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Blurred Lines: Mexican Cartels and the Narco-Terrorism Debate

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Since 2006 well over 70 000 lives have been claimed by narcotics-related violence in Mexico.[1] The sheer scale of this conflict has attracted considerable scholarly attention, particularly that which seeks to classify what type of violence this is, be it terrorism, insurgency or something else altogether. This discourse touches on deeper debates found within the study of terrorism. This literature asks several questions such as: What is the connection between terrorism and guerrilla warfare? What are the moral, ethical and political implications for defining terrorism? Is there a relationship between crime

[1] Tracy Wilkinson, "Mexico scrambles as violence threatens tourism zones," *Los Angeles Times*, 9 February 2013, at: http://www.latimes.com/world/la-fg-mexico-tourism-violence-20130210-story.html#page=1.

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and terrorism?[2] It becomes clear that a central problem embedded within the study of international terrorism is the lack of a consensus in terms of governmental and scholarly perspectives as to how to define it.[3] Each attempted definition has the potential to classify terrorist goals, tactics and motivations in a different manner. The most commonly associated motivations with terrorism are political in nature. However, the role of crime has entered this discourse. Still, many common definitions of terrorism tend to differentiate profit motivated criminal organizations from politically motivated terror groups.[4]

The presence of organized crime in Mexico began to surge in the 1990s due to the narcotics trade. The most prominent cartels include: The Gulf Cartel, the *Beltran Leyva* Organization, the Juarez Cartel, Los Zetas, Sinaloa Cartel, the Tijuana Cartel, Jalisco New Generation, the Knights Templar and *La Familia Michoacana* (disbanded). The Mexican government has publicly characterized some of the cartel actions as terrorism. President Felipe Calderon went as far as to refer to the August 2011 grenade attack of the Casino Royale in Monterrey as one of the worst examples of terrorist brutality in "recent history."[5] However, there is a lack of scholarly consensus as to whether the cartels can be considered terrorist organizations or are merely organized crime syndicates.[6] This paper addresses this issue by asking: *Can Mexican cartels be considered terrorist organizations?*

The paper begins by exploring the various debates surrounding terrorism and narco-terrorism and uses them to develop a conceptual framework to analyze the actions of the Cartels. The paper will then examine the behavior of Mexican cartels and their associated sub-organizations from 2006-to present. This time frame was selected as it represents the start of the Mexican government's "War on Drugs", which saw a large

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[2] Boaz Ganor, "Defining Terrorism: Is One Man's Terrorist another Man's Freedom Fighter?" *Police Practice and Research: An International Journal* 3, 4 (2002): pp. 288-289.
[3] Thomas J. Badey, "Defining international terrorism: A pragmatic approach," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 10, 1 (1998): p.90.
[4] Ibid., pp. 95-96.
[5] Katherine Corcoran, "Deadly casino attack shocks Mexicans already numbed by drug war violence," *Montreal Gazette*, 26 August 2011, at: http://www.globalmontreal.com/world/deadly+casino+attack+shocks+mexicans+already+numbed+by+drug+war+violence/6442470395/story.html.
[6] Phil Williams, "The Terrorism Debate Over Mexican Drug Trafficking Violence," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 24, 2 (2012): p. 259.

surge in cartel violence. It identifies and analyzes the cartel's motivations, organizational structures, tactics and operations and their targets of violence.[7] The paper concludes by examining how the answer to the definitional question can help better inform North American policymakers as they continue to formulate a response to this phenomenon. The paper posits that while cartels can not be formally defined as terrorists, they share many similar qualities.

Narco-terrorism and the problem with definitions

There has been an inability to define terrorism universally within academic, legal and governmental circles. Common themes that hinder the construction of a universally acceptable definition of terrorism include those relating to power, legitimacy and subjectivity. Governments will often define groups as being terrorists based on contemporary assumptions on threats to the national security of the state, and is thus highly subjective.[8] The term has been used to refer to such a wide variety of groups that some scholars consider the label near meaningless, as it is often very difficult to isolate and identify clearly how each group fits under the same classification of terrorist organization. An incredibly broad range of actions by state and non-state actors have been referred to as terrorism, such as anti-government protestors in Thailand, or the Israeli Navy's disruption of a flotilla of pro-Palestinian protestors in 2004. Some observers have even called the United States government terrorists due to the collateral damage that has resulted from drone strikes. Even in the realm of cybersecurity, hackers such as Julian Assange have also been referred to as terrorists by US government officials. Geoffrey Levitt has observed that, "the search for a legal definition of terrorism in some ways resembles the quest for the Holy Grail: periodically, eager souls set out, full of purpose, energy and self-confidence, to succeed

[8] Jessie Blackbourn, "The evolving definition of terrorism in UK law," *Behavioral Sciences of Terrorism and Political Aggression* 3, 2 (2011): pp. 132-147.

where so many others before have tried and failed."[9] A. Silke has referred to the terrorism definitional debates as a "wasteful quagmire."[10]

Many definitions assert that terrorism needs to involve a degree of repetition, and that related groups tend not to self-identify as terrorists. There can be a high variety of potential motivations for terrorism; however, all terrorism must involve a political interest where violence is undertaken to overturn real or perceived injustices. The violence must be considered unlawful and be systematic in the pursuit of a political objective. Intent is as important as action. The direct actions of a terrorist must contain the intention to install fear within a population and to coerce concessions from a wider audience than the direct victims of its violence.[11] Terrorism is often directed at a mass audience that seeks to maximize media exposure by selecting high profile targets so it can be used to change public opinion.[12] Terrorists utilize violence often to achieve clear and achievable political goals. For example, Hezbollah in Lebanon and the Irish Republican Army in Northern Ireland both engaged in the systematic use of terrorism in order to achieve political objectives by seeking to bring their respective national governments into direct negotiations over issues of territorial sovereignty.[13]

