

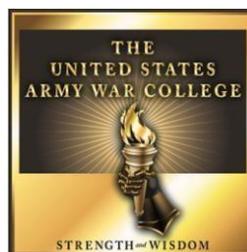
Strategy Research Project

Convergence of Transnational Organized Crime and Terrorism in Latin America

by

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Class of 2016

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REPORT DOCUMENTATION PAGE			Form Approved--OMB No. 0704-0188		
The public reporting burden for this collection of information is estimated to average 1 hour per response, including the time for reviewing instructions, searching existing data sources, gathering and maintaining the data needed, and completing and reviewing the collection of information. Send comments regarding this burden estimate or any other aspect of this collection of information, including suggestions for reducing the burden, to Department of Defense, Washington Headquarters Services, Directorate for Information Operations and Reports (0704-0188), 1215 Jefferson Davis Highway, Suite 1204, Arlington, VA 22202-4302. Respondents should be aware that notwithstanding any other provision of law, no person shall be subject to any penalty for failing to comply with a collection of information if it does not display a currently valid OMB control number. PLEASE DO NOT RETURN YOUR FORM TO THE ABOVE ADDRESS.					
1. REPORT DATE (DD-MM-YYYY) 01-04-2016		2. REPORT TYPE STRATEGY RESEARCH PROJECT		3. DATES COVERED (From - To)	
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE Convergence of Transnational Organized Crime and Terrorism in Latin America			5a. CONTRACT NUMBER		
			5b. GRANT NUMBER		
			5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER		
6. AUTHOR(S) Colonel Ricardo Gonzalez United States Army			5d. PROJECT NUMBER		
			5e. TASK NUMBER		
			5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER		
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) Dr. Evan Ellis			8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER		
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) U.S. Army War College, 122 Forbes Avenue, Carlisle, PA 17013			10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)		
			11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)		
12. DISTRIBUTION / AVAILABILITY STATEMENT Distribution A: Approved for Public Release. Distribution is Unlimited. Please consider submitting to DTIC for worldwide availability? YES: <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> or NO: <input type="checkbox"/> (student check one) Project Adviser recommends DTIC submission? YES: <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> or NO: <input type="checkbox"/> (PA check one)					
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES Word Count: 7,672					
14. ABSTRACT Transnational Organized Crime in Latin America has expanded in the last decade and is responsible for most of the illicit trafficking of drugs, contraband goods and humans in the Western Hemisphere. These criminal activities take place along well-established and resourced networks, which lack effective government control measures. This sophisticated grid with access into U.S. territory could conceivably be used by extremist terrorist organizations to inflict harm inside the United States. Yet ironically, if Transnational Crime Organizations allow the use of illicit networks by extremist organizations, it could bring about adverse consequences for their own lucrative international operations. This Strategic Research Project examines these networks and potential links to terrorism that could be manipulated by religious extremist terrorist organizations. It also assesses the possible U.S. response to a significant terrorist event borne out of this convergence. The study concludes by providing recommendations for U.S. policymakers.					
15. SUBJECT TERMS Western Hemisphere, Extremism, Drugs, Trafficking, Smuggling					
16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT	18. NUMBER OF PAGES 37	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON
a. REPORT UU	b. ABSTRACT UU	c. THIS PAGE UU			19b. TELEPHONE NUMBER (w/ area code)

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(7,672 words)

Abstract

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Convergence of Transnational Organized Crime and Terrorism in Latin America

Unless confronted by an immediate, visible, or uncomfortable crisis, our nation's tendency is to take the security of the Western Hemisphere for granted. I believe this is a mistake.

—GEN (Ret.) John F. Kelly¹

The United States faces many challenges to its national security interests today from nation-states as well as from non-state actors. Of the numerous threats it faces, terrorism, and in particular religious extremist terrorism from Islamic extremist groups, presents the most complex danger. The use of porous borders across the Western Hemisphere to infiltrate trained and capable terrorist operatives into the United States is one aspect of this complex problem-set. The introduction of harmful materials across the United States' border with Mexico is another facet of the threat. The precarious levels of security in Central America and Mexico, combined with the lack of resources applied to combating the expansion of sophisticated criminal organizations, provides an opportunity for extremist terrorist groups to inflict harm to the United States.

Terrorism, however, is not a tactic only used by religious-based extremist groups. Ideologically-based organizations in Latin America, for example, flourished in the latter half of the twentieth century in countries like Colombia and Peru, and used terrorist tactics to attempt to influence political change. Even today, former insurgency groups use terrorist tactics across the Western Hemisphere as a means to achieving their ends, although the Latin American terrorism of today is no longer driven by ideology. Latin American terrorism is directly linked to drug trafficking in particular and to a myriad of other transnational illicit activities in general. The increase in the trafficking of drugs from South America, through Central America and the Caribbean, into the United States

has transformed the security environment in the hemisphere. The rise of powerful Transnational Crime Organizations that enlist the services of Latin American terrorist groups such as the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and Shining Path (SL) of Peru, to secure and facilitate their operations, has led to the virtual dismemberment of citizen security in the Americas.²

