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**Mexican Drug Cartels and al Qaeda: Credible Link or Impracticable Alliance?**

**by**

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**A paper submitted to the Faculty of the Naval War College in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the Department of Joint Military Operations.**

**The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the Naval War College or the Department of the Navy.**

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**28 October 2011**

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## **Abstract**

### *Mexican Drug Cartels and al Qaeda: Credible Link or Impracticable Alliance?*

Since the attacks of September 11, 2001, a pressing question has arisen. Why has there not been an al Qaeda attack, or attempted attack, within the United States homeland originating from the southern border? Additionally, would the Mexican drug cartels collaborate with al Qaeda? Through examining the strategic objectives, operational objectives, methods, and organizational transformations of al Qaeda and the Mexican drug cartels, this paper concludes that cooperation among the two entities is highly unlikely. It is true that the two entities share some methods; however, their organizational goals are antithetical and divergent. This paper explains the complexities that have prevented a partnership from ever emerging between the Mexican drug cartels and al Qaeda.

## INTRODUCTION

In April 2008, then Homeland Security Undersecretary for Intelligence and Analysis, Charles Allen, told reporters, "We know of no trained al Qaeda operatives who have crossed over our southern border." Additionally, Allen added that "We do know that going back to 2004, the southern border is something that al Qaeda's central leadership has looked at. At this time we know of no specifics of where al Qaeda has really endeavored to cross our borders in the south."<sup>1</sup> Since the time of Allen's remarks, there have been multiple attempted or executed al Qaeda attacks in the United States, yet not one has materialized linking the Mexican drug cartels.

With so much debate and scrutiny focused over vulnerabilities along the U.S.-Mexican border, why hasn't there been a documented case of an al Qaeda and Associated Movements (AQAM) operative surreptitiously entering the country in cooperation with the Mexican cartels?<sup>2</sup> The answer to this question includes many reasons, but at the heart of this enigma rest incompatible, desired end states between the Mexican drug cartels and al Qaeda. United States counter-terrorism resources face increasing constraints and require precise prioritization. Additionally, United States and Mexican law enforcement efforts to defeat the cartels must be effective and efficient. To best utilize its limited resources in Central America, the United States must understand that potentially complex relationships between the Mexican drug cartels and al Qaeda are antithetical and unlikely given their divergent, strategic end states and operational objectives.

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<sup>1</sup> Randall Mikkelsen, "No Signs of Qaeda at US-Mexican Border." Reuters, April 11, 2008. Accessed October 4, 2011. <http://www.reuters.com/article/2008/04/11/us-security-usa-qaeda-correction-USHUN17603020080411>.

<sup>2</sup> al Qaeda and Associated Movements (AQAM), refers to the al Qaeda network formerly led by Osama bin Laden and other, potentially operationally disconnected, violent Islamist groups. Definition derived from the American Enterprise Institutes' [criticalthreats.org](http://criticalthreats.org).

A prevailing assumption identifies al Qaeda as the predominant threat in conducting terrorist operations and attacking targets within the U.S. homeland. After ten years of degradation, al Qaeda stills maintains a desire and credible capability unlike any other Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO) to conduct terrorist operations aimed at the U.S. within its borders. AQAM's aspiration is well documented in this area. The intent is not to ignore other FTOs, such as Hezbollah, who exhibit significant operations in Latin America and less visible activities in Mexico. Hezbollah's goals in the region appear to be focused more on the criminal financing lines of operation such as money laundering, arms smuggling, drug trafficking, and human trafficking, rather than on conducting terrorism within the United States.<sup>3</sup> For this reason, this paper's focus is on al Qaeda/AQAM and Mexican drug cartels because of their potentially direct threat to the U.S. homeland. Most agree that a cartel-terrorist relationship is possible. However, when it comes to the extent of potential cooperation, there are two competing analytical approaches to the problem.

