

Hezbollah and Al Shabaab in Mexico and the Terrorist Threat to the United States

Dawn L. Bartell
Norwich University
Masters of Diplomacy
School of Graduate Studies
Northfield, Vermont 05663-0367
Spiritbear68@hotmail.com

David H. Gray
Campbell University
Buies Creek, NC 27506
grayd@campbell.edu

Abstract

Hezbollah and Al Shabaab have been discovered to have a footprint in Mexico, are receiving Mexican language and cultural assimilation training, have been discovered to have a relationship of convenience with the Mexican drug cartels, and have been smuggling their operatives into the United States to raise money and to recruit members to their cause. With raising tensions between the U.S. and Iran, Iran has stated that it currently has the ability to reach out and target the U.S. on U.S. soil. Since it is unlikely Iran will send military troops to the U.S. and lacks the capacity to strike the U.S. with an intercontinental ballistic missile, with Hezbollah residing in Mexico Iran could use Hezbollah as a proxy to strike targets within the United States. With Al Shabaab aligning itself with al Qaeda, residing in Mexico, and successfully smuggling operatives into the U.S. This provides a force multiplier and an established strategic cell structure for al Qaeda to reside near and within the U.S. and target the U.S. on U.S. soil. Therefore, Hezbollah and Al Shabaab residing in Mexico pose a direct terrorist threat to the United States.

Key Terms: Hezbollah, Al Shabaab, Smuggling, Language, Culture, Training, Recruiting, Cartels, Jihad, Anti-Israeli

There is a growing terrorist security threat to the United States because Hezbollah and Al Shabaab have established a footprint in Mexico and have been successful in using Mexico as a safe haven and as a transit area to smuggle weapons and terrorist operatives into the United States.

There are several reasons why Hezbollah staging itself in Mexico presents a direct threat to the United States. First, Iran is Hezbollah's number one sponsor state, which presents a threat to the United States because Iran has been known to use Hezbollah as a proxy entity to strike targets of interest for Iran. Second, Hezbollah's anti-Israeli goals make the United States and its interests a legitimate target in Hezbollah's opinion since the United States is a supporter of the state of Israel. Third, Hezbollah's relationship with Mexico's drug cartels presents a threat to the United States because the drug cartels are a force multiplier for

Hezbollah. The Mexican drug cartels have facilitated the acquisition of weapons and weapon components and the smuggling of weapons, weapon components, and Hezbollah operatives into the United States. These smuggling operations place Hezbollah terrorists and the resources they need to carry out terrorist operations within the borders of the United States. And fourth, the potential of Hezbollah establishing itself in Mexico gives Hezbollah safe haven within close proximity to the United States. This makes it easier for Hezbollah to plan and stage terrorist operations against the United States.

Similar to Hezbollah, Al Shabaab presents a direct threat to the United States for several reasons by staging itself within Mexico. First, the recruitment efforts of Al Shabaab to target Islamic residents of the United States is easier when Al Shabaab is geographically co-located within proximity of the targets of its recruitment. Al Shabaab recruiting Islamic residents of the United States creates radicalized and terrorist trained individuals that can travel, reside, and operate freely in the United States. Second, Al Shabaab's affiliation with al Qaeda aligns Al Shabaab with al Qaeda's global jihad in which the United States, its allies, and interests are a primary target. With Al Shabaab absorbing the philosophy of al Qaeda's global jihad, an Al Shabaab terrorist element in the state of Mexico makes it easier for Al Shabaab to successfully target the United States. Third, Al Shabaab residing in Mexico makes it easier to smuggle Al Shabaab operatives into the United States via the U.S./Mexican border. These smuggling operations have created a situation where US officials are unable to track the number of Al Shabaab terrorists that may already be in the United States, making it difficult for the United States to mitigate this threat. And fourth, the potential of Al Shabaab establishing itself in Mexico gives Al Shabaab safe haven within close proximity to the United States. This makes it easier for Al Shabaab to plan and stage terrorist operations against the United States. The common contributing factor that has allowed for Hezbollah and Al Shabaab to reside within the state of Mexico is Mexico's inability to secure much of its sovereign territory or its border between Mexico and the United States.

The Creation and Development of Hezbollah

One terrorist group residing in Mexico that presents a direct threat to the United States is Hezbollah. Hezbollah is a Shi'a militant group that is also considered a Muslim political entity, but because of its violent activities is also considered a terrorist group. "Hezbollah is a Shiite Muslim political group with a militant wing the United States defines as a terrorist organization" (CFR, Hezbollah, 2010). The event that led to the creation and development of Hezbollah stems from "the creation of the state of Israel in 1948, when thousands of Palestinians were pushed into the neighboring countries of Lebanon and Jordan" (Fetini, 2009). The Anti Defamation League (ADL) goes further to explain that Hezbollah was able to do establish itself "with the help of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC), Iran's elite military unit" (ADL, Hezbollah, 2012). Since Hezbollah's creation, Hezbollah has continued to enjoy substantial support and sponsorship from Iran.