Transnational organized crime in Latin America has developed rapidly since the U.S. war on drugs began in the 1980s. What started as family-run drug trafficking ventures and later morphed into more sophisticated drug trafficking organizations of the early twenty first century, are now intricate multinational corporations. These organizations traffic globally not only in drugs but in persons, weapons and a myriad of illicit goods as well.³ Latin American Transnational Organized Crime networks are vast and influential, with reach into government, police and the military. Today's transnational crime organizations are businesses focused primarily on maximizing their profits and exploiting the demand for the products they provide. Additionally, some of the most prolific transnational crime organizations, such as Sinaloa, the Zetas and other Mexican cartels, aim to achieve power and control over local and regional government organizations where these groups operate and are rivals to each other.⁴ The trafficking of drugs, particularly cocaine, heroin, marihuana and forms of manufactured substances, is the primary source of revenue for these organizations.⁵ The demand for illicit substances is global, emanating from Russia, Africa and Asia, but the U.S. and European markets are the most profitable and prolific. The insatiable U.S. drug market helps to explain the existence of the grid of infiltration routes and related support networks that expand from the Pacific to the Caribbean Basin, and are balanced on the

land avenues of approach across the U.S.-Mexico border.⁶ These complex webs exist to produce, transport and distribute the product into the United States and the profits back to the drug lords.

The convergence of Transnational Organized Crime and Latin American terrorist organizations specifically is well known, but the existence of a possible nexus between the same transnational crime organizations and Islamic extremist terrorist groups, is still undetermined. Although there have been cases of Islamic extremist terrorism in the Americas, such as the 1992 and 1994 bombings in Argentina by Iran-backed Hezbollah, and the 2014 arrest of a suspected Hezbollah operative in Peru, the intent of these attacks or plans to conduct attacks differed from those of other Islamic extremist groups.⁷ Hezbollah's actions in the the region are primarily focused on terrorism financing for their own operations elsewhere.⁸

The exploitation of Transnational Organized Crime networks into the United States by extremist terrorist groups could take place with or without the knowledge of these criminal organizations. Hence, the possible convergence could be an unwitting one. Extremist terrorist groups could potentially use Transnational Organized Crime networks to smuggle operatives in order to conduct terrorist acts against the United States or its interest in the Latin American region. These networks could also be used to launder operational funds and harbor terrorist activities such as training camps and recruiting sources in the United States and the rest of the region. Finally, extremist terrorist organizations may use the existing transnational crime networks to introduce a weapon of mass destruction or elements of such a device to be deployed inside U.S. territory.

The U.S. government and many of its partners in Latin America have developed separate strategies to combat Transnational Organized Crime as well as terrorism in the Americas, but these do not focus on the confluence with Islamic extremist terrorism in the Americas.⁹ The possible emergence of collaboration, willing or not, between Islamic extremist terrorism and Transnational Organized Crime in Latin America, could force a strategic shift to the south. Such a close and imminent threat has the potential to generate a strong policy response from the United States, likely triggering a de-facto closure of the U.S. southern border. A measure of this magnitude along the border, would in turn have a significant impact on the economies of not only the United States, but also of Mexico and Central America as well. Conversely, it would affect the economic interests of transnational crime organizations in the region as well. This loss of access through the U.S.-Mexico border would directly affect the flow of illicit goods and money in either direction, putting at great risk the very existence of the most developed Transnational Organized Crime groups.

In such a scenario, all sides have something to lose and it is likely not a desired end state for Latin American transnational crime organizations. The possible emergent threat of a nexus between Islamic extremist terrorism and Transnational Organized Crime would warrant a reevaluation of the U.S. Homeland Security strategy and a new look at the current allocation of national security resources. Southern U.S. states would likely see an increase in federal support, a restructuring of their collective security posture, and a renewed popular and political focus toward the region. Resources for U.S. partners in the Western Hemisphere to counter terrorist and Transnational Organized Crime activities and collaboration would also increase, with more military

collaboration and further U.S. involvement in Latin American affairs. Such a convergence would have a direct effect on the political, social and economic state of the Americas, likely putting at risk the great progress that the hemisphere has earned over the past few decades.

Transnational Organized Crime

The use of the term Transnational Organized Crime throughout this paper refers to known criminal groups who conduct specific illegal activities related to the trafficking of banned materials and other illicit activities. There are multiple transnational crime organizations in Latin America and not all operate in the same way or have the exact same priorities. Transnational Crime Organizations are intricate and multifaceted groups, many of which compete with each other for power, influence and control over the operation. The U.S. government official definition of Transnational Organized Crime describes it as “self-perpetuating associations of individuals who operate transnationally for the purpose of obtaining power, influence, monetary and/or commercial gains, wholly or in part by illegal means, while protecting their activities through a pattern of corruption and/or violence...through a transnational organizational structure.”¹⁰

The rise of Transnational Crime Organizations in Latin America was closely tied to the formation and growth of the leftist guerrilla movements of the region during the political turmoil of the seventies and eighties. Then, leftist movements became militarized organizations who fought against right-wing dictatorships. Movements such as the FARC and the National Liberation Army (ELN) in Colombia, and SL in Peru, were ideological paramilitary groups who fought to instill political change in their countries.¹¹ After years of conflict and changes in the Latin American political landscape, these paramilitary groups lost some political legitimacy and relevance. As the war on drugs

increased in intensity across the hemisphere, these guerrilla movements and insurgencies saw a strategic shift in their purpose and became part of the drug trade business, working closely with some of the most prominent Transnational Crime Organizations, protecting terrain, facilitating production, securing trafficking routes, and moving materials.¹² Latin American transnational organized crime and the former guerrilla movements found synergy and common interests to use the skills developed over decades of war in return for monetary gain. The guerrillas became mercenaries for the drug cartels and entire communities developed as narco-economies, heavily dependent on the production and distribution of illicit substances.¹³