When examining the interaction between transnational criminal organizations (TCOs) and terror organizations, two schools of thought come to prominence. Both camps tend to agree that crime is primarily economically driven, while terrorism remains inherently political.<sup>4</sup> At the core of this debate lies the differing interpretation of motives and methods. In one camp stands the "cooperation is unlikely" school of thought. In general terms, this group believes that the motives and objectives of the western hemisphere TCOs and Islamist

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<sup>3</sup> Roger F. Noriega, and Jose R. Cardenas. "The Mounting Hezbollah Threat in Latin America." American Enterprise Institute, (2011): 5-6. Accessed October 10, 2011. <http://www.aei.org/docLib/Updated-No3LatinAmerican%202011g.pdf>. In this Latin American Outlook for AEI the authors cite many examples of Hezbollah arrests in Mexico, they ultimately state "While there certainly have been no reported cases of Hezbollah smuggling operatives across the border to carry out terrorist attacks in the United States, it is neither "sensationalist" nor "alarmist" to be concerned about it and respond with appropriate policy measures".

<sup>4</sup> Louise I. Shelley, and John T. Picarelli. "Methods Not Motives: Implications of the Convergence of International Organized Crime and Terrorism ." American University, 305. Accessed September 12, 2011. [http://www.law.syr.edu/Pdfs/0methods\\_motives.pdf](http://www.law.syr.edu/Pdfs/0methods_motives.pdf).

terrorist organizations are too divergent to facilitate a long-term, strategic alliance, and that the emergence of cooperation is suspect at best and remains doubtful.<sup>5</sup> A second camp comprises the “cooperation is likely” school of thought. Fundamental to this group is its linkage connecting the environment and methods that both TCOs and terrorists employ.<sup>6</sup> This school’s perspective and interpretations provide the basis for this paper’s counter-argument.

### COUNTER-ARGUMENT

In general, there appear to be at least four primary ways in which the Mexican drug cartels and al Qaeda may overlap: (1) The operational environment is sufficient in Mexico for cooperation, (2) Through shared tactics and methods, (3) Through the process of transformation from one type of group to the other over time, and (4) Through short-term transaction-based, service-for-hire activities between groups.<sup>7</sup> Most in this camp admit that the joining of forces has yet to be widely recognized, but they vehemently warn of the potential national security threat should this relationship come to fruition.<sup>8</sup>

Critics who suggest a linkage between terrorist organizations and the drug cartels turn to the operational environment in Mexico. Some consider Mexico a weak or nearly failed state. The Government of Mexico’s inability to control rampant corruption, intimidation, and escalating violence has caused some to question its legitimacy. In 2009, U.S. Army War College professor and Central American expert Max Manwaring identified 233 “Zones of

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<sup>5</sup> Carlos A. Proveda, *The Likelihood of Collaboration Between Central American Transnational Gangs and Terrorist Organizations*. (Thesis, Naval Postgraduate School, 2007), 7-8.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 5-6.

<sup>7</sup> John Rollins, and Liana Sun Wyler. *International Terrorism and Transnational Crime Security Threats, U.S. Policy, and Considerations for Congress*. (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2010), 1.

<sup>8</sup> Joseph A. Lanzante, *The Relationship Between Criminal and Terrorist Organizations and Human Smuggling*. (Thesis, Naval Postgraduate School, 2009), 1.

Impunity” that exist throughout large geographical portions of Mexico.<sup>9</sup> Such ingredients when combined with the lack of governance could breed terrorism and create an environment where al Qaeda could prosper. Similar environments exist in Somalia, the Maghreb in Africa, and western Pakistan. Historically, al Qaeda enjoyed a comparable environment in pre-2001 Afghanistan. Most alarming and threatening is the proximity of such conditions to the United States.

Another major point in the “cooperation is likely” camp centers on shared tactics and methods. It is true that increasingly the tactics employed by the Mexican cartels are similar to those used by al Qaeda. The cartels’ use of intimidation, kidnappings, beheadings, and other forms of execution to achieve a desired psychological effect seem to be straight out of al Qaeda’s playbook. Just recently Mexican cartels resorted to vehicle-improvised explosive devices. The major Colombian cartels also reverted to such techniques. Through the sharing of such techniques, some believe a level of cooperation could emerge and possibly grow.

