

Special Essay:

A NEW THREAT:

The Crossover of Urban Gang Warfare and Terrorism

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On the 22nd of June of this year, residents of a Phoenix, Arizona, neighborhood saw an eight-man Police SWAT team apparently serving a warrant. Team members were equipped as usual -- black boots, black Kevlar vests and helmets, Phoenix Police Department shirts and low-light laser aiming devices. But the "SWAT" team was actually a Mexican hit squad carrying out a targeted, and successful, assassination of a troublesome drug dealer -- in the United States. When the real cops arrived, one part of the hit team attempted a tactically-proficient ambush of pursuing police, who counter-ambushed and captured three. The others escaped, most likely back into the drug-fueled insurgency now underway in Mexico, where targeted assassination of officials and intimidation of public institutions -- for example, hospitals treating wounded officers -- is increasingly widespread. The Mexican drug war -- and much else besides -- is spilling over our borders, part of a growing nexus of criminal gang activity and terrorism sponsored by Islamist radicals.

A growing body of evidence shows that criminal gang activities

in the United States are taking on the characteristics of a domestic insurgency similar, in some ways, to the war going on in Mexico against drug gangs. There is also growing circumstantial evidence of mutual support between the more serious international gangs and state-sponsored terrorism that will soon pose a clear danger to American national security -- if it hasn't already. This isn't just the local punk "gangstas" that are preoccupying our police, educators and parents across America. Nor is it solely an attack by 9/11-style terrorists, either from outside the U.S. or from sleeper cells inside America. Rather it is a new thing -- a potentially murderous combination that is spreading rapidly northward from South and Central America into densely packed American urban centers into suburbia and rural areas. Unless it is checked, and defeated, the United States will be increasingly vulnerable to civil violence and catastrophic attack from within.

This is a national security problem that does not yet have a name. It is still the business of a relatively small group of experts. In many ways, this -- whatever it is -- is at a stage now

similar to the U.S. awareness of Islamic jihadism before 9/11. Our responses to this growing threat lack coordination and focus at the national level. To try to come to grips with the challenge growing up in our own back yard, we will pose a series of questions. First, what does this new threat look like? Who are the players? Second, has a crossover between criminal gangs and terrorism already occurred -- is this a current challenge or a future threat? Is there a “smoking gun” that ties al-Qaeda-type terrorist organizations to criminal gangs in the U.S.? Third, what can we expect to see next? Is there some kind of growth pattern that will increasingly threaten American security, or will this fade away over time? And finally, what has been effective thus far in counter-ing both criminal gangs and terrorist cells in the U.S., whether imported or domestic? What can we do?

The New Threat

Very roughly, the “new” threat -- that is, alliances between terrorists and criminal gangs -- has roughly three parts. They are **small-time** or “**local**” **gangs**, **big international gangs**, and **terrorist networks**, whether support-

ed by a relatively parsimonious al Qaeda, or a more generous nation-state like Iran, the global financier of terrorism.¹ Local gangs and the internationals -- specifically MS-13 (“Mara Salvatrucha”) and similar organizations -- are generally free of nationalist sentiments and indeed rarely recognize political boundaries except as obstacles to their enterprises.

“Local” gangs may include a homegrown group of young men (or women) who band together to hang out and commit petty crime, to local “affiliates” of national groups like the Crips, Bloods, Gangster Disciples and others, with their distinctive colors, hand signals and turf picked up and copied through the news media, Internet, or word of mouth. As a rule, locals fight over turf, respect, or shares in local drug markets. Depending on hometown conditions, gangs may include boys and girls, men and women, of all races and economic classes, though Latinos and African Americans predominate. Although they are not as organized or violent as the international gangs, “locals” can be vicious enough to terrorize neighborhoods and schools, conduct brutal turf wars, and murder one another -- and sometimes bystanders who get in

¹ In 2007 alone, the Iranians contributed over \$200 Million to Hezbollah, and other sums to Hamas and other terrorist movements. “Timely Reminder of Iranian Support for Terrorism,” Matthew Levett and Michael Jacobson, Washington Institute for Mideast Policy, Feb 22, 08.

the line of fire.