Transnational Organized Crime in Latin America is closely associated with the more prominent gangs such as Mara Salvatrucha and 18th Street, including their leadership. Gangs have enjoyed a considerable growth particularly in impoverished urban communities across Central America.¹⁴ Although transnational crime organizations and most gangs are generally distinctive groups, they maintain a mutually beneficial association that is similar to that between the Latin American guerrilla movements and the Transnational Crime Organizations. This collaboration provides transnational crime organizations with workers to distribute drugs and soldiers to conduct assassinations on their behalf, while providing gangs with useful connections and logistical support.¹⁵ The U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) assesses that these gangs and the transnational crime organizations they are associated with, have become a “transnational concern that demands a coordinated, multinational response to effectively combat [their] increasingly sophisticated networks” which expand their influence and activities cross-border.¹⁶ Both transnational organized

crime and the associated gangs have well developed logistics networks into the United States and follow a sort of business model.

Transnational crime organizations in the Western Hemisphere thrived in recent decades, adopting twenty first century business practices.¹⁷ Their activities include the movement and sale of illicit substances, trafficking of weapons and persons, human smuggling, money laundering and a myriad of other illegal activities that provide them various streams of revenue.¹⁸ The convergence of the former guerrillas with the gangs, the cartels and the different levels of drug trafficking organizations in support of transnational crime organizations, create a powerful and influential alliance. Its purpose is primarily to increase profits. These conglomerates are not motivated by ideology but by money and power instead.¹⁹ It is these profits that allow Transnational Organized Crime to gain even more power and influence.

According to the U.S. Southern Command, transnational crime organizations' illegal activities undermine citizen security and the rule of law, while obstructing economic development and steadily preventing governance.²⁰ The powerful effects of these transnational crime organizations on society and the effectiveness with which these nodes operate, create disruptive waves across whole societies and their institutions. The rapid and violent expansion of Transnational Organized Crime in the Americas has resulted in the "near collapse of societies" in several countries.²¹ Although the governments of the United States and of all Latin American countries acknowledge this common threat and have developed strategies to combat its activities, the resources allocated to this effort seem to be insufficient in comparison to the means that these transnational crime organizations have at their disposal.

Although there is insufficient data to fully understand the scope of the drug flow through the region, the estimated global sale of South American cocaine alone yields approximately \$84 billion per year.²² This revenue added to profits from other illicit activities that Transnational Organized Crime is involved with, thwart the \$2.5 billion designated by the U.S. Congress to enforce the 2008 Merida Initiative assisting Mexico as it combats transnational crime.²³ Similarly, the \$65 million designated for the U.S. Southern Command to fund the Foreign Military Finance program that provides military equipment to partner nations, seems to be inadequate when compared to the funding available to the transnational crime organizations.²⁴

The international borders that link Mexico and Central America together do not offer a significant obstacle to determined transnational crime organizations, whose operatives can easily relocate from one country to another to avoid capture.²⁵ Although in recent years Mexico and its neighboring countries have taken measures to curtail illicit trafficking and activities, transnational crime activities in the region continue to flourish.²⁶ The population of these border areas, in particular, are exposed to violence and drug addiction on a daily basis, which causes a significant social and cultural impact on whole communities. These adverse social conditions create opportunities for extreme ideologies, fueled by dissatisfaction and despair, to flourish.

Terrorism

When it comes to defining terrorism, there is no international consensus and various definitions exist at the national and regional levels. In 2004, the United Nations attempted to formulate a global definition of the term through Security Council resolution 1566, but in the opinion of several members, the result lacked “legal authority in international law” and various other definitions were adopted.²⁷ Academia has also

attempted to find common ground to define this term. A shared idea among the majority of academic definitions is that terrorism is primarily a tactic. Terrorism is a method of fighting used to counter perceived “illegal state repression,” to produce “propagandistic agitation by non-state actors in times of peace or outside zones of conflict, and as an illicit tactic of irregular warfare employed by state and non-state actors.”²⁸ The U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation’s (FBI) definition of terrorism draws from the various academic definitions and narrows down the specific characteristics of this tactic, characterizing particularly, international terrorism. The FBI defines terrorism as “violent acts or acts dangerous to human life...that appear to be intended to intimidate or coerce a civilian population, to influence the policy of a government by intimidation or coercion, or affect the conduct of a government by mass destruction, assassination, or kidnapping.”²⁹

In essence, all terrorist organizations use these methods to intimidate or influence a sector of a population through the conduct of violent acts designed to instill fear, but not all terrorist groups are motivated by the same themes. Some terrorist groups such as those that originate and are predominant in the Middle East are motivated and driven by religious beliefs, like Al Qaeda or Daesh. These groups also operate globally instead of locally. Other terrorist groups such as ETA in Spain and the Red Brigades in Italy, are or were motivated by a desire to affect political change in their respective geographic areas. Many of these groups evolved through the years and tried to adapt to the changing political context in their particular regions. Over time, several of these politically-driven terrorist groups such as the Latin American terrorist groups in particular, struggled to maintain their identity and the relevance of their cause. Islamic

extremist groups in contrast, maintain constant relevance through the interpretation of their chosen religion.