A third possible means of cooperation surfaces through the crime-terror nexus. Under this theory, the cartels transform and engage in ever-increasing terrorism operations. Conversely, the terror organizations begin to engage in criminal enterprises including drug trafficking. This is similar to Colombia when the Medellin and Cali cartels expanded their operations to include terrorism. To a degree, the al-Qaeda Organization in the Islamic Maghreb has morphed into a hybrid criminal organization through kidnapping, the drug trade, and diamond smuggling in Africa.<sup>10</sup> As the two types of organizations transform, the

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<sup>9</sup> Max G. Manwaring. A "New" Dynamic in the Western Hemisphere Security Environment: The Mexican Zetas and Other Private Armies. (Strategic Studies Institute, 2009), 9. Accessed September 17, 2011. <http://www.strategicstudiesinstitute.army.mil/pubs/display.cfm?pubid=940>.

<sup>10</sup> Mawassi Lahcen, "Kidnapping, Drug Trafficking Dominate AQIM Crimes, Analysts Say." Infosurhoy.com. Accessed October 14, 2011. [http://infosurhoy.com/cocoon/saii/xhtml/en\\_GB/features/saii/features/society/2010/12/13/feature-02](http://infosurhoy.com/cocoon/saii/xhtml/en_GB/features/saii/features/society/2010/12/13/feature-02).



concern turns to the possible collaboration as they converge within the shadowy world of illicit trade.

Finally, the “cooperation is likely” camp highlights the possibility of collaboration that seeks short-term financial gain. The concern lies in a Mexican cartel’s willingness to smuggle a terrorist across the United States southern border for the “right” price. Particularly alarming in this scenario is a terrorist possessing a Weapon of Mass Destruction (WMD). The advocates of this argument cite potential infiltrations across the border given the number of Other Than Mexicans (OTMs) and Special Interest Aliens (SIAs) from Special Interest Countries (SICs) that have been apprehended.<sup>11</sup> Cartels and human traffickers demand a much higher transit price for subjects under the aforementioned categories. In this circumstance, they believe the cartel’s immediate lust for profit outweighs the potential risk to a long-term strategic objective.

Many of these arguments have valid points when narrowly examined. However, not one exposes a “smoking gun”. It is certainly possible that a single actor or a single incident could threaten United States’ interests. However, when examining the potential relationships against a larger strategic context and operational methods, it becomes clear why an alliance never materialized.

### **STRATEGIC AND OPERATIONAL OBJECTIVES OF AL QAEDA**

al Qaeda’s motivations and objectives have been studied through the lens of many disciplines. Both governmental or operational and academic analyses tend to reach similar findings. al Qaeda’s motivation is one of an ideology that seeks political ends.

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<sup>11</sup> Michael T. Kindt, Jerrold M. Post, and Barry Schneider. *The World's Most Threatening Terrorist Networks and Criminal Gangs*. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 228.

In 2005, Ambassador Henry A. Crumpton testified before the House International Relations Committee and identified al Qaeda's primary strategic objective desires to "overthrow the existing international system and replace it with a radical, totalitarian pan-Islamic 'Caliphate'".<sup>12</sup> In a briefing to the Senate Armed Services Committee, then Commander of U.S. Central Command General John Abizaid identified al Qaeda's strategic objectives as twofold: re-establish the Caliphate and establish Sharia Law.<sup>13</sup> General Abizaid, in the briefing entitled "Global Islamic Extremist Threat", identified al Qaeda's objectives within the perspectives of a current and future fight.

In conducting the current fight, al Qaeda is primarily focused on its active jihads in the Middle East, Africa, Central Asia, and the Philippines. Within these regions, al Qaeda's objectives encompass the expansion, further development, and maintenance of safe havens. In Latin America, al Qaeda's goal is centered on establishing new safe havens. Most importantly, al Qaeda seeks to take advantage of open societies, and strike at a time of its choosing within Europe and the United States.<sup>14</sup>

al Qaeda's goals globally mature in the future fight. Its end state in the future fight includes the expansion of the jihad to secure Dar al Islam, overthrow apostates, gain WMD capabilities, and control the oil resources of the region. Dar al Islam includes a Caliphate under Sharia law that expands from Western Africa through Indonesia in the east. In Latin America, it continues to establish safe havens. Finally, in the future fight al Qaeda's goal is

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<sup>12</sup> Martin L. MacNabb, *Hemispheric Counter-Terrorism Strategy*. (Thesis, Inter-American Defense College, 2007), 30. Accessed September 9, 2011. <http://library.jid.org/en/thesis/MacNabb.pdf>.