Terrorism can be used for a multitude of purposes. It can provoke a specific government response, such as an increase in authoritarian measures. It can create a state of anarchy within a country and to diminish the capacity of the ruling government's ability to function. Economic motivations are one of the more underexplored motivations for terrorism. Some groups will target corporations or take over things like public highways to impose a tax on its users, or even rob banks. C. C. Harmon argues that economic considerations can play a major role in motivating terrorist actions. Harmon points historically to attempts by right-wing militia groups within the US who circumvent paying taxes and endeavour to commit significant commercial fraud such as printing their own counterfeit currency. A further example is Shining Path, the Maoist group in Peru, which has attempted to fight a war on economic modernization by

[9] G. Levitt, "Is Terrorism Worth Defining?" *Ohio Northern University Law Review* 13, 1 (1986): p. 97.
[10] A. Silke, "An Introduction to Terrorism Research," in *Research on Terrorism, Trends, Achievements and Failures*, ed. A. Silke (London: Frank Cass, 2004), p. 4.
[11] Badey, "Defining international terrorism," pp.93-97.
[12] Gazor, "Defining Terrorism," p. 35.
[13] Giandomenico Picco "Tactical and Strategic Terrorism," *Journal of Aggression, Maltreatment & Trauma* 9, 1-2 (2004): pp. 72-73.

destroying power grids and highways while promoting primitive agricultural practices.[14]

The convergence thesis of crime and terrorism identifies when the area of separation between criminal and terrorist organizations is removed and the two types of groups become one of the same. This process involves the transformation of a group's motivations from a profit driven organized crime group into one focused on political goals or vice versa. These political interventions can involve attempts to disrupt the implementation of a state's anti-narcotics policies, interference in legal and judicial systems, to attempting to secure direct political and administrative control over parts of territory.[15]

The link between crime and terrorism is not new and can be traced back hundreds of years. Criminals and terrorist frequently utilize many of the same tactics and organizational structures to achieve their desired ends. In recent years, the trend for both types of organizations has been to adopt a network-centric structure, which relies less upon highly centralized leadership in order to increase organizational flexibility and to make it harder for states to disrupt their existence.[16] Criminal and terrorist organizations are always clandestine in nature, operate counter to state law and utilize violence as a tool.[17]

Economic drivers can be an incredibly powerful and destabilizing force. Mary Kaldor has argued that most conflicts in the post-Cold War era have blurred the lines between war, terrorism, insurgency and crime. Kaldor asserts that these modern conflicts are often not fought by formal militaries, but rather by non-state actors such as criminals and warlords using small arms instead of major weapons systems.[18] Kalevi

[14] C. C. Harmon, "Five Strategies of Terrorism," *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 12, 3 (2001): pp. 40-52.
[15] Tamara Makarenko, "The Crime-Terror Continuum: Tracing the Interplay between Transnational Organised Crime and Terrorism," *Global Crime* 6, 1 (2004): pp. 135-136.
[16] Chris Dishman, "The Leaderless nexus: When Crime and Terror Coverage," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 28, 3 (2005): pp. 237-238.
[17] Boaz Ganor & Miri Halperin Wernli, "The Infiltration of Terrorist Organizations Into the Pharmaceutical Industry: Hezbollah as a Case Study," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 36, 9 (2013): p. 699.
[18] Mary Kaldor, *New Wars and Old* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007); other authors who have discussed the rise of criminals as a destabilizing force in the post-Cold War world include, Martin van Creveld, *The Transformation of War: The Most Radical Reinterpretation of Armed Conflict Since Clausewitz* (New York: The Free Press, 1991); Rupert Smith, *The Utility of Force: The Art of War in the Modern World* (London: Penguin Books, 2006).

Holsti further contends that the power of states continues to grow weaker in the developing world, as the rise of warlordism and criminals has led to a decay of state sovereignty.[19] John Mueller has demonstrated how criminal actors can be perpetrators of violence on a large scale, pointing out that it was in fact largely criminal gangs and thugs responsible for much of the violence during the Rwandan Genocide and during the ethnic cleansing in the former Yugoslavia during the 1990s.[20] Economic gains are often one of the primary drivers of violence during intra-state conflicts, where even alleged political actors, such as Liberia's Charles Taylor, would often focus their groups' violence in a way that allowed for considerable personal profit during civil wars.[21]

In the post-Cold War era these non-state actors, which include transnational criminal organizations, are challenging the dominance of the nation-state by influencing the political, social and economic interactions of society. Many of these organizations are hybrid in nature, blurring the lines between political and economic motivations.[22] There are multiple examples of terrorist groups being involved in the narcotics trade; for example, the Shining Path in Peru and Hezbollah in Lebanon. Hezbollah in particular has been quite active in the illicit narcotics industry. This in part has been driven by the Lebanese state's lack of control and administrative functions. Narcotics are not the only illicit economic activity utilized by Hezbollah, as they also engage in fraud, smuggling and forgery.[23] Globalization and the increase of transnational networks in recent years have led to a growing global governmental concern over the interlinking of crime and terrorism. For example, the culprits of the 2004 Madrid Train Bombing had been working as hashish smugglers, moving narcotics from Morocco into Europe. These future terrorists had developed the means of moving men, weapons and other supplies clandestinely across transnational lines while being just criminals.[24]

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[19] Kalevi Holsti, *The State, war, and the state of war* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).
[20] John Mueller, "The Banality of 'Ethnic War,'" *International Security* 25, 1 (Summer 2000).
[21] Mats Berdal and David M. Malone, eds., *Greed and Grievance: Economic Agendas in Civil Wars* (Ottawa: International Development Research Centre, 2000).
[22] John P. Sullivan & Robert J. Bunker, "Drug Cartels, Street Gangs, and Warlords," *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 13, 2 (2002): pp. 40-42.
[23] Ganor and Wernli, "The Infiltration of Terrorist Organizations Into the Pharmaceutical Industry," pp. 700-701.
[24] John T. Picarelli "Osama bin Corleone? Vito the Jackal? Framing Threat Convergence Through an Examination of Transnational Organized Crime and International Terrorism," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 24, 2 (2012): pp. 180-198.

