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The Mexican Cartel Debate: As Viewed Through Five Divergent Fields of Security Studies

Robert J. Bunker

The Mexican cartel debate is becoming increasingly more important to U.S. national security, however, it is also becoming ever more confused, heated, and at times downright nasty, with little agreement about what is taking place in Mexico or in other regions of the Americas, such as Guatemala, Honduras, and even this side of the U.S. border. To shed some light on this critical debate—a debate we need to have now and not later—it is the contention of this author that, since the Mexican cartel phenomena is being looked at by scholars from divergent fields of security studies and since each field of study brings with it its own key assumptions and concerns, preferred responses, terminology, works, and authors, those analyzing the problem are often talking at cross-purposes which is unproductive. Additionally, dissention among those within each individual field of study about the threat the cartels represent—the divergences among those who study insurgencies as but one important example— adds another layer of confusion to this debate.

It can be argued that an ordinal threat continuum exists, differentiated by field of security study, of the danger that cartels represent to the Mexican state and, in turn, those states bordering it. Taken together, these threat assessments are helping to actively influence U.S. public and governmental perceptions of the conflict now taking place in Mexico and, ultimately, help shape U.S. policy. While it is accepted that other major factors and biases are in play—U.S. federal and state governments and administrations, political parties and action committees, citizens groups, and the ideological leanings of the individual media outlets all attempt to influence this debate—academics and professionals aligned within recognized fields of security studies have a disproportionate impact due to their propensity to actively publish as well as get their messages out via other media. The debate benefits from each field's unique insights, unfortunately, these come with the baggage of having its own biases and their own interests at heart. Accordingly, some attempt will be made to mitigate the deleterious effects of this fact while seeking potential areas for cooperation between the fields.

Divergent Fields of Security Studies

Five primary fields of security studies are presently engaged, to one extent or another, in research and publication on the Mexican cartel phenomena and on the threat that this phenomena poses to that country, to the United States, and to other Western Hemispheric nations. Each field

of security study will be summarized and its major assumptions, concerns, and authors highlighted:¹

- *Gang Studies*: These studies fall primarily under the disciplines of sociology and criminal justice. Law enforcement practitioners in gang units, such as Wes McBride (Sgt. LASD, Ret), and university academics have long dominated this field. This field focuses on generic street and drug gangs, prison gangs, geographically focused (e.g. New York, Chicago, Los Angeles) gangs, specialized ethnic (e.g. Hispanic, African American) gangs and gender (female) gangs. Gangs with more organized structures—such as Asian and Outlaw Motorcycle— also fall into this field with some overlap into organized crime studies. The basic assumption is that street, drug, and prison gangs engage in ‘low intensity crime’ activities and therefore they are a local law enforcement problem— though regional and national gang investigators associations have emerged for information sharing and coordination purposes due to the spread of these groups throughout the United States. Key authors in this field include the late Frederic Thrasher along with present day authors Malcolm Klein, George Knox, William Dunn, and John Hagedorn. [It must be noted that Hagedorn has recently rethought the usefulness of studies derived from traditional criminology—parting ways with the statement “De mortuis nil nisi bonum” (*Speak no ill of the dead*)²— and is branching out into terrorism and insurgency research due to the increasing global nature of ‘armed young men’ and the growing influence of criminal networks.]
- *Organized Crime Studies*: This field, which covers both domestic and transnational (or global) organized crime, draws normally upon the disciplines of political science, history, and criminal justice. Organized criminal organizations and illicit economies are the center focus of these studies. It should be pointed out that the Mexican cartels are still drawing the bulk of their resources presently from illicit narcotics sales, but have also branched out into numerous other illicit endeavors including human trafficking, kidnapping, and street taxation. The basic assumption of this field is that organized crime entities seek to establish a parasitic (and symbiotic) relationship with their host state(s) and simply obtain freedom of actions for their illicit activities. Such criminal entities are viewed as solely money making endeavors, are not politicized, and have no intention of creating their own shadow political structures or taking over the reigns of governance. These studies view organized crime as the purview of law enforcement with specialized units (i.e. FBI and DEA task forces) required to dismantle the more sophisticated and dangerous criminal organizations. The conflict environment is said to be that of crime or organized crime with the extreme operational environment now found in Mexico being labeled as that of ‘high intensity crime’. Key authors in this field include Phil Williams, Bruce Bagley, George Grayson, and Tony Rafael.
- *Terrorism Studies*: This field of studies emerged out of the late 1960s—as urban guerillas became politically motivated terrorists— with initial terrorism courses taught in the mid-to-late 1970s in political science and international relations departments. This field has had its assumptions shift from limited levels of violence utilized and the use of kidnappings as theater plays; hence “terrorists want lots of people watching— not dead”³ to religiously motivated terrorists who seek to engage in killing on a mass scale. The

basic assumption is that terrorists, both politically and religiously motivated, engage in destructive attacks that generate ‘terror’ (a form of disruptive societal targeting) in order to change governmental policies. Further, terrorism is considered a technique that, when utilized in a revolutionary or insurgent setting, can help to create a shadow government and/or overthrow a government in power. Narco-terrorism would be considered a subfield of terrorism studies—though utilizing terror to promote criminal objectives. To date, many of the best and brightest terrorism scholars—except for Brian Jenkins who possesses insurgency expertise from the Vietnam era—have not made an attempt to engage in this area of research as it pertains to the cartels in Mexico. Depending on its severity and where it takes place, terrorism can be considered a law enforcement problem, a homeland security problem, and/or a military problem. Key authors in this field include Brian Jenkins, Stephen Sloan, Bruce Hoffman, David Rapoport, and Marc Sageman.

- *Insurgency Studies*: These studies are politico-military based and undertaken at think tanks, in some university departments, and at U.S. military and governmental institutions. They are the bread and butter focus of *Small Wars Journal* and get us into topical areas including revolutionary warfare, insurgency, guerrilla warfare, low intensity conflict, operations other than war, shadow governmental structures, and a host of other terms for this level of conflict and/or techniques. Since terrorism is also common as an insurgency technique, some bleed over from this field to terrorism studies exists as do some forays into organized crime studies, due to the benefits illicit economies provide to insurgents (for example, we might ask where the Taliban would be without its illicit narcotics income). This field predates Mao Zedong’s works of the late 1930s and has been developing for over a half-century with key interest during the Vietnam era. The field is especially vibrant now with American involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan-Pakistan. Assumptions and concerns focus on political change and revolution, that is, how groups out of power in a country seize control of a government by indirect and irregular means not conventional military conquest. The latter may, however, be considered the final phase of revolutionary warfare so clearly the techniques used vary widely. Insurgency itself, if allowed to gain strength, is viewed as a national security threat to a state. This field of study is undergoing its own internal debate concerning the primacy of political based insurgency vs. broadening the definition of insurgency to include other forms derived from religion and/or criminality. The threat posed by the Mexican cartels encompasses this internal debate and raises the question as to whether Mexico is or is not facing “criminal insurgencies”.⁴ Key authors in this field include Max Manwaring, Graham Turbiville, Jr., T.X. Hammes, Steve Metz, and David Kilcullen.
- *Future Warfare Studies*: The areas of military and strategic studies, political science, international relations, and military history (via trend analysis) have all contributed to the study of future warfare. This form of study assumes that ‘modes of warfare’ or ‘coherent warfare practices’ exist and that warfare is continually evolving. Typically, this is attributed to the introduction of new forms of technology (such as the stirrup or gunpowder), an expansion of the battlespace into new temporal and spatial dimensions (such as the domain of cyberspace), or the rise of new military organizational forms (such as the legion or modern divisional structure). Multivariate explanations for the evolution

of warfare also readily exist in this field of study. The threat represented by the Mexican cartels would therein be considered part of a modal warfare shift. This shift would, at a minimum, elevate the threat the Mexican cartels represent to that of a national security threat as the cartels would be engaging in a new form of warfare against the Mexican state—though a number of scholars would argue such a threat transcends national security and represents a threat to the nation-state form itself. Key authors in this field include Martin van Creveld, John Arquilla and David Ronfeldt, Phillip Bobbitt, John Robb, and the author of this essay along with his frequent collaborator and ‘intellectual wingman’ John Sullivan.

Numerous discipline and author omissions certainly exist concerning this security studies conceptual schema— country (Mexico) and area (Central and Latin America) and peace studies and conflict resolution scholars are not directly considered here. As a result, the important work of Roderic Camp (Mexican studies/army specialist), David Shirk (peace studies applied to Mexico), and Steven Dudley (Central America specialist), and the contributions of many others— including Ed Vulliamy, Hal Brands, Samuel Logan, Malcolm Beith, and David Danelo— would seemingly be overlooked. It is the perspective of this author, however, that their focuses and assumptions could and would be incorporated into this schema because they will weigh in on the Mexican cartel debate via their varying focuses as they fit within these five fields of security studies. Hypothetically, for instance, Roderic Camp might analyze the Mexican army at the level of organized crime studies—how effective is its policing operations—or just as easily analyze it at the terrorism or insurgency studies level and, as a result, measure how effective it is in either counter-terrorism or counter-insurgency operations.

Threat Continuum

The threat continuum represented by these five fields of security studies is ordinal in nature and begins at the micro level and extends to the macro level (Fig. 1).

Figure 1. Threat Continuum with Worst Case Scenarios for Mexico

GANG STUDIES	ORGANIZED CRIME STUDIES	TERRORISM STUDIES	INSURGENCY STUDIES	FUTURE WARFARE STUDIES
Gangs take control of neighborhoods, prisons, and drug markets	Cartel creation of ‘zones of impunity’ to freely engage in illicit economic pursuits (no political agendas)	Cartel use of narco-terrorism to obtain Mexican governmental concessions (to benefit criminal activities)	Indirect cartel take over/alliance with Mexican government via a parallel shadow government (politicized cartels)	Rise of a new warmaking entity (criminal & networked) that controls territories, population centers, and sovereign governments

As applied to Mexico, each field envisions a ‘worst case scenario’ that characterizes the severity of the threat as it is derived from the parameters of that field of study.⁵ These worst case scenarios and governmental threat perceptions, theoretical insights, and other important developments are as follows:

- *Gang Members/Street & Prison Gangs*: The worst case scenario at this level of threat is for gangs to control neighborhoods and prisons or drug markets in different sections of cities or towns. **Operational environments: crime and low intensity crime.** Virtually no one thinks the threat to Mexico exists solely at this level, although these groups are integral allies and/or contractors to the cartels for intelligence, security, drug distribution, and enforcement services. From the perspective of 3GEN Gangs theory, these groups represent 1st (Turf) and 2nd (Drug) gangs. Increasingly, law enforcement agencies from Los Angeles and other U.S. cities are providing gang unit support to Mexico and Central American countries concerning this threat.
- *Drug Dealers and Enforcers/Drug Trafficking Organizations*: The worst case scenario is DTOs (or cartels) creating ‘zones of impunity’ which provide them with the ability to engage in their activities without governmental hindrance. These organizations simply seek to make money via illicit means and have no desire to be involved in politics or governance. Corruption is utilized, along with violence, to obtain freedom of action for their criminal activities. **Operational environments: crime, organized crime, and high intensity crime.**

The Calderon administration has stated that this level accurately reflects the security threat facing Mexico. The Mexican cartels are said to represent the forces of organized crime and nothing more, even though some hundreds of ‘zones of impunity’ are recognized to exist and the deployment of military forces to maintain civil order in some of the cities in Mexico continues. The DEA and FBI are heavily involved in suppressing the various Mexican cartels in the United States (e.g. Operation Deliverance, Operation Xcellerator, Project Coronado) and insuring that the corruption coming over the border does not deeply penetrate our public law enforcement agencies (e.g. FBI-led Border Corruption Task Forces are expanding). These and other U.S. Federal Law Enforcement Agencies are also active in Mexico and Central America in responding to Mexican drug trafficking organization activities.

- *Terrorists/Terrorist Groups*: The worst case scenario for this level of threat is cartel use of narco-terrorist tactics—bombings and standup assaults, kidnappings, and other forms of violence directed at the Mexican public (e.g. the grenade attacks in Morelia, Michoacán, in September 2008)—to obtain political concessions from the Mexican federal government so that the cartels can freely continue with their illicit activities. Cartel weapons of mass destruction (WMD) use potentials have never been contemplated and this threat is viewed to exist at the ‘gun and the bomb’ level only. **Operational environments: terrorism and homeland security.**

Terrorist tactics are actually being used against other cartels (to eliminate or scare off organized crime competitors/secure illicit revenues), against Mexican police and military

forces (in a classic insurgency role), and at times against the Mexican public (as a form of narco-terrorism). Both Federal Mexican law enforcement and the Mexican military are being forced to develop counter-terrorism and force protection capabilities to respond to the use of terrorism. Of interest is the January 2011 suggestion by Edgardo Buscaglia, a fellow at the Autonomous Technological Institute of Mexico (ITAM), that Los Zetas and other cartel groups be designated as terrorists under U.N. statutes. This suggestion, however, will go nowhere with the Calderon administration. From the perspective of the U.S. State Department, it may hold some eventual merit since the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC)—Colombian insurgents involved in drug trafficking—are so designated under its Foreign Terrorist Organizations (FTOs) designations.

- *Insurgents/Insurgent Groups*: The worst case scenario is an indirect cartel (criminal) takeover of the Mexican government and/or alliance with it by means of the creation of a parallel shadow government. This would imply the installation of a new Mexican president and ruling party controlled by, most likely, the Sinaloa Cartel, representing a multi-cartel and multi-gang coalition. Numerous shadow governments at the city and town (and possibly even state governor) levels already exist in Mexico. This would be an extension of the process of the assassination of local mayors, suppression of the free press, and mass corruption of many public officials already taking place. **Operational environments: small wars, insurgency, low intensity conflict, and guerilla warfare.**

The Obama Administration in September 2010, via Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, injected a ‘trial balloon’ in the Mexican cartel debate. The conflict in Mexico was said to be beginning to appear like the insurgencies that have taken place in Colombia. This was immediately met with a strong diplomatic rebuke by the Calderon administration and resulted in President Obama personally apologizing for the comparison. Absolutely no mention was made of the threat embodied by the Mexican cartels during Obama’s January 2011 State of the Union address, suggesting that this issue, compounded by the released Wikileaks diplomatic messages, has made any public statements concerning this threat too politically sensitive to be issued. In February 2011, Undersecretary of the Army Joseph Westphal speaking at a public forum at a University in Utah said “As all of you know, there is a form of insurgency in Mexico with the drug cartels that’s right on our border... This is about, potentially, a takeover of a government by individuals who are corrupt.”⁶ These words received a fierce rebuke by the Calderon administration that resulted in Undersecretary Westphal quickly apologizing and withdrawing his public statement. At the same time that the “I” word has been mentioned in the public media and shot down by the Calderon administration, the U.S. has been quietly providing counter-insurgency aid and training to Mexican military forces.

- *Non-State (Criminal) Soldiers/Criminal Armies*: Threats at this level basically represent criminal challengers to the nation-state form that are extremely hostile to traditional states such as Mexico and the United States. The worst case scenario is that of the rise of a new warmaking entity—one that is network organized—establishing itself in Mexico and other nations of the Americas and, as it grows in strength, takes control of transnational territories and population centers including that of sovereign governments. Al Qaeda, by

the way, would be considered representative of another one of these new and still evolving warmaking entities. **Operational environments: the blurring of crime and war, hybrid war, netwar, post-modern war.**

Such a worst case scenario is usually found only in scholarly books and papers, which rarely get much attention or readership outside the field, and in governmental and military analytical products on future threats, typically not for public disclosure. This author can only speak to the former of these worst case scenarios. Martin van Creveld's *The Transformation of War* (1991) is the best known work in this regard, especially when we remember his prophetic statement—"In the future, war will not be waged by armies but by groups whom we today call terrorists, guerrillas, bandits and robbers, but who will undoubtedly hit on more formal titles to describe themselves" (p. 197). A sole focus on his work alone would take us deep into debates on the merits and detractions of non-trinitarian warfare, therefore, it must be realized that extensive work has been done in this area of security studies by many other authors. Terms associated with this level of threat include 3GEN (politicized/mercenary) Gangs, 3rd Phase Cartels, Epochal Change, BLACKFOR, Revolution in Political and Military Affairs (RPMA), and 'Criminal Insurgencies' as a component of an RPMA which takes place during periods of Epochal Change. Of interest is Guatemalan President Alvaro Colom's "remarkable call for a unified counternarcotics force that would set aside nationalist rivalries to combine soldiers from Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras to retake territory from the expanding crime syndicates" in January 2011.⁷ For Guatemala, which has imposed a "state of siege" and martial law in Alta Verapaz province due to Los Zetas and Sinaloan cartel invasions, the threat represented by criminal-armies has become a reality.

It would be fair to say that attributes of the Mexican cartels and their network affiliates exist all along this threat continuum from the micro to the macro level of concern. Hence, all of these fields of security studies should rightfully be involved in analyzing this complex threat to the Mexican state. It should also be noted that much of the violence taking place in Mexico is cartel network vs. cartel network —these entities and their gang and mercenary allies are fighting over lucrative drug plazas and transit routes, new illicit revenue opportunities, influence and control over Mexican public officials, and even petty squabbles over perceived slights to one's honor. This is truly making the conflict taking place in Mexico resemble a free-for-all with ever shifting cartel and gang alliances and even different Mexican governmental institutions and public officials either siding with, or in actuality members of, one cartel or another.

Stove Pipes, Rice Bowls, and Areas of Cooperation

The problem of the narrow compartmentalization of fields (i.e. stove pipes) and the fight for a part of limited resources (i.e. rice bowls) as it pertains to debating the threat posed by the Mexican cartels, before one even gets to the problem of responding to the violence and corruption carried out by these cartels and their affiliates, is nothing new. It was discussed by this author in the earlier *Narcos Over the Border* work as it pertained to the seven trans-operational environments involving U.S. engagement with Mexican cartels, mercenaries and Sureños gangs in the Americas.⁸

Each discipline represents a cohesive area of study with its own level of concern and focus of threat emphasis. For simple threats, such as a specific street gang— like the Hicks gang in El Monte, California— the gang studies (in the applied sense, gang suppression) approach utilized by local law enforcement is adequate for the task at hand. The same could be said for organized crime studies and the New York based mafias—scholars within the field are able to successfully analyze them and FBI lead task forces are well suited to contend with such threats.

These traditional organizational structures—combining scholars and more applied professionals (e.g. gang cops, FBI agents, and intelligence analysts)—as an extension of the differing fields of security studies begin to falter, however, when faced with more complex threats. In this instance, the extreme specialization that works so well for focusing on a specific threat—be it gangs, organized criminals, terrorists or insurgents— can become a great liability. Members belonging to these divergent security fields hold very different viewpoints about what constitutes a threat, which threats are more important than others, and how they should be addressed, and may even possess extremely different professional cultures. Sometimes these security fields, especially within much larger agencies or between academic departments and think tank divisions, come into conflict when they compete for finite resources to engage in their activities. Ultimately, this extreme specialization means that wide ‘informational seams’ exist between insular, and at times competing, fields of security studies. An attempt to get two or more of these fields together to contend with a complex threat such as that posed by the Mexican cartels (and their vast network of gang and mercenary auxiliaries) likely means that major problems will ensue. These problems multiply as more fields are required to contend with a complex threat. If personnel representing fields at opposite ends of the threat continuum are brought together to work on a threat issue— assuming you can get such differing security professionals together in the first place—then the problems may multiply exponentially.

What is clear is that complex post-modern threats—such as those posed by the Mexican cartels and, for that matter, Al Qaeda and its affiliate network— do not fit into neat categories and well-defined security fields. What is needed is for a U.S. governmental ‘honest broker’ or supra-security organization to come into the Mexican cartel debate and leverage the five fields of security studies highlighted in this essay into a broader networked effort. This effort must further be tied into issues pertaining to the trans-operational environments involving U.S. engagement with Mexican cartels and their affiliates. We can no longer afford the luxury of watching numerous fields of study and security response organizations—each with their own form of ‘extreme specialization’— independently going about their activities in a totally uncoordinated manner. Instead, attention should be directed at creating a hemispheric strategy for the Americas, possibly even global in scale, to directly challenge the rise of the Mexican cartels and their mercenary and gang affiliates along the entire threat continuum highlighted in this essay.

Notes

1. Key authors may write and have influence in more than one field of study. They have been assigned to the field of security studies which best characterizes their dominant works and impact. Note that some of the authors designated may have great impact in their field of studies

but at present have not fully weighed in on the Mexican cartel debate. For omissions and errors made, I apologize.

2. John M. Hagedorn, *A World of Gangs*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2008: 134.

3. This well known refrain is attributed to Brian Jenkins.

4. *Small Wars Journal* readers will benefit from this discussion because ultimately many of those readers either have an interest in, or actively identify themselves, with the field of insurgency (small wars) studies. That field of security studies, like the others, seeks to influence the Mexican cartel debate and this author would, among others, argue that the “insurgency” construct, albeit a criminal (as in John Sullivan’s ‘criminal insurgencies’ construct) rather than a traditional political or revolutionary derived one, represents the most accurate perceptual lens by which to understand and respond to this threat—one that is in actuality grand strategic in nature.

5. Worst case scenarios for each of these fields of security studies may be different than projections of alternative futures. See Robert J. Bunker and John P. Sullivan, “Cartel evolution revisited: third phase cartel potentials and alternative futures in Mexico.” Robert J. Bunker, ed., *Narcos Over the Border: Gangs, Cartels and Mercenaries*. London: Routledge, 2011: 46-50. Another future discussed is that of Mexico becoming a failed-state. For an analysis of state disintegration in Mexico see George W. Grayson, *Mexico: Narco-Violence and a Failed State?* New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2010.

6. Matthew D. LaPlante, “Army Official Suggests U.S. Troops Might be Needed in Mexico.” *The Salt Lake Tribune*. 8 February 2011 (Update). <http://www.sltrib.com/sltrib/home/51207681-76/mexico-westphal-army-drug.html.csp#> (accessed 9 February 2011).

7. William Booth and Nick Miroff, “Mexican drug cartels draws Guatemalan army to jungles where it fought civil war.” *The Washington Post*. 9 February 2011. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2011/02/09/AR2011020906371.html> (accessed 10 February 2011).

8. Robert J. Bunker, “Strategic threat: narcotics and narcotics overview.” Robert J. Bunker, ed., *Narcos Over the Border: Gangs, Cartels and Mercenaries*. London: Routledge, 2011: 21-24.

Dr. Robert J. Bunker has had the privilege of being involved in projects related to all five of these fields of security studies over the last two decades. This has provided him with a rather unique perspective on each of these fields, their assumptions, concerns, and the major authors influencing them. He holds degrees in political science, government, behavioral science, social science, anthropology-geography, and history. Past associations have included Futurist in Residence, FBI Academy, Quantico, VA; Counter-OPFOR Program Consultant (Staff Member), National Law Enforcement and Corrections Technology Center—West, El Segundo, CA; Fellow, Institute of Law Warfare, Association of the US Army, Arlington, VA; Lecturer-Adjunct Professor, National Security Studies Program, California State University San Bernardino, San Bernardino, CA; Instructor, University of Southern California, Los Angeles, CA; and founding member, Los Angeles County Terrorism Early Warning Group. Dr. Bunker has over 200 publications including short essays, articles, chapters, papers and book length documents. These include *Non-State Threats and Future Wars* (editor); *Networks, Terrorism and Global Insurgency* (editor); *Criminal-States and Criminal-Soldiers* (editor); *Narcos Over the Border* (editor); and *Red Teams and Counter-Terrorism Training* (co-author—forthcoming). He has provided over 200 briefings, papers, and presentations to US LE, MIL, GOV, and other groups

in the US and overseas. He is a frequent Small Wars Journal contributor and can be reached at bunker@usc.edu.

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