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Mexican Cartel Strategic Note No. 9: Why Does Napolitano Focus on Al Qaeda Lone Wolves and Ignore the Mexican Cartels?

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Mexican Cartel Strategic Note No. 9

By [Robert Bunker](#)

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Why Does Napolitano Focus on Al Qaeda Lone Wolves
and Ignore the Mexican Cartels?

Via The Associated Press, 2 December 2011. Circulated in major newspapers including Washington Post, Miami Herald, and the Denver Post

Napolitano says lone wolf terror threat growing

PARIS (AP) — U.S. Homeland Security Director Janet Napolitano says the risk of “lone wolf” attackers is on the rise as the global terrorist threat has shifted in recent years.

Napolitano is also warning about the need to keep dangerous travelers from reaching the United States and urging European partners to finalize a deal on sharing passenger data.

Napolitano, in an interview with The Associated Press, said the agreement is needed “to make these global networks and global systems that we all rely on remain safe.” She spoke on a visit to Paris focused on international security cooperation.

Noting current threats to the United States, she singled out al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula and “the growth of the lone wolf,” a single attacker not part of a larger conspiracy or network [1].

Analysis: While the above statements—some might even say political “sound bytes”—uttered by US Homeland Security Director Janet Napolitano were directed at America’s European allies, they convey the ongoing Washington obsession with Al Qaeda to the exclusion of other non-state threat entities. The memory of the 9/11 attacks is still a visceral experience for most of our nation’s financial and political elites.

Napolitano now equates lone wolf (Al Qaeda inspired) attackers, who need to take commercial aircraft to reach the US, as a significant threat to our nation [2]. Such terrorists have extremely limited combat capabilities, both destructive and disruptive, and suffer from lack of training, equipment, and finances. They represent nodal criminal-soldiers (devoid of network support) who at best can engage in sporadic active aggressor (shooter) or IED (improvised explosive device) attacks. Such attackers are not the most pressing US national security threat; even if a few got through, the damage inflicted will be inconsequential to the integrity of American society and the functioning of its governmental system [3]. Yes—even a suicide bomber or two detonating in the Mall of the Americas, on Wall Street, or in a high-

end bistro in N.W. DC is a survivable attack for our nation, though the media would replay newscasts of the incident and make quite a bit of money off of the ad revenue in the process.

What is most amazing about Napolitano's statements is that they ignore a far more significant threat derived from geographic proximity, mass of numbers, training and organization, wealth, and corruptive capability. Mexican cartel operatives do not have to take commercial flights to get to the US and hundreds-of-thousands of personnel exist running the gamut from foot-soldiers through lookouts into narcotics production and distribution, street extortion, human trafficking, kidnapping, and bulk thefts. Tens-of-thousands of these cartel members operate in the US in conjunction with US street, prison, and motorcycle gangs which number well in excess of 1 million individuals. The Mexican cartels control more wealth than Al Qaeda ever had at its disposal—even at Osama bin Laden's high point—and have specialized commando units on par, if not surpassing, the best Al Qaeda could ever field. Further, the Mexican cartels have taken corruption to an art form and have compromised entire regions of the Mexican state. This corruption is now being used in a targeted manner on the US border— hundreds of documented incidents exist— a capability with which Al Qaeda has never possessed to threaten the US homeland.

Common sense dictates that we address the real threat next door and already over the border— in excess of 1,000 US cities have Mexican cartel operatives in them. While the Mexican cartel threat to the US is subtler than that of Al Qaeda— the 9/11 attacks were indeed fierce and bloody— it is also in many ways more threatening, especially now that Al Qaeda central is a former shell of itself. While 'border spillover' attacks and corruption have been downplayed and wide swaths of Mexico resemble a war zone (with well over 45,000 deaths), we continually hear DHS rhetoric about Al Qaeda being the #1 threat to the United States.

Napolitano's January 2011 statements concerning the cartels have been half-hearted at best:

"So today I say to the cartels: Don't even think about bringing your violence and tactics across this border," Napolitano told an audience at the University of Texas at El Paso.

"You will be met by an overwhelming response. And we're going to continue to work with our partners in Mexico to dismantle and defeat you," she said [4].

Further, in March 2011:

The perception of Mexican drug cartel violence spilling into U.S. border towns is flat-out inaccurate, U.S. Homeland Security boss Janet Napolitano insisted Friday.

Napolitano, speaking in El Paso, Texas, declared that security along the southern U.S. border is at an all-time high.

"There is a perception that the border is worse now than it has ever been," Napolitano said Friday in El Paso, Texas. "That is wrong. The border is better now than it ever has been."

As for crime, the image of Mexican drug violence contaminating U.S. border cities is "wrong again," she said [5].

This statement is in variance with documents such as 2011 National Gang Threat Assessment [6] and Texas Border Security: A Strategic Military Assessment

[7] which analyze Mexican cartel penetration throughout the US and increasing incidents of border violence taking place, respectively.

Napolitano's rhetoric is derived from a myopic focus on the "T" (terrorism) designated threat facilitated by her wearing 'DHS bureaucratic blinders'. Since the Mexican cartel groups are not accorded the same prestige bestowed upon Al Qaeda, they are considered lesser organized crime, gang, and criminal entities. This is somewhat strange given that Napolitano in September 2010 appeared to support the use of the "T" word to describe the cartels while providing US Senate testimony:

Napolitano's concession that Mexican drug cartels pose a terrorist threat to the United States came while she was testifying beside FBI Director Robert Mueller who told McCain that violence on the Mexican side of the border increased the "national security threat" to the United States, an assessment Napolitano shared.