This paper's use of the term Latin American terrorism, is intended to put under one umbrella those guerrilla movements born in the second half of the twentieth century that originally aimed to affect regime change in their respective countries, and which were primarily ideologically motivated with distinct political goals. Similarly, the use of the term Islamic extremist terrorism, refers primarily to the various Middle Eastern groups which use terrorist tactics and a version of the Islamic religion to affect political and social change in one way or another. The convergence of Islamic extremist terrorism with Transnational Organized Crime networks in Mexico and Central America is the central issue.

Latin American terrorist groups, most notably the FARC and SL, were created during the second half of the twentieth century as insurgencies aimed to affect political change and counter the wave of right-wing dictatorships passing through the Western Hemisphere. For many years, the FARC and SL battled with their respective governments' militaries and law enforcement agencies, to claim their political goals. These and other Latin American guerrilla movements were ideologically motivated and had clear political goals within their own territories. These groups did not generally project their power outside of their countries' borders to further their political goals. For the most part, movements such as the FARC were anti-government insurgencies fighting to liberate their people from what they viewed as oppressive governments, fighting for the poor and the working class.³⁰ It was later in the dawn of the twentieth century that these groups began to use terrorist tactics by targeting civilians and non-

combatants in cities and rural areas, and to kidnap for ransom. Initially these groups would kidnap drug traffickers, knowing that their families had the funds to make payment.³¹

Things changed in the 1980s and 90s however, with the spread of democracy throughout Latin America, and these insurgent groups began to lose their ideological legitimacy.³² The rise of powerful drug cartels in both Peru and Colombia around the same period, provided an opportunity for these groups to survive, since the cartels were in need of foot soldiers to protect their business. The ideological crises that the Latin American insurgencies were going through, propelled these groups to join forces with the drug cartels. Their leftist plight took on a secondary role protecting the drug business.³³ Over time, the relationship between the cartels, the family clans and the insurgencies became mutually beneficial. The insurgents would guarantee and protect the passage of drugs through the territories they controlled in exchange for a tax.³⁴

Soon, the growing cartels began to employ insurgent units, now to protect their shipments outside of their country of origin, and to exert more pressure on government military and security forces. These new activities and tactics changed the character of these organizations and so changed their purpose. More aggressive military campaigns by the sitting governments and their allies, primarily the United States, also pressured these groups' character to change. Then, in the wake of the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001 in New York City and Washington D.C., the United States worked to redefine its defense and security strategies. U.S. government officials began to use the term "narco-terrorism" to define the activities of groups like the FARC, ELN and SL in

Latin America, and these insurgency movements started to officially be considered terrorists.³⁵

Since then, the governments of the United States and of many Latin American countries have classified several of these guerrilla movements as terrorist organizations, because of the tactics they use to intimidate communities, to control trafficking routes, to collect taxes and generally to rule their operational environment. These terrorist organizations however, have a nature and character of their own, and differ greatly from many other terrorist groups around the world. The United States and many of its allies are heavily involved in a global fight against terrorism, and are primarily concerned with the Islamic extremist ideology. Although the methods of these extremist groups may be similar to a certain level, including not only violence, but also involvement in drug trafficking and illicit industries, the goals of leftist versus Islamic terrorist groups are quite distinct.

Although Latin American terrorist groups today are part of the threat that Transnational Organized Crime represents to U.S. National security and the security of several Latin American countries, these terrorist groups by themselves, do not pose a direct threat to the U.S. national security. Groups such as the FARC and SL, do not aim to inflict harm on the U.S. through the execution of terrorist acts on U.S. soil or against U.S. interests overseas. They do harm the U.S. by facilitating drug and other illicit trade into the United States, Mexico and Central America, through the use of terrorist tactics, but this does not equate to a terrorist threat to the United States. Terrorist groups such as Al Qaeda and Daesh, however, do intend to cause physical and psychological harm to U.S. targets on its soil and overseas. Their goals, though political and ideological as

well, are driven primarily by an extreme religious ideology that guides them to kill and terrorize western cultures and other foreign powers in general.

Islamic Extremist Terrorism

Islamic extremist terrorist groups such as Daesh (also known as the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant or ISIL), Al-Qaeda and Hezbollah, for example, have clear political goals that they aim to fulfill through the conduct of terrorist activities. Their goals are primarily political but heavily influenced by their religious beliefs. Their goals are also global, in contrast in principle with the local or regional goals of many other terrorist groups, to include Latin American terrorist groups. Daesh, for example, aims to establish a caliphate, as an independent and sovereign nation based solely on Daesh's interpretation of Islam, "under the rule of a community of religious scholars guided by a supreme leader, the caliph," believed to be the successor of their prophet.³⁶

Al-Qaeda has political goals similar to Daesh, but their primary wish is to rid what they consider their holy land of non-Muslims. This expulsion of the infidel is closely linked to their ultimate goal to establish an "ultra-conservative interpretation of sharia-based governance spanning the Muslim world," which extends well beyond the Middle East.³⁷ The global aim and reach of Daesh and Al-Qaeda in particular, greatly differentiate them from other terrorist groups. Their aim is to inflict harm upon the United States and on U.S. soil if possible, as was done on 11 September 2001 by Al-Qaeda and more recently on 2 December 2015 by Daesh sympathizers in San Bernardino, California.

