

HAVE THE MEXICAN DRUG CARTELS EVOLVED INTO
A TERRORIST INSURGENCY?

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Homeland Security Studies

by

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The opinions and conclusions expressed herein are those of the student author and do not necessarily represent the views of the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College or any other governmental agency. (References to this study should include the foregoing statement.)

ABSTRACT

HAVE THE MEXICAN DRUG CARTELS EVOLVED INTO A TERRORIST INSURGENCY?, by Todd A. Barnes, 85 pages.

The escalation of violence between rival drug cartels, street gangs, and the government within Mexico has created concern in both Mexico and the United States. The fluid situation surrounding the Mexican drug war has led to much speculation about how to classify the powerful drug cartels conducting it. There is literature debating whether the cartels are merely a criminal enterprise or whether the cartels represent a new terrorist insurgency in Mexico. Utilizing multiple definitions of “terrorism” and “insurgency,” this study developed a conceptual model to compare and contrast with the activities of the drug cartels. The primary conclusion drawn is that the drug cartels do not represent an insurgency, rather they continue to operate as criminal organizations that occasionally use terrorist tactics.

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ACRONYMS

PAN	National Action Party
PRI	Institutional Revolutionary Party
TCO	Transnational Criminal Organization

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Introduction and Background

Given that Mexico shares a nearly 2,000-mile land border with the United States, it is logical that Mexico has long been used as a transportation corridor for illegal goods to be exported into the U.S. Prior to the rise of powerful Mexican drug traffickers, Colombian drug cartels formed business partnerships with traffickers in Mexico to transport Colombian narcotics into the U.S. market. In the 1990s, the Colombian government was successful in capturing most of the top leaders of their cartels and undermined the power of Colombian drug trafficking organizations. While drug trafficking still exists in Colombia, the Colombian government has held the reemergence of powerful cocaine cartels in check.¹

In the aftermath of the toppling of the Colombian cartels, Mexican trafficking organizations were able to expand their operations and became increasingly involved in the distribution of illegal narcotics, greatly enhancing their profitability.² As the Mexican cartels grew in strength in the 1990s, the controlling federal political party, the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), seemed to have an implicit arrangement of non-enforcement with regard to the drug cartels.³ The practice of law enforcement looking the other way allowed the cartels to solidify their position within the drug trade network in the Western Hemisphere.⁴ However, that began to change following the defeat of the PRI and the election of the National Action Party's (PAN) Vicente Fox in 2000.⁵ Fox tended to be less amenable to letting the cartels operate with impunity. The result was a growing trend of violence surrounding the drug trade.⁶ By 2006, newly elected President Felipe

Calderon of the PAN aggressively increased efforts to combat the Mexican drug cartels. To the President, the cartels were a public safety threat and undermined the rule of law within Mexico. Beginning with Operation Michoacán, Calderon confronted the cartels head-on with 7,000 federal military troops.⁷ Since then, the number of Mexican federal troops employed to fight the cartels has risen along with the number of deaths and level of violence.

According to many sources, the number of deaths attributable to the drug war exceeds 60,000.⁸ A growing number of those deaths are the result of brutal violence. Beheadings, public executions, and assassinations are becoming more common. Calderon's strategy has been to target the heads of the cartels. Once the government removed these leaders, he surmised, the organizations would collapse and fade away. However, that has not always been the case during the drug war. At times, when the head of a cartel is eliminated, there is an uptick in violence. This is typically the result of fights for control within the organization or competing cartels attempting to control the previous cartel's territory.⁹

The United States naturally has great interest in the drug war. Mexico is a significant commercial trading partner and the two countries share a lengthy international border. To the U.S., Mexico is the third largest trading partner after Canada and China.¹⁰ Legal goods and services exchanged with Mexico totaled \$500 billion in 2011.¹¹ Illicit drug trafficking between the two neighboring countries also amounts to several billion dollars.¹² However, the negative impact of drug abuse and trafficking in the U.S. represents a drain on a variety of U.S. resources. The U.S. National Drug Intelligence Center (NDIC) estimates that the annual cost to the criminal justice system to handle drug

related crimes in the U.S. exceeds \$56 billion and the loss of labor market productivity tops \$120 billion.¹³

Thus, there are enormous security implications for the United States if Mexico becomes a failed state as a result of the drug war or the extreme brutality occurring in Mexico spills over the border. Some sources offer anecdotal evidence of drug war spillover violence occurring within U.S. cities. Typically, these cities are geographically close to the Mexican border. For example, NDIC in a 2009 report attributed a majority of violent crimes and property crimes in Phoenix, Arizona, to the drug trade.¹⁴ In the same report, the NDIC stated that drug related kidnappings in Phoenix occurred in 2008 at the rate of nearly one per day, and this number was likely underreported.¹⁵

In response to this escalation in violence, many within the U.S. have called for the use of the U.S. military to help secure America's southwest border. As recently as 2010, President Barack Obama authorized the deployment of 1,200 National Guard troops to assist in securing international border areas in California, Arizona, New Mexico, and Texas. However, these short-term deployments to the border region frequently do not satisfy the most vocal pundits who advocate combating the issue with military might. The result is there are still requests for added military presence at the border. These advocates seek a permanent military presence or a more proactive U.S. military policy to curb the illegal flow of drugs from Mexico into the U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton initiated much of this debate during her remarks in 2010 at the Council on Foreign Relations in Washington, D.C. when she described the Mexican drug cartels as a security threat that was morphing into an insurgency.¹⁶