The term "narco-terrorism" entered the international lexicon in 1983 when the Peruvian President used it to classify the violence being directed against anti-narcotics police. A broad definition of narco-terrorism is: when narcotics, power and violence come together and the foundations of democracy and rule of law within a state are threatened as a result of the use of fear, violence and intimidation.[25] Often, the concept of for-profit terrorism is traditionally viewed as the result of a group which formed out of an ideological or political motivation, but eventually became almost solely focused on illicit for-profit ventures. FARC in Columbia is a prime example of this trend, although it continues to consider itself a political organization, its politically motivated goals have become unclear, and the bulk of its operations have been focused on the narcotics trade.[26] FARC has been responsible for a large number of terrorist attacks within Columbia and has inflicted many civilian causalities.[27]

The discourse over the use of the word "terrorism" within the Mexican Drug War is highly contentious and politicized. The US House of Representatives has debated legislation that would have formally categorized the main Mexican cartels as "Foreign Terrorist Organizations", yet the issue is far from reaching a consensus within the US government.[28] Phil Williams argues that any claims that Mexican cartels are terrorist organizations are misguided and that the cartels are merely following similar operational patterns to other organized criminal groups. Williams argues that the cartels are much more similar to the Mafia in Sicily than any terrorist group example. Williams goes on to write that, "arguments that Mexico is the victim of growing terrorism are both exaggerated and unconvincing."[29] Grant Wardlaw argues that narco-terrorism is a catchword with very broad connotations. Wardlaw dismisses the use of the term "narco-terrorism", and feels that it is far too broad and not particularly helpful when attempting to develop policy level responses to organized crime.[30] Abraham H. Miller and Nicholas A. Damask also argue that the concept of narco-terrorism is

[25] Fernando Celaya Pacheco, "Narcofearance: How has Narcoterrorism Settled in Mexico?," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 32, 12 (2009): pp. 1023-1024.
[26] Williams, "The Terrorism Debate Over Mexican Drug Trafficking Violence," p. 484.
[27] Marc Chernick, "The dynamics of Columbia's three-dimensional war," *Conflict, Security & Development* 1, 01 (2001): p. 94.
[28] Julian Aguilar, "Bill Seeks to Designate Drug Cartels as Terrorists," *The New York Times*, 21 April 2011, at http://www.nytimes.com/2011/04/22/us/22ttcartels.html.
[29] Williams, "The Terrorism Debate Over Mexican Drug Trafficking Violence," pp. 260-261.
[30] Grant Wardlaw, "Linkages between Illegal Drug Traffic & Terrorism," *Conflict Quarterly* 7, 3 (1988): p. 22.

essentially a myth designed as a policy making tool which allows governments to take more aggressive actions against criminal organizations. The use of the term narco-terrorism allows governments to make dramatic public statements to grab the public's attention and ultimately shape the academic understanding of the concept in a way that has become distorted.[31]

Some have classified the cartels in Mexico as being an insurgency rather than terrorism. Hal Bands has described the Cartels as a narco-insurgency, where in his view the Cartels are seeking to wholly disrupt the sovereignty of the Mexican federal government.[32] While serving as Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton referred to the Mexican cartel situation as something resembling an insurgency, pointing out how the levels of violence and cartel sophistication poses a threat to Mexico as well as the United States.[33] Daniel Byman has outlined the phenomenon of "proto-insurgencies" in which smaller groups of individuals, such as criminal gangs became drawn together for common interest, and eventually transform themselves into full blown insurgencies by destroying rivals and accumulating resources in a quick manner.[34] Robert J. Bunker and John P. Sullivan argue that cartels undergo a series of evolutionary transformations that elevates them from mere criminal organizations into an entity capable of truly destabilizing the state, particularly a weaker one such as Mexico. Bunker and Sullivan argue that cartels are formed first and foremost as criminal enterprises, yet become accustomed to using elevated levels of violence, which when paired with a growing interest in formally controlling their local communities, essentially challenges the core sovereignty of the state.[35] Paul Rexton Kan prefers the term "high-intensity crime" to describe the cartels, as he feels while cartels challenge the power of the government and are clearly more powerful than an average street gang, they are still at their core a

[31] Abraham H. Miller and Nicholas A. Damask, "The dual myths of 'narco-terrorism': How myths drive policy," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 8, 1 (1996): pp. 114-131.
[32] Hal Bands, *Mexico's Narco-Insurgency and U.S. Counterdrug Policy* (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, 2009).
[33] Hillary Clinton, "A Conversation with U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton," *Council on Foreign Relations*, 8 September 2010, at https://www.cfr.org/event/conversation-us-secretary-state-hillary-rodham-clinton-2.
[34] Daniel Byman, *Understanding Proto-Insurgencies* (Santa Monica, CA: Rand, 2007).
[35] Robert J. Bunker and John P. Sullivan, "Cartel evolution revisited: third phase cartel potentials and alternative futures in Mexico," *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 21, 1 (2010): pp. 31-32.

criminal enterprise.[36] The issue of whether or not cartels are terrorists, criminals or narco-insurgents remains far from any sort of consensus.