As a rule, “locals” are geographically based. Police profiles of local gang members point to poor or disruptive students, with peer pressure and dysfunctional homes cited as contributory causes for gang membership. Police in one locality have noticed that if membership in a gang begins fairly late in adolescence (age sixteen, say) the gang member, if he survives, tends to eventually grow out of membership by his early twenties. Conversely, if gang membership begins early (age ten or so), the member tends to remain violent through later life. Until the new trend in younger-age gang members became evident, most local gang members have tended to “age out” of gangs.²

The big “international” gangs now on the scene are different. They may include more traditional nationalist groupings like the Russian mafia, but the particular gangs that are the focus of this study -- and which cause greatest concern -- are the primarily Latino gangs like MS-13 and The 18th Street Gang, numbering an estimated 20,000 and 30,000 members in the U.S. alone, but with other thousands in Central America, primarily El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala. These gangs are distin-

guishable by their closed natures and tight discipline, by body tattoos, and extreme violence. Their gangs have an international reach, running south-north from South and Central America into the U.S. and Canada. Recruits in many cases have prior Central American military training or combat experience, and their criminal enterprises run the gamut from illegal drugs, extortion, murder for hire, theft, and other enterprises. Rape, murder and mutilation are commonly-used tools to enforce discipline and recruit members. According to law enforcement officials, MS-13, the most violent of the gangs, is deeply involved in Mexican drug smuggling, as well as other forms of criminal activity from kidnapping to murder. It, and other drug cartels, is increasingly targeting Mexican soldiers and government officials, striking at the heart of the state. Additionally, the gangs have entered politics, which poses the possibility of Mexico eventually becoming an official sponsor of illegal, terrorist activity on the other side of the Rio Grande. MS-13 is now operating in 30 states, Canada, Mexico and Central America, including sizable gangs on the West Coast, in the Washington, D.C. area, and throughout the rest of the U.S.³ Gang operations, to include MS-13 and other gangs, originally fo-

² I am grateful to the Hampton (VA) police department for this insight, and for orienting me thoroughly on local gang culture that does not, as yet, include the “internationals.”

³ *Washington Times*, July 25, 2007 (on line)

cused in large cities but members and gangs are now found increasingly in suburban and rural areas.

As an important footnote, prisons play a unique role in gang operations as accepted way stations in gang members' criminal careers. Prisons serve as "crime academies" where minor offenders meet and learn to emulate hardened criminals, and centers of criminal activity by prison gangs that often exist not only in prisons, but "outside" as well and are self-perpetuating. Gangs in prison often maintain control of "outside" criminal enterprises like drug distribution, prostitution, murder for hire and internal disciplinary issues from inside prison walls.

Finally, anti-U.S. Islamic-based terrorist groups, active worldwide, are more prevalent in Mexico and South and Central America than is generally understood. Both al Qaeda and Hezbollah are actively working among the Arab-descended populations of South America, in particular in Colombia and Venezuela. Since the accession of Hugo Chavez to power in Venezuela in 1998, Venezuela's foreign policy has moved steadily to support states sponsoring anti-U.S. terrorism, particularly Iran. Additionally, links have been established between Ven-

ezeuela and various terrorist organizations located in South America.

According to a 2002 report released by the U.S. Federal Research Division of the Library of Congress, in conjunction with the U.S. Department of State, radical Islam has become prominent throughout the Latin American region, and Venezuela, specifically Margarita Island, has become a focal point for the Arab population. Evidence shows that the Venezuelan president and his government actively aid militants, specifically in the acquisition of illegal documents; these documents make it possible, and especially easy, for terrorists and terror organizations to thrive in the region. Chavez maintains a strong relationship with several state sponsors of terror, or countries that support terror organizations. Consequently, Hezbollah cells and members have been located on the peninsula which Colombia and Venezuela both share, Guajira⁴.

⁴Library of Congress, "A Global Overview of Narcotics-Funded Terrorist and Other Extremist Groups", May 2002.

According to the U.S. State Department, Hugo Chavez' government is building ties to radical regimes around the world, notably Iran, and is cooperating with Hezbollah and other groups' operations in this hemisphere.⁵ In addition to official Venezuelan support for Hezbollah and other terrorist groups, several areas in South America have large indigenous Muslim populations sympathetic to Islamic radicalism, which are located in areas also frequented by criminal gangs and anti-U.S. insurgencies, particularly the semi-autonomous Andean Ridge border areas of Colombia, Venezuela, Ecuador and Peru, and the "Tri-border Area" of Argentina, Brazil and Paraguay (centered around Paraguayan town of Ciudad del Este, an "international trading center where the admixture of drug runners, terrorists, and pinstriped bankers trespasses on the sovereignty and safety of democratic countries and their citizens"). Al Qaeda is rumored to have established a base in Ciudad del Este, along with other quasi-terrorist/criminal organizations.⁶

Essential ingredients in this mix of state-sponsored support for terrorism and active criminal gangs are the disproportionately large popula-

tions of former combat-experienced ex-insurgents and soldiers in South and Central America who inhabit the unsettled border areas in the region, and who learned their trade in the insurgent wars of the 1980s and in the ongoing Colombian war against the insurgent Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (known by its Spanish initials FARC). Already trained in the rudiments of military operations and combat-experienced, ex-FARC and other former insurgents have been showing up in drug gangs from the United States, Mexico and the Central American states of El Salvador, Honduras, Guatemala and Nicaragua, and in the ongoing drug wars in Mexico. These rootless ex-soldiers have become an essential ingredient in the lawless and violent Petri dish in which terrorism and criminal gangs are mixed.