Ambassador Crumpton served at the FBI as Deputy Chief of the International Terrorism Operations Section, 1998-1999. He was Deputy Chief (Operations) of CIA's Counterterrorism Center, 1999-2001. He led CIA's Afghanistan campaign, 2001-2002.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

<sup>14</sup> John Abizaid. "Global Islamic Extremist Threat," September 29, 2005, (US Central Command slide show presented before the US Senate Armed Services Committee), 6. Accessed September 14, 2011. Available at: <http://www.comw.org/tct/fulltext/0509daralislam.pdf>.

to bankrupt and exhaust the “far enemy” in Europe and the United States.<sup>15</sup> These conclusions and identification of objectives emerged from U.S. Central Command’s analysis of al Qaeda.

Academic approaches differ slightly, but come to roughly the same identification of objectives. Professor Detlof von Winterfeldt and associate Gregory Keeney<sup>16</sup> conducted extensive research using al Qaeda key leader statements over a period of years. They categorized their findings into strategic and fundamental objectives. Strategic objectives provide guidance for all decisions and fundamental objectives must be accomplished and directly influence the probability of success in achieving strategic objectives.<sup>17</sup> The authors’ analysis identified al Qaeda’s five strategic objectives:

- (1) Inspire and incite Islamic movements and the Muslim masses of the world to attack the enemies of Islam.
- (2) Expel western powers from the Middle East.
- (3) Destroy Israel.
- (4) Establish Islamic religious authority in the Middle East (Caliphate).
- (5) Extend Islamic authority and religion into new areas of the world.<sup>18</sup>

A series of fundamental objectives were additionally identified. Fundamental objectives are segregated into two general categories; the first group consists of those related to the organization’s growth, while the second group impacts the enemy or the western world. The fundamental objectives concerning the United States include:

- (1) Attack U.S. targets.
- (2) Cause economic loss for the United States.
- (3) Expel the Americans from Iraq.

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 7

<sup>16</sup> Dr. Detlof von Winterfeldt was the Director of the National Center for Risk and Economic Analysis of Terrorism Events (CREATE), the first university-based center of excellence funded by the Department of Homeland Security at the University of Southern California. Gregory Keeney is a student in the Master of Management Studies program at Duke University's Fuqua School of Business and co-authored the study.

<sup>17</sup> Gregory L. Keeney, and Detlof von Winterfeldt. "Identifying and Structuring the Objectives of Terrorists." (Risk Analysis 30, no. 12, 2010): 1805-1806. Accessed September 19, 2011. <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1539-6924.2010.01472.x/pdf>.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 1806.

(4) Kill large numbers of infidels.<sup>19</sup>

Both the military and scholarly analyses of al Qaeda's objectives are similar. The synthesis drawn from both disciplines concludes that al Qaeda's objectives stem from an ideology that seeks political ends. al Qaeda's mid and long-term goals in the west focus on the economic destruction of the United States and Europe. For this reason its objectives are in stark contrast to those of the Mexican drug cartels.

### **STRATEGIC AND OPERATIONAL OBJECTIVES OF THE CARTELS**

Mexican drug cartels' primary motivation is profit. Accordingly, they generally lack ideological or political ends. Some experts identified their aims as being defined by their greed and corruption that they propagate with the primary goals of maximizing profits and ensuring survival of the organization at any cost.<sup>20</sup> However, a complete understanding of the Mexican drug cartels' objectives requires one to recognize their geo-strategic situation.

Mexico sits between the United States (consumers) and Latin America (producers). This decisive location places Mexico in a central location in the present cycle of illicit commodities for the western hemisphere.<sup>21</sup> United States government terminology considers Latin America a "source zone", Mexico a "transit zone", and the United States an "arrival zone".<sup>22</sup> By virtue of its location, Mexico became heavily involved in drug trafficking during the 1980s when the powerful Columbian cartels transported their products to the United States.