"Would you agree that the violence in Mexico has dramatically escalated in, say, the last three or four years?" McCain asked.

"Yes," said Mueller.

"And would you say that, then, increases the national security threat on the other side of our border?" asked McCain.

"Yes," said Mueller.

When McCain asked Napolitano if she agree with that, Napolitano said, "I think that's right. Particularly in some of the state of northern Mexico—Chihuahua, Tamaulipas, for example, homicide rates are up dramatically, attacks on government, and, of course, we saw the paper in Juarez just a few days ago, on a front page editorial saying, 'What do we need to do?'" [8].

Still, the Mexican cartels have not been elevated to a terrorist designation, so Napolitano has since backed away from any "T" word mention. Further, Obama administration policies also appear to be at work [9]. While such bureaucratic, and possibly executive, logic plays well in Washington, it makes little sense to the rest of the nation. We, the people, need to inject some common sense into Washington threat perceptions— if not, Napolitano, or her successor, will be fixating solely on Al Qaeda for years to come and in the process continue to be preoccupied with what has become the second tier national security threat to our nation [10].

Note(s):

1. Longer reports also exist re these statements. See Angela Charlton (AP), "Napolitano Says Lone Wolf Terror Threat Growing," ABC News 2 December 2011, <http://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/napolitano-lone-wolf-terror-threat-growing-15074453>
2. To be fair, Napolitano also mentions affinity terrorists radicalized within the US. Such terrorists could immediately engage in terrorist attacks against the US homeland. While a long list of 'lone wolf', and even 'gang of guys', Al Qaeda influenced terrorist incidents (both successful and interdicted) exist, they are still the second tier threat vis-à-vis that of the Mexican cartels.
3. The author has done extensive work on the radical Islamic use of suicide bombing (including that of

projecting body cavity bomb use against high value targets and writing law enforcement suicide bomber response guidance) and has been involved in projects related to active aggressor (active shooter) response. Further, he has worked on projects related to early Al Qaeda doctrine and the early characterization of the Al Qaeda network. During the Summer of 2001 a graduate student, Hakim Hazim, worked with him on a special research project pertaining to the growing Al Qaeda threat.

4. Alejandro Martinez-Cabrera. "U.S. warns Mexican cartels on cross-border violence" Reuters Monday 31 January 2011 <http://mobile.reuters.com/article/idUKTRE70U5TB20110131?irpc=932>

5. Larry McShane, "Mexico drug violence not spilling into U.S.; security 'better than ever': Napolitano." New York Daily News Friday 25 March 2011 http://articles.nydailynews.com/2011-03-25/news/29363229_1_mexican-drug-drug-violence-border-agents

6. 2011 National Gang Threat Assessment National Gang Intelligence Center (NGIC): Washington DC, October 2011 <http://www.fbi.gov/stats-services/publications/2011-national-gang-threat-assessment>

7. Barry R. McCaffrey and Robert H. Scalapelo. Texas Border Security: A Strategic Military Assessment Alexandria VA: COLGEN, September 2011 www.texasagriculture.gov/.../46982_Final%20Report-Texas%20Border%20Security.pdf

8. Edwin Mora, "Napolitano to McCain: Yes, Mexican Cartels Pose Terror Threat to U.S." CNS News 24 September 2010 <http://cnsnews.com/news/article/napolitano-mccain-yes-mexican-cartels-pose-terror-threat-us>.

9. This is reminiscent of US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton who stated in September 2010 that the conflict in Mexico was looking much like of what took place in Colombia with its battles against the Medellin and Cali cartels in the 1980s and 1990s. President Obama apologized and retracted her usage of the "I" (insurgency) word to describe the situation in Mexico. See Kevin Spak, "Obama Takes Back Clinton's Comments on Mexico" Newser 10 September 2010 www.newser.com/.../obama-takes-back-clintons-comments-on-mexico.html

10. Radicalized Islam, Al Qaeda inspired or otherwise, is recognized as the first tier threat to our allies in Europe. This threat goes beyond that of terrorism and includes the potentials for socio-cultural modification of the laws and norms of European society. For example 2,823 honor attacks took place in the United Kingdom last year. See "'Honour' attack numbers revealed by UK police" BBC News 3 December 2011 <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-16014368>

About the Author

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Dr. Robert J. Bunker holds degrees in political science, government, behavioral science, social science, anthropology-geography, and history. Training taken includes that provided by DHS, FLETC, DIA, Cal DOJ, Cal POST, LA JRIC, NTOA, and private security entities in counter-terrorism, counter-surveillance, incident-response, force protection, and intelligence. Dr. Bunker has been involved in red teaming and counter-terrorism exercises and has provided operations support within Los Angeles County.

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Links:

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- {3} <http://mobile.reuters.com/article/idUKTRE70U5TB20110131?irpc=932>
- {4} http://articles.nydailynews.com/2011-03-25/news/29363229_1_mexican-drug-drug-violence-border-agents
- {5} <http://www.fbi.gov/stats-services/publications/2011-national-gang-threat-assessment>
- {6} http://www.texasagriculture.gov/.../46982_Final%20Report-Texas%20Border%20Security.pdf
- {7} <http://cnsnews.com/news/article/napolitano-mccain-yes-mexican-cartels-pose-terror-threat-us>
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