Categorization is necessary in any study, but this discussion of "local" gangs, "international" gangs" and state-sponsored insurgency and terrorist organizations in Central and South America may detract from what is actually happening on the ground. In an area where national governments are weak and working north along the Andean Ridge and other well-es-

⁵ Statement by Frank C. Urbancic, Principal Deputy Coordinator for Counterterrorism, before the House Committee on International Relations, Subcommittee on International Terrorism and Non-proliferation, Washington, DC, July 13, 2006. See also U.S. State Department, *Country Reports on Terrorism* (Office of Coordinator for Counterterrorism, April 30, 2008).

⁶ William W. Mendell, *Military Review*, March-April 2002

established smuggling routes, stateless, amoral and violence-prone gangs constantly form alliances of convenience to conduct criminal activities, which includes pushing drugs north toward the American market. Basing in dozens of towns like Ciudad del Este, and in Mexico itself, these gangs are not organized in the military sense, but rely on thousands of personal contacts to do business, control turf, and dominate the competition -- which unfortunately does not often include local law enforcement officials. A code of silence, ruthlessly enforced, guards their interests. In Ciudad del Este and other crossover border towns with radical jihadi sympathizers, if not active Hezbollah cells, traffic in money, drugs and people can enter an illegal pipeline and emerge at one of dozens of points north, including American cities. What that means for American security is profound.

A Crossover Between Criminal Gangs and Terrorists

Some months ago a government briefer told the author, "I can't show you a 'smoking gun' between Iran and MS-13 in the United States, but

I can give you enough circumstantial evidence to convince you that one exists." Strictly speaking though, a "crossover" has already occurred. A New York Black Muslim gang nicknamed "The Forty Thieves" by law enforcement officials was helpful in assisting the Muslim conspirators in the first World Trade Center bombing in 1993. Centered around a radical mosque in New York City, the twists and turns of the gang-terrorist connection illustrate the personal and complex nature of associations, with gang members and soon-to-be terrorists sharing training and weapons.⁷

Since 1993, the spread of criminal gangs in the U.S. and their increasing (and brutal) sophistication has provided more opportunity for jihadi terrorists and others to find common cause, or at least opportunity, to work together. In its 2007 *Country Reports on Terrorism*, the U.S. State Department made a case for the connection between terrorism and crime:

Many of the 42 groups recognized as foreign terrorist organizations by the United States have criminal ties, says David Johnson, the top U.S. envoy specializing in confronting

⁷ An excellent contemporary account of this association is *The Cell*, by John Miller, Michael Stone and Chris Mitchell (Hyperion, New York, 2002), an account of the conspiracy that brought down the Twin Towers in 2001. Miller, Stone and Mitchell do an excellent job of documenting the successes and failures of NYPD and FBI investigators as jihadi planning progressed.

illegal drugs and organized crime. The most notable of these groups is the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), which has raised an estimated \$60 million a year from narcotics trafficking, in addition to an active campaign of kidnappings for ransom.⁸

Iranian support for terrorist activities in the Middle East continues to be well documented -- particularly Hezbollah, which is now entrenched in Lebanon and may soon dominate its government.⁹ Less well known is Iran's growing focus on Islamic groups in the Western Hemisphere, and South America in particular. Venezuela's role has become central to the crossover from criminal gangs to terrorism. The Chavez government sponsors a growing number of terrorist training camps throughout the region and, important to the crossover, continues its support for the narco-terrorist FARC whose former members are showing up in international gangs in Mexico and the southern United States.¹⁰ A growing number of studies, some classified, point to the growing vitality of the Iran-

Venezuela-FARC link, and the link between the FARC, Mexico and the United States.

One complication in investigating the growing links between terrorism and criminal gangs is the complex and involved nature of the relationships. Paper trails are typically nonexistent. Operational and organizational discussions and decisions are often conducted face-to-face or by cell phone. A second difficulty is the typical code of silence -- the "no snitch" law -- often encountered in gang investigations. Unless one is deeply involved in confidential investigations or trial litigation, finding a specific "smoking gun" that links specific jihadis and criminal gangs is often difficult at best, dangerous at worst. Even in local gangs, a code of silence on snitching is enforced by the most brutal consequences. For example, MS-13 has an international reach and a highly stylized "language" for discouraging informants by specific, protracted torture-mutilations according to certain, well understood protocols. Operational security is rigorously enforced, even over great distances. In a 2006 report on a trial of MS-13 gang members in Washington, D.C., the *Wash-*

⁸ "Terrorism, Crime Often Linked, Says Report," *America.gov*, 6 May 2008.

