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Mexico: A Mosaic Cartel War

by Paul Rexton Kan

A situation of high-intensity crime does not mean that a war is not occurring in Mexico. But it is a war of a different kind. In fact, there are several conflicts occurring at once that blend into each other. There is the conflict of cartels among each other, the conflict within cartels, cartels against the Mexican state, cartels and gangs against the Mexican people and gangs versus gangs. When combined, they form a mosaic cartel war that creates an atmosphere “somewhere between Al Capone’s Chicago and an outright war”.¹ It is not an irregular or regular war; neither is it a small war nor a general war, nor a limited war, nor a total war, nor any of the familiar appellations given to armed conflicts fought by conventional militaries. And, finally it is not “a war about nothing.”² It is a multidimensional, multiparty and multi-location armed conflict fought among criminal groups over what are essentially criminal goals; the groups are resisted by the state while their goals are rejected by it, making the state a party to the conflict.

Because it is a war of a different kind, the targets of the cartels have been wide ranging—from police to journalists, from clinics to discos, military bases to children’s birthday parties. “Criminal cleansing” has occurred in Mexican towns where cartels have ordered residents to leave or face possible death. A mosaic cartel war is complex in its manifestation and confounding to traditional military and law enforcement solutions. As a result, there is great difficulty for governments on either side of the border to fight this type of war and to bring the violence under control. As RT Naylor argues, “the violence of the state is often a response to the violence of the criminal; the reverse is also true. And once the interactive cycle of violence is set in motion, it may be impossible to separate action from reaction, or to say for sure if the reduction in the use of violence on one side will lead to the same on the other.”³ This frustration over cause and effect is part of the reason that many have used inappropriate labels from other types of conflicts to describe the situation in Mexico. An alternative conception is required to more accurately describe and assess the current outbreak of a mosaic cartel war in Mexico, its dynamics and its potential end.

The Violence of High-Intensity Crime: War of All against All

The lumping together of insurgents, terrorists and organized criminal syndicates under the overly broad category of non-state actors adds little analytical clarity. Defining a term in opposition to another term—such as *non-state* as opposed to *state*—is conceptually murky. Many disparate groups can be classified as non-state actors, ranging from multinational corporations to civic organizations. Adding the qualifier of “violent” does little to ease the confusion because violent non-state actors can include sea going pirates as well as private

¹ Brands, 11.

² Ed Vulliamy, “Killing for Kudos”, *The Guardian online*, 7 February 2010, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2010/feb/07/mexico-drug-war> (accessed on 5 July 2010).

³ RT Naylor, “Violence and Illegal Economic Activity”, *Crime, Law and Social Change* (September 2009), 232.

military companies. The term “network” is more descriptive than non-state actor. It refers to the structure and operation of a group, but once again it encompasses a wide variety of groups that are both legal and illegal. The term “dark network” focuses on how non-hierarchical, dispersed social structures are used for criminal ends.⁴ While a useful improvement, it fails to capture many of the dynamics and pressures that the actors face in dark networks and why they choose to use violence.

To sharpen the focus, it is important to understand why differing groups are organized and under what conditions they use collective violence in order to achieve a particular goal or set of goals. In Mexico, high-intensity crime is occurring due to a war waged by *violent entrepreneurs who seek to prevail over one another and the state in a hypercompetitive illegal market in order to control it or a particular portion of it*. Violent entrepreneurs are mostly private groups that create “a set of organizational solutions and action strategies enabling organized force (or organized violence) to be converted into money or other valuable assets on a permanent basis....Violent entrepreneurship is a means of increasing the private income of the wielders of force through ongoing relations of exchange with other groups that own other resources.”⁵ Cartels are a type of violent entrepreneur because they derive their income from the use of force to prevail in private activities that are highly circumscribed or prohibited by the state. For violent entrepreneurs, the use of force is the extension of private profit making, rather than the extension of a political agenda. Violence itself is a means, not an end; it is “a resource, not the final product.”⁶ As a resource, violence is used by cartels to insure that the product, which is illegal in nature, is delivered to its client base so that profits can be derived.

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⁴ Jorg Raab and H. Brinton Milward, “Dark Networks as Problems”, *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory*, (October 2003).

⁵ Vadim Volkov, *Violent Entrepreneurs*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002), 27-28.

⁶ Gambetta, *The Sicilian Mafia*, 2.