Taking this even a step further, U.S. Congressman and Chairman of the Homeland Security Oversight and Investigations Subcommittee Michael McCaul of Texas introduced congressional legislation in April 2011 that would specifically label the Mexican drug cartels as “terrorists.”¹⁷ Fearing a continued increase in violence both in Mexico and possibly in the U.S. near the border areas, McCaul hoped that a redesignation of the cartels would offer additional legal avenues to assist in fighting the Mexican drug cartels’ influence in the U.S.¹⁸ Also, the terrorist label could set the stage for an increased level of U.S. military intervention domestically and possibly even within Mexico.¹⁹

Echoing the sentiments of Clinton and McCaul, Connie Mack of Florida, a U.S. Congressman and Chairman of the Western Hemisphere Subcommittee, recently described the Mexican drug cartels criminals who create an atmosphere of total anarchy on both sides of the border.²⁰ To restore peace and order to the international border area Mack introduced in Congress the Enhanced Border Security Act of 2011. His proposal called for working closely with Mexico to pursue a coordinated and targeted counterinsurgency effort between the two nations against the drug cartels.²¹

Behind the proposed legislation from McCaul and Mack is access to additional tools to deal with the problems created by the drug cartels. According to U.S. law, the Secretary of State, in consultation with the Attorney General and Secretary of the Treasury, makes recommendations to Congress regarding any official nomination foreign organizations as terrorists.²² Once Congress confirms the terrorist label, federal law requires U.S. financial institutions to freeze the funds in any account linked to the terrorist organization.²³ In addition, it allows the U.S. to limit their financial and travel interests as well as impose harsh punishment for anyone who provides material support to

the terrorist designated cartels.²⁴ The use of these tools also opens the door to utilizing the U.S. armed forces in some capacity. Texas Governor Rick Perry suggested this option while on the presidential campaign trail in 2012 when he inferred that the American military might be required to work in Mexico to destroy the cartels.²⁵

These senior American officials have outlined their stance on the Mexican drug war and some have proposed legislation to deal with the issue. Since their public remarks, there has been a flood of interest from law enforcement, politicians, think tanks, academics, and journalists who have weighed in on this debate. That is the reason behind this study as well. Ultimately, this thesis will attempt to answer the issue at hand: Have the Mexican drug cartels evolved into a terrorist insurgency?

Key Terms

The following list encompasses definitions of key terms, locations, and organizations used within this study. While some terms may have more than one possible definition, the definitions that follow will define the terms as used within the context of this thesis.

Cartels: Powerful Mexican criminal organizations that are known to dominate the illegal drug trade from Mexico into the U.S. This term is used synonymously with drug trafficking organizations.

Counterdrug: Those active measures taken to detect, monitor, and counter the production, trafficking, and use of illegal drugs.²⁶ This is also known as counternarcotics.

Counterinsurgency: Comprehensive civilian and military efforts taken to defeat an insurgency and to address any core grievances.²⁷ Counterinsurgency is primarily political and incorporates a wide range of activities.²⁸

Counterterrorism: Actions taken directly against terrorist networks and indirectly to influence and render global and regional environments inhospitable to terrorist networks.²⁹

Drug Smuggling: The act of covertly and illegally transporting drugs across the international border separating the U.S. and Mexico. This is also commonly referred to as drug trafficking.

Drug Trafficking: U.S. federal code does not define drug trafficking, however the U.S. Sentencing Commission does refer to drug trafficking offenses as offenses against laws that prohibit the manufacture, import, export, distribution, possession, or dispensing of a controlled substance or counterfeit substance.³⁰

Institutional Revolutionary Party: Mexican national political party that dominated politics throughout the second half of the twentieth century. Also known as PRI.

Mérida Initiative: A financial assistance package from the United States given to Mexico to assist with the drug war. This plan was in effect from 2008 to 2012 and dispersed \$1.4 billion.³¹

National Action Party: Mexican national political party of recent presidents Vicente Fox and Felipe Calderón. Also known as PAN.

Plazas: Geographic zones of control to include smuggling routes used to facilitate the illegal movement of drugs from Mexico into the U.S.

Transnational Criminal Organization (TCO): Associations of individuals who operate transnationally for the purpose of obtaining power, influence, monetary, and/or commercial gains, wholly or in part by illegal means, while protecting their activities through a pattern of corruption and/ or violence, or while protecting their illegal activities

through a transnational organizational structure and the exploitation of transnational commerce or communication mechanisms.³² This is also known as transnational organized crime.

Limitations and Delimitations

The most significant limitation of this study is the constantly changing nature of the Mexican drug war. Worldwide media outlets routinely provide updates on arrests of cartel leaders, battles over smuggling routes, and many other facets of the on-going drug war. While this study is based on recent sources, the sheer volume of information updated daily necessitates a stopping point for research. As a result, the information in this paper is current as of 1 December 2012. That is the date of the most recent transfer of presidential power from Felipe Calderón to the current president, Enrique Peña Nieto, and it provides a logical ending for this study.

