, *Killing Pablo: The Hunt for the World's Greatest Outlaw* (Washington: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2001).

cartel operations are truly a hemispheric problem. America enjoys an advantage in its relative security and law enforcement control—thus important Mexican witnesses can be protected in the United States and more aggressive American operations can be mounted stateside against cartel operatives. Military advisers and expeditionary police units can also play a role in helping build Mexican forces. Mexican police already receive limited training from American advisors, but an expanded advisor corps of American police could do much to bring up the quality of Mexico’s lawmen. Raising the salaries of Mexican municipal police may also help make them more resistant to corruption.

However, American assistance will be most valuable in helping to build up Mexican civil society. Only through a careful reconstruction of the rule of law can the cartels power ultimately be dialed back to manageable level. Law enforcement and military aid can only go so far in dealing with far rooted problems of authority, accountability, and infrastructure. This will be a delicate process—the United States cannot push too hard, as Mexico (nor any other nation) does not take kindly to lectures about human rights and transparency.

Policing and law enforcement services are essential to community stability, stable governance and effective functioning of the rule of law. Many parts of Mexico have become areas of “limited statehood.” These “criminal enclaves” have become *de facto* “Lawless zones” where the barbarization of crime and conflict dominate.<sup>45</sup> Maintaining or revitalizing stability and order in Mexico must become the priority of both Mexico and the United States. This will require action on both sides of the border.

Community policing and intelligence-led policing strategies can help at the tactical and operational levels. New levels of community trust need to be built in Mexican villages, cities, and states. This will require a high degree of local, state, federal and cross-border cooperation. Multi-lateral coordination, intelligence-sharing and enforcement efforts must be bolstered. This will require a concerted effort to eliminate corruption and build skills and professional trust needed for effective cross-border interaction.

In addition to Federal programs, in both the United States of America and Mexico, cross-border programs involving the four US and ten Mexican “Border States”<sup>46</sup> will be needed. Personnel exchanges, joint-training, and skill-building among police, intelligence and judicial officials could help build the required skill-base and knowledge needed to revitalize and sustain the stability needed for countering cartels. The Border Governors Conference/Conferencia de Gobernadores Fronterizos is an ideal forum for starting this cross-border security cooperation. Comprised of the governors and their staffs from all ten “border states,” it meets annually and conducts on-going coordination through a series of worktables, including border security.

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<sup>45</sup> John P. Sullivan and Keith Weston, “Afterward: Law Enforcement Response Strategies for Criminal-states and Criminal-soldiers, *Global Crime*, Vol. 7, No. 3-4 (August-November 2006), pp. 615-628.

<sup>46</sup> The “border states” are comprised of the states of Arizona, Baja California, Chihuahua, Coahuila, Nuevo Leon, New Mexico, Sonora, Tamaulipas, and Texas.

Neither Mexico nor the United States can eliminate drug trafficking, but what it can do is shrink the cartels into more manageable, localized entities unable to pose a threat to the Mexican state. Such a task is daunting, and may strike most as impossible. But the example of Italy is instructive—the Sicilian mafia once routinely assassinated mayors and judges that it did not like. But a team of American-Italian law enforcement gumshoes pounding pavement on both sides of the Atlantic amassed enough evidence to cut the mafia down to size.<sup>47</sup> Perhaps in a generation or so, Mexican gangbangers will be less Al Capone and more Snoop Dogg—old, posturing, and irrelevant.

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<sup>47</sup> Ralph Blumenthal, “What the Mexicans Might Learn from the Italians,” *New York Times*, June 1, 2008.

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