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 1808.

<sup>20</sup> Kindt, Post, and Schneider. *The World's Most Threatening Terrorist Networks and Criminal Gangs*, 214.

<sup>21</sup> Ben Zweibelson. "Cartel Next: How Army Design Methodology Offers Holistic and Dissimilar Approaches to the Mexican Drug Problem." (*Small Wars Journal*, 2011), 9. Accessed October 17, 2011. <http://smallwarsjournal.com/blog/journal/docs-temp/801-zweibelson.pdf>.

<sup>22</sup> Zweibelson cites that Source, Transit, and Arrival Zone terminology reflects current U.S. government illegal drug enforcement doctrine and protocol. Office of National Drug Control Policy, *Transit Zone Interdiction Operations*, [http://www.whitehousedrugpolicy.gov/publications/international/factsht/transit\\_zone\\_interdic\\_op.html](http://www.whitehousedrugpolicy.gov/publications/international/factsht/transit_zone_interdic_op.html)

A major operational objective of the cartels is control of the crossing points into the United States. Controlling these key crossing points is essential to achieving the highest profits in the illicit drug trade. Only the most dominant drug cartels—Sinaloa, Los Zetas, Carrillo Fuentes Organization, and the Gulf Cartel—have the capability to fight for the crossings. Cartels that control the crossing points are best able to exploit a position of advantage and grow in power and profit.<sup>23</sup> At the most critical points, there is usually a “sister” city on the United States side. Drug parlance defines these locations as *the plazas*. The stronger cartels establish themselves as gatekeepers at *the plazas* to ensure safe passage of the illicit trade. These points are so critical that the cartels will use any means necessary to gain and maintain control through intimidation, extortion, or violence.<sup>24</sup>

### **COMPARISON OF THE OBJECTIVES**

In comparing the strategic and operational objectives of al Qaeda and the Mexican drug cartels, it is evident why an alliance never emerged. Primarily their motives are entirely divergent from the others. In al Qaeda’s case, they are driven by religion and ideology all focused on a political end state, the Caliphate. The cartels’ motivation is profit, and they will resort by any means to ensure their survival while maintaining the ability to conduct the very prosperous illicit trade. Both al Qaeda and the cartels hold core beliefs that encompass drastic differences which tend to discourage any potential relationship.

Protection of their profits is everything to the cartels. This includes securing markets, of which the most prosperous are in the United States and Europe. al Qaeda’s operational objectives in the west focus on the destruction of the United States and European economies.

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<sup>23</sup> Kindt, Post, and Schneider, *The World's Most Threatening Terrorist Networks and Criminal Gangs*, 212.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 215.

Mexican drug cartel profits require a stable economy in the west. Weakening of western economies is absolutely bad business for the Mexican cartels.

Today Mexican cartels must face many challenges. On a daily basis, cartels encounter internal subversion, cartel-on-cartel violence, and ever-increasing pressure from the Mexican authorities. It is not in the cartels' interest to agitate the United States government beyond its current state. As a senior homeland security official noted, "it would be bad business for a criminal organization to associate with terrorists because there would be so much scrutiny and pressure from international law enforcement and intelligence agencies that life as they know it would cease to exist".<sup>25</sup>

Of further concern to the cartels is the recent interest of the United States legislature concerning escalating violence in Mexico. Currently there is a movement in the United States Congress to designate certain Mexican drug cartels as FTOs.<sup>26</sup> Certainly some violent methods employed by the cartels are terrorist actions by definition. If intelligence or law enforcement identified a strong cartel-terrorist linkage, it would most certainly facilitate their addition to the FTO list. The cartels do not want to face the added pressure of United States national counter-terrorism assets when they are simultaneously fighting competitors and the Mexican military. It's just not in any of the cartels' business interests to bring this kind of scrutiny to its operations. Any short-term benefit with a terrorist organization would be offset by increased measures against the cartels from the United States.

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<sup>25</sup> Lanzante, *The Relationship Between Criminal and Terrorist Organizations and Human Smuggling*, 74.