There are also several delimitations in this study. The first delimitation is the starting point for the period researched. Significant documentation regarding the topic of smuggling goods from Mexico into the United States dates back to the era of Prohibition of alcohol in the 1920s and 1930s and continues to the present day. Similarly, the topic of drug smuggling routes out of Mexico dates back to the 1960s. However, it was not until the 1990s, following the destruction of the powerful Colombian drug cartels that Mexican cartels became key drug traffickers in the Western Hemisphere. Therefore, 1990 is the starting point for research of this paper.

The second delimitation is a supply side only focus. In other words, there is no discussion of U.S. demand for illegal drugs from Mexico. Addressing that issue would

greatly increase the size and scope of the paper and would not assist in focusing the study to answer the research questions.

There is a third delimitation regarding the type of sources utilized for this study. All sources used are unclassified and openly available. There are no “law enforcement sensitive,” “for official use only,” “classified,” or any other restricted materials used for research of this thesis.

Finally, a fourth limitation is this thesis is not intended to be a policy paper. It does not provide recommendations for U.S. or Mexican policy. The intent is not to provide exhaustive information but rather to inform the public debate on a current topic and provide a framework for further discussion. In other words, the nature of this study is analytical, rather than prescriptive.

¹Natalia Cote-Muñoz, “Mexico’s Drug War: Not Another Colombia,” *Council on Hemispheric Affairs*, <http://www.coha.org/mexicos-drug-war-not-another-colombia> (accessed 11 November 2012).

²June S. Beittel, *Mexico’s Drug Trafficking Organizations: Source and Scope of the Rising Violence* (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 3 August 2012), 5-8.

³*Ibid.*, 6-7.

⁴*Ibid.*

⁵*Ibid.*

⁶*Ibid.*, 7-8.

⁷Agnes Gereben Schaefer, Benjamin Bahney, and K. Jack Riley, *Security in Mexico: Implication for U.S. Policy Options* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2001), 35.

⁸Justin Peele, “The Case of Mexico: A Hard Pill to Swallow,” *Small Wars Journal*, <http://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/the-case-of-mexico-a-hard-pill-to-swallow> (accessed 14 October 2012).

⁹June S. Beittel, *Mexico's Drug Related Violence* (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 27 May 2009), 11-12.

¹⁰United States Department of State, "U.S.-Mexico: Trade and Investment at a Glance," <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2010/05/142020.htm> (accessed 30 December 2012).

¹¹Office of the United States Trade Representative, "Mexico," <http://www.ustr.gov/countries-regions/americas/mexico> (accessed 22 December 2012).

¹²United States Department of Justice, National Drug Intelligence Center, *National Drug Threat Assessment 2011* (Washington, DC: NDIC Publication, 2011), 3.

¹³*Ibid.*, 4.

¹⁴United States Department of Justice, National Drug Intelligence Center, High Intensity Drug Trafficking Area Program, *Drug Market Analysis 2009* (Washington, DC: NDIC Publication, 2009), 18.

¹⁵*Ibid.*

¹⁶Tom A. Peter, "Mexico denies Hillary Clinton's 'insurgency' comparison," *The Christian Science Monitor*, 9 September 2010, <http://www.csmonitor.com/World/terrorism-security/2010/0909/Mexico-denies-Hillary-Clinton-s-insurgency-comparison> (accessed 20 December 2012).

¹⁷Michael McCaul, "McCaul Seeks to Classify Mexican Drug Cartels as Terrorists," 30 March 2011, <http://mccaul.house.gov/index.cfm?sectionid=29&itemid=1161> (accessed 3 October 2012).

¹⁸*Ibid.*

¹⁹*Ibid.*

²⁰Connie Mack, "Enhanced Border Security Act," 10 November 2011, http://mack.house.gov/index.cfm?p=PressReleases&ContentRecord_id=f9870754 (accessed 4 October 2012).

²¹*Ibid.*

²²Brett O'Donnell and David H. Gray, "The Mexican Cartels: Not Just Criminals but Terrorists," *Global Security Studies* 3, no. 1 (Winter 2012): 34-36.

²³*Ibid.*

²⁴*Ibid.*

²⁵James Poulos, "Gateway Interventions," *Foreign Policy*, 10 November 2011, http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2011/11/09/gateway_interventions (accessed 2 December 2012).

²⁶*Ibid.*, 70.

²⁷*Ibid.*, 71.

²⁸United States Department of Defense, Joint Publication (JP) 3-24, *Counterinsurgency Operations* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2009), I-2.

²⁹Joint Chiefs of Staff, Joint Publication(JP) 1-02, *Department of Defense Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, November 2010, as amended through January 2011), 73.

³⁰United States Sentencing Commission, "United States Sentencing Guidelines," <http://www.ussc.gov/index.html> (accessed 12 January 2013).

³¹Cory Molzahn, Viridiana Rios, and David A. Shirk, "Drug Violence in Mexico: Data and Analysis Through 2011," <http://justiceinmexico.files.wordpress.com/2012/03/2012-tbi-drugviolence.pdf> (accessed 3 October 2012), 23.