⁹ Another state sponsor of terror -- in this case, a Lebanon dominated by Hezbollah -- would add to the Iran-Venezuela axis; Chavez regards Hezbollah as a legitimate Lebanese political party and, as above, sponsors Hezbollah training camps in South America.

¹⁰ Luis Fleischman, "Venezuela; Anatomy of a Dictator," in *Journal of International Security Affairs*, Washington, D.C. Fall, 2006, vol 11.

ington Post reported:

...a Salvadoran police officer testified last week on behalf of the (U.S.) government that MS-13 leaders in El Salvador told Maryland gang leaders how the organization should be run and even sent two leaders to Maryland to provide advice. Killing witnesses against the gang was one of the tenets the Salvadoran gang leaders imparted, the officer testified.

The Salvadoran officer testified under a pseudonym after prosecutors convinced U.S. District Judge Deborah K. Chasanow that his life would be in jeopardy if gang members in El Salvador learned of his identity.¹¹

An analysis of known “cross-overs” thus far shows that relationships between terror groups and criminals are opportunistic and mutually self-serving. While there can be ideological compatibility -- as in the 1993 case of the New York Black Muslim gang and the Abdel-Rahman jihadi group -- self-interest is clearly the motivation of the larger, more disciplined international gangs, at least

so far.

Gangs’ most significant potential contribution to terrorism within the United States, though, is probably not direct association -- the Hollywood picture of one group meeting clandestinely with another to hand off a bomb -- but by infiltrating terrorists into the U.S. and providing opportunities for them to conduct reconnaissance and attacks. Gang activities lead to the development of “ungoverned spaces” within the U.S., where terrorist groups can operate with reduced fear of detection by law enforcement organizations. An “ungoverned space” is a territory -- an urban, suburban or even rural area -- in which civil government is not capable of enforcing the peace. A recent conference on domestic insurgency and terrorism posited three kinds of spaces; (a) those that are controlled by civil government (b) “contested” zones in which gangs contend with civil government for control, and (c) gang-controlled areas in which civil government functions at the sufferance of gangs. In these spaces, life may be apparently normal, but actual power resides in gang organizations.¹²

According to conference participants, “contested” zones and “lost” zones that exist throughout the U.S. generally offer the greatest opportuni-

¹¹ *Washington Post*, November 3, 2006, p. B01.

¹² Conference on criminal gangs as threats to national security, held at Oracle Corp., May 28, 2008.

ty for terrorist activity, though gang-terrorist links in specific cases will be highly dependent on the personalities, objectives and funding of the individuals concerned. One participant with experience in the Los Angeles Police Department pointed out that MS-13 is a purely profit-driven organization, although it also fights for turf, having recently attempted several terror-style attacks against the LAPD.¹³

To summarize this complex subject, sufficient “smoking guns” exist to illustrate a crossover relationship between criminal gangs and terrorist organizations, specifically jihadi or Iranian-backed groups. A supporting network of state-sponsored terrorist sympathizers and training camps has developed in the Western Hemisphere, chiefly through Venezuelan efforts to promote FARC and other such organizations. A large and volatile population of rootless, combat-experienced former soldiers is available to be recruited by gangs or terrorists. Well-established “rat lines,” protected by disciplined criminal gangs, run from South America through Mexico and into the U.S. and Canada. Testimony against local criminal gangs, whether terrorism is involved or not, is very difficult to obtain, and one consequence, when gang control is strong, is the development of the

“ungoverned spaces” and contested neighborhoods or regions that will be battlegrounds against gangs and terrorists in the future.

What Next?

In the very broadest sense, criminal gangs, both local and international, and the growth of international terrorism constitute sustained attacks on international order and domestic safety. Just as the 9/11 attacks brought international terrorism to our front door, a continuation of these trends threatens to move their impact onto Main Street in horrific ways, just as the 9/11 attacks brought international terrorism to our front door. And the threat has grown slowly enough for us to be desensitized to its worse offenses, so long as they occur in immigrant populations and in the poor parts of society. It is worth considering how much our society has adapted already to the presence of gangs. A student of my acquaintance, who lives in a “safe” upscale, “safe” neighborhood of Washington D.C., knows precisely where the local gang boundaries are and where not to go at certain times of day. She lives her life, in part, by adapting to gang behavior in a sector considered secure not ten years ago.

¹³Ibid; at least one of the attacks was an Iraqi-style vehicular explosive device.

