

# Op-Ed: The Criminals South of the Border: Lessons from Mexico

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Authorities have no consistent or reliable data on the Transnational Criminal Organizations (TCO)-gang phenomenon in Mexico. Nevertheless, the TCO-gang phenomenon in that country is acknowledged to be large, complex, and increasingly violent. In addition, the gang situation is known to be different in the north (along the U.S. border) than it is in the south (along the Guatemala-Belize borders). Second, the phenomenon is also different in the areas between the northern and southern borders of Mexico. Third, there is a formidable gang presence known to exist throughout the entire country (regardless of the questionable accuracy of the data estimating the size and extent of the gang presence), and—given the weakness of the national political and police institutions—criminality has considerable opportunity to prosper. <sup>1</sup> As a result, the rate of homicides along the northern and southern borders is considered epidemic (e.g., “worse than Iraq”),<sup>2</sup> and Mexico has the highest incidence of kidnapping in the world.<sup>3</sup> Finally, violent TCO-gang activity in Mexico clearly threatens the national stability and sovereignty of the state, and the personal security of the citizenry.<sup>4</sup>

## Organization.

The gangs operating on the northern border of Mexico are long-time, well-established, “generational” (that is, consisting of Mexican grandfathers, sons, and grandsons) organizations with 40-to-50 year histories. There are, reportedly, at least 24 different gangs operating in the city of Nuevo Laredo and 320 active gangs operating within the city of Juarez—with an estimated 17,000 members. The best-known gangs in the north are the Azteca, Mexicles, and Zeta organizations, whose members have been known to work as hired guns and drug runners for the major cartels operating in the area.

The major cartels include “the big four”—Juarez (aka Vicente Carrillo Fuentes organization), Gulf, Sinaloa, and Tijuana (aka Arellano Felix organization) cartels, which operate generally in the north. Additionally, the Beltran-Leyva, (aka Cartel Pacifico Sur and Independent Cartel of Acapulco) La Familia Michoacana (aka Knights Templar), and the Zetas organizations must also be acknowledged as important players in the context of the Mexican TCO-gang phenomenon. As an example, the Zetas appear to be in the process of becoming a cartel in their own right, and have launched an aggressive expansion strategy into areas as far away as Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador.<sup>5</sup> The Sinaloa federation, however, is the only cartel that appears to be growing.<sup>6</sup>

Despite the fact that most of the reported violence is concentrated in three northern states—Chihuahua, Sinaloa, and Baja California—the Juarez cartel maintains a presence in 21 of the 30 Mexican states; the Gulf Cartel is found in 13 states; the Sinaloa Cartel has located itself in 17 states; and remnants of the reportedly disintegrating Tijuana Cartel (Areliano Feliz) are present in 15 states. There are also the Colima, Oaxaca, and Valencia cartels, which generally operate in the southern parts of Mexico. The Mexican Mafia (EME) further complicates the Mexican TCO-gang organizational picture.<sup>7</sup> At one time, all gangs operating south of Bakersfield, CA, and into northern Mexico had to pay homage to and take orders from EME. That is no longer a rigid requirement. The Central American Maras are known to have broken that agreement as early as 2005.<sup>8</sup>

More specifically, the Central American Mara Salvatrucha 13 and Mara Salvatrucha 18 gangs (referred to as the “Maras” collectively) have made significant inroads into Mexican territory and appear to be working as mercenaries for and/or competing effectively with Mexican TCO-gangs. In the south, along the Belize-Guatemala borders—the Maras have gained control of illegal immigrant and drug trafficking moving north through Mexico to the United States. Between the northern and southern borders, an ad hoc mix of up to 15,000 members of the various Mexican gangs and Central American Maras are reported to be operating in more than 20 of Mexico’s 30 states. Additionally, members and former members of the elite Guatemalan Special Forces (Kaibiles) have been recruited as mercenaries by the Mexican Zetas private army.<sup>9</sup> Each of the above entities appears to be fighting against each other, against the government, and against the citizenry to achieve their various commercial and political agendas.

## **Activities.**

Virtually all of the gangs operating in Mexico have flourished under the protection and mercenary income provided by larger and older TCO (cartel) networks. The basis for those alliances is the illegal drug trade that is credited with the transshipment of 60 to 90 percent of the cocaine that enters the United States. In addition to trafficking in drugs, as noted above, gangs operating in Mexico are engaged in trafficking in human beings and weapons and are responsible for kidnappings, robberies, extortion, assassinations, and myriad other illicit, high profit-generating activities (e.g., “everything from narcotics to avocados”).<sup>10</sup> On another political-psychological level of activity, gangs operating in Mexico are also engaged in intimidating and killing entertainers, journalists, teachers, bureaucrats, candidates for political office, office holders, and anyone else who may not be sympathetic to their causes.<sup>11</sup>

As a consequence, the TCO-gang phenomenon represents challenges to the authority and sovereignty of the Mexican government and those of its neighbors on three significant levels. First, murder, kidnapping, intimidation, corruption, and impunity give the cartels and gangs a de facto veto in the political process and undermines democracy. Second, by violently imposing their influence over bureaucrats and elected officials of the state, the TCO-gang phenomenon compromises the ability of the state

to perform its legitimizing national security and public service functions. Third, by neutralizing (making irrelevant) government and taking control of portions of a given national territory and performing some of the tasks of government (establishing a criminal version of law and order), the TCO-gang phenomenon erodes state sovereignty (control of the national territory and the people in it) and replaces it with a criminal concept of law and order. In this context, the cartels and their gang allies create quasi-states within a state, and criminal leaders control these areas as they wish. <sup>12</sup> Lastly, these challenges combine to create a basis for state failure and/or a revolutionary situation. <sup>13</sup>

## **Motives.**

Even though commercial enrichment remains the primary motive for TCO-gang phenomenon challenges to state stability, security, and sovereignty in Mexico, the strategic architecture of the major organizations within that phenomenon resembles that of a political or ideological insurgency. Nevertheless, the primary objective of the cartels, criminal gangs, and private armies such as the Zetas is not to depose the Mexican government. Rather, the objective is to coerce the government and the citizenry into allowing them a level of freedom of movement and action (impunity) that provides for the achievement of significant self-enrichment. Again, this defines war as well as criminal insurgency. That is, the violent coercion of a given political, economic, and social system in order to compel it to accept one's will. <sup>14</sup>

## **General Effects.**

This convoluted array of gangs and TCOs—Central American Maras, Guatemalan Kaibiles, Mexican Zetas, and other enforcer gangs, Mexican drug cartels, and the Mexican Mafia—appear to have created a high level of violence and criminal anarchy throughout most of Mexico. <sup>15</sup> As a result, democracy is questionable and the nation-state's presence and authority (sovereignty) is at best questionable in over more than 980 "Zones of Impunity" (criminal free-states) that exist throughout large geographical portions of Mexico, and 17 of the 22 departments in Guatemala. <sup>16</sup> This is a feudal environment defined by extreme violence, patronage, bribes, kickbacks, cronyism, impunity, ethnic exclusion, and personal whim. <sup>17</sup> That environment of violence and criminal anarchy, in turn, has been known to define the state failure process and/or a narco-criminal state. <sup>18</sup>

## **Endnotes**

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