³²Office of the President of the United States, *Strategy to Combat Transnational Organized Crime* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2011).

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of this research paper is to determine if the Mexican drug cartels have evolved into terrorist insurgents. The intense situation of the drug war in Mexico has sparked speculation about how to label the powerful drug cartels. A wealth of material exists on this topic; however, the Mexican drug war is a fluid and dynamic situation that changes daily. As a result, many publications on the subject become quickly outdated. Part of the research challenge for this thesis has been to filter through many publications to find the ones that are the most relevant to the current situation in Mexico. Furthermore, due to the potential political nature of the topic, the reputation of sources must also guide decisions on their use. Recent published works, which come from established institutions and governmental agencies, comprise the bulk of the source material used within this paper.

Existing MMAS Theses

Theses from the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College are noteworthy in that they offer a glimpse of how other recent students have approached this topic. In 2010, U.S. Marshal David Campbell discussed the relative strength and stability of the Mexican state in his thesis “Evaluating the Impact of Drug Trafficking Organizations on the Stability of the Mexican State.” He concluded the Mexican state was resilient enough to withstand the violence of the drug cartels, but suggests a U.S. focus on drug demand reduction to further assist in the drug war.¹ The following year, U.S. Army Major Terry Neil Hilderbrand offered his understanding of the social and economic conditions within

Mexico that led to the current situation. In his thesis, “Drug Trafficking within Mexico: A Law Enforcement Issue or Insurgency,” he concludes that the outline of an insurgency is apparent within Mexico.² In 2012, U.S. Army Major Mark Wade published “Defeating Mexico’s Drug Trafficking Organizations: The Range of Military Operations in Mexico.” His premise is that the U.S. military is the only tool capable of satisfactorily defeating the drug cartels and protecting the southern border of the U.S. He recommends a variety of U.S. military operations within Mexico that range from simple security cooperation to major land operations to defeat the cartels and stabilize Mexico.³

Defining Characteristics of Terrorist Insurgency

Definitions of terrorism and insurgency abound and cross many fields of study. Unfortunately, there is no accepted universal definition of terrorism or insurgency. Frequently, writers of published works use these words interchangeably along with terms such as guerrilla warfare and revolutionary.⁴ Much of the literature surrounding the Mexican drug cartels has a singular focus on the insurgency debate. Typically, these debates gravitate toward the level of violence in Mexico as a determining factor. However, many publications fail to adequately define terms such as insurgency or terrorist. Without a foundation of defining terms, there appears to be little consensus within this field of scholarship. In an attempt to answer this paper’s primary research question, it is of paramount importance to establish a working model based on the defining characteristics of a terrorist insurgency. In doing so, this paper will help to fill a gap of understanding within this field of discipline.

In order to characterize terrorist insurgency, this paper will use domestic and international governmental agency definitions as well as definitions from recognized

experts in the field. For domestic governmental agencies, the Department of Justice and the Central Intelligence Agency offer comprehensive definitions. The Department of the Army also provides significant discussion of insurgencies in Field Manual (FM) 3-24, *Counterinsurgency*. Internationally, both the United Nations Security Council and the United Nations General Assembly have both provided definitions of terrorism.

Outside of governmental agencies and organizations, several publications discuss terrorism and insurgency. There are three books that are particularly well known in the field and should be of great benefit in providing useable definitions. The first is Bard O'Neill's *Insurgency and Terrorism: From Revolution to Apocalypse*. O'Neill, a professor of international affairs and the director of studies of insurgency and revolution at the National War College in Washington, DC, focuses on the nature of insurgencies and their popular support. Ultimately, he provides a framework to understand the diverse and complex nature that identifies each insurgency as unique.⁵

The second key publication comes from a French military officer and scholar who was familiar with insurgencies due to his first hand experiences in China, Indochina, Greece, and Algeria. A pioneer in counterinsurgency studies, David Galula's 1964 book *Counter-Insurgency Warfare: Theory and Practice*, continues to be influential and was frequently a source of information used in the U.S. Army's FM 3-24, *Counterinsurgency*. Galula recognizes that political action is far more important than violent military action in an insurgency.⁶

The third piece of key literature is Bruce Hoffman's *Inside Terrorism*. Hoffman, a senior fellow at the Combating Terrorism Center at the U.S. Military Academy, provides

a broad historical context of terrorism. Moreover, he analyzes the evolution of terrorist motivations, ideologies, and tactics.⁷

History of Mexican Drug Cartels

There is extensive literature on the history and present state of the Mexican drug war and the individual drug cartels. Informative sources can be found in newspapers and blog sites. However, for this study, there are three categories of sources that provided the best and most objective information regarding the drug war and drug cartel history. The first is U.S. government publications. For example, June Beittel, a Latin American Affairs Analyst, wrote two informative works for the Congressional Research Service, which provide useful insights into the background of drug smuggling. Her works *Mexico's Drug Related Violence* and *Mexico's Drug Trafficking Organizations: Source and Scope of the Rising Violence*, published in 2009 and 2012 respectively, identify the major drug cartels and how they have evolved to include current competition for lucrative trafficking routes.⁸ She also identifies key trends in the drug war and provides an evaluation of Mexican government operations designed to combat the cartels.⁹

Other useful government publications came from the now defunct National Drug Intelligence Center, a component of the U.S. Department of Justice. Between 2006 and 2011, this government agency published their very useful *National Drug Threat Assessment*. That publication addressed the impact of the global drug problem as it relates to the U.S. The assessment also provided up to date information on the Mexican government's efforts to combat the cartels.