Gang influence on American society is a growing phenomenon; unlike the Mafia of decades ago, though, gangs don't observe rules; their propensity for violence puts them outside even the Mafia's boundaries.¹⁴

In the past decade, narcotrafficking has spread northward from the Tri-Border region, through the Andean Ridge and Central America, into Mexico and thus to the United States. This trend, coupled with the rise of criminal gangs in Central America, has devastated the region, with only Colombia -- under a determined leader and with large infusions of American aid -- successfully rolling back the tide.¹⁵ Although the governments of Panama, Mexico and El Salvador, and the key states of Paraguay and Argentina, have made concerted efforts to cooperate with U.S. counterterrorism organizations and to strengthen their internal security systems, most governments in the area are generally preoccupied with economic and social problems such as soaring crime rates (particularly in the case of Brazil). It is unlikely these governments will have the capability to mount sustained antiterrorism campaigns.¹⁶ Unfortunately, if pres-

ent trends continue, criminal gangs and support for terrorism look likely to continue to grow throughout most of Latin America.

Venezuela deserves special mention. Since the election of Hugo Chavez in 1998 and his subsequent reelections in 2000 and 2006, Chavez has promoted cooperation between his government and Iran, Hezbollah and other anti-U.S. terror groups, and has promoted virulently anti-U.S. policies in the region. Initially dismissed by U.S. officials as a short-lived phenomenon, Chavez' longevity in office and his impact on the Venezuelan state bureaucracy indicates that it may eventually become a full state sponsor of terrorism, with powerful implications for his neighbors and the U.S.

Domestically, national, state and local law enforcement officials are all too aware of criminal gangs - home-grown or imported. A number of cities, notably but not exclusively on the West Coast, are virtually on a wartime footing against a criminal brew that includes gang members like MS-13 and members of Mexican drug cartels expanding their war against the Mexican government to the U.S. As in the

¹⁴ One police officer observed recently that the Mafia had certain rules that made them almost civilized; for example, they frowned on killing "civilians" and generally did not fight police officers. The gangs, he observed, had no rules; violence is a first resort.

¹⁵ See "Counterterrorist Strategies in Latin America," Committee on Foreign Relations, U.S. House of Representatives, 109th Congress, March 30, 2006.

¹⁶ U.S. State Department, *Country Reports on Terrorism*, op. cit., Ch. 2.

Phoenix, Arizona case cited above, violence is increasingly spilling over the borders. While there have been cases of “strategic success” against gangs (notably in New York City) and some local victories in Los Angeles and elsewhere, the record shows that when gang members are pressed, they move their activities to another jurisdiction where police departments are less capable.¹⁷

Counterterrorism cooperation between national agencies in the United States - between CIA, FBI, other agencies - and state and local law enforcement agencies has improved dramatically in the wake of 9/11. Joint Terrorism Task Forces (JTTF) have been established in over 100 cities nationwide to facilitate information exchanges, with a national JTTF to coordinate intelligence at FBI headquarters. Within major city police departments, support for counterterrorism has become a major department focus.

It is unclear whether the scope of JTTF coordinative activities includes countering the spread of criminal gangs. Like many nationally sponsored law enforcement measures since 9/11, the JTTFs have occasion-

ally come under fire from civil rights advocates concerned about infringements on personal liberties. Concerns about infringements on civil liberties highlight the gap between terrorist suspects and gang members, who may be other local homeboys or members of organizations with roots outside the U.S. Relations between criminal gangs and terrorist organizations are liable to continue to be opportunistic and episodic, and will be governed more by personal relationships and mutual animosities between gangs and police or the government than by long-range planning. Though they could change, gangs are characteristically driven more by the immediate benefits of criminal activities -- “bling and broads” -- than by long-range goals.¹⁸ Gang activities, however, will almost certainly provide opportunities for terrorist organizations to set up shop in the U.S. and plan attacks on American soil. The U.S. can expect to see more incidents like the Phoenix raid in U.S. territory, and, ominously, attacks on public officials -- a tactic of the Mexican gangs and MS-13 alike.

In the United States, coordination between federal and local police forces will continue to improve. The gap

¹⁷As one participant at the Oracle Conference said, “When we ran ‘em out of New York, and murder rate in New Jersey went through the roof.” *Oracle Conference, op.cit.*

¹⁸One police official familiar with gangs commented to the author that “your average gang-banger doesn’t think beyond today; he only wants cars, guns and sex.”

between terrorist organizations and criminal gangs, however, represents vulnerability in most police coverage of terrorist activity. As big-city police capability improves, the terrorist-gang combination will seek to establish ungoverned spaces in medium to small cities, and even rural areas where law enforcement capabilities are weakest. As far back as 2004, MS-13 had targeted mid-sized cities in the South, as reported by *U.S. News and World Report*:

Even hardened cops are rattled by gang members' seemingly casual embrace of violence. Just this year, a Virginia gang member was convicted of conspiring to murder a police officer, and in Charlotte, N.C., and Prince George's County, MD., police got death threats after arresting MS-13 gang members. Two purported gang members, one with an AK-47, allegedly murdered an off-duty Los Angeles County police captain during an apparent robbery attempt.¹⁹

The gangs' fluid and menacing spread into small cities and suburbia will lead to increased expenses for law enforcement in areas already straining under local taxes. As a result,

¹⁹ *U.S. News and World Report* May 15, 2004.