Despite the controversy surrounding the narco-terrorism debate and the fact that the act of defining terrorism remains a contested topic, some broad themes and organizational characteristics can still be can be identified from the literature on defining terrorism, which can be applied to most terrorist organizations.[37] Firstly, the organizational structure of most terrorist organizations is that individuals or groups are organized in a clandestine manner, in either a traditional hierarchy or network. Second, the goals and motivations of a terrorist group involve a desire to enact change in society or government policy via unlawful violence or the threat of violence to create an atmosphere of fear. The third theme are common tactics and operations, which involve: kidnapping, bombing, assassination, hijacking, ambushes, mass murder and in terms of equipment will involve the use of explosives, small arms or even WMDs. Finally, the targets of terrorist violence can be civilian and governmental, but the use of violence must be intended to influence via psychological coercion a wider audience than the immediate victims.[38] The following sections of the paper will outline if and how the organizational dynamics of the Mexican cartels conform to these common terrorist group characteristics.

Organizational Structure

The cartels have been undertaking a series of organizational adaptations in order to shift from a traditional hierarchal structure to a more network-centric one, due to pressure from the Mexican government's security operations. The rise of network-centric organizational structures is part of a rising trend among illicit groups across the globe, where organizations such as the cartels transform into an increasingly horizontal command structure, in which a series of loosely connected nodes of groups or

[36] Paul Rexton Kan, "What We're Getting Wrong about Mexico," *Parameters* 41, 2 (Summer 2011): pp. 37-48.

[37] These characteristics and themes are those which concern non-state examples of terrorism.

[38] These themes are identified from: Alex P. Schmid, 'The Response Problem as a Definition Problem', in *Western Response to Terrorism,* by Alex Schmid and Ronald D. Crelinsten (London: Frank Cass & Co. Ltd., 1993); Anthony Richards, "Conceptualizing Terrorism," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 37, 3 (2014); Karen Rasler and William R. Thompson, "Looking for Waves of Terrorism," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 21, 1 (2009); Thomas J. Badey, "Defining international terrorism: a pragmatic approach," pp. 90-107.).

individuals becomes linked to a wider network that is united by either an objective or ideology. This significantly minimizes the command and control abilities of cartel senior leadership, yet it can make the organization much harder to stop than traditional hierarchical organizational structures. Evolving into a network-centric structure does not mean, however, that senior cartel leadership becomes irrelevant as there is often still an element of traditionalist command and control processes within the organization.[39] The increased use of information technologies allows networked groups to streamline their decision-making capabilities and allow such organizations to maximize information flows at relatively low costs.[40]

A strong example of the cartel's hybrid network-centric structure can be found with the Los Zetas, who were initially founded as a sub-organization to serve as the private army of the Gulf Cartel. The Zetas soon split off and established its own independent network. They have a senior commander, followed by a group of lower level sub-commanders who directly coordinate with lieutenants charged with overseeing the group's operations. This command structure is then linked to a network of sleeper cells, gunmen, assassins, new recruits (the Lil' Zetas), lookouts, border crossing experts, freelance contractors and landowners who allow the Zetas to have a logistical base of operations. Once a primary objective for an operation has been determined, the senior Zeta's commanders then develop necessary strategies and direct which operational cell from the organization is best suited to carry out the mission.[41]

The cartels are exceedingly well financed. In 2006, it was estimated that cartels earned upwards of $25 billion via laundering operations and a further $29 billion in drug sales to the US market. However, narcotics are only part of their financial empire. The main business of the cartels is logistics. They completely control every aspect of their operations, including owning their own transportation vehicles. It is via these logistical networks where the bulk of cartel revenues are earned and narcotics are but one of the many goods and services that are part of the operations.[42] The cartels have

[39] Dishman, "The Leaderless nexus," pp. 237-239.
[40] Michele Zanini, "Middle Eastern Terrorism and Netwar," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 22, 3 (1999): p. 251.
[41] Lisa J. Campbell, "Los Zetas: operational assessment," *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 25, 1 (2010): pp. 57-59.
[42] Evelyn Krache Morris, "Think Again: Mexican Cartels," *Foreign Policy* 3 (December 2013), at: http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2013/12/03/think_again_mexican_drug_cartels.

transcended the narcotics markets into other money-making ventures including extortion, fraud, loan sharking and human smuggling.[43]

Although sometimes described as transnational organizations, cartels are often deeply rooted in controlled territory. This allows them to maintain control over drug smuggling routes and provides a logistical base of operations. They primarily began operating in the north of Mexico but their operations have spread throughout the country.[44] There are some smaller towns and villages that are essentially entirely under the direct control of the cartels. In these smaller communities, nearly the entire population is employed either directly or indirectly by the drug trade and what basic services and facilities that exist are provided by the cartels.[45]

Goals and Motivations

There is no single causation for cartel violence. Primarily, the cartels are seeking to maximize their control of various illicit industries and markets and so they wish to put their rivals out of business to maximize their profits. Thus, motivation for violence on one level is to intimidate and murder the members of competing cartels and criminal organizations until they no longer pose a threat. However, the cartels have adapted over time, and so have their objectives and ambitions. Transnational criminal organizations, such as cartels, have directly undermined state sovereignty and the normalcy of civil society by normalizing the use of extreme violence and essentially institutionalizing corruption within governments and preventing the state from enforcing laws and regulations.[46] Their use of violence has been used to reduce the efficiency of state bureaucracy and has significantly impacted Mexican society. In 2009, the president of Mexico publicly stated that up to half of the number of police personnel in his country were unreliable as they had likely been infiltrated or bought off by the cartels. The Mexican state is very weak, and is plagued by corruption and ineffectual

[43] George W. Grayson, *La Familia Drug Cartel: Implications For U.S.-Mexican Security* (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, 2010), p. 2.
[44] Morris, "Think Again: Mexican Cartels".
[45] Sylvia Longmire, *Cartel: The Coming Invasion of Mexico's Drug Wars* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), p. 13.
[46] John P. Sullivan, "Terrorism, Crime and Private Armies," *Low Intensity Conflict & Law Enforcement* 11, 2-3 (2002): p. 241.