The second source category consists of independent organizations with a history of publishing quality research. The global intelligence company STRATFOR and the

RAND Corporation offer detailed analysis of the Mexican drug war and its implications for U.S. security. Their publications are valuable for their understanding of the intricacies of cartel operations, the geography of smuggling routes, and the rapidly changing security situation in Mexico. Also within their respective publications, they provide U.S. policy recommendations on how to improve relations with the government of Mexico while curbing the flow of illegal drugs from Mexico.

The final source category is an institute of higher education. The Trans-Border Institute at the University of San Diego maintains a diverse archive of information about the drug cartels, displaced Mexican citizens, violent crimes, and many other items related to Mexican drug smuggling. They have published a series of reports entitled *Drug Violence in Mexico* that cover varying periods. As a whole, these reports offer a glimpse at the evolving nature of the conflict between cartels and various Mexican institutions.

No Insurgency vs Insurgency

Since 11 September 2001, many people have expressed concern that terrorists or potential terrorists could illegally enter the United States via Mexico. Millions of Mexican citizens are estimated to have illegally entered the U.S. since that date. Typically, these immigrants utilize the services of a Mexican smuggling organization in an effort to reach their final destination within the U.S. These organizations are but one branch of a parent drug trafficking organization. Hence, in a post 9/11 world, there has been a great deal of debate about the possibility of a drug cartel smuggling a terrorist into the U.S. However, no credible link could tie any 9/11 terrorists within the U.S. to illegal entries into the U.S. through Mexico. While this debate continues, it was largely

overtaken by a focus on Mexican President Felipe Calderón's war on drugs beginning in 2006.

Much of the debate centers on Mexico's strategy to combat the drug cartels. Discussions often seek to determine if that strategy is sufficient to deal with the problem and how effective it had been. The literature also notes how the level of violence surrounding the drug trade rapidly escalated. The escalation in violence, according to some literature, was the cartels mimicking Middle Eastern insurgent methods such as those from Al Qaida.

Responding to the increasing barbarity of the drug wars, in 2011 U.S. Representative Michael McCaul of Texas pressed Congress and President Obama to classify the drug cartels as foreign terrorist organizations, fearing the drug war violence would spill over into the U.S. Redesignating the cartels as terrorists would give the situation greater political visibility, making it an issue that would demand increased U.S. attention. In addition, it would give the U.S. expanded resource options to assist with the fight against the cartels. Of course, the ultimate resource for any potential future U.S. operations would be the U.S. armed forces.

There are currently two pervasive views on this topic. One suggests the cartels are criminal organizations who are only motivated by economic profit. Therefore, they are not terrorist insurgents because they do not espouse an ideological mission. This school of thought tends to suggest that the Mexican government is winning the war against the cartels and stresses the resilience of legitimate social and political infrastructure within Mexico to deal with this law enforcement problem. In other words, Mexico is not devolving into a failed state. While the rising violence is a concern, they claim it is not

entirely out of line with the level of violence from other organized crime syndicates such as the mafia or the Russian mob.

Phil Williams, the director of the Matthew B. Ridgway Center for International Security Studies at the University of Pittsburgh, is representative of this point of view. In his 2012 article “The Terrorism Debate Over Mexican Drug Trafficking Violence,” Williams asserts that most of the killings in the ongoing drug war are between rival cartels. Admittedly, law enforcement officials also die in the line of duty, but in general, the drug war deaths are confined to those involved in the drug trade. In other words, there is very little indiscriminate killing or direct targeting of innocent civilians.¹⁰ Furthermore, the cartels do not espouse any sort of ideology. There is no advocacy for oppressed peoples or a religious cause. They exist simply to make a profit. Thus, the cartels do not seek to overturn the legitimate Mexican government and insert itself in its place.¹¹ The high level of violence amongst the cartels is simply a tool to intimidate rival cartels and law enforcement officials who could stand in the way of more profits. Williams sees no political message in the use of violence. For these reasons, he concludes that the cartels are not terrorist organizations.