MS-13 and other international gangs are liable to find more opportunity for "ungoverned spaces" and gang turf outside cities, leading for more calls for federal and state intervention, particularly with coordination and intelligence, as gangs spread.

The ebb and flow of the response to criminal gangs should not obscure the larger picture. Criminal gangs, particularly the "international" gangs, will provide opportunities for terrorist organizations and their activities. Some terrorist organizations and gang elements will have connections rooted in South American border areas and they will be unlikely to have shed those associations when they come north. Their spread will continue throughout the United States, away from police jurisdictions that successfully counter and incarcerate their members, toward jurisdictions that are more permissive. As carriers of potential terrorist activities, as well as their unsavory activities, they constitute a danger to the security of the U.S. John Sullivan, a noted U.S. expert on connections between gangs and terrorists, commented recently, "Terrorism is definitely both crime and war. It is indeed the crime-war overlap that terrorists (and insurgents alike) exploit... The capability gap

and organizational ghettos that divide civil-military and foreign-domestic operations is problematic and needs to be closed, while preserving liberty and civil institutions. Gangs...and cartels certainly blur the distinctions between crime and war.”²⁰ (See John Sullivan’s article, “Forging Improved Government Agency Cooperation to Combat Violence” on page 24.)

What Works?

If the marriage of criminal gangs and terrorist organizations is in fact becoming a “fifth column” threat, what measures should be taken against them? This is the most challenging national security problem: a layered combination of local, state and national law enforcement challenges connected to diplomatic and military strategies outside the U.S. For national security specialists, this is a “wicked problem”: a circular, contradictory and aggressive one with no obvious solution. Two overarching points should be made.

First, the United States must recognize that the spread of criminal gangs presents opportunities for terrorist attacks on the United States, and that as a consequence of the difficulty of knowing just when those opportunities might present themselves,

international gangs should be considered a threat to U.S. national security. Defense resources - dollars - should thus be made available to other federal, state and local jurisdictions to continue the fight against terrorism in the U.S.

Second, with regard to criminal gang and terrorist links overseas, the United States already has a model for success in Colombia’s long and hopeful fight against the FARC and other narco-traffickers that once paralyzed its national will. While Colombia’s agony is not yet over, it represents the best model to date as to how the U.S. can use its influence and power to enable a neighbor to win its own fight. America’s ongoing experience in Iran and Afghanistan has taught us how to provide help to our allies. In the words of a U.S. counterterrorism expert, “We can only be the external support to governments that are threatened with insurgency. We can only help them to be successful as the essence of an insurgency is the fight for who will be the legitimate governing power of the indigenous population.”²¹ There are circumstances in which our allies may be contending with narco-cum-terrorist gangs in which the distinction between war and crime, and gangs and armies are blurry. When these circumstances ex-

²⁰ John Sullivan in email to author, 23 August 2008.

²¹ COL David Maxwell to author, April 7, 2008.

ist, U.S. security interests are as much at stake as if “pure” terrorist movements were threatening friendly governments whose survival is important to our own security interests.

The first response to the criminal-terrorist combination is good police work at the local level, in the neighborhoods and towns where most Americans live and work. Fortunately, most police departments nationwide recognize the challenge. Many departments are already operating at a higher level of awareness against either gangs or terrorist organizations. Whether the predecessors of a terrorist threat or standing alone, gangs attack the American way of life at in very local, in-your-face way. The fundamental task, as stated by top law enforcement officials, is that police everywhere aggressively pursue gang members wherever they are, no matter the origin of the gang or its nature. According to NYPD former Chief of Department Lou Anemone, surrendering the initiative or, worse, formally or informally negotiating “cease fires” or ceding turf to gangs sets back law enforcement efforts. He supports, as other police do, an aggressive and constant ‘block by block’ campaign, which must be vigorously prosecuted to loosen gang holds on neighborhoods.

Aggressive tactics require troops

-- “boots on the sidewalk” -- in this war. Counterinsurgency operations, whether overseas or in gang-controlled neighborhoods, first rely on having enough “troops” on the ground to embolden the neighborhoods to break the code of silence -- the “no snitch” law -- to identify criminals and swing the people behind the government and police. In strategy-speak, that means “resources” -- more police and the funding to pay for them, their schooling and equipment, and the long-term expenses of “surging” an enlarged force and then reducing strength as the neighborhoods return to normal. Many mid-and small-town police forces lack the sheer numbers of police necessary to smother endangered neighborhoods with uniformed officers and to provide the protection necessary to flush out the gangs.