bureaucratic and policing services, and so the government has failed to maintain the trust of the populace.[47]

The cartels have utilized very complex media operations, where they attempt to gain editorial control over newspapers and television stations for propaganda purposes by using the threat of violence. cartels use the media outlets they control to attack their rivals, as well as to delegitimize the government. The cartels also began to provide social goods to the Mexican citizenry, including the sponsoring of cultural festivals as well as providing other acts of charity.[48] The cartels have made use of social networking websites for propaganda marketing to improve their public image within the eyes of the country's civilian population. This media campaign has been compared to that of FARC.[49] The rationale behind these media operations is that they have been building increased legitimacy among the country's citizenry. Some feel the cartels are essentially attempting to replace the state itself, with a quasi-feudalistic structure in which the cartels control sections of territory like private fiefdoms. The cartels goals have evolved from merely seeing to push out rivals to actively attempting to control territory[50]

Prior to the disbandment of the *La Familia* Cartel in 2011, George W. Grayson described their hold on parts of the Michoacan region as essentially establishing a narco-state in place of the Mexican government, as *La Familia* administered civic and bureaucratic functions.[51] *La Familia* had established the practice of "dual sovereignty" in which they formed an alternative government to the official federally elected one. This rival governmental body sought to administer law and order, provide various forms of social services, such as the repairing of churches, and even implement taxation via the extortion of local businesses. In Michoacan, politicians became incredibly concerned for their lives, many of whom wore bullet proof vests during day to day business and death threats have caused political candidates to withdrawal from electoral races.[52] In

[47] Pacheco, "Narcofearance," p. 1033.
[48] Brophy, "Mexico: Cartels, corruption and cocaine," pp. 254-255.
[49] Sarah Womer & Robert J. Bunker, "Sureños gangs and Mexican cartel use of social networking sites," *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 21, 1 (2010): p. 86.
[50] Pacheco, "Narcofearance," pp. 1034-1035.
[51] Grayson, *La Familia Drug Cartel*, pp. 61-73.
[52] Ibid., pp. 33-36, 61-62.

2009, the Attorney General of Mexico described *La Familia's* actions in Michoacan as attempting to use violence to terrorize the country's politicians.[53]

La Familia adopted a quasi-religious ideology that played a role in motivating its operations. It publicly portrays itself as seeking to deliver "divine justice" to those who "deserve it". When *La Familia* released public communications they purposely avoided the use of the term "cartel", rather they sought to market themselves as a local community organization that provided public goods in the vein of the Salvation Army.[54] *La Familia*'s recruitment process for new membership involved a study of biblical texts that were paired with an initiating process that involved the execution and dismemberment of a selected victim.[55] If other cartels follow this path and develop increased political ambitions and ideological organizational dynamics, there is a potential for Mexico to dissolve into a series of quasi fiefdoms, each one being controlled and administered by druglords. However, the majority of cartels remain primarily focused on increasing profits from their various illicit businesses. The first and foremost of these illicit industries is the narcotics sales and distribution.[56]

Tactics and Operations

Violence is the primary tool of the cartels in their quest to expand their illicit industries. Not a single region of Mexico has been free of narco-related homicides; however, the bulk of the killing has occurred primarily within the north and the western coastal regions of the country.[57] The scale of the cartel violence has caused the Mexican government to deploy the military as a means of countering their operations.[58] There was a forty percent increase in narcotics related homicides from 2007 to 2008 in Mexico and then it doubled in the 2008-2010 period when Mexico had more homicides

[53] Paul Rexton Kan, *Mexico's "Narco-Refugees": The Looming Challenge for U.S. National Security* (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, 2011), p. 19.
[54] Ibid.
[55] Grayson, *La Familia*, pp. 35-45.
[56] Longmire, *Cartel*, pp. 11-12.
[57] Johanna Tuckman, "Mexico drugs war murders data mapped," *The Guardian*, 14 January 2011 at: http://www.theguardian.com/news/datablog/2011/jan/14/mexico-drug-war-murders-map.
[58] June S. Beittel, *CRS Report for Congress: Mexico's Drug Cartels* (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2009), p. 13.

than Iraq and Afghanistan combined.[59] In 2014, Mexico was the third deadliest country in the world for civilians, with only Syria and Iraq being riskier locations. The violence levels show no sign of subsiding either, as May 2017 was the highest number of homicides during a single month for the country, with over 2000 deaths.[60] Clearly, the level of violence far exceeds the norms of organized crime

What is most significant about these narco-related homicides is that they have been used by the cartels to create a considerable atmosphere of fear within Mexico. The Mexican government issued an official public warning to Mexicans abroad in 2010 that should they return to Mexico during the Christmas season, that they must travel in groups and in daylight to protect their safety. The government had predicted that the number of holiday travelers would decrease upwards of fifty percent from the norm out of the prevailing fear of violence despite the presence of substantial number of military personnel.[61] Cartel operations often make use of public displays of gruesome acts of violence which include the mounting and arranging of corpses into crude structures which are left to be discovered in public places.[62]

Torture and beheadings are common terror tactics used by the cartels to intimidate and terrorize government officials, civilians and rival organizations. The use of torture is considerable in the conflict; in 2008 alone, around eighteen percent of total casualties were torture victims. Furthermore, in 2008 there were around 190 beheadings. Torture techniques used by cartels includes beatings, breaking of bones, knife cutting, acid burns, water boarding, suffocation and electrocution. The torture process often takes several hours or even days. The beheading tactics are not just directed at rival cartel members but have even included police officers, bureaucrats and