An influential article from Paul Rexton Kan entitled “What We’re Getting Wrong About Mexico” also does not see any evidence of an insurgency within the cartels. Kan, a professor of National Security Studies at the U.S. Army War College in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, insists that the cartels have no negotiable demands, as they would if they were an insurgency.¹² In addition, the cartels are not trying to substitute their own ideology for an existing one or trying to create a new homeland.¹³ Without these factors at the forefront, there is no insurgency, according to Kan. Cartel violence is admittedly

worrisome to Kan. Creating a new term, he labels the brutal crimes “high intensity violence.”¹⁴ However, regardless of the level of violence, he contends the cartels use violence simply to extend their profits with no higher agenda.¹⁵

The opposing school of thought agrees with Representative McCaul and sees the Mexican drug cartels as terrorist insurgent organizations. According to them, the drug cartels are incorporating the same violent methods other terrorist organizations utilize, such as beheadings or dismembering of bodies. Furthermore, this level of violence is often displayed publicly. This is an indication that cartels use violence as a political weapon, just as Al Qaida would do. The drug cartels, according to this line of scholarship, are trying to undermine the legitimate Mexican state and terrorize the general populace. These theorists tend to suggest that the cartels are winning the drug war and that Mexico is following the path of a failed state. Regardless of whether the cartels have an ideology or not, they are acting nearly identical to a traditional terrorist organization and the current methods to combat the cartels are insufficient. Among those who espouse this belief, there is often a sense of urgency to use more resources, and potentially to use the U.S. military, to deal with the terrorist cartels.

Sylvia Longmire, an independent consultant and former law enforcement expert on the Mexican drug cartels and Latin American terrorist groups, is a leading voice within this school. In her 2008 article, co-authored with Air Force Lieutenant John Longmire, “Redefining Terrorism: Why Mexican Drug Trafficking is More than Just Organized Crime,” Longmire contends that due to the cartels’ use of terrorist tactics and drug money to fund violent activity, the cartels are actually more terrorist organizations than criminal cabals. Beyond this reclassification of the cartels, Longmire also finds a

pragmatic reason to redefine the cartels as terrorists. Simply put, she believes that the Mexican drug war is at a stalemate. Neither side is able to subdue the other and the result is a lingering, draining, and unproductive conflict.¹⁶ Placing the classification of terrorist on the cartels allows the U.S. to allocate new resources and tools to the fight.¹⁷ It also opens the door for more aggressive U.S. military involvement on the U.S.-Mexico border and potentially within Mexico itself.¹⁸

Among those that view the cartels as insurgents, the strongest voice comes from John Sullivan, a career police officer with the Los Angeles Sheriff's Department and a Senior Fellow at *Small Wars Journal*. In his recent book, *Mexico's Criminal Insurgency*, Sullivan avers that the drug cartels have evolved beyond organizations having merely economic interests to become political actors. As their power has grown, he identifies the cartels as having morphed into an alternative insurgent society that is eroding and challenging the state of Mexico for legitimacy.¹⁹ They have done this through their key weapon of violence, which is instrumental in communicating its political message.²⁰

These differing schools of thought typically conclude either that the drug cartels should be labeled as terrorist insurgents or they should not be labeled as such. It is clear that the current debate revolves around the question should the cartels be labeled as terrorist insurgents? Such a research question naturally leads to policy recommendations. Nearly all of the current literature commonly offers solutions or at least a path forward to fix the current issue either for the U.S. or for Mexico. This thesis seeks to avoid national policy recommendations. Its purpose is to advance the scholarship by illuminating a slightly different research question. As opposed to discussing should cartels be labeled as

terrorist insurgents, this paper will answer the related but slightly different question of *are the cartels terrorist insurgents?*

¹David R. Campbell, “Evaluating the Impact of Drug Trafficking Organizations on the Stability of the Mexican State” (Master’s Thesis, U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, Fort Leavenworth, KS, 2010).

²Terry Neil Hilderbrand Jr., “Drug Trafficking Within Mexico: A Law Enforcement Issue or Insurgency?” (Master’s Thesis, U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, Fort Leavenworth, KS, 2011).

³Mark J. Wade, “Defeating Mexico’s Drug Trafficking Organizations: The Range of Military Operations in Mexico” (Master’s Thesis, U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, Fort Leavenworth, KS, 2012).

⁴Bard E. O’Neill, *Insurgency and Terrorism: From Revolution to Apocalypse*, 2nd ed. (Dulles: Potomac Books, Inc., 2005), 13.

⁵*Ibid.*

⁶David Galula, *Counter-Insurgency Warfare: Theory and Practice* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, Inc., 1964).

⁷Bruce Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism*, rev. ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006).

⁸Beittel, *Mexico’s Drug Trafficking Organizations*, 5-8.

⁹Beittel, *Mexico’s Drug Related Violence*.

¹⁰Phil Williams, “The Terrorism Debate Over Mexican Drug Trafficking Violence,” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 24, no. 2 (2012): 261.

¹¹*Ibid.*, 260.

¹²Paul Rexton Kan, “What We’re Getting Wrong About Mexico,” *Parameters* (Summer 2011): 39-40.

¹³*Ibid.*

¹⁴*Ibid.*

¹⁵*Ibid.*

¹⁶Sylvia M. Longmire and John P. Longmire IV, “Redefining Terrorism: Why Mexican Drug Trafficking is More than Just Organized Crime,” *Journal of Strategic Security* 1, no. 1 (2008): 50-51.

¹⁷*Ibid.*

¹⁸*Ibid.*

¹⁹John P. Sullivan and Robert J. Bunker, *Mexico’s Criminal Insurgency: A Small Wars Journal-El Centro Anthology* (Bloomington: iUniverse, 2012), 19-28.

²⁰*Ibid.*, 71-75.

