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Robert J. Bunker
Claremont Graduate University

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Mexican Cartel Strategic Note No. 7

By [Robert Bunker](#)

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Mexican Cartel Strategic Note No. 7: US National Security and the Mexican Cartel
Magazine Interview with Dr. Robert J. Bunker

Jorge Carrasco Araizaga, reporter on military and judicial issues for

<http://www.proceso.com.mx/> conducted an interview of the author pertaining to various elements of US national security and the Mexican cartels. The interview appeared in *Proceso Magazine* 6 de noviembre de 2011 (No. 1827). *Proceso* is a liberal—some would say left-wing—magazine which has shown a willingness to continue reporting on the criminal insurgencies taking place in Mexico. Given the ongoing cartel campaigns to silence journalists in Mexico, and the Sunday 6 November 2011 armed gunmen entry and ensuing arson attack on *Bueno Tono* (“The Good Tone”) newspaper in Cordoba, Veracruz which gutted their offices [1], the willingness of *Proceso* to continue engaging in the freedom of the press (regardless of their politics) has to be respected.

Key Information: Interview Based Article

El imperio busca otros enemigos... en México

Jorge Carrasco Araizaga

2011-11-06 00:01:35 · Comentarios Desactivados

Narcotráfico

Una vez que su misión en Irak y Afganistán está a punto de culminar, el aparato militar estadounidense reenfoca un objetivo sensible: México. Es el principio de un cambio de prioridades –lo que en términos de la lógica del imperio implica buscar justificaciones para desatar nuevas guerras– en los “imperativos estratégicos” de Washington hacia su frontera sur, asegura a *Proceso* el experto en temas militares Robert J. Bunker, y advierte: ese cambio “será lento, pero ocurrirá”. Según este analista, las organizaciones delictivas mexicanas “son mucho más que eso. Son delincuentes insurgentes que de facto están ganando poder vía campañas de violencia y corrupción”.

http://www.proceso.com.mx/?page_id=278958&a51dc26366d99bb5fa29cea4747565fec=287282
(Note—Requires subscription).

The entire interview based article in Spanish is posted at this blogger site:

<http://senderodefeca1.blogspot.com/2011/11/proceso-el-imperio-busca-otros-enemigos.html?m=1>

Initial Interview Questions and Responses:

In order to ensure that the initial interview questions and responses are available to English readers, they

are posted below. This will also ensure that the nuances of the responses that were then translated from English to Spanish are archived for researchers and not lost. The questions were submitted and then responded to by the author in written form to ensure accuracy of response.

1. What does it mean the information related to the alleged plots against US interest in and from México?

It means either that the Iranian state's capability to pull off highly successful and complex terrorist bombings has degraded to the point that it requires an Iranian-American used-car salesman operative and Mexican cartel assassins or that the alleged plot itself should be seriously re-examined. I'd go with the later. The best scenario we could come up with would be that of a self-radicalized 'affinity' terrorist, Manssor Arbabsiar, seeking to have the Saudi ambassador to the US killed and some embassies attacked. This neither makes him an Iranian state agent nor a member of the proxy Hezbollah terrorist group. We see Al Qaeda 'affinity' terrorists arising quite frequently via self and internet influenced radicalization. The fellow was definitely operating above his terrorist planning skill set. Did Arbabsiar have a renegade Al Quds backer? Was it Gholam Shakuri? This may or may not have some validity and is actually of the most concern—it would mean very hard line factions exist in Iran—a nation bent on developing its own nuclear weapons. Still, it does not mean that this was an Iranian state sanctioned operation nor that the Los Zetas cartel would ever be involved in a high profile attack in Washington DC.

2. What are the facts supporting that versions?

The facts are derived from the filing of a Federal case against Arbabsiar and Shakuri. It is based on recordings of Arbabsiar made by the shadowy 'CS-1', a paid DEA informant, who posed as Mexican cartel member. Much of this analysis is derived from fragmentary information reported in the media and is thus speculative in nature.

3. The Mexican Navy said the alleged report on the Islamic terrorist was a false paper. Who to believe to? Was an American leak to Borderland Beat or is an Mexican government lie?

We have no idea whom to believe. The first rule in something like this is to deny it, deny it, and then deny it again. I'm sure a forensic analysis of the document could be conducted to try to authenticate it. One of the questions to be asked is, if this is a counterfeit document, who would gain by undertaking this action.