[59] Williams, "The Terrorism Debate Over Mexican Drug Trafficking Violence," pp. 259-260.
[60] *AlJazeera*, "Mexico murder rate reaches record high," 22 June 2017, at http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/06/mexico-murder-rate-reaches-record-high-170622052056456.
[61] Daniel Hernandez, ''Mexican Expats Warned About Holiday Travel Home,'' *Los Angeles Times*, 24 November 2010 at: http://articles.latimes.com/2010/nov/24/world/la-fg-mexico-convoys-20101124.
[62] Sylvia M. Longmire and John P. Longmire, "Redefining Terrorism: Why Mexican Drug Trafficking is More than Just Organized Crime," *Journal of Strategic Security* 1, 1 (2008): p. 43.

soldiers.[63] The levels of brutality from the cartels are nothing short of extreme; bodies have been dissolved in acid, other corpses have been quartered.[64]

The very public displays of horrific violence in Mexico are a direct challenge to the rule of law of the state. For example, narco-violence has terrorized the civilian population of southern city of Tampico, where residents have experienced bomb threats to local hospitals and gun fighting in the downtown core. A local university has seen its enrolment plummet by twenty percent in reaction to this chaos. The violence in the city has sparked widespread public outrage and political mobilization where in one rally 10 000 citizens showed up to protest.[65] These public protests in reaction to the cartel's operations are not isolated to the Tampico area, as the violence has sparked a fierce public reaction from the civilian population across the country.[66]

Brutality has proven to be a key strategy for the Zetas Cartel. They openly assassinate and torture rivals, security personnel, government officials, journalists and even random civilians. They take no care to attempt to minimize collateral damage from the civilian population. The spread of fear is central to their success as an organization. It allows them to gain clear tactical advantages when trying to seize control of new territories. The Zetas will purposely leave mutilated and severed body parts along with a note claiming responsibility to gain maximum exposure for their actions. The Zetas are also responsible for large civilian massacres; one of the largest massacres occurred in 2010, where a total of seventy-two migrant workers were collectively executed due to their refusal to give the Zetas use of their labour.[67]

A major tactical adaptation by cartels has been the use of explosives. For example, the use of car bombs has escalated considerably and is now common practice. There have been over twenty car bombings since 2008; the targets often include police

[63] Pamela L. Bunker, Lisa J. Campbell & Robert J. Bunker, "Torture, beheadings, and narcocultos," *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 21, 1 (2010): pp. 145-149.
[64] Kan, *Mexico's "Narco-Refugees*, p. 7.
[65] Tracy Wilkinson, "In Mexico, Tamaulipas state residents rise up against cartel violence," *Los Angeles Times*, 19 June 2014, at: http://www.latimes.com/world/mexico-americas/la-fg-mexico-tampico-20140619-story.html#page=1.
[66] Ken Ellingwood, ''In Mexico City, Crowds Protest Drug Violence,'' *Los Angeles Times*, 8 May 2011 at: http://articles.latimes.com/2011/may/08/world/la-fg-mexican-violence-protest-20110509.
[67] Kan, *Mexico's "Narco-Refugees*, pp. 16-17.

stations or media outlets such as newspaper or television headquarters.[68] A popular tactic has been the use of grenade attacks against Mexican police and military units and even used against media centres. From July 2009 to July 2010, there were seventy-two unique grenade attacks. The US consulate in Nuevo Laredo has also been the victim of a grenade attacks.[69]

Assassination is another common tactic, as the cartels have carried out a large number of operations with the aim of killing key governmental officials. For example, the Hidalgo state police commander was kidnapped and executed in August 2008. Over a dozen mayors have been killed by cartel gunmen and senior and mid ranked police officials are also common targets. Cartels have launched assassination operations against rivals within US territory and in 2010 a dozen mayors as well as two US consular employees were also assassinated.[70] Large scale ambushes have also emerged as a common tactic by the cartels. These operations frequently target Mexican police or military units. The cartels have increased the sophistication of these operations; one of their preferred tactics is to ambush police convoys and patrols by setting traps and then blocking off escape routes by setting fire to vehicles and then finally overwhelming the trapped personnel with speed and ferocity.[71]

The cartels are highly professional organizations. Many of their personnel are ex-members of the Mexican military. The cartels and their sub-organizations have access to large amounts of advanced weaponry which includes assault rifles such as M-16s and AK-47s, as well as Rocket Launchers, hand grenades, surface-to-air missiles, anti-aircraft launchers, anti-personnel mines, antitank rockets, night vision devices, armored vehicles and helicopters.[72]

Cartel Targets

[68] Robert J. Bunker and John P. Sullivan, *Cartel Car Bombings in Mexico* (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, 2013), pp, 18-19.
[69] Longmire, *Cartel*, pp. 24-25.
[70] Longmire and Longmire, "Redefining Terrorism," pp. 42-43.
[71] Chris Hawley, "Drug cartels outmatch, outgun Mexico's police," *The USA Today*, 16 June 2010, At: http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/news/world/2010-06-15-mexico-police_N.htm
[72] Lisa J. Cambell, "Los Zetas: operational assessment," *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 21, 1 (2010): pp. 64-65; Brophy, "Mexico: Cartels, corruption and cocaine," p. 248.