CHAPTER 3

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This chapter outlines the research methodology used to conduct this analysis and provides a brief overview of the sources of data used to answer the multiple research questions. The purpose of this research is to determine if the operations and actions of the various Mexican drug cartels constitute a terrorist insurgency against the Mexican state. This study will utilize qualitative research methods in the form of a case study and historical analysis. The manner in which the study will acquire information will be through literature review. The study will also collect data from numerous sources to include scholarly articles, government publications, congressional research documents, and other sources from noted experts in this field of study. After collection, this study will analyze and synthesize the data in order to “make sense of it, and organize it into categories or themes that cut across all of the data sources.”¹

The case study method is useful for developing a theory or constructing a model in order to understand a complex problem or situation. It is primarily an investigative process used to gradually make sense of a defined issue through comparing, contrasting, cataloging, and classifying sets of data.² Within this case study, the complex problem is whether Mexican drug cartels are operating as terrorist insurgent organizations. Because there are multiple definitions of these terms, it is necessary to conduct a qualitative analysis of sources to create a reasonable conceptual model of a terrorist insurgent organization. Moreover, this study will gather data on the recent history of the Mexican drug cartels and contrast that data with the newly constructed conceptual model.

To better answer the primary research question, this study must be broken down into secondary questions that, when answered, will help to focus an answer to the primary research question. This research paper will present the information and analysis through the use of three secondary research questions. These questions will assist in forming an answer to the primary research question.

Secondary Research Question One: What are the defining characteristics of a “terrorist insurgency”?

This research question is a critical part of the case study, which involves creating a theoretical lens or framework to compare against the particular “case” of the contemporary drug cartels. Before beginning to build a model to facilitate understanding of the current state of the Mexican drug cartels, this study must conduct a literature review to determine what constitutes a terrorist insurgent organization. There are numerous and varying definitions and guidelines from law enforcement sources, federal statutes, the U.S. Department of Defense publications, as well as opinions from experts in the field of study that address this question. A thorough and qualitative analysis of these sources is necessary in an effort to construct a reasonable working model of a terrorist insurgent organization.

Secondary Research Question Two: What is the historical background and current state of the major drug cartels?

After identifying key characteristics of terrorist insurgent organizations, this study will utilize a historical narrative to describe the recent history of the drug cartels in order to understand the roots of their current activities. This historical background will provide an understanding of the relevant actors and significant historical events with regard to the

extant Mexican drug war. In more familiar terms, it will begin to frame the operational environment. Achieving an understanding of the operational environment is a formidable task due to the complexity of the subject, emerging and dissolving alliances, new organizational leadership, and power shifts that are frequently changing. In addition, there is a need to break down the label “drug cartels” as though they were a monolithic organization. In describing the recent history, this study will also separate and identify the major cartels as individual units as opposed to a singular organism. A qualitative literature review of field experts will help to provide a historical narrative of how the cartels evolved into their current state.

Secondary Research Question Three: Why have the drug cartels become so violent?

Following the history of the cartels and the drug war, this study will analyze historical and current reports to capture the reasons behind the cartels’ violent methods. The level of violence in Mexico has skyrocketed as a result of the drug war. The number of deaths attributed to the drug war is quite high, but what is staggering is the level of brutality frequently displayed. This study will need to determine if the cartels have a political, social, or religious ideology or if they are simply motivated by profits. In order to answer this question the case study will rely on expert opinions, recent scholarship on the topic, as well as news media reports and social media outlets.

Weaknesses of Methodology

In spite of efforts to create an illuminating and useful thesis, the research methodology outlined above does have several weaknesses. One weakness is the unclassified, open-source nature of the research materials. This eliminates any

information not released to the public, which may have compelling relevance to the research questions at hand. Furthermore, given the illicit nature of drug trafficking, it is not possible to find insider sources or first hand internal documentation of the illegal activities of drug cartels. Hence, there may be some gap between reality and the perceived reality that the sources of data provide.

Another weakness of this form of research is that the answers to the research questions will be qualitative in nature. The analysis and conclusion of this qualitative methodology will inherently leave room for variance based on point of view or bias. In simpler terms, this thesis is a singular interpretation of data. There may indeed be multiple interpretations of the same pool of information. Furthermore, the interpretation is specific to this particular case study on Mexican drug cartels. It may not apply to seemingly similar situations of a differing time and place. Often times there may a tendency toward generalizing the interpretation of one case study as though it was a template to fit other case studies.³

To ensure validity and minimize bias, this research will use multiple sources and points of view when possible. This type of triangulation of data will also aid in forming a more coherent and accurate case study. Finally, this research must remain aware of potential researcher bias. With many years of personal experience working to combat drug cartel operations, the researcher must ensure that any personal predisposition is squelched when gathering data and presenting conclusions. By clarifying this potential researcher bias in chapter 3, it is a strategy to ensure internal validity of future chapters that focus on analysis, conclusions, and recommendations.⁴

¹John W. Creswell, *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches*, 3rd ed. (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, Inc., 2009), 175.

²*Ibid.*, 194.

³*Ibid.*, 193.

⁴*Ibid.*, 194-200.