4. On the alleged Iranian plot, many did not gave much credibility, because the main goal of the Mexican Cartel is to make money, and no attack to the US, because they are afraid of retaliations. What do you say to our readers?

The alleged Iranian state plot makes absolutely no sense and appeared to be used by some for 'political coinage' in Washington DC. Notice how the story has quickly died down. It sounded like a bad movie plot with elements of differing threat groups thrown together. Neither Iran, Hezbollah (a proxy), or Los Zetas want to put themselves in the direct gunights of the American giant —strategically, it is far better for Al Qaeda to be allowed to remain the major focus of US attentions. And, yes— the threat of massive and overwhelming retaliation still does have some deterrent value.

5. You have asked for a shift in the American strategic imperative from Iraq/Afganistan to México. Are there the political conditions in Washington to do so or it is taking place, already? That means that Mexican cartels are now as dangerous as Al Qaeda for the US national security?

When I testified before a US Congressional Committee in September 2011, a number of congressmen, both implicitly and on the record, agreed with the assessment that the Mexican cartels—rather than Al Qaeda— should now be considered a greater national security threat to the United States. The view that 'criminal insurgencies' were taking place in Mexico, ones in which de facto political control was shifting to the cartels in the 'areas of impunity', was also discussed and the perception accepted by a number of the congressmen on the committee. With this said, US foreign policy is much like that of an oil

supertanker— altering course is a painfully slow process. Bureaucratic inertia and vested agency interests to continue to focus on Al Qaeda as the #1 threat will mean that change will come slowly—but it will come.

6. How the American experience in Iraq/Afghanistan, both military and civilian, can be transferred to México?

The American experience in Iraq and Afghanistan is not something that can be easily transferable to Mexico—nor should it be. Those conflicts encompassed violent radical Islamic groups, tribalism and competing religious Shia and Sunni religious views, the power politics of neighboring states, and the endemic use of IEDs (improvised explosive devices) and suicide bombers. Much of the American nation-building experience in those conflicts have no relevance to Mexico. The dominant issues for Mexico focus on basic security, corruption, and the challenge of narcoauthority (and culture) to Mexican state sovereignty.

7. US soldiers are sharing that experience with Mexico, already?

Where immediate lessons learned will come into play will be with the use of UAVs (unmanned aerial vehicles) for real time intelligence support/targeting identification for Mexican Federal forces. They will not, however, be used for the actual elimination (targeted killing) of cartel personnel. Also the US military has quite a bit of experience in the use of social networking analysis applied to insurgent forces. This would be very useful as an intelligence support function for the Mexican authorities as they analyze the various cartel networks.

8. What kind of contributions can make the US contractors In México?

US contractors can provide logistical, intelligence, analytical, and training support. This would place them in a general contracting role and they would be up against domestic Mexican and foreign corporations also competing to fulfill these services. The Mexican government would probably would keep a strict limit on how many US contractors they might use but private and public Mexican corporations and the multinationals with operations in Mexico will go with the best deals they can cut in a globalized and highly competitive business environment.

9. One concern in Mexico is the possibility of American mercenaries come dawn to the country via the private security contractors, in order to confront the cartels. Are there reasons to believe that?

As military contracts begin to dry up in Iraq and Afghanistan, it would only be natural for American private military corporations to look at the conflict in Mexico as a new area for business development. I believe private Colombian organizations also have an eye on this emerging market. This is no different than the Blackwater (later Xe) Corporation seeking to provide security services, and providing them, in post-Katrina New Orleans in 2005. I'm guessing that Mexican owned and manned private security corporations are doing a booming contract business already. Given the cost-effectiveness, cultural and language factors, and far greater political acceptability of using local security companies, immense barriers of entry would exist for foreign private security contractors. Also, I don't think Mexico wants or needs them. This of course assumes that the majority of the Mexican security companies remain uncorrupted by cartel influences.