Cartel violence has a diverse range of targets. The majority of the cartel activity is directed against their rivals. This involves killing lower level drug dealers to secure control over distribution areas. Cartel propaganda is also primarily directed towards their narcotics rivals. For example, when the Mata Zetas emerged in 2011 they immediately sought to use public imagery to create a public organizational persona of fear. The Mata Zetas' first public message contained imagery that bares a similarity to those released by al-Qaeda and other Islamic terrorist organizations. This public video release showed a group of well armed, masked young men wearing body armor proclaiming they were going to use brutal violence to wipe out their rivals.[73] Cartels are very active in creating a public atmosphere of fear against rivals; they will display banners referred to as *narcomantas* across cities, stating that certain cartels control the city and will bring violence to those who oppose them.[74]

So far, the majority of cartel targets have been domestic in nature. The narco-violence in Mexico has received relatively little public political attention in the United States. For example, during the 2012 US Presidential debates not a single Mexico related question was asked of the candidates, which is interesting considering some US diplomatic staff have been recently killed by the cartels.[75] The Mexican government has been the victim of a large number of attacks and its security services have been attacked by the cartels on many occasions. Mayors, civil servants, police officers and soldiers have all been targeted by the cartels.[76] The cartels have also shifted violence beyond the targeting of individual members of the Mexican security services to directing violence towards the organizations themselves in larger scale attacks. For example, in summer of 2010, a large group of cartel gunman boxed in a convoy of police trucks in the state of Michoacan, killing twelve police officers.[77] This anti-government violence has not always been common practice, as during the 1980s and 1990s the drug cartels in Mexico were primarily nationalistic and thus focused solely on subverting the state, not challenging it.[78]

[73] Corcoran, "Deadly casino attack shocks Mexicans already numbed by drug war violence,".
[74] Longmire, *Cartel*, p. 22.
[75] Morris "Think Again: Mexican Cartels."
[76] Beittel, *CRS Report for Congress: Mexico's Drug Cartels*, p. 4.
[77] Hawley, "Drug cartels outmatch, outgun Mexico's police."
[78] Fernando Pacheco, ''Narcofearance: How has Narcoterrorism Settled in Mexico?,'' *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 32, no. 12 (2009): pp. 1021–1048

Civilians, including children, have not escaped the violence of the cartels. The threat of violence has terrorized the civilian population in Mexico. There has been an increase in the number of Mexicans seeking asylum in the United States. The reason behind this act is that they had been directly threatened with death by narcotics gangs. In 2008, a total of 2543 people applied for political asylum out of fear of narcotics related violence in Mexico. In comparison, there was not a single case of political asylum requests from Mexicans during the 1990s. There are some estimates which have suggested that up to 124 000 persons have entered the US illegally as a means of escaping the threat of narcotics related violence. The sheer number of persons attempting to flee this violence is a demonstration that the Mexican federal government's grip on parts of the country is weakening due to the targeting selection by the cartels.[79] This situation has created a widespread sense of fear among Mexican civilians. Middleclass and wealthy citizens have begun to live in gated communities with private security. Businessmen often require bodyguards and have bulletproof vehicles to work in violent areas. Some civilians have even gone to the length of being microchipped so they can be tracked if captured by cartels.[80]

Conclusions and Policy Implications

The Mexican cartels have used horrific violence to achieve their goals; however, can they be considered terrorist organizations? The findings of this analysis have been plotted in Table 1.

Table 1. Mexican Cartels and terrorist themes and characteristics.

Terrorist Organizational Themes and Characteristics	Descriptions	Cartels

[79] Khan, *Mexico's "Narco-Refugees*," pp. 1-3.
[80] Longmire, *Cartel*, pp. 20-22.

Organizational Structure	Individuals or groups that are structured in a traditional hierarchy or network and are primarily clandestine by nature.	They are primarily organized into clandestine network-centric structures.
Goals and Motivations	A desire to enact change in society or government policy via unlawful violence or the threat of violence to create an atmosphere of fear.	The Cartels remain first and foremost focused on maximizing profits from illicit businesses.
Tactics and Operations	Kidnapping, bombing, assassination, hijacking, ambushes, mass murder. Use of explosives, small arms or even WMDs.	Cartels have engaged in all of these, except the use of WMDs.
Targets of Violence	Civilian and governmental targets. The use of violence is intended to influence via psychological coercion a wider audience than the immediate victims.	Cartel violence has directly targeted civilians, politicians and security personnel, and the brutality of their violence is intended to intimidate a wider group.

Of the four key themes of terrorist organizations identified at the beginning of the paper, three of the four apply to cartels. The primary difference is that terrorists are motivated by political and ideological goals, while cartels remain primarily profit

driven organizations. In terms of organizational structure, cartels are non-state clandestine actors structured in a hybrid network-centric manner, where they have central leadership that is connected to a series of sub-networks of illicit actors. This structure allows them to conceal their activities from state security services more efficiently, and allows for increased speed in developing and overseeing new operations.

Cartels have multiple motivations for their actions, including the pursuit of profit, which is primarily an apolitical motivation and thus not connected to any form of ideology. However, as demonstrated, the cartels have at times blurred the lines with their operations towards some minor political goals, which include the desire to directly control and administer parts of the Mexican state. Furthermore, the cartels have been attempting to influence societal change by fostering a prevailing atmosphere of fear across the country which will allow them to continue their operations unopposed.

Tactically and operationally, the cartel use of violence in many ways mirrors that of other terrorist organizations, such as al Qaeda's use of car bombs, or the Islamic State's use of public beheadings and torture. The targets of cartel violence are varied. A large amount of their violent actions is against their Narco rivals, which is not usually considered in traditional definitions of terrorism; however, when conducting these operations, they rely on fear and intimidation. Furthermore, the cartels have directly attacked civilian and government targets just like a terrorist organization to create an atmosphere of fear within the state.

These findings thus suggest Mexican cartels should not be classified as terrorist organizations due to the lack of any major political motivation for their use of violence. Cartels are not motivated to establish a homeland or fighting for an ethnic constituency or other broader political objectives commonly associated with terrorists. However, it would also be erroneous to consider them to be mere criminals. Their use of extreme violence far exceeds the norms for criminal behavior such as smugglers or street gangs. Further, there have been times where certain cartel organizations have come close to blurring the lines between profit making and ideological reverence; an example of this would be the behavior of the now defunct *La Familia* drug cartel, which frequently used Catholic imagery and made new recruits study biblical texts. *La Familia* also sought to hold more formal control over the local communities in its area of operations. Still,

while *La Familia* represents a troubling example, they still also remained focused on profit making and their foray into wider ideological objectives seem to be clearly the exception rather than the norm for most cartels in Mexico.