These two groups present the most serious U.S. national security concern emanating from Latin America along the southern avenues of approach. Although not native to the Western Hemisphere, these groups may take advantage of the region's

porous borders to infiltrate the United States. Daesh and Al-Qaeda would be the most likely terrorist groups to exploit the vulnerability of a relatively permissive operational environment in Central America and Mexico. Infiltrating the well established Transnational Crime Organizations' networks and passages into the United States would present a significant challenge to the security, defense and intelligence communities charged with protecting the United States. Organizations such as Hezbollah have already achieved this convergence, but their ends differ from those of Sunni extremist groups.

The Lebanese terrorist group Hezbollah is active in Latin America and it has been linked to Transnational Crime Organizations in the region.³⁸ Hezbollah maintains a sophisticated funding campaign and cash flow through the large Lebanese community that exists in Latin America.³⁹ Despite these facts, Hezbollah's strategic priorities are different from those of Al Qaeda or Daesh. Although Hezbollah has operated and conducted attacks in Latin America, their operations in the region today, are primarily focused on establishing funding streams back to Lebanon, rather than to conspire against U.S. territory or interests in the Western Hemisphere.⁴⁰ This proved convergence, however, has the potential to develop further and become a direct threat to the United States, particularly as extremist elements may take advantage of the growing Muslim community in Latin America.

The Muslim population of the Western Hemisphere has increased significantly in the past decade and is projected to continue growing. This population is anticipated to increase from 2.3 million in 2010 to an estimated 5.6 million by 2030.⁴¹ As the Muslim population in Latin America grows, so does concern that young men and women will

become subject to extremist supporters and recruiters, although there is no clear evidence that the rapid growth of the Muslim faith in the region is linked to religious extremism or terrorist tendencies.^{42 43} Still, extremist views do proliferate in some of these communities. The hotbed for Islamic extremist ideology in Latin America is the Tri-border area in South America, where Argentina, Paraguay and Brazil meet.⁴⁴ There are also extremist nodes in all the major Latin American cities. These communities play a critical role in the possible eventual convergence between Transnational Organized Crime and extremist Islamic terrorism.

The creation of large Islamic cultural centers throughout the region, funded by foreign governments, inflames concerns that terrorist groups may take advantage of these facilities to enlist support for their cause.⁴⁵ Iran is the primary funding source for Shia mosques in Latin America, while Saudi Arabia funds most Sunni mosques.^{46 47} The overt allocation of resources on the part of these and other governments to fund construction and other projects in Latin America, gives way to suspicion that something larger is at play. The Iranian government in particular, has been linked to extremist Shia groups in the region, principally Hezbollah. Iran is known to have links to some drug cartels through the use of its diplomatic corps and actions by covert Iranian Revolutionary Guard and Qods Force personnel.⁴⁸ Similarly, the presence of Sunni extremist cells within several of these communities is evident and the radicalization of young Muslims takes place throughout the region.⁴⁹ Both of these groups take advantage of the region's "loosely-regulated financial institutions, easy access to forged identification documents, and the drug trade," to conduct recruiting efforts as well as to collect funds that are filtered back to Islamic extremist organizations.⁵⁰

Despite their methodical similarities, Shia and Sunni extremist have different aims and support different causes. Sunni terrorism aims to harm the United States and its interests directly, and presents therefore, the most significant threat in regard to the use of Transnational Organized Crime networks. Iran-backed Hezbollah in contrast, is primarily concerned with its foes in Lebanon, Syria and elsewhere, so it launders funds across the Atlantic to purchase weapons and other military equipment.⁵¹ Both groups have the potential to harm the United States, its allies and its interests, but the Sunni extremist sector is the most worrisome and the most likely to exploit the current routes into the United States.

Evaluation of Risk

The risk of a convergence of Transnational Organized Crime and Islamic extremist terrorism is the use by these terrorist of illicit communications and logistics networks through Central America and Mexico to enter the United States undetected. Islamic extremists, who have for decades aimed to attack the United States inside its borders, could use these networks in a variety of ways, smuggling trained operatives to conduct a terrorist attack inside the United States, laundering operational funds to existing sleeper cells, harboring terrorist activities such as training camps and recruiting sources in or close to the United States, and introducing a weapon of mass destruction or elements of such a device within U.S. borders. The physical movement of personnel, materiel and equipment through these elaborate networks presents a high risk to U.S. national security.