<sup>26</sup> See letter addressed to The Honorable Hillary Rodham Clinton, from the U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Homeland Security, dated April 27, 2011. The letter requests the Secretary include certain Mexican drug cartels as FTOs which would increase authorities for law enforcement in their fight against the cartels. Available at: <http://homeland.house.gov/sites/homeland.house.gov/files/04.29.11%20McCaul%20DoS%20Sec%20%20Letter.pdf>

## AL QAEDA'S MODUS OPERANDI

Divergent objectives may not be the only cause for divergence among the cartels and al Qaeda. Under deeper analysis, it is not necessarily in al Qaeda's interest or modus operandi to collaborate with the Mexican cartels. Both share an interest in accessing the United States; however, al Qaeda's approach stresses legal entry.

Historically, al Qaeda has conducted its attacks in three phases. During the initial phase of its operations, al Qaeda tries to recruit English-speaking individuals with visas, residency permits, or citizenship in western countries. Next, al Qaeda trains and deploys in safe havens such as Afghanistan, Pakistan, Yemen, and Somalia. In the final phase, al Qaeda coordinates, supports, and directs operations while the operatives are on the ground in targeted countries.<sup>27</sup> al Qaeda's operations require the strictest security and compartmentalization. Because of this, they tend not to collaborate with outside entities, including criminal organizations.

In nearly all cases, al Qaeda operatives have "clean" papers and enter the target countries legally. Surreptitious or illegal entries are not the preferred means of entry. This could compromise operations if an operative is picked up on an innocent charge such as a faulty tail light. A conclusion reached by the 9/11 Commission found no evidence of the hijackers entering or trying to enter the United States surreptitiously.<sup>28</sup> This is also true of more recent attempted attacks in the United States and Europe.

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<sup>27</sup> Critical Threats. "How al Qaeda Prepares Attacks against the West: What the July 7-8 Rollup Revealed." Accessed October 3, 2011. <http://www.criticalthreats.org/print/1579>.

<sup>28</sup> National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, ("Entry of the 9/11 Hijackers into the United States: Staff Statement No. 1."), 1. Accessed September 13, 2011. [http://www.9-11commission.gov/staff\\_statements/staff\\_statement\\_1.pdf](http://www.9-11commission.gov/staff_statements/staff_statement_1.pdf).

Could there be operatives that crossed the southern border that are not on the “radar screen”? Certainly it may be possible, but many law enforcement agents don’t believe this to be the case. If this were occurring, we would be aware of it through some evidence.<sup>29</sup> To date, not one al Qaeda operative has been apprehended at the U.S.-Mexican border. In 2008, the Department of Homeland Security documented 791,568 apprehensions at the southern border. Approximately 1,300 originated from special interest countries where al Qaeda is active, such as Pakistan, Afghanistan, Yemen, and Saudi Arabia.<sup>30</sup> However, none could be identified as an al Qaeda operative. Security expert Sylvia Longmire acknowledges vulnerabilities along the U.S.-Mexican border; however, there are far more agents, police, and electronic devices than at any time in history. If an operative wished to enter illegally, Longmire points to a path of less resistance along the U.S.-Canadian border.<sup>31</sup>

## ORGANIZATIONAL TRANSFORMATIONS

Over the last decade, both al Qaeda and the Mexican cartels have transformed greatly. The power and influence of al Qaeda has declined while it has been under constant pursuit by the United States and its allies. Conversely, the Mexican cartels collectively have increased their power, influence, and profits. Evolution among the two entities will most likely hinder collaboration.

In the 1980s, the Mexican cartels were not much more than a cluster of gangs that facilitated the transfer of drugs through Mexico. They have evolved beyond mere street gangs into sophisticated and complex criminal organizations. This metamorphosis is best

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<sup>29</sup> Lanzante, *The Relationship Between Criminal and Terrorist Organizations and Human Smuggling*, 74.

<sup>30</sup> Chelsea Schilling. "Foreign 'Terrorists' Breach U.S. Border." *WorldNetDaily*. Accessed October 3, 2011. <http://www.wnd.com/?pageId=156441>.