10. What is your opinion on the Fast and Furious Operation and the Vicente Zambada criminal case in Chicago, who says the Sinaloa cartel had a deal with the DEA?

a. Opinion on the Fast and Furious Operation:

It appeared to originate at a relatively high management level in the US BATF. It would definitely require authorization much higher than that of the regional level. Apparently, at least eleven BATF Agents and senior managers protested this operation during its earliest stages. This, unfortunately, is a prime case of one or more high level BATF manager(s) being out of touch with tactical and operational realities. Cartel confederates purchased possibly over fifty Barrett .50 caliber rifles and about 2,500 other firearms, including AK-47 semi-automatic rifles. The purported purpose for this operation was to track the path of the weapons once they entered Mexico. It is extremely difficult to understand from any law enforcement perspective what value, if any, could be realized from such an operation.

b. Opinion on Vicente Zambada criminal case in Chicago, who says the Sinaloa cartel had a deal with the DEA?

He has absolutely nothing to lose by saying this since he is looking at considerable prison time. Possibly he is trying to cut a deal for a reduced sentence. Strategically, if the DEA gave the suppression of the Sinaloa cartel a lower priority in its operations—as opposed to the other cartels—this would make some sense. It would represent a law enforcement triage approach to contending with these threats—this, however, would not mean that the DEA had a hand shake deal with the Sinaloa cartel. Any notion that the DEA is working with that cartel strikes me as a conspiracy theory. The DEA does not inherently like or will favor one cartel over another—the Enrique “Kiki” Camarena saga from the mid-1980s shows the lengths that organization will go to avenge the death of its agents and its inherent loathing for drug trafficking organizations in general.

11. Giving the evolution of the Mexican cartels, it is correct to say that the Mexican intelligence services, both civilian and military, were surpassed?

My estimate is that these intelligence services were initially blindsided by Calderon’s military deployments/initiatives in December 2006 against the cartels in areas of the country over which the state was losing control. They surely were not given much early warning of what was coming via the new administration’s policies. They have since had to recover and have done so fairly well—though they keep facing cartel counter-moves and unintended second order effects of the governmental policies. Cartel movement into parts of Central America to set up safe havens/logistical bases is a prime example of a counter-move. The morphing of the cartels from illicit narcotics based (drug gangs) to multiple illicit revenue streams via street taxation, kidnapping, bulk fuel theft, human smuggling (making them polygot criminal entities) and the development of a larger illicit narcotics market in Mexico represent unintended second order effects. The cartels exist in that ‘blurring between crime and war’ arena—this is maddening from a criminal intelligence (policing) and military intelligence (warfighting) perspective. The cartels, as criminal-soldier based entities, are difficult for intelligence services to contend with because a blended form of intelligence is required to counter them.

12. Could you point out the strategic and tactical errors of the Mexican government fighting the cartels, as well their achievements?

The first strategic error is continuing to characterize and respond to the cartels as simple organized criminals—they are much more than that. They are criminal insurgents and are gaining de facto political power via campaigns of violence and corruption—in some regions the local cartel bosses look a lot like medieval warlords. The second strategic error is the ongoing centralization of the effort against the cartels. Eliminating local police forces in favor of state or national level forces only would be a great mistake. While a centralized effort is required and should be coordinated from Mexico City, it has to be blended with a bottom up and local operational area networked response. Strategic achievements have been the targeting and elimination (arrest or killing) of much of the higher level cartel leadership of the various cartels and what appears to be the policy of targeting the most violent cartels—La Familia and Los Zetas—first. This strategy was undertaken in Colombia years ago with first the elimination of the

more violent Medellin cartel followed by the elimination of the more subtle Cali cartel. Note— tactical errors are of little consequence. Also— I think, in retrospect historians, will be very kind to President Calderon, but it might take some decades. He saw what needed to be done and did it. The majority of Americans really respect that. He will probably always be considered a failure as a politician—but then great statesmen such as Calderon put the good of their nation above party politics.

Notes

1. From CNNMexico.com, “Newspaper Office in Vera Cruz Mexico Set on Borderland Beat Sunday, 6 November 2011” <http://www.borderlandbeat.com/2011/11/newspaper-office-in-vera-cruz-mexico.html>.

About the Author

Robert Bunker

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.

Available online at : <http://smallwarsjournal.com/blog/mexican-cartel-strategic-note-no-7>

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{4} <http://senderodefeca1.blogspot.com/2011/11/proceso-el-imperio-busca-otros-enemigos.html?m=1>

{5} <http://www.borderlandbeat.com/2011/11/newspaper-office-in-vera-cruz-mexico.html>

{6} <http://smallwarsjournal.com/comment/reply/11754#comment-form>

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