

Gangs, Terrorists, and Trade

By Adam Elkus | April 12, 2007

While most Americans are familiar with al-Qaida, they're less knowledgeable about a group spreading terror within U.S. inner cities: Mara Salvatrucha. Also known as MS-13, the Maras have 20,000 North American members. Mara cadres have set up in many American cities, creating the beginnings of a national command hierarchy, with some Maras on the East and West coast reporting directly to and paying gang dues to leaders in Central America. As these cadres grow and learn, they become more dangerous, and already they have begun to actively target law enforcement officers. Although the FBI and law enforcement agencies have tried to contain them using anti-racketeering statutes, which allow prosecutors to attack the structures of organized crime, the real problem lies beyond the border.

MS-13 is the product of the vicious Central American civil wars of the 1980s. Thousands fled north, many of them veterans of both sides. Unable to find work because of a lack of education, some of these refugees decided to leverage their combat skills to survive, forming Mara Salvatrucha. As a result of toughened immigration policies, U.S. officials deported MS-13 members to their countries of origin. However, this solution proved facile and politically expedient. After their return home, MS-13 members ruthlessly destroyed the local gangs and took control of huge swathes of Central American cities.

There are 70,000 Maras in Latin America. Like al-Qaida, they operate loose, autonomous cells that form a broad transnational network. Individual cells are surprisingly sophisticated. Some are devoted to intelligence gathering, propaganda, recruitment, and logistics, as well as their more common activities of drug trafficking, extortion, prostitution, and murder. In the cities and provinces they control, the Maras have carved out zones of autonomy, parasite structures within the larger state where they provide a rudimentary system of patronage and protection to the people in return for allegiance and tribute.

Paralyzed by a lack of resources and decades of authoritarianism, neglect, and economic disparity, Central American states have found it difficult to deal with this threat. The Maras are heavily armed with M16s, AK-47s, and military grade explosives. Gang-related violence has risen to pandemic levels. In El Salvador alone, gang-related violence is responsible for 60% of all murders. Many security experts fear that Central America could become like Colombia, with huge areas of the country governed by mini-narcostates. The Peten region of Guatemala has already become just that. It is devoid of government authority, with the economy and local life dominated by the Maras and other criminal gangs and oriented primarily around drug trafficking. Another fear is that the Maras will start to carve out a political identity, making the jump from criminal overlords to a fully functional, armed political movement--with the sole goal of loosening state authority to create a jungle of quasi-feudal narcostates.

The Maras are part of a troubling trend in Latin America: the rise of transnational gangs, narcotraffickers, and terrorists. These anti-state formations have successfully created power networks of their own, overwhelming security forces and creating rudimentary fiefdoms in areas where state control is weak. These actors have thrived in an environment where neoliberal economic policies have exacerbated traditional inequalities. They have profited from the legacy of civil wars and U.S.-backed dictators. It is not a new trend but the latest twist in a century of violent upheaval and inequality. Although these actors are not representative of a decline in state power in general, their success at eluding and challenging the state and forming autonomous zones indicates that they have decisively broken the state's monopoly of violence. This does not bode well for the long-term security of the Americas.

Losing the Drug War

In Mexico, President Felipe Calderon's efforts to bring narcotics cartels to heel have produced no visible results. His most recent operation, a December 2006 6,000-man raid on narcotraffickers throughout the country, netted no important arrests. Drug prices in the United States have held steady or fallen, suggesting that the Mexican government's efforts to stem the supply of narcotics have failed. For the foreseeable future, things seem likely to only get worse. In poverty-stricken northern Mexico, cartels still run narco-states within the larger state superstructure. Corrupt local officials tolerate these cartels' usurpation of state authority as long as it does not undermine their own positions. In response to Calderon's efforts, cartel thugs have only gotten bolder. Inspired by al-Qaida, they have added beheadings to their repertoire, slaughtering their rivals and leaving their heads for show. Drug cartels even videotape the killings of rivals and put them up on Youtube. Drug killings have climbed to a high of 2,000 per year.

In Colombia, illicit coca production in Columbia has increased from 80,000 to 86,000 hectares, according to the International Crisis Group. The leftist narco-insurgent Revolutionary Armed Forces of Columbia (FARC) still maintains a virtual state in large sections of the countryside despite President Alvaro Uribe's stepped-up military offensive. It dominates local life and criminal structures, sustained by profitable cocaine exports that the government has failed to eradicate.

The lure of drug money has maintained high levels of corruption in the Colombian military, and the drug shadow economy has woven itself into the very DNA of the country's power structure. The elite counter-drug units that Uribe has fielded to eliminate the narco-traffickers have found themselves betrayed and militarily targeted by their comrades in the security forces who have been bought by drug lords. Uribe's chief success to date, the demobilization of right-wing paramilitaries operating outside the state, has even backfired. Scandals involving right-wing paramilitaries linked to the highest levels of government have multiplied, further tarnishing Uribe's credibility and proving that murderous right-wing militiamen still maintain significant influence within the Colombian government.

Uribe has raised defense spending to unprecedented levels with little effect. Guerrillas have won a number of tactical victories over government troops from their base in the countryside through the use of anti-personnel landmines and snipers. In Colombia's major cities, FARC cadres wait underground for the right moment for bloody assault. Uribe seems blind to the structural reasons for the failure of the state to eliminate the narco-state within Columbia. Fifty percent of the country lives below the poverty line, and class conflict burns in the cities and the countryside. With the government fixated solely on a military response, it is unlikely that there will be any progress in Colombia's drug war, and the state will remain a weak top layer to the multiple narco-groups warring for supremacy.

Gangs and Terrorists Challenge the State

In Brazil in May 2006, criminal groups took on the state itself in a twisted variation of the Tet offensive. The First Capital Command (PCC), a criminal network operating out of Sao Paulo, launched calculated assaults on police officers in Sao Paulo and across neighboring provinces, taking over prisons, carrying out drive-by shootings, ambushing police officers, storming police stations, buses, public transport systems, and shopping centers. Their goal was to demonstrate to the government who was really in charge. The outgunned police were helpless against the PCC's heavy machine guns and grenades. More than 100 prisons rioted, 150 people died, and millions were terrorized. The PCC's power remains formidable, controlling more than 140,000 prisoners in Sao Paolo alone with 500,000 outside affiliates, which include lawyers, informants, drug dealers, bankers, and gun runners. The PCC's assault, however, is only one public example of increasing gang power. In the many slums (favelas) of Rio de Janeiro, local politicians only enter with the permission of gang leaders who deliver votes in exchange for patronage.

The tri-border region between Paraguay, Brazil, and Argentina remains a lawless center where drug traffickers, criminals, money launderers, gun runners, and terrorists operate freely. Argentine authorities believe that Hezbollah operatives planned and carried out dry runs in the tri-border region in preparation for the 1994 car bombing of the Israeli-Argentinean Mutual Assistance Center. And intelligence experts speculate that Al-Qaeda may be trying to set up a cell within the tri-border region.

Sadly, instability is not restricted to Latin America. In Haiti, criminal organizations continue to dominate civic life. During the 2004 coup that ousted former President Jean-Bertrand Aristide, many prisons and courthouses were destroyed by rebels and criminals, gutting the legal system. The country's judiciary--poorly paid, corrupt, poorly equipped, and burdened by a legal code that has essentially remained unchanged since the 19th century--has been powerless to resist an overwhelming surge in criminal activity. An ever-expanding network of transnational crime syndicates, drug traffickers, and armed groups aided by allies among the corrupt police and security forces control the streets. This is unsurprising, as the leaders and soldiers of the 2004 coup included many criminals and ex-paramilitaries from the junta that briefly ousted Aristide in 1994.

War, Corruption, and Neoliberalism

A century of poverty, violence, steep income imbalance, and corruption has taken their toll, disemboweling the features of the modern state. Goods, services, education, health care, and basic governance remain out of reach for many. The gangs, terrorists, and narco-criminals have prospered in the vacuum of authority. The growth of "global cities," with their ever-expanding networks of slums and transnational drug economies, has also provided a perfect environment for traffickers in illicit goods to thrive beyond the control of states.

The imposition of American-backed neoliberal economic policies on many countries in the region has been the last straw. According to John Rapley, "In many countries, [neoliberal policy] has skewed the distribution of income, leading to the emergence of pockets of vast wealth and areas of abject poverty. As the more prosperous players plug into a global economy and their production relies ever less on local labor, they retreat into secure enclaves protected by private security forces. ... Marginalized communities have essentially done the same thing, using a different kind of private security force—the gang—to maintain order in the global cities' multiplying and expanding ghettos."

Decades of Cold War-era conflict and civil wars between socialists, CIA-trained right-wing militias, drug traffickers, and U.S.-backed dictators produced a great many battle-hardened mercenaries. These gangs have little ideological purpose other than to fill the power vacuum created by the decaying ruins of states. With the aid of plentiful, cheap weaponry pumped into the region by both the United States and the Soviet Union during the Cold War, and their only opposition coming from equally corrupt state security forces, gangs face few difficulties.

The FARC once fought for Communist revolution; now it fights to enjoy its drug profits in peace. Its counterparts in Latin American militaries exhibit a similar cynicism, pocketing drug money with the same enthusiasm they once reserved for hunting down and "disappearing" enemies of the state. In Guatemala, the military has actively protected narco-traffickers, with top intelligence officers profiting from criminal enterprises. A key advantage these forces have over governments is that they are also transnational, able to exploit informal lines of communication such as smuggling channels, migration routes, and trade links that are invisible to the state.

In many parts of Latin America, faith in a democracy that benefits the few remains tenuous. The people accept gangsters as the lesser of two evils, as a state that cannot protect its citizens or manifest any visible signal of its own legitimate right to rule will not command any allegiance. Meanwhile, American policymakers remain largely oblivious, conceiving of Latin American policy as merely a means to prevent a leftist resurgence. The neoconservative crusade in the Middle East and Central Asia has remained the principal obsession of foreign policy in American politics since 2001, and aside from the occasional controversy caused by the ramblings of Hugo Chavez, hardly any attention is paid by policymakers or the media to the rapidly growing instability next door.

The root cause of Latin American instability is the persistent inequalities that American foreign policies have helped to maintain. But with American policymakers obsessed with Iran and Iraq, little attention is being paid to the instability next door.

A State-Friendly Policy

Here's a suggestion for American policy: stop treating Latin American states as enemies. Since the days of the Monroe doctrine, American presidents have focused on using force and subterfuge to bend Latin American states

to the will of corporate interests. CIA-backed coups overthrew left-leaning rulers, a practice that continued under the Bush administration with its prominent backing for the 2004 coup that unseated Aristide and the 2002 attempted coup against Hugo Chavez. This gunboat diplomacy has weakened and corroded the very institutions necessary to prevent instability.

Washington is also fixated on destroying the sovereignty and cohesion of states through IMF and World Bank-approved policies that eliminate state assistance and control of vital industries. Such policies, rather than creating broad-based wealth in Latin America, have merely fattened the pockets of the upper crust. The end of patronage, without a corresponding growth of trade and a healthy middle class, has partly created many opportunities for all-too-willing guerrillas, terrorists, and thugs.

The inevitable results of Washington's policy of subversion cannot be defeated through military means. Huge sums of money are spent on "Plan Colombia," the unsuccessful U.S.-Colombian joint military operation against Colombian coca growers, but relatively little on social programs that could reduce the appeal of the FARC and the drug trade. And merely building up a wall along the U.S. border won't solve illegal immigration, drugs, and transnational crime. In an age of free-flowing capital, human beings and contraband will also bypass national borders.

Ironically, the very leftist regimes Washington opposes, such as Hugo Chavez's Venezuela and Evo Morales's Bolivia, have had success dealing with poverty and instability through their social spending programs, flawed as they may be. In many parts of Latin America, the state remains strong and provides economic and communitarian dividends for its citizens. Even in areas like Brazil, where the state's monopoly of violence has clearly disintegrated, strong state control of the economy exists.

Given the negative role of American foreign policy in Latin America, some might argue that the best solution to these problems is to simply let Latin American states battle these problems on their own. This argument has some validity, especially in the light of the Bush administration's recent bumbling attempts to counter the influence of left-leaning Latin American leaders. However, America still can play a healthy role in ensuring hemispheric stability, as long as it engages Latin American states as partners rather than servants.

If American policymakers would listen to the concerns of their Latin American counterparts and embrace a more holistic policy targeted at resolving social problems, they might help end the chaos that coercive neoliberalism has enabled. Assistance to states should not take the form of massive military aid that is clearly ineffective against networked guerrillas, terrorists, and narcotraffickers. Instead, U.S. policymakers should focus on changing the strategic environment that has enabled the rise of these guerrillas, facilitating development instead of dictating trade terms. Only by changing the strategic environment and shrinking the zones of disorder that have cropped up can Latin American states defeat these newly empowered guerrillas, criminals, and terrorists. Cooperation with states against non-state actors should encompass development and the strengthening of civil society and government, rather than a strict focus on counter-terrorism and military aid. U.S. policymakers should also take care to avoid interfering in Latin American domestic politics, working in cooperation with states instead of trying to undermine their governments.

Ensuring hemispheric stability the right way is also in America's national interest. In a networked world, instability from the south will spill over in the border, in the form of illegal immigration, gang crime, the drug trade, and other aspects of the illicit economy. Ignoring these problems inevitably leads to public backlash and support for harsh and ignorant solutions such as the "war on drugs." By proactively helping Latin American states deal with social issues and security threats in a fundamentally progressive manner, America can atone for the mistakes of the past, protect its own interests, and help make Latin America safer and more prosperous.

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