CHAPTER 4

ANALYSIS

The purpose of this study is to gain a better understanding of the drug cartels currently operating in Mexico. The fluid situation surrounding the Mexican drug war has led to speculation about how to classify the powerful criminal organizations conducting it. There is literature debating whether the cartels are merely a criminal enterprise or whether the cartels represent a new terrorist insurgency in Mexico. This study seeks to address that issue by answering the multiple secondary research questions outlined in the previous chapter.

This chapter consists of four sections. The first considers multiple definitions of “terrorism” and “insurgency,” in order to identify common themes. These characteristics will develop a conceptual model to describe the activities of the cartels in Mexico that the rest of this research will rely upon. The second section examines the major drug cartels in Mexico, and offers a thumbnail sketch of each cartel’s operations. The third section provides a chronology of the ongoing drug related violence in Mexico. Finally, the fourth section utilizes the newly created conceptual model to determine if the Mexican cartels meet the defining criteria of a terrorist insurgency.

Section One: Defining Characteristics of Insurgency and Terrorism

Frequently, literature uses the words “terrorism” and “insurgency” interchangeably. However, most experts in the field find the two terms represent different phenomena. While definitions of terrorism abound and cross many fields of study, the term insurgency appears more settled with regard to its defining characteristics.

According to most published works, an insurgency is a movement with a political or ideological goal. It seeks to overthrow or challenge the existing government by gaining popular support and/or control over geographic pieces of the state's territory.¹ It achieves these ends using violence. Violence is what distinguishes an insurgency from a protest movement. Therefore, an insurgency is part political and part violence. Both aspects must be present to define an organized movement as an insurgency.² Bard O'Neill suggests an insurgency manifests itself through three means, or forms of warfare: conventional warfare, guerrilla war, and terrorism.³ Conventional war is traditional combat involving organized and identifiable armies. Guerrilla warfare is smaller in scale and less complex. "In essence, guerrilla warfare is highly mobile hit-and-run attacks by lightly to moderately armed groups that seek to harass the enemy and gradually erode his will and capability."⁴ Typically, its primary targets are the government's military or police forces.⁵

A plethora of literature, studies, and reports exist on the topic of insurgency. Most published works focus on ways to defeat an insurgency. There is, however, no noticeable debate about how to define the word. Typically, published scholarship uses a definition of insurgency from the Department of the Army, a renowned specialist in the field, or some variation of those. In Field Manual 3-24, *Counterinsurgency*, the U.S. Army defines insurgency as an "organized movement aimed at the overthrow of a constituted government through the use of subversion and armed conflict."⁶ Similarly, David Galula states, "insurgency is the pursuit of the policy of a party, inside a country by every means."⁷ Recognizing this as a broad Clausewitzian definition, Galula narrows the term by describing it as a civil war. Furthermore, it is a civil war that involves "a protracted

struggle conducted methodically, step by step, in order to attain specific intermediate objectives leading finally to the overthrow of the existing order.”⁸ Bard E. O’Neill defines insurgency as “a struggle between a nonruling group and the ruling authorities in which the nonruling group consciously uses political resources and violence to destroy, reformulate, or sustain the basis of legitimacy of one or more aspects of politics.”⁹ Finally, Australian counterinsurgency theorist David Kilcullen writes insurgency is “a popular movement that seeks to overthrow the status quo through subversion, political activity, insurrection, armed conflict, and terrorism.”¹⁰

Based on these widely accepted definitions, it is clear an insurgency is a type of political movement. The specific aim of that movement is to overthrow or challenge the existing government.¹¹ With such a goal, successful insurgencies often emerge as grass roots uprisings from within the population.¹² A supportive populace is key to a successful insurgency by providing sanctuary, logistical support, intelligence, and other important elements needed to combat or undermine the government.¹³

In contrast to the settled characterization of an insurgency, no consensus exists for the term “terrorism.” Because of varying viewpoints, whether to label an organization or an act as “terrorist” is frequently subjective and dependent upon one’s point of view. In other words, the decision to use such a pejorative label largely depends on whether one agrees or disagrees with the organization or act in question. Hence, using the label becomes a form of moral judgment, and as such is inherently controversial.

Another reason the word terrorism is difficult to define is that the meaning of the word has changed over time. French Revolutionaries first popularized the word during the 1793-1794 Reign of Terror.¹⁴ Unlike its contemporary meaning, which tends to focus

on non-state actors subverting a legitimate government, eighteenth century revolutionaries identified terror as a useful tool of a newly instituted government.¹⁵ Instead of it being a tactic to undermine the state, the new government and its supporters used it as an instrument of the state to consolidate power and keep counter-revolutionaries in check.¹⁶ Due to the violent excesses of the French Revolution, eighteenth century France, and ultimately much of the rest of the world, came to identify terrorism with governmental abuse of power.¹⁷ That is also the definition that continued to endure throughout the first half of the twentieth century. To illustrate this point, Bruce Hoffman notes that most citizens of nations with dictatorial leaders used the term “terror” when describing “the authoritarian regimes that had come to power in Fascist Italy, Nazi Germany, and Stalinist Russia.”¹⁸ Indeed, terror became an intrinsic component of early twentieth century dictatorial governments. They utilized mass repression, intimidation, and violence against their own citizