

New Alliance in Mexico's Drug War

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Abstract

Mexico is in chaos. Drug trafficking and corruption has enveloped many of the cities and communities of our neighbor to the south. Assassinations and abductions associated with drug trafficking have taken many lives rivaling those killed in Iraq and Afghanistan. The Mexican government has been overrun with corruption along with law enforcement and the military. The world sees this conflict raging in Mexico and knows that the government there is unable to quell the violence. Terrorist groups like Al-Shabaab, Hezbollah, and Al-Qaeda have taken an interest in the conflict and have made contact with the Cartels. The relationship which has been formed is beneficial for both sides. The Terrorists seek a closer base to attack and harm the United States while the Cartels get money and arms to support their drug operations. This new relationship poses a national security threat for the United States. This essay will examine the evidences of the alliance between the Cartels and Terrorist groups as well as the consequences for Mexico and the United States

Key Words: Drug Trafficking Organizations (DTOs), Al-Shabaab, Los Zetas, Assimilation, Foreign Terrorist Organizations (FTOs), U.S./Mexico Border, Recruiting, Hezbollah, Al-Qaeda, Mexico

Introduction

A new relationship has formed; terrorist organizations from the Middle East have been in contact with Mexican drug trafficking organizations. The collaboration between these two entities is of grave importance for security to the United States. However before you can look at this new relationship you must understand the conflict being raged along the U.S./Mexico border. Since the Mexican drug war began thousands have died rivaling the numbers of those killed in both Iraq and Afghanistan. It's estimated that 47,515 people have been killed over a five year period (BBC, Mexico, 2012). The conflict and blood shed come from competing Cartels who are battling for control of territory and drug routes into the United States. Citizens are caught in the middle and have to bear the brute violence and terror caused by this relentless fighting. Many people have fled to escape the escalated violence. "In Mexico, some 230,000 people have been forced to flee their homes, according to the Internal Displacement Monitoring Center (IDMC), based in Norway" (Llana, 2011). "About half went north to the US, leaving some 115,000 internally displaced people in Mexico" (Llana, 2011). Those who do not have the option to leave have to choose between working for the Cartels or being a statistic on the nightly

news. With no stable government to provide proper care and protection the average citizen most often will look towards the drug traffickers for their needs.

The United States has much at stake with the decline of stability in Mexico. Currently it is engaged around the globe fighting Islamic extremists in Afghanistan as well as tying up loose ends still in Iraq. The primary focus has been on these areas and other places in the Middle East like Yemen and Syria. The U.S. often forgets its southern border with Mexico as being a major front in the war on terror. With a heavy amount of unauthorized people coming over the border it's hard to know really who or what is crossing and what they plan to do when they arrive. Many are average people who want better lives for themselves who have been forced to enter illegally given the harsh circumstances. The current level of border protection and security is not able to prevent these people from entering, so one can assume that those with devious intentions could enter with relative ease. There are simply not enough boots on the ground to stop every single person who wants to enter the United States illegally. Since 9/11 airport security has increased leaving many would be attackers to find other alternatives to harm Americans and westerners. Terrorists are looking for better and safer places to launch attacks against U.S. targets. The instability in Mexico offers a close and easy base to plan such devastating attacks.

Los Zetas: Likely Partner

There are many different Cartels waging war in Mexico but the most violent is Los Zetas. This drug trafficking organization began as a protective unit for the Gulf Cartel (Grayson, 2008). Made up of former Mexican Special Forces operatives these individuals protected drug shipments, provided security for members, and enforced the rules and regulations of the Gulf Cartel (Grayson, 2008). Eventually the Zetas surpassed the Gulf Cartel and became the most dominant of the DTOs (Grayson, 2008). Los Zetas pride themselves in their ability to inflict harm and impose fear on those whom they mean to control. Their training enabled them to become the most brutal of any Cartel. "Los Zetas have set up camps in which to train recruits aged 15 to 18 years old, as well as ex-federal, state, and local police officers" (Grayson, 2008). The Zetas also recruit outside of Mexico for individuals who have similar skill sets (Grayson, 2008). "Their arsenal includes AR-15 and AK-47 assault rifles, MP5s submachine guns, 50-mm machine guns, grenade launchers, ground-to-air missiles, dynamite, bazookas, and helicopters" (Grayson, 2008). Clearly their weapons rival that of the weak Mexican Army and Police forces. The Zetas often dress in military style clothes and use military grade equipment (Grayson, 2008). Torture is widely used among Cartels in Mexico to gather information and impose fear however the Zetas seem to do it the best. They are known for their brutal and savage techniques. Los Zetas have many groups who work for them in other capacities not just for murder and torture (Grayson, 2008).

"Los Halcones (The Hawks) keep watch over distribution zones; authorities have found 80 members, equipped with radio-transmitters, in Matamoros alone. Las Ventanas (The Windows) comprise bike-riding youngsters in their mid-teens who whistle to warn of the presence of police and other suspicious individuals near small stores that sell drugs. Los Manosos (The Cunning Ones) acquire arms; Las Leopardos (Leopards) are prostitutes who slyly extract information from their clients; and Dirección (Command) are approximately 20 communications experts who intercept phone calls, follow and identify suspicious automobiles, and even accomplish kidnappings and executions" (Grayson, 2008).

The complexity of the Zetas is vast. They have a hand in all aspects of the drug trade. Los Zetas may number between 100 and 200 men and women, most of whom are believed to be in their early- to mid-twenties (Grayson, 2008). The military style training and fear instilled in each member creates a structured organization capable of establishing influence throughout many areas in Mexico. The Zetas have created such a threat to stability that Mexican President Calderón has labeled them similar to Al-Qaeda in their actions (Grayson, 2008). In a sense they do act like Al-Qaeda and other Foreign Terrorist Organizations. With the way day to day operations are run and the cell-like structure the Zetas have adopted it is easy to see a likeness (Grayson, 2008). A strong Cartel like the Zetas would make a great partner and host to FTOs looking for a base inside of Mexico.

FTOs in Mexico

Terrorist groups have much to gain in establishing a foothold in Mexico. The chaos these groups are accustomed to working around is ever present along the U.S./Mexico border. Terror groups like Al-Shabaab and Hezbollah have been reported inside Mexico cooperating with major DTOs. Al-Shabaab is a Somalia-based terrorist group affiliated with Al-Qaeda according to the National Counterterrorism Center. The group has exerted temporary and, at times, sustained control over strategic locations in southern and central Somalia by recruiting, sometimes forcibly, regional sub-clans and their militias, using guerrilla asymmetrical warfare and terrorist tactics against the Transitional Federal Government (TFG) of Somalia and its allies, African Union peacekeepers, and nongovernmental aid organizations (NCTC, 2012). While most of its fighters are predominantly interested in the nationalistic battle against the TFG and not supportive of global jihad, al-Shabaab's senior leadership is affiliated with al-Qaeda, and certain extremists aligned with al-Shabaab are believed to have trained and fought in Afghanistan (NCTC, 2012).

Al-Shabaab in recent years has made statements about harming Americans and supporting Usama Bin Ladin (NCTC, 2012). The group has claimed responsibility for many bombings including various types of suicide attacks in Mogadishu and in central and northern Somalia, typically targeting Somali Government officials and perceived allies of the TFG (NCTC, 2012). Al-Shabaab has many Americans and Westerners in its ranks who participate in attacks against targets inside of Somalia (NCTC, 2012). Many Somali-Americans are radicalized and recruited inside the United States (Harwood, 2010). U.S. law enforcement has already arrested Somali-Americans in Minnesota returning from the fighting with al-Shabab militants (Harwood, 2010). According to a May 2010 article on FoxNews.com, The Department of Homeland Security is alerting Texas authorities to be on the lookout for a suspected member of the Somalia-based Al Shabaab terrorist group who might be attempting to travel to the U.S. through Mexico (Winter, 2010). The warning follows an indictment unsealed this month in Texas federal court that accuses a Somali man in Texas of running a large-scale smuggling enterprise responsible for bringing hundreds of Somalis from Brazil through South America and eventually across the Mexican border (Winter, 2010).

Somalis and Middle Easterners reportedly receive language and cultural training from Mexican smugglers to assist them when they arrive in America (Winter, 2010). The cultural assimilation being used is to disguise the operatives as Latinos to avoid U.S. law enforcement officials (Winter, 2010). There have even been cases where citizens in northern Mexico have reported a large influx of Middle Easterners moving into their communities and changing their

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names to match Latino ones (Winter, 2010). "Security experts say the push by illegal immigrants to try to fit in also could be the realization of what officials have feared for years: Latin American drug cartels are helping jihadist groups bring terrorists across the Mexican border" (Winter, 2010). These are bold steps for Al-Shabaab. Clearly they have the capability to place operatives inside the U.S. and potentially use them to plan and carry out attacks.

Hezbollah is a Lebanon-based Shia terrorist group whose main objective is to destroy Israel and stop its influence in the Middle East (NCTC, 2012). Hezbollah also "advocates Shia empowerment within Lebanon" (NCTC, 2012). Hezbollah over the years has trained militants to fight against American and Coalition forces inside of Iraq following the invasion, and been linked to multiple terrorist attacks against the United States (NCTC, 2012). In July 2011 an article online from Gatestone Institute claimed a computer hacking group called Luiz Security "targeted the Arizona Department of Public Safety (AZDPS). LuizSec has claimed responsibility for several high profile attacks; this time, however, the 440 megabyte AZDPS documents displayed a bulletin mentioning the presence of Hezbollah militants operating in smuggling corridors on the U.S. border with Mexico" (Mahjar-Barducci, Hezbollah, 2011). "The document, from the Tucson Police Department, is dated September 20, 2010. At the time, just few months earlier, the Kuwaiti daily newspaper *Al-Seyassah* published an article saying that operatives of the Lebanese terrorist group Hezbollah were employing Mexican nationals to set up a network in Latin America to target Israeli and Western interests" (Mahjar-Barducci, Hezbollah, 2011).

U.S. Rep. Sue Myrick, R-NC has noticed the Hezbollah presence growing in Mexico. Congresswoman Myrick sent a letter to DHS Secretary Napolitano in June 2010 about the issue, "Former intelligence officials have suggested that Hezbollah has increased its presence in Central and South America, and are now operating in Mexico and on our southern border. Even more troubling is that I believe Hezbollah and the drug cartels may be operating as partners on our border". Congresswoman Myrick suggested that a task force be sent to monitor the presence of Hezbollah on the U.S./Mexico border, later in the letter she stated, "Across states in the Southwest, well trained officials are beginning to notice the tattoos of gang members in prisons are being written in Farsi. We have typically seen tattoos in Arabic, but Farsi implies a Persian influence that can likely be traced back to Iran and its proxy army, Hezbollah" (Myrick, 2010).

When mentioning Hezbollah you must mention its counterpart and chief supporter Iran. The U.S. State Department has Iran listed as a state sponsor of terrorism. "U.S. officials say Iran provides funding, weapons, training, and sanctuary to numerous terrorist groups--most notably in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Lebanon--posing a security concern to the international community" (Bruno, Iran Plot, 2011). In October 2011 a plot was averted by U.S. officials in which the Saudi ambassador to the U.S. was to be killed by a bomb in a Washington D.C. restaurant (Bennett, Iran Plot, 2011). The plot was planned by members of the Quds Force, which is a secretive unit under the control of Iran's Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) (Bennett, Iran Plot, 2011). "The current plot was infiltrated by a Drug Enforcement Agency informant posing as a member of a Mexican drug cartel, officials said. The plotters planned to pay a member of the Zetas cartel \$1.5 million to carry out the attack, and two advance payments of nearly \$50,000 each were wired to an FBI-controlled bank account in August, they said" (Bennett, Iran Plot, 2011).

The cooperation between Iran's Quds Force and the Zetas in this plot should not be ignored. Iran looked for allies and found a willing one in the Zetas drug cartel. FTOs or countries like Iran know there is a weak area when it comes to the U.S./Mexico border. Groups like Al-

Shabaab and Hezbollah have set up operations in Mexico because of the ease and accessibility of it. The Zetas and other Cartels present themselves as strong partners and allies with those whom mean to harm the United States. All FTOs need is to provide money support to the DTOs and alliances are built.

Implications for Mexican and American Security

The United States must look at the conflict in Mexico very differently. Mexican stability is very important to American stability. The border region is a vital area for the U.S. and Mexico's security. If groups like Al-Shabaab and Hezbollah can infiltrate and set up bases in Mexico others can do the same. The Cartels pose a security risk by themselves to the United States. With the amount of arms and equipment they've acquired and the operational planning in use, areas along the U.S./Mexico border are in grave danger. Cooperation between FTOs and the Cartels must be monitored and watched constantly. Terror groups cannot be allowed in Mexico for obvious reasons. First the Cartels can help the Terrorist groups by providing routes and entry into the United States undetected by the authorities. Second the Terrorist groups can train and help equip the Cartels in their fight against other DTOs and the Mexican government further destabilizing the region. Third Terrorist groups can use the Cartels to attack the United States and other nations who oppose their global jihadist movement. Also it should be noted that since there is evidence that Iran has used the Zetas in the past, specifically in their plot against the Saudi ambassador's life, they could very well recruit them again in the future. With alliances like this forming right at the U.S.'s doorstep more must be done.

Mexico must also step up its fight against the Cartels and the drug problem. One thing it could do better is improve its infrastructure by fixing up communities that have been ravaged by the conflict and providing basic living essentials to its people again. Doing this would restore the government's image and give citizens the idea that help is there from the government if they need it. At the present moment the average Mexican citizen has two choices the corrupt government and the power hungry Cartels. Often the Cartels are chosen because they have more power and influence to help the people. The situation in Mexico is similar in ways to the Middle East and Africa. An insurgency is raging and the people are taking active roles in it to survive. Mexico must eliminate the option for its people to join in with the Cartels and the drug trade. Doing this would help stabilize the region and prevent terrorist groups from coming in and manipulating its people to fight for their cause.

Conclusion

There are relationships and alliances that have formed between Mexican Drug Cartels and Terrorist groups like Al-Shabaab, Hezbollah, and Al-Qaeda. These partnerships are lethal to both the United States and Mexico. The ease of which terror operatives can use the U.S./Mexico border to enter the United States is staggering. The training and armament of the Cartels has increased giving them an edge over the Mexican Army and Police forces. In turn they are noticed and seen as viable candidates for FTOs looking for assistance against the United States. More must be done to eliminate these issues from both the American and Mexican side of the border. If nothing is done there is the potential for a region to emerge similar to the unstable Middle East right at America's doorstep.

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