The existing networks that originate in Central America, travel through Mexico, and end in the United States, are communication webs developed initially by the drug cartels to introduce their product into the profitable U.S. market. These smuggling

routes are also complex communication routes with an elaborate grid of support and security assets, to ensure the safekeeping of the cargo. No one transnational crime organization owns a specific route, but instead each controls sectors or operational areas on which networks are developed. These organizations tend to be “territory-bound organized crime groups” and aim to control large areas to maintain flexibility.⁵² Transnational Organized Crime traffics with illegal substances, weapons, money, and people, all of which enter the United States through covert routes. Along the way, the organizations’ structures make use of *transportistas* or *coyotes*, who ensure that the product arrives safely at its destination.⁵³

Smuggling or trafficking activities from Latin America into the United States take place over land, by sea, and air. The U.S. Department of Justice estimates that the majority of the illegal drugs that enter the United States are smuggled overland, across the southern border, and a lesser amount through the Canadian border.⁵⁴ The same arteries used to smuggle drugs into the United States, are for the most part, used to smuggle people and Central America is a “global pathway” for human smuggling into the United States.⁵⁵ The indiscriminate smuggling methods used by human smugglers take subjects from all over the world to nine primary crossing areas along the U.S.-Mexico border, from Rio Grande in Texas, through Tucson in Arizona, to San Diego in California.⁵⁶ An estimated three hundred thousand “irregular immigrants” enter the United States clandestinely through the Mexico border each year through these primary areas, helped by well developed transnational crime organization networks.⁵⁷ The nearly unimpeded movement through the porous borders in the region, presents a

considerable weakness for terrorist organizations to take advantage of and gain access into the U.S. undetected.⁵⁸

The evidence of a convergence between terrorism and Transnational Organized Crime is limited for the most part, to the already explained association with Hezbollah in certain areas of the hemisphere, as well as the association with Latin American terrorist groups. There are instances of collaboration between Al Qaeda and Latin American Transnational Organized Crime in West Africa, where Latin American traffickers of drugs work with the terrorist group to smuggle illicit substances to Europe.⁵⁹ The extent to which this Al Qaeda link extends to the Americas is still unknown but the existence of this nexus gives validity to the theory that Islamic extremist groups could take advantage of the existing trafficking networks in the Western Hemisphere.⁶⁰ This ongoing collaboration makes the United States more vulnerable, particularly given the operational sophistication of the Latin American transnational crime organizations and their strong hold in the region.

There are several recent cases that involve the illegal smuggling of Middle Eastern military-age males into the hemisphere. Some of these individuals were detained in Latin America with false documents, which supports theories of a link to Transnational Organized Crime, who provide the documents. In November 2015, Honduran authorities detained six Syrians “travelling on doctored Greek passports” from Costa Rica, whose projected destination was the United States.⁶¹ A month later, six other Syrian individuals were detained in Argentina, also carrying false Greek documentation.⁶² Although these cases do not necessarily prove an Islamic extremist terrorist link, they point to the vulnerability of the hemisphere’s borders and to the

operating procedures that extremists could use to gain access into the United States clandestinely. Such vulnerability is also evident in the case of one of the individuals responsible for the Paris attacks of November 2015, who entered Europe “among migrants registered in Greece.”⁶³ This connection points to the facility with which anyone with the right networks and ten thousand U.S. dollars can cross borders undetected and eventually gain access to the United States. The most interesting recent case, however, is that of Paris attacks suspect Al Sakhadi Seham, who traveled through Ecuador and Colombia months prior to the terrorist attacks, with a stolen Israeli passport, bribing immigration officials along the way.^{64 65} Such procedures are common practice by Transnational Organized Crime in the Americas, who make use of their long-established human trafficking networks to gain access into the United States. The facility with which a willing foe can exploit these networks presents the biggest challenge to U.S. national security in the region.

The danger of a willing collaboration between Transnational Organized Crime and Islamic extremist terrorism is considerable. As the association between Al Qaeda and Latin American Transnational Organized Crime networks in Western Africa demonstrate, such collaboration can be profitable for both parties. Al Qaeda needs money to fund its operations and they obtain it through drug trade into Europe.⁶⁶ Latin American drug smugglers need to get the product to Europe, and Al Qaeda is their conduit. It is a mutually beneficial association, although their ideologies and goals are vastly different in the end. This very fact makes the possible association of these same groups in relation to the networks feeding into the United States more plausible. This willing association of convenience poses an important risk and a challenge to U.S.

authorities, who work to balance the security needs of the country with their duty to protect the United States.

Such an association, however, presents an existential risk to transnational crime organizations and could have a negative impact on their bottom line. As noted previously, the strategic and operational goals of Islamic extremist terrorist organizations are vastly different from those of Latin American criminal organizations.⁶⁷ It is not, for example, in the economic interest of Latin American transnational crime organizations in general, to allow an Islamic extremist terrorist organization to take advantage of the established transnational organized crime communication and logistics networks into the United States because such an association would jeopardize the productive business of illegal trafficking. Transnational Organized Crime as a whole is not a monolithic entity or syndicate, and each organization with a certain level of authority and power, may make its own decisions, but organized crime is a business and it is “motivated by a desire to make money.”⁶⁸

Transnational crime organizations likely estimate that the U.S. response to the known collaboration with Islamic extremist terrorist groups would be considerable. The U.S. response to a significant terrorist event on U.S. soil emanating from Latin America through its southern border, the Caribbean basin or through the American Pacific avenues of approach, would arguably trigger a unified and strong response. The forceful implementation of immigration laws, the tightening of border security procedures, an increase of resources applied to border security, and an increased domestic political focus on the U.S. southern border, would have a severe monetary impact on Latin American Transnational Organized Crime. Such an event would capture

the attention of the U.S. public and trigger the enactment of increased security measures along the southern U.S. states. The possible virtual closure of the U.S.-Mexico border and other access routes into the United States, would greatly affect the profit margins of Latin American Transnational Organized Crime, and their financial losses would be devastating. A terrorist attack of these characteristics would also be detrimental to Latin American relations with the U.S. in areas of security, immigration and commerce.