<sup>31</sup> Sylvia Longmire, "Terrorist Infiltration of the US: Are We Looking at the Wrong Border? ." *Borderland Beat*. Accessed September 25, 2011. <http://www.borderlandbeat.com/2011/05/terrorist-infiltration-of-us-are-we.html>.



described by U.S. Army War College professor and Central American expert Max Manwaring as second and third generation gangs. Second generation gangs are better organized for business and commercial gain, possess a centralized leadership, and all the while focus on drug trafficking and market protection.<sup>32</sup> As cartels approach third generation, they mature organizationally, broaden their markets, and develop sophisticated transnational business relationships. They inevitably challenge the deteriorated nation state and acquire political power.<sup>33</sup>

An unwillingness to collaborate with al Qaeda is a direct result born from the evolution into second and third generation cartels. The risk is simply too great at this stage of a cartels' development. Whatever amount a terrorist organization could bribe the cartels to house or smuggle an operative pales in comparison to the profit and power generated by the cartels' illicit businesses. Their operations are too sophisticated to engage potentially damaging alliances.

Conversely, al Qaeda has devolved into a less centralized organization. Al Qaeda as it exists today comprises the core, affiliates or like-minded groups, and inspires nonaffiliated cells or individuals.<sup>34</sup> The al Qaeda core still provides spiritual guidance for operations and recruitment, but has become less operationally active. Non-core actors may try and develop relationships with Mexican drug cartels but most likely lack the sophistication to create long-lasting alliances. In 2005, Honduran diplomat Carlos Cruz doubted a likelihood of relations between al Qaeda and Central American Maras, because the gangs lacked centralized

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<sup>32</sup>Kindt, Post, and Schneider. *The World's Most Threatening Terrorist Networks and Criminal Gangs*, 212-13.

<sup>33</sup> *Idid.*, 213.

<sup>34</sup> Rick Nelson, and Thomas A. Sanderson. *A Threat Transformed: al Qaeda and Associated Movements in 2011*. (Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2011), 14-17. Accessed October 3, 2011. [http://csis.org/files/publication/110203\\_Nelson\\_AThreatTransformed\\_web.pdf](http://csis.org/files/publication/110203_Nelson_AThreatTransformed_web.pdf).

decision-making mechanisms.<sup>35</sup> The arguments he used for the Maras are just as applicable for the al Qaeda-inspired nonaffiliated cells and individuals.

## CONCLUSION

When studying the question of potential cooperation between al Qaeda and Mexican drug cartels, one must realize the complexity of the issue. On the surface, it appears there is an obvious linkage; however, under further scrutiny, the lack of a “smoking gun” becomes evident. To best utilize its limited resources in Central America, the United States must understand that a potentially complex relationship and a long-term alliance between the cartels and al Qaeda is highly unlikely because of the antithetical and divergent, strategic end states and operational objectives.

The establishment of a Caliphate governed by Shari law is al Qaeda’s overall strategic end state. Its primary motivation is guided by ideology and has a political goal. Mexican drug cartels are motivated by profit and survival at any cost. While cartels use terrorist methods, their motives are almost exclusively business related. Their strategic objectives lack ideology and political ends. Accordingly, al Qaeda seeks to achieve operational objectives, such as the destruction of Western economies, which are detrimental to cartels’ strategic goals.

Over the last decade both organizations have undergone a series of transformations. For the most part, al Qaeda has been weakened as a result of the relentless pursuit by the United States. The organization has devolved into a decentralized entity. Conversely, the

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<sup>35</sup> Cruz, Carlos Mauricio Pineda. "Al-Qaeda's Unlikely Allies in Central America." *Terrorism Monitor* 3, no. 1 (2005) Accessed September 21, 2011. [http://www.jamestown.org/programs/gta/single/?tx\\_ttnews%5Btt\\_news%5D=27378&tx\\_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=180&no\\_cache=1](http://www.jamestown.org/programs/gta/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=27378&tx_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=180&no_cache=1).

cartels in the aggregate have become more sophisticated, powerful, and profitable. They have emerged as “second” and possibly “third” generation gangs. Because of this, any collaboration with terrorist organizations becomes too risky when weighed against their long-term strategic goals. When examined in their entirety and in relation to goals, objectives, and the operational environment, it is clear that al Qaeda and the Mexican drug cartels will not form a long-term alliance.

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