Like a military counterinsurgency, locally effective anti-gang programs require more than an effective police program. To fight gangs effectively, the *entire* community must be involved -- courts, schools, parents, police, social services. While community involvement must be more than just building a basketball court on the street, outlets for juvenile behavior at the earliest ages, particularly among young males, can make a startling difference. Adequate drug-treatment facilities at the community level are urgently needed to treat would-be

offenders who seek treatment -- too often, the only local approaches are to “lock ‘em up.” Summer camps, school counseling programs, effective intervention at the right time can make a difference in a young person’s life, but it only happens when the whole community is involved, not just police.

In addition to incentives to encourage drug-free living, the punitive aspects of our national drug policy must be reexamined and modified to stress rehabilitation of first-time offenders rather than prison time. Simply locking up minor offenders makes them vulnerable to gang recruitment (below), does little or nothing to rehabilitate offenders, and in many cases discharges them back onto the streets more hardened and more likely to return to crime. We have not examined the ramifications of a national drug-treatment program as a strategic response to a strategic threat, but since drug use in the U.S. appears unlikely to diminish sufficiently to wither up the gangs’ drug traffic, helping addicts overcome drug-use habits can diminish, to an extent, the gangs’ profits and reduce the number of gang recruits.

Because prisons, including local lockups, have become recruiting centers and training grounds for criminal gangs and terrorists alike (at least one of the 9/11 conspirators had served

time in a U.S. prison), prison reform is a national priority that should be addressed nationally, with an eye to genuinely rehabilitating offenders where possible, and strictly segregating from the general prison populations those adjudged to be too far gone for rehabilitation. Again, drug policies could take a tip from military counterinsurgency doctrines. In Iraq, enlightened rehabilitation policies at the notorious Abu Ghraib prison have dropped recidivism rates to low single-digits. The United States should be able to do as well with its own citizens, particularly those whose membership in gangs or narcotic use may have been tentative or forced. As with the general population, drug-treatment and rehabilitation resources are critical in reducing recidivism, especially in prisons. After prison, counseling and rehabilitation programs should be available to encourage non-career criminals to return to productive lives. Above all, “prison gangs” should be suppressed; the ability to inspire, direct and recruit for gang activity from prison should be curtailed.

Finally, federal resources are needed to help integrate police communications across the country. Law enforcement officials at all levels need better communication: common communications protocols, common data bases and other technical means that link together not only vertical levels

(FBI, DEA, State and local officials), but also facilitate horizontal communications and data-sharing among local jurisdictions of all sizes - from many smaller departments squeezed by restricted budgets to the metropolitan forces with millions of dollars for high-tech. At present, effective counterterrorism and counter-gang programs are bright spots in an uneven galaxy of thousands of police jurisdictions; those lessons learned and suspect identification queries must be passed faster than a gang member can drive from Anaheim to Kenosha. Certainly, there will be understandable concerns about civil liberties, but the urgent need now is not newly-intrusive data, but the ability to pass data already in the possession of a police department somewhere, or to receive data from other sources (the CIA, for example), while protecting civil liberties. These processes - with the appropriate constitutional safeguards - are already in place in larger jurisdictions. They need to be shared.

Outside the United States, U.S. law enforcement agencies from the FBI to the LAPD and NYPD, and others, have developed close ties with selected foreign law enforcement agencies to identify terrorist and gang threats. Increasingly, international

law enforcement webs are being drawn tighter, particularly in relation to ties with Mexico and other countries to the south. The U.S. should do everything possible to encourage international police coordination.

Given the emerging threat of merged criminal gangs and terrorist organizations in Latin America, U.S. foreign policy clearly must shift more resources to Central and South America. Considerable military attention is already focused on the region.²² U.S. Southern Command, based in Miami, Florida, has for several years been executing combined counternarcotics and counterterrorism campaigns in cooperation with host military forces in the region. U.S. military aid to Colombia, underway for decades, is becoming a success story, but only after great effort. The objective of U.S. policy in other areas should be to prevent the development of a FARC or, if that proves impossible, then its marginalization as rapidly as possible.

Along with other missions worldwide, U.S. diplomatic missions in the Southern Hemisphere should be upgraded with more staff and more capability to represent U.S. interests, cultures and ideals to host countries. With the growing Latino demo-

²² See *Posture Statement of Admiral James G Stavridis, Commander, U.S. Southern Command*, before the House Armed Services Committee, 110th Congress, March 21, 2007

graphic in the United States, it would seem logical - even without the press of criminal gangs and terrorist influences in the region, as well as market penetration by the Chinese and others - for the United States to upgrade its representation in countries with large U.S. expatriate populations.