Iran's elite military unit – the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) – supports Hezbollah with training, weapons and financial support. The IRGC's special operations branch provides Hezbollah with \$100-\$200 million in funding every year and has allegedly trained Hezbollah fighters in various

military tactics, according to the U.S. Treasury Department. (ADL, Hezbollah, 2012)

Another country Hezbollah relies heavily on for different types of support is Syria. Hezbollah “receives diplomatic, political and logistical support from Syria, according to the U.S. State Department. Syria reportedly supplies Hezbollah with a quarter of the terrorist organization's arsenal of mid-and long-range missiles” (ADL, Hezbollah, 2012). On the political side, Hezbollah maintains a presence and political influence within Lebanon. “Its base is in Lebanon's Shiite-dominated areas, including parts of Beirut, southern Lebanon, and the Bekaa Valley” (CFR, Hezbollah, 2010). Hezbollah’s main goal is “eradicating the Israeli presence in Lebanon through a series of crude guerrilla attacks, including suicide bombings, kidnappings and assassinations” (Fetini, 2009). Since Hezbollah’s creation in 1982, Hezbollah has persistently pursued the goal of eradicating the Israeli presence in Lebanon and up to the present time has continued to wage “an anti-Israel campaign and guerilla war against Israeli forces” (CFR, Hezbollah, 2010).

However, Hezbollah did realize in order to be completely successful in reaching this goal of eradicating Israeli forces in Lebanon it could not remain strictly a guerilla force, it had to expand into politics in order to achieve strength, legitimacy, and political influence in the region. Hezbollah began pursuing political legitimacy in 1992 when Hezbollah got a new leader.

Nasrallah took over as the group's secretary-general. Capitalizing on its growing clout among sympathetic Lebanese and claiming a spot under the ideological umbrella of Iran's ayatollah, Nasrallah entered Hizballah into Lebanon's general election that year; the group won eight parliamentary seats, solidifying its legitimacy. (Fetini, 2009)

In addition to becoming a political entity, Hezbollah provides basic services and assistance to Lebanon’s Shi’a population in order to maintain and grow its support. Hezbollah “is a major provider of social services, operating schools, hospitals, and agricultural services for thousands of Lebanese Shiites” (CFR, Hezbollah, 2010). Hezbollah also provides these basic services, assistance, and military protection in order to maintain its political influence in the region and retain its parliamentary seats. “Hezbollah's political standing was bolstered after a wave of violence in May 2008 prompted Lebanon's lawmakers to compromise with the group. In August 2008, the country's parliament approved a national unity cabinet, giving Hezbollah and its allies veto power with eleven of thirty cabinet seats” (CFR, Hezbollah, 2010).

Although Hezbollah may be a recognized political entity and a legitimate force by Lebanon and most Arab states, “many Western governments, meanwhile, consider it a terrorist group; it was placed on the U.S. State Department's terrorist list in 1999” (Fetini, 2009). The perspective of many Western governments that Hezbollah is a terrorist group is well founded due to the historical terrorist operations Hezbollah has been involved in. Hezbollah has:

Been implicated in numerous terrorist attacks against Western targets,

including the 1983 bombings at the U.S. Embassy and the multinational force barracks in Beirut. Hezbollah is also responsible for the 1985 hijacking of TWA flight 847, during which a U.S. Navy diver was killed, and the 1996 Khobar Towers bombing in Saudi Arabia that killed 19 American servicemen. (CFR, Hezbollah, 2010)

What is disturbing about these terrorist operations is that it shows Hezbollah's willingness to conduct terrorist operations outside the region of Lebanon and Israel and to also target Western targets. Although it is well established that Hezbollah is based mainly in Lebanon, "U.S. intelligence reports say that Hezbollah cells operate in Europe, Africa, South America, and North America" (CFR, Hezbollah, 2010). Hezbollah's willingness to operate internationally has become a direct threat to the United States. According to a former U.S. intelligence agent, "Hezbollah has operated in South America for decades and then Central America, along with their sometime rival, sometime ally Hamas. Now, the group is blending into Shi'a Muslim communities in Mexico, including Tijuana" (San Diego News, 2011). The threat to the United States by Hezbollah establishing itself in Mexico, according to the Tucson Police Department is "due to the U.S.' political and financial support of Israel, Hezbollah regards our nation as a viable target" (Rios, 2010). What compounds this danger is the fact that Iran is also vehemently anti-Israel and Iran has been known to use Hezbollah as a proxy to strike targets directed by Iran.

Iran was previously accused in a disrupted plot to assassinate the Saudi ambassador to the U.S. here last year, a plan interpreted in the U.S. intelligence community as a clear message that Iran is not afraid to carry out an attack inside this country. U.S. officials long have worried that Iran would use Hezbollah to carry attacks into the United States. (Sullivan, 2012)

Hezbollah in Mexico

The presence of Hezbollah in Mexico makes it easier for Iran to use Hezbollah as a proxy to strike targets within the United States if Iran were ever to see fit to do so. "Iran has been blamed for violent acts in the U.S. before. In 1980, for instance, an American convert to Islam gunned down an Iranian critic of Iran's religious leaders in Bethesda, MD" (Sullivan, 2012). The presence of terrorist groups in Mexico is not a recent trend.

Statements made by high-ranking Mexican officials prior to and following the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks indicate that one or more Islamic terrorist organizations has sought to establish a presence in Mexico. In May 2001, former Mexican National security adviser and ambassador to the United Nations, Adolfo Aguilar Zinser, reported, that "Spanish and Islamic terrorist groups are using Mexico as a refuge." (McCaul, 2006)

Nor is the presence of Hezbollah in Mexico a recent trend. In 2011 a former U.S. intelligence agent stated in a report aired by 10 News San Diego that, "we are looking at 15 or 20 years that Hezbollah has been setting up shop in Mexico" (San Diego News, 2011). Hezbollah is not the only terrorist group establishing itself in Mexico.

Federal Bureau of Investigation Director Robert Mueller has confirmed in testimony “that there are individuals from countries with known al-Qa’ida connections who are changing their Islamic surnames to Hispanic-sounding names and obtaining false Hispanic identities, learning to speak Spanish and pretending to be Hispanic immigrants. (McCaul, 2006).

The danger in having terrorist operatives in Mexico assimilating and blending into the Mexican population is that it makes it much more difficult for authorities to properly identify these individuals as terrorists and gives these terrorists freedom of movement within Mexico and possibly within the United States as well.

Furthering Hezbollah’s success as an international terrorist group in North America is Hezbollah’s efforts to establish a relationship with Mexico’s drug cartels. “Michael Braun, a former chief of operations at the Drug Enforcement Agency, said Hezbollah had developed relationships with the powerful Mexican drug cartels to move their agenda forward” (New Mexico Department of Homeland Security and Emergency Management, 2012). Hezbollah, in establishing this relationship with Mexican drug cartels, has set itself up to take advantage of the well-established criminal transportation and smuggling routes between Mexico and the United States.

Sheriff Sigifredo Gonzalez summed it up this way: “I dare to say that at any given time, daytime or nighttime, one can get on a boat and traverse back and forth between Texas and Mexico and not get caught. If smugglers can bring in tons of marijuana and cocaine at one time and can smuggle 20 to 30 persons at one time, one can just imagine how easy it would be to bring in 2 to 3 terrorists or their weapons of mass destruction across the river and not be detected. Chances of apprehension are very slim.” (McCaul, 2006)

The danger in this is it increases the ability of Hezbollah to plan, set up, and conduct terrorist operations from Mexico against targets in the United States.

Braun said Quds Force and Hezbollah work very, very hard to develop relationships with criminal groups that already have in place systems for illegal activities, including drug and human trafficking, money laundering and forged document operations. And by developing those relations it provides them with the ability to operate far from home in our neighborhood and – as I said earlier – on our doorstep. (New Mexico Department of Homeland Security and Emergency Management 2012)

Although Hezbollah mainly operates within Lebanon with an anti-Israeli agenda, the United States is considered a viable target because of the United State’s open support to Israel. Historically Hezbollah has shown it is willing to targeting Americans around the world and willing to strike targets in the United States. “Prior to the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, Hezbollah was responsible for the deaths of more Americans around the world than any other terrorist organization” (ADL, Hezbollah, 2012). Hezbollah residing in

Mexico and fostering a relationship with the Mexican drug cartels has increased the terrorist capacity of Hezbollah to strike targets in the United States. In a 20 February 2012 New Mexico Department of Homeland Security report, Michael Braun:

Cited a plot, recently uncovered by the DEA, involving an Iranian operative in Mexico allegedly planning to assassinate the Saudi ambassador in Washington, D.C. Hezbollah are absolute masters at forming close relationships with existing organized crime groups around the world that helps them facilitate what they need to do to move their agendas forward. (New Mexico Department of Homeland Security and Emergency Management, 2012)

And in a 20 September, 2010 Tucson Police Department Tucson Urban Area Security Initiative report, it states:

In April of last year, the arrest of Jamal Yousef – in New York City - exposed a weapons cache of 100 M-16 assault rifles, 100 AR-15 rifles, 2,500 hand grenades, C4 explosives and antitank munitions. According to Yousef, the weapons, which were being stored in Mexico, had been stolen from Iraq with the help of his cousin who was a member of Hezbollah. (Rios, 2010)

This illuminates the threat Hezbollah presents by having a presence in Mexico and fostering relationships with Mexico's drug cartels. "Braun warned that those relationships allow these groups to operate freely in our neighborhood and said the U.S. would regret it if the threats were not taken seriously" (New Mexico Department of Homeland Security and Emergency Management, 2012).

In conclusion, Hezbollah does present a direct threat to the United States by residing in Mexico for the following reasons. Iran is Hezbollah's number one sponsor state, which presents a threat to the United States because Iran has been known to use Hezbollah as a proxy entity to strike targets of interest for Iran. Hezbollah's anti-Israeli goals make the United States and its interests a legitimate target in Hezbollah's opinion since the United States is a supporter of the state of Israel. And a Hezbollah presence in Mexico makes it much easier for Hezbollah to strike targets within the United States. Hezbollah's relationship with Mexico's drug cartels is a threat to the United States because drug cartels are a force multiplier for Hezbollah. Mexican drug cartels have facilitated the acquisition of weapons and weapon components and the smuggling of weapons, weapon components, and Hezbollah operatives into the United States. And finally, the potential of Hezbollah establishing itself in Mexico gives Hezbollah safe haven within close proximity to the United States, which makes it easier for Hezbollah to plan and stage terrorist operations against the United States.

The Creation and Development of Al Shabaab

Another group using Mexico to further its cause and also presents a direct threat to the United States is Al Shabaab. Al Shabaab is a Sunni radical terrorist group from Somalia. "Al Shabaab (Arabic for 'the youth'), an Islamic militant group that seeks to create an

Islamic state in Somalia, formed in 2004 as the militant wing of the Islamic Courts Union (ICU), a network of Islamist militant tribes that controlled southern and central Somalia” (ADL, Al Shabaab, 2012). The status of Al Shabaab as the militant wing of the ICU remained until the ICU lost power in December of 2006. Since the ICU lost power, “Al Shabaab has waged an insurgency against Somalia’s transitional governments and its Ethiopian supporters” (ADL, Al Shabaab, 2012). However Al Shabaab has not limited its violence against governmental officials. “Al-Shabaab’s leaders also have ordered their fighters to attack African Union peace-keeping troops based in Mogadishu. Al-Shabaab is responsible for the assassination of Somali peace activists, international aid workers, numerous civil society figures, and journalists” (National Counterterrorism Center, 2011).

Due to Al Shabaab’s tactics against and targeting of non-combatants, “on 29 February 2008, the US Government designated al-Shabaab as a Foreign Terrorist Organization under Section 219 of the Immigration and Nationality Act (as amended) and as a Specially Designated Global Terrorist under Section 1(b) of Executive Order 13224 (as amended)” (National Counterterrorism Center, 2011). Prior to the United States declaring Al Shabaab as a foreign terrorist organization, Al Shabaab’s main focus and mission was fighting the government of Somalia in order to establish Somalia as an Islamic state and Al Shabaab was only targeting U.S interests within Somalia. However this changed in March of 2008 when Al Shabaab “threatened to attack the United States, but this time the threat was not limited geographically to targets in Somalia” (Harnisch, 2010). Al Shabaab has continued to evolve and in addition to targeting American interests, Al Shabaab also targets Israel and Jewish interests.

Al Shabaab has also declared an “open battle” against Israel, which it deems the “oppressing Zionist entity,” and Jewish interests in Africa. In November 2009, the terrorist organization announced the establishment of Al Quds Brigade, a military unit specifically tasked with attacking Israel and freeing “Islamic holy places” from the Israelis. (ADL, Al Shabaab, 2012).

This rhetoric appears to be the beginning of Al Shabaab’s interest in expanding its jihad operations into the international community. In a 2012 report compiled by the Critical Threats Project of the American Enterprise Institute, Christopher Harnisch makes the observation that Al Shabaab’s interests “have shifted over the past two years reflecting an eagerness to strike internationally” (Harnisch 2010). Another indication of Al Shabaab’s desire to strike targets internationally was its declaration to align itself with al Qaeda. “In a February 2010 press conference, Al Shabaab announced it will be aligning with Al Qaeda ‘to confront the international crusaders and their aggression against the Muslim people’” (ADL, Al Shabaab, 2012). Al Shabaab demonstrated its willingness to strike targets outside of Somalia when it targeted the World Cup finals in Uganda. “Twin bombings in Uganda in July 2010 marked the first time the terror group launched an attack outside of Somalia. The bombings, which tore through two venues where crowds gathered to watch the broadcast of the World Cup finals” (ADL, Al Shabaab, 2012).

There are some reports that indicate Al Shabaab may not be much of a threat to the international community and may have internal weaknesses that can be exploited in order to dismantle the group.

Some experts say there are deep divisions within al-Shabaab. In a February 2009 report for the Enough Project, Somalia expert Ken Menkhaus writes that, “The al-Shabaab faces multiple internal divisions--over clan, leadership, tactics, and ideology--which a new unity government can exploit to convince parts of the al-Shabaab to abandon the movement and gradually outmaneuver, marginalize, and defeat the core hardliners.” (Hanson, 2011)

However Christopher Harnisch in his 2010 report, *The Terror Threat from Somalia: The Internationalization of Al Shabaab* believes:

Al Shabaab poses a real and imminent threat to the United States, its interests, and its allies, perhaps equal to the threat posed by any militant Islamist group in the world. It has many of the same elements that have made al Qaeda so dangerous, including strong leadership, technical expertise, and militants from around the world willing to die for a cause, while also governing large swaths of the country in a manner reminiscent of the Afghan Taliban. (Harnisch, 2010)

Christopher Harnisch explains further why he believes Al Shabaab is a viable threat to the international community. “No other militant Islamist group in the world, with the possible exception of Hezbollah, has unchallenged control of such large parts of a country. These conditions have allowed al Shabaab to set up training camps to prepare for its insurgency and terrorist operations” (Harnisch, 2010).

One of the main ways Al Shabaab is targeting the United States is by recruiting potential jihadists who live in the United States to fight in Somalia.

The FBI assesses with high confidence a Somalia-based terrorist group al-Shabaab continues to hold appeal for US-based Islamic extremists, including non-Somalis, as highlighted by the arrest of US person Craig Benedict Baxam. Baxam, a Muslim convert and US Army veteran from Maryland, traveled to Kenya in late December 2011 with the intent of traveling on to Somalia to join al-Shabaab. (FBI, 2012)

There are many reasons why Al Shabaab recruiting within the United States presents a threat to the United States. When Al Shabaab is able to successfully recruit Islamic extremists who legitimately and legally reside in the United States those recruits “offer al-Shabaab an enhanced understanding of US and Western culture and vulnerabilities, insight into prospective targets for attacks in the Homeland, access to the United States and the West by virtue of their US passports, and the ability to enhance the group’s Western-targeted English-language propaganda” (FBI, 2012). Al Shabaab recruits go to Somalia to training camps “where trainees undergo Islamist indoctrination and receive instruction on how to make and

detonate bombs and operate small arms, machine guns, and rocket propelled grenades” (Harnisch, 2010).

American Al Shabaab recruits receiving this indoctrination and terrorist training become a direct threat to the United States because “they may return and wreak havoc with their foreign passports and ease of passage” (Pelton, 2011). If U.S. authorities are unaware of an individual’s recruitment to Al Shabaab and subsequent radicalization and training, then an individual’s return to the United States will not raise any red flags. If no red flags are triggered and U.S. officials are unable to identify individuals as a threat, Al Shabaab recruits would have freedom of movement to plan and conduct terrorist operations within the United States.

There “is a looming danger of American Shabaab fighters returning to the U.S. to strike or helping Al Qaeda or its affiliates attack the homeland. U.S. intelligence underestimated the Pakistani Taliban and Al Qaeda in Yemen’s capability of launching attacks here; we cannot afford to make the same mistake with Shabaab.” (Investigative Project on Terrorism, 2011)

Al Shabaab in Mexico

Like Hezbollah, another way Al Shabaab is targeting the United States is by smuggling Al Shabaab operatives into the United States over the U.S./Mexico border. In a KHOU 17 May 2010 news report from Houston Texas Joan Neuhaus Schaan states, “[Al Shabaab operatives] are certainly a real threat to U.S. security and an increasing threat to U.S. security’... Schaan is an expert on Homeland Security and terrorism, and her research is reviewed by the U.S. government, military and civil authorities” (Chow, 2010). The news report also points out that this threat is related to the ability of Somali nationals to gain access to the United States through Mexico. “The route from Somalia to Texas is shorter than Americans would like to think. It goes through Mexico” (Chow, 2010).

In May of 2010, Fox News reported on two individuals who had been apprehended for being directly involved in human smuggling operations that smuggled Somalia nationals into the United States via Mexico. These apprehended individuals or the numerous Somali nationals could have ties to Al Shabaab.

An indictment was unsealed in Texas federal court earlier this month that revealed that a Somali man, Ahmed Muhammed Dhakane, led a human smuggling ring that brought East Africans, including Somalis with ties to terror groups, from Brazil and across the Mexican border and into Texas. (Winter, 2010)

And “in a separate case, Anthony Joseph Tracy, of Virginia, who admitted to having ties to Al Shabaab, is currently being prosecuted for his alleged role in an international ring that illegally brought more than 200 Somalis across the Mexican border” (Winter, 2010). The illegal smuggling operations conducted by Muhammed Dhakane and Anthony Joseph Tracy pose a serious threat to the United States because “the smuggled Somalis are believed to have

spread out across the United States and remain mostly at large” (Winter, 2010). Somali nationals at large in the United States is specifically dangerous because it has been assessed that Al Shabaab “recruiters coming through the Mexican border are the ones who could be the most dangerous, according to law enforcement officials” (Winter, 2010).

One of Al Shabaab’s smuggling tactics that makes it more difficult for U.S. officials to identify Somalia nationals who have been smuggled into the United States is “Mexican smugglers are coaching some Middle Eastern immigrants before they cross the border – schooling them on how to dress and giving them phrases to help them look and sound like Latinos, law enforcement sources told FoxNews.com” (Winter, 2010). It has also been noted by Joan Neuhaus Schaan that “‘villages in northern Mexico where Middle Easterners try to move into town and learn Spanish,’ Neuhaus Schaan said. ‘People were changing there names from Middle Eastern names to Hispanic names’” (Winter, 2010). Like Hezbollah, the effort of Al Shabaab operatives to assimilate and blend into the Mexican population makes it much more difficult for authorities to properly identify these individuals as terrorists and gives these terrorists freedom of movement within Mexico and possibly within the United States as well.

There are indications Al Shabaab has already attempted to conduct operations in Mexico. “A Mexican radio station on Tuesday claimed it had a report that the Mexican marines had foiled a plot by the Somalian Islamic group al-Shabaab to attack the U.S. [sic]embassay in Mexico City” (Grillo, 2011). After the plot to attack the U.S. Embassy in Mexico City had been discovered, Mexican officials searched the house of a suspected Al Shabaab operative. “Marines raided a house in the middle-class Mexico City Roma neighborhood on 9 June, 2010 and found 22.7 kilos of explosive material along with detonators. They had located the house — which is less than a mile from the U.S. embassy — after tracking a Somali national who worked for al-Shabaab” (Grillo, 2011).

Another incident confirming the presence of Al Shabaab in Mexico occurred in April 2010. Prior to the plot to attack the U.S. Embassy in Mexico City, Mexico’s immigration service reported “that a Somali national with alleged links to al Shabaab had been arrested in Mexico City in April 2010. That individual was deported for entering Mexico illegally” (Grillo, 2011). With Al Shabaab openly stating it is interested in targeting the United States and United States’ interests, the reports of a foiled Al Shabaab plot against the American Embassy in Mexico City and the illegal entry of an Al Shabaab operative into Mexico are indicators “that radical Islamic groups will take advantage of the insecurity in Mexico, and its porous border with the U.S., to launch attacks on the United States and its allies” (Grillo, 2011).

In conclusion, Al Shabaab does present a direct threat to the United States by residing in Mexico for the following reasons. Recruitment efforts of Islamic residents of the United States creates radicalized and terrorist trained individuals that can travel, reside, and operate freely in the United States. Al Shabaab’s affiliation with al Qaeda aligns Al Shabaab with al Qaeda’s global jihad in which the United States, it allies, and interests are a primary target and Al Shabaab’s presence in Mexico makes it easier for Al Shabaab to target the United States. Smuggling operations to get Al Shabaab operatives into the United States via the

U.S./Mexican border is easier when there is an Al Shabaab contingent residing in Mexico. These smuggling operations have created a situation where U.S. officials are unable to track the number of Al Shabaab terrorist that may already be in the United States making it difficult for U.S. officials to mitigate this threat. And finally, the potential of Al Shabaab establishing itself in Mexico gives Al Shabaab safe haven within close proximity to the United States, which makes it easier for Al Shabaab to plan and stage terrorist operations against the United States.

Hezbollah and Al Shabaab Residing in Mexico is a Threat to the United States

Hezbollah and Al Shabaab do present a direct threat to the United States by residing in Mexico or by using Mexico as a transit area to get weapons, weapon components, and terrorist operators into the United States. Mr. Jeff Duncan, a representative of the South Carolina Subcommittee on Terrorism, Nonproliferation, and Trade, in a 24 May 2011 hearing before the Subcommittee on Terrorism, Nonproliferation, and Trade of the Committee on Foreign Affairs House of Representatives asked “what is your opinion on the threat level from the terrorist organizations, Hezbollah and al-Shabaab in, say, Latin America, and even closer to home in Mexico, along our border” (Committee on Foreign Affairs, 2011)? Dr. Seth Jones, a senior political scientist for the RAND Corporation responded with, “my personal view on the two you noted, Hezbollah and al- Shabaab, is both do present a threat” (Committee on Foreign Affairs, 2011).

The common contributing factor facilitating for the ability of Hezbollah and Al Shabaab to present a direct threat to the United States is weak governance in Mexico. “The primary systemic weakness of Mexico is its inability to keep its citizens secure and exercise its authority over its sovereign territories” (Nava. 2011). Major Juan P. Nava from the U.S. Army also points out the Mexican government is unable to secure its border with the United States. “Mexico joins a community of nations, including the United States, with an ineffective sovereign border” (Nava, 2011). Because the Mexican government has been unable to secure its sovereign territories and border areas there has been a notable rise in criminal and terrorist activity. “The sharp rise in criminal violence in the northern regions of Mexico and the border states of the United States indicates declining security conditions due to gangs, cross-border crime (i.e. smuggling, kidnapping, etc.), and transnational terrorism” (Nava, 2011).

The lack of territory and border security has created an environment where drug cartels can easily smuggle weapons and personnel through Mexico and into the United States, which directly benefits Hezbollah and Al Shabaab terrorists seeking to target the United States. “There is a growing concern of the use by al-Shabaab of a range of trafficking and other networks in Latin America, especially, Mexico, that were they to decide to fundamentally target the U.S. homeland there is a well-defined ability to get into the U.S.” (Committee on Foreign Affairs, 2011).

Addressing the Threat: The International Community and Mexico

In order to address the security problem within Mexico and the security problem along the U.S./Mexico border, the international community needs to assist Mexico in becoming more stable politically and economically. This would help legitimize the government of Mexico to the general population because it would provide the government of Mexico with the authority and finances to provide the basic needs of security to the country. To address the security threat to the United States due to Hezbollah and Al Shabaab residing in Mexico, it is also vital for bilateral cooperation to exist between the United States and Mexico. Shannon O'Neil, the director of the U.S. Council on Foreign Relations Independent Task Force on U.S. Policy for Latin America, "recommends that the United States recognize Mexico as 'a permanent partner, rather than an often-forgotten neighbor'" (Nava, 2011).

A security plan will not work if the United States acts alone or if Mexico acts alone due to the uncontrolled or poorly governed areas within Mexico and along the two thousand mile border between Mexico and the United States. In most areas, the border between Mexico and the United States is "located in remote and sparsely populated areas of vast desert and rugged mountain terrain" (McCaul, 2006). This makes it difficult to effectively control the border between Mexico and the United States. Therefore bilateral cooperation is vital. "It is imperative that immediate action be taken to enhance security along our nation's Southwest border. Greater control of the border can be achieved by: enhancing intelligence capabilities and information sharing with our Mexican counterparts and improving cooperation with the Mexican government" (McCaul, 2006). Therefore there are two keys to mitigating the terrorist threats to the United States that Hezbollah and Al Shabaab pose by residing in Mexico. One is the need for strong international cooperation and assistance to the government of Mexico to help stabilize the country politically and economically. This would give the government of Mexico the power and resources needed to secure its sovereign territories and border areas. And two, strong bilateral cooperation between the United States and Mexico is vital in order to address and reinforce border security between the two countries.

Conclusion

The inability of Mexico to secure its sovereign territories and border areas has contributed to the ability of Hezbollah and Al Shabaab to develop a footprint within Mexico, reside in Mexico, and use Mexico as a safe haven and as a transit area to smuggle weapons and terrorist operatives into the United States. The ability of Hezbollah and Al Shabaab to reside and operate within Mexico and to successfully smuggle weapons and terrorist operatives into the United States has created a growing terrorist threat to the United States by providing Hezbollah and Al Shabaab the ability to access and strike targets on American soil.

There are several reasons why Hezbollah staging itself in Mexico presents a direct threat to the United States. First, Iran is Hezbollah's number one sponsor state, which presents a threat to the United States because Iran has been known to use Hezbollah as a proxy to strike targets of interest for Iran. Second, Hezbollah's anti-Israeli goals make the United States and its interests a legitimate target in Hezbollah's opinion since the United

States is a supporter of the state of Israel. Third, Hezbollah's relationship with Mexico's drug cartels presents a threat to the United States because the drug cartels are a force multiplier for Hezbollah. The Mexican drug cartels have facilitated the acquisition of weapons and weapon components and the smuggling of weapons, weapon components, and Hezbollah operatives into the United States. And fourth, the potential of Hezbollah establishing itself in Mexico gives Hezbollah safe haven within close proximity to the United States, which makes it easier for Hezbollah to plan and stage terrorist operations against the United States.

Similar to Hezbollah, Al Shabaab presents a direct threat to the United States by staging itself within Mexico. First, the recruitment efforts of Al Shabaab to target Islamic residents of the United States is easier when Al Shabaab is geographically co-located within proximity of the targets of its recruitment. Al Shabaab recruiting Islamic residents of the United States creates radicalized and terrorist trained individuals that can travel, reside, and operate freely in the United States. Second, Al Shabaab's affiliation with al Qaeda aligns Al Shabaab with al Qaeda's global jihad in which the United States, its allies, and interests are a primary target. With Al Shabaab absorbing the philosophy of al Qaeda's global jihad, an Al Shabaab terrorist element in the state of Mexico makes it much easier for Al Shabaab to successfully target the United States. Third, Al Shabaab residing in Mexico makes it much easier for smuggling operations to successfully get Al Shabaab operatives into the United States via the U.S./Mexican border. These smuggling operations have created a situation where U.S. officials are unable to track the number of Al Shabaab terrorists that may already be in the United States, making it difficult for the United States to mitigate this threat. And fourth, the potential of Al Shabaab establishing itself in Mexico gives Al Shabaab safe haven within close proximity to the United States, which makes it easier for Al Shabaab to plan and stage terrorist operations against the United States. The common contributing factor that has allowed for Hezbollah and Al Shabaab to reside within the state of Mexico is Mexico's inability to secure much of its sovereign territory or its border between Mexico and the United States.

Hezbollah and Al Shabaab pose a threat to the United States by residing in Mexico, therefore it is vital for the international community, the United States, and Mexico to work together in order to help create a strong Mexico. This would reduce or eliminate the ability of Hezbollah or Al Shabaab to use Mexico as a safe haven and as a platform to plan and conduct terrorist operations against Mexico, the United States, or any other state in the international community.

References

- Anti-Defamation League. Al Shabaab. Terrorism. International Terrorist Symbols Database. 2012. Web. 25 February 2012. <http://www.adl.org/terrorism/symbols/al_shabaab.asp>
- Anti-Defamation League. Hezbollah. Terrorism. International Terrorist Symbols Database. 2012. Web. 17 February 2012. <<http://www.adl.org/terrorism/symbols/hezbollah.asp>>
- Chow, Shern-Min. Homeland Security Alert: Terror Suspect May be Headed to Texas Through Mexico. KHOU.ComNews. 11 News. Houston Texas. 18 May 2010. Web. 24 February 2012. <<http://www.khou.com/news/Homeland-Secuir-94020394.html>>
- Committee on Foreign Affairs. Future of Al-Qaeda. Hearing Before the Subcommittee on Terrorism, Nonproliferation, and Trade of the Committee on Foreign Affairs House of Representatives. One Hundred Twelfth Congress. First Session. Serial No. 112-21. 24 May 2011.
- Council on Foreign Relations. Hezbollah (aka: hizzbollah, Hizbu'llah. Council on Foreign Relations. Publications Backgrounder. 15 July 2010. Web. 17 February 2012. <<http://www.cfr.org/lebanon/hezbollah-k-hizzbollah-hizbullah/p9155>>
- Federal Bureau of Investigation. Arrest Demonstrates Al-Shabaab's Continuing Appeal to US-Based Extremists. Intelligence Bulletin. Counterterrorism Analysis Section. 9 February 2012.
- Fetini, Alyssa. A Brief History of: Hizballah. Time World. 8 June 2009. Web. 17 February 2012. <<http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1903301,00.html>>
- Grillo, Loan. Al Shabaab in Mexico? Global Post Blogs. 18 October 2011. Web. 24 February 2012. <<http://www.globalpost.com/dispatches/globalpost-blogs/que-pasa/al-shabaab-mexico>>
- Hanson, Stephanie. Al-Shabaab. Council on Foreign Relations. Backgrounder. 10 August 2011. Web. 17 February 2012. <<http://www.cfr.org/somalia/al-shabaab/p18650>>
- Harnisch, Christopher. The Terror Threat From Somalia: The Internationalization of Al Shabaab. A Report by the Critical Threats Project of the American Enterprise Institute. 12 February 2010.
- Investigative Project on Terrorism. IPT. Al-Shabaab: A Jihadist Threat to America. News. 13 September 2011. Web. 24 February 2012. <<http://www.investigativeproject.org/3170/al-shabaab-a-jihadist-threat-to-america>>
- McCaul, Michael T. A Line in the Sand: Confronting the Threat at the Southwest Border. House Committee on Homeland Security Subcommittee on Investigations. October 2006. Web. 24 February 2012. <http://www.house.gov/sites/members/tx10_mccaul/pdf/Investigaions-Border-Report.pdf>
- National Counterterrorism Center. Al-Shabaab. Counterterrorism Calendar 2011. Calendar Content Notes. Web. 24 February 2012. <http://www.nctc.gov/site/groups/al_shabaab.html>
- Nava, Juan P. Major, U.S. Army. Mexico: Failing State or Emerging Democracy? Military Review. March-April 2011, pp 31-40.
- New Mexico Department of Homeland Security and Emergency Management. New Mexico All Source Intelligence Center. Daily Intelligence Brief. 20 February 2012.

Hezbollah and Al Shabaab in Mexico and the Terrorist Threat to the United States

- Pelton, Robert Young. Foreign Recruits Continue to Join Al-Shabaab: Will Fighters Stay or Return Home? Somalia Report. Homeland. Analysis. 8 December 2011. Web. 24 February 2012. <<http://www.somaliareport.com/index.php/post/2252>>
- Rios, Carmen. International Terrorism Situational Awareness: Hezbollah. Tucson Police Department Tucson Urban Area Security Initiative. 20 September 2010.
- San Diego News. 10 News. Terrorist Group Setting Up Operations Near Border: Hezbollah Considered to be More Advanced Than Al-Qaida. 4 May 2011. Web 17 February 2012. <<http://www.10news.com/news/27780427/detail.html>>
- Sullivan, Eileen. Tensions with Iran Raise US Safety Concerns. 17 February 2012. Web. 25 February 2012.
<<http://www.google.com/hostednews/ap/article/ALeqM5jdn7JPuzdEr-qtUlfUGX1MMUi5aQ?docId=8dec5b7df64842229414c59eea6e0b44>>
- Winter, Jana. Feds Issue Terror Watch for the Texas/Mexico Border. FoxNews.Com. Immigration. US. 26 May 2010. Web. 24 February 2012.
<<http://www.foxnews.com/us/2010/05/26/terror-alert-mexican-border/>>