However, Mexican cartels do share many similar characteristics and themes of terrorist organizations. Thus, the cartels can be said to have a dual nature; sometimes they act like terrorists in terms of their operational and tactical level behavior, and the rest of the time they act as businessmen. The case of the cartels, it seems, is a clear example of the "convergence thesis" where the lines between terrorism and crime becoming blurred in practice. These findings can complicate things for the Mexican and US governments, when trying to formulate policy level responses to the cartel phenomenon. The Mexican and US governments should re-evaluate their policies and strategies for dealing with cartels, and perhaps should bring in elements of past successful counter-terrorism strategies that have been learned in other parts of the world to deal with this issue, as clearly the threat of these illicit organizations is elevated above mere criminal behavior. The US will need to increase the amount of attention and resources directed towards the problem, as Mexican cartels have been steadily increasing their operations into the southern regions of the US. Senior US military officials, such as Admiral Kurt W. Tidd, the commanding officer of SOUTHCOM, has openly acknowledged that cartels are a major security concern, and in particular their connections to transitional networks could lead to regional destabilization. There have also been some connections made between Islamic terrorist organizations such as Hezbollah and Latin American narcotics groups. This Islamic terrorism connection is particularly concerning as human smuggling has now become a major part of the Cartel's illicit business empire.[81]

The US military has a potential role to play in stopping the spread of cartels in Central America and preventing them from causing regional instability. Chad Serna points out that US Special Operations Forces (SOF) have the capacity to disrupt even horizontally structured criminal organizational networks, such as cartels, thus reducing not only their criminal narcotics operations but also their ability to commit further acts

[81] Devin M. Henry, "Criminal Networks: A Gateway for Terrorists," *Small Wars Journal*, 1 May 2017, at http://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/criminal-networks-a-gateway-for-terrorists; Guy Taylor, "Hezbollah moving "tons of cocaine" in Latin America, Europe to finance terror operations," *Washington Times*, 8 June 2016, at, September, http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2016/jun/8/hezbollah-moving-tons-of-cocaine-in-latin-america-/.

of extreme violence. SOF can be used to target the networks as a whole, rather than particular individuals of a hierarchal organizational structure. SOF are partially organized in a network-centric structure themselves, allowing them to have increased mobility and streamlined communications; they are also able to operate clandestinely and pay particularly close attention to developing their localized situational awareness capabilities. Their networked structure and small force size allow them to not interfere into the day to day lives of civilians and are also able to operate in hostile local environments without attracting significant amounts of unwanted attention.[82] However, the US would need to be wary of deploying troops into Mexico and other regional locations, due to a uneasy history of US military interventions into Mexico and central America, as the presence of US forces could prove to be widely unpopular with the local population. SOF's clandestine nature and low visible presence could, perhaps, allow them to serve closely with Mexican counterparts without causing too much social disruption. Some polling data has suggested that a majority of Mexicans welcome an increased US role in the conflict, though only a minority would accept an active US military intervention.[83] A potential solution to this would be for the US to follow an indirect strategy that continues to focus on supporting and facilitating anti-cartel operations without a large commitment of forces.

The US military and intelligence agencies have been gradually increasing their role in combating cartels. US Department of Defense drones and manned aircraft have been operating over Mexican airspace to provide Mexican security forces with near real-time intelligence data on cartel activities.[84] US troops are already training their Mexican counterparts and have been taking lessons learned from operations in Iraq and Afghanistan and incorporating them into this training process. The US military has provided training on how to protect against small unit ambushes and how infantry patrols can respond in a disciplined manner. Much of the US training assistance has

[82] Chad Serena, "Dynamic Attenuation: Terrorism, Transnational Crime and the Role of the US Army Special Forces," *Global Crime* 8, 4 (2007): pp. 347,354-356.
[83] Robert Beckhusen, "Majority of Mexicans Want More U.S. Help in Drug War," *Wired*, 15 May 2012, at: https://www.wired.com/2012/05/mexico-poll/.
[84] Ginger Thompson and Mark Mazzetti, "U.S. Drones Fight Mexican Drug Trade," *The New York Times*, 15 March 2011, at http://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/16/world/americas/16drug.html.

been directed towards the Mexican Marines, who are widely viewed as the most effective of the anti-cartel security institutions.[85]

If the cartels remain unchecked, Mexico has the potential to become a quasi-failed state, and thus threaten the security of all of North America. The US and Mexico must partner with other regional actors to deal with this problem. Any strategy will require a multinational approach; military and intelligence services have a role to play, but so does economic assistance and development programs that could help stimulate economic prosperity in parts of Mexico that have become over reliant on income from the narcotics trade. The US should also continue to disrupt the smuggling of small arms across its borders into Mexico, as well as finding ways of reducing its domestic demand for illicit narcotics.

There are multiple avenues for future research. There should be further examination into how a group like *La Familia* began the organizational transformation from a purely criminal organization into one that embraced ideological elements such as Catholic imagery while most other cartels have shunned such practices. Will *La Familia* continue to be an outlier or a sign of potential transformations among other cartels? Furthermore, how will the continued diversification of cartel business interests affect their use of violence? How are the cartels expanding their transnational connections, particularly with Islamic terrorist organizations? There also needs to be further exploration of the effectiveness of the US military's security partnerships with Mexican security institutions, and to identify what sort of metrics could be used to evaluate the impact of the training and resources provided to Mexico.

[85] Ioan Grillo, "U.S. Troops Increase Aid Mexico in Drug War," *National Public Radio*, 6 October 2011, at http://www.npr.org/2011/10/06/141128178/u-s-troops-increase-aid-to-mexico-in-drug-war.