With due regard for Latin American nationalist sentiments, U.S. missions should be empowered to provide discretely to host governments certain military aid useful in reinforcing host country sovereignty and restoring host country control over border areas, particularly those is disputed areas. Provision of counter-narcotics training is already a discrete military aid program; it should be increased.²³ “Military aid” can come in many forms, ranging from training missions to discrete, over-the-horizon intelligence sharing. U.S. Southern Command should be empowered to support U.S. missions in this manner. Within the U.S. mission, barriers to sharing information should be knocked down between military officials, law enforcement officers and intelligence agency specialists. As well, U.S. Southern Command should provide the military nexus for connectivity between host country intelligence data and U.S. domestic

law enforcement data; other U.S. entry points should be located in U.S. missions under control of the resident FBI agent or other appropriate domestic law enforcement official. In many Central and South American countries, police and paramilitary forces are the state’s primary guarantor of domestic security. Sanctions that prevent U.S. military assistance to paramilitary or police organizations should be eased by the next Congress.

Funding required to support a more serious U.S. campaign to prevent a juncture between criminal gangs and terrorist organizations should be directed initially at domestic priorities; that’s the near target, and it is in the U.S. that the connection must first be disrupted. Priorities should be assigned as indicated by their appearance in this report: first, more police on the beat; second, support to community and regional organizations for more citizen involvement in the fight against gangs, to include drug treatment facilities for users; third, prison reform to reduce recidivism among junior offenders; and, finally, greater technical connectivity nationwide between police jurisdictions.

With regard to overseas funding, the priorities should be:

²³ See “U.S. Foreign Military Assistance,” at fas.org/asmp/profiles/aid/aidindex.htm

(1) To reinforce U.S. missions, particularly in the “frontline” gang and terrorist states. This should be part of an overall strengthening of U.S. State Department diplomatic resources that is sadly overdue.

(2) To discretely offer up selected counternarcotics and counterterrorism training and associated materiel (to include intelligence) to other states in the region.

(3) To remove barriers to training and equipping police and paramilitary officers as needed by the host countries.

Mexico deserves a special mention in this strategy. In the 18 months or so since President Felipe Calderon deployed special drug units and the army against drug gangs, over 4,000 Mexicans have died. While the bulk of those deaths have been in drug gangs, over 450 soldiers and police have also been killed. The battle rages with drug-gang ferocity; severed heads are delivered with warning notes to prospective victims. Last month, Mexico’s top drug cop was killed in his apartment; other officials have been targets of assassination attempts, and too many were successful.²⁴ Because of past histories, and because the U.S. drug market is the proximate cause of

Mexico’s drug wars, U.S. assistance to Mexico must be tightly held to avoid either the appearance of “gringo” interference in Mexico’s internal affairs, or “Yankee” stinginess and indifference. But the United States clearly has a vital national interest in preventing a Mexican slide into chaos, or, almost as bad, accommodation to such an extent that Mexico would become a gang and terrorist enabling state. Aid to Mexico must be negotiated at the highest levels of government, Mexican sensitivities must be considered, but in the end, we must do all we can to insure the success of the Calderon government’s courageous stand on drugs and gangs.

Final Analysis

Criminal gangs of both the international and local variety have already cooperated with terrorist organizations, and will do so again. When they do, they will operate with the worst features of both -- ruthlessness and long-range planning -- and so become a more potent threat to the security of the U.S. To counter this more dangerous version of either threat, tactics and strategy used by U.S. police must be combined with a patient and focused diplomatic, military and law enforcement policies outside the

²⁴ Ken Ellngwood in the *Los Angeles Times*, “Mexico versus the Drug Gangs; a Deadly Clash for Control,” June 3, 2008.

U.S. While there is no particular order in which solutions should be begun, the first concern should be close to home -- to disrupt criminal gangs and terrorist cells now in the U.S. and begin to turn the tide against the spread of both local and international gangs. Second, U.S. diplomatic, military and law enforcement activities overseas should be coordinated to support emerging countries struggling with their own gang and terrorist problems.

In his book *Terrorism: The New Face of Warfare*, scholar Donald Hanle makes the argument that if the objectives of ideologically-motivated terrorists or insurgents are frustrated long enough, members get disillusioned and eventually turn to crime -- as FARC has done in Colombia. As they do, their "movement" devolves into common crime, vulnerable to be picked off by law enforcement and without any ideological attraction for the population it was trying to win. If so, then a strategy for South America may well be to hold Hezbollah and its clones at bay long enough for the local jihads to sink into the criminal background they have chosen, while at the same time assisting local police forces and other relevant national institutions, thus increasing the vulnerability of gangs and terrorists to improved policing and counterinsurgency techniques. Even so, it's not an easy so-

lution -- Mexico's intense criminal drug war is threatening the state itself without any ideological expression but money, and most South American nations are not now prepared to fight an all-out, Mexican-style war on narco-terrorists, but in the future it's quite likely they will be, and our role can be as the "quiet American" who supports them in their own fights for survival. The first step, however, is for the U.S. to get its own house in order and recognize that gangs and terrorists are increasingly different parts of a common problem.

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