The most dangerous scenario to the United States, however, is the possible use of illicit networks into the United States by Islamic extremist terrorist groups without the express knowledge of Transnational Organized Crime. Total ignorance of such a situation would be impossible. Some actors within the Transnational Organized Crime networks would know if Islamic terrorist groups were using their procedures, systems and personnel to gain clandestine access into the United States. It may be possible however, for terrorist groups to make use of these networks without the full knowledge of the major Transnational Organized Crime players consciously deciding to support religious extremist terrorists. With a history of collaboration, it is possible that certain terrorist groups and transnational crime organizations “may procure each others’ smuggling services and remain unaware of each other’s affiliation.”⁶⁹

Although there is currently no evidence of a formal nexus between Islamic terrorist organizations and Transnational Organized Crime in Latin America for the purpose of conducting terrorist acts against the United States, the potential for an unintended association between the two does exist.⁷⁰ In a 2014 posture statement to the United States Congress, retired Marine General John F. Kelly, then the Commander

of the U.S. Southern Command, declared that transnational organized crime posed a serious national security concern to the United States for three particular reasons: “the spread of criminal networks into U.S. territory, the public health effect that illicit trafficking poses,” and the potential that terrorist organizations would “seek to leverage those same smuggling routes to move operatives with intent to cause grave harm to our citizens or even quite easily bring weapons of mass destruction into the U.S.”⁷¹ The possibility of Islamic extremist networks infiltrating the Latin American Transnational Organized Crime grid with trained, tactically proficient and motivated terrorists to introduce personnel, weapons or equipment into U.S. territory presents, at a minimum, a vital threat to the United States. These conditions warrant a re-examination of the efficacy of the U.S. interagency counter-terrorism strategy focused on Latin America and the Caribbean with the inclusion of the U.S. present strategy to counter Transnational Organized Crime. The U.S. government currently lacks an “overarching national strategy or policy to address comprehensively the confluence of terrorism and transnational crime.”⁷² Such a composite strategy would necessitate a reassessment of the ways and means allocated to both the counter-terrorism and counter-Transnational Organized Crime initiatives in the Western Hemisphere, not only for the Department of Defense, but more importantly, for the other agencies engaged in this effort, as well as for partner nations in the region.

U.S. Policy Recommendations

Joining the current efforts of the governments of the United States, Mexico and those of the Central American region, as well as those of their neighbors to the south and other powers in Europe and Africa, would give this fight its best chance to succeed. Such a partnership would require the equal and well coordinated efforts of the

interagency from each of these countries, in order to ensure that a multilateral approach is effective and absolute. This partnership already exists in many ways, as seen in the work that the U.S. Southern Command has been engaged in for the past fifteen years with an all-inclusive approach to the countering Transnational Organized Crime, but a lack of resources and operational forces diminish its intended effectiveness.⁷³ The recommendations that follow would propel some of such ongoing efforts in the region to succeed and could empower the exploration of new areas to apply collective effort.

1. Make the Western Hemisphere a Strategic Priority

From a policy perspective, the United States government should reprioritize the importance that it places on the issues threatening the security of the Western Hemisphere. Although there are efforts being made to work with and assist partner nations in their fight against their own existential threats, the United States government has not prioritized the hemisphere and Latin America in particular, in terms of whole of government engagement, resource allocation and political emphasis. The issue of immigration is at the forefront of the current political rhetoric, but this phenomenon is simply an effect of the many ills that affect the Americas. These ills, which are now directly affecting the United States, should put Latin America on top of the deck once again.

As seen during the 2014 flood of over fifty thousand unaccompanied children from Central America and Mexico to the United States southern border, Latin American families are willingly sending their children across dangerous borders over thousands of miles to escape the terror they live under.⁷⁴ This fact and the almost half a million migrants from Central America and Mexico who were intercepted at the Mexico border in 2015, should give the United States government cause to reassess its commitment

and investment in the development of the region in all areas.⁷⁵ The United States as a whole, has not yet accepted that the negative effects caused by Transnational Organized Crime across Latin America, are at its doorstep. A confluence of Transnational Organized Crime, its networks, and Islamic extremist terrorism in the Americas, together with a lack of proactive and all-inclusive policy measures, adds seriousness to the issue. Raising the level of strategic importance given to Latin America would better position the United States to face a terrorist threat originated in the region. Failure to adapt to this new context could find the United States unprepared to protect itself.

2. Unite Effort

There are numerous U.S. strategies to combat Transnational Organized Crime, illegal drugs, violent extremist groups and international terrorism in Latin America and other parts of the world. Efforts such as the Department of Justice's Law Enforcement Strategy to Combat International Organized Crime, or the Director of National Intelligence's National Intelligence Strategy and others, come short in their ability to provide effective and efficient solutions because they are for the most part, unilateral efforts.⁷⁶ A 2010 Congressional Research Service report investigating international terrorism and transnational crime, found that surprisingly enough, "none of these strategies provided the U.S. government with a comprehensive whole-of-government approach to combating the nexus of transnational crime and terrorism."⁷⁷

There are great efforts being made by various U.S. agencies and departments to battle human smuggling, narco-trafficking, clandestine terrorist travel, money laundering, drug trafficking and other activities related to the nexus of Transnational

Organized Crime and Terrorism, but none of these are interconnected.⁷⁸ Individual agency efforts are valuable but the expenditure of resources provides limited success.

A common, joint and multinational approach to countering the collaboration of Transnational Organized Crime and Islamic extremist terrorism would greatly increase the odds for success. A united front with a leadership chain that could orchestrate all efforts and bring harmony to the operational process, would be better poised to effectively take on this regional problem. Improving interagency and /international cooperation across borders could be done with the establishment of a joint command element overseeing all intelligence, law enforcement, financial, diplomatic, military and economic initiatives with an overarching and all-inclusive strategy to prevent extremist terrorists from using established Transnational Organized Crime networks from attacking the United States or its allies in the region.

A Geographic Combatant Command such as the U.S. Southern Command, could be the proponent for this effort, but the creation of a Joint Task Force (JTF) dedicated expressly to countering this nexus would add efficiencies to the process. The role of U.S. Southern Command would still be critical and therefore, the Task Force commander would be assigned to the command, providing strategic guidance and the proper allocation of resources. At the same time, the Southern Command would be able to coordinate more effectively with the Central Command, for example, in cases when networks transcend into a different theater of operations, which they often do.

This concept of a Joint Task Force is not new and there is such an effort already in place within the U.S. Southern Command, called the Joint Interagency Task Force-South (JIATF-S). This joint task force consists of an interagency and multinational effort

in the Americas for the conduct of “detection and monitoring operations” to facilitate the “interdiction of illicit trafficking and other narco-terrorist threats in support of national and partner nation security.”⁷⁹ Although its net effectiveness is debated, the construct of this task force is efficient. It includes personnel from the militaries and law enforcement agencies from multiple Latin American countries, plus members of the interagency, and it coordinates interdiction operations throughout Latin America. The consolidation of command and control under one symbolic room is what gives this task force credibility and what has the power to make it effective, but to be truly successful it needs to be backed by a solid flow of operational resources.

3. Make Resourcing These Efforts Priority One

Funding to engagement with Latin America in general, as compared with other areas of the world, is inadequate. A new approach to tackling the Islamic Terrorist-Transnational Crime nexus, would necessitate a considerable increase in resources at all levels and across all the agencies participating. The resource allocation for all involved would need to be raised, from the U.S. Border Patrol, to USAID, and to law enforcement authorities at the State and local levels across the U.S. southern border.

One of the primary U.S. government proponents for security engagement in the Americas, the U.S. Southern Command, is under-resourced and “grappling with the cumulative effect of the various budget cuts enacted over the past few years.”⁸⁰ A bigger focus on the region, and a clear intent to combat Islamic terrorism emanating from Latin America, would require a significant reallocation of counter-terrorism resources to shift from other areas of the world to the Americas. As it is, the current funding levels that the U.S. Southern Command receives to counter illicit trafficking, but not terrorist threats, amounts to “five percent of the capacity it needs” to attain a measured success.⁸¹

Conclusion

During his last testimony to Congress in 2015, General John F. Kelly, expressed that although not in great numbers at this point, Sunni extremists were “involved in the radicalization of converts and other Muslims” in Latin America.⁸² These same individuals actively provided “financial and logistical support to designated terrorist organizations within and outside Latin America.”⁸³ There were also cases of radicalized young men from the Americas traveling to the Middle East to fight for their *Jihad*.⁸⁴ The potential for one or more of these battle-hardened individuals, or other Islamic extremists, to conspire against the United States from the Western Hemisphere is not only possible, but likely. Many of these youths are acquainted with criminal elements in their places of origin and may have relationships established or familial ties to members of Transnational Organized Crime. The willing collaboration by an organized crime element and a determined Islamic extremist to use the existing communication networks to cause harm on the United States, presents a dangerous and realistic threat to U.S. national security.

The unwitting collaboration between members of these two elements is the most dangerous scenario. Islamic extremist elements may use these networks to clandestinely infiltrate operatives, support elements or a weapon of mass destruction into the United States, without the general knowledge of the hierarchy in a specific transnational crime organization. As exposed earlier, Islamic extremist terrorist groups already have established relationships with Transnational Organized Crime in Latin America, and may intend to exploit these to infiltrate into the United States. It is entirely

possible that Islamic terrorist elements may have already used Transnational Organized Crime networks to enter the United States undercover.⁸⁵

The U.S. Strategy to combat Transnational Organized Crime acknowledges the possible nexus of “crime, terror and insurgency,” but falls short of recognizing its impact on U.S. national security.⁸⁶ Although this strategy calls the crime-terror nexus “mostly opportunistic,” it does highlight the concern that a penetration by terrorists into the United States as a critical issue.⁸⁷

The convergence of Transnational Organized Crime and Islamic extremist terrorism in Latin America exists and presents a strategic challenge for the United States and for its allies in the region. It only takes one trained, properly equipped and motivated individual to carry out a significant terrorist attack. Single-man events are, however, not normal procedure of Islamic terrorists, who prefer to carry out complex terrorist attacks in centers of gravity whose destruction with a high casualty rate, would have the most impact on their enemy. This threat warrants an increased focus on the region and a deliberate collective strategy to prevent another terrorist attack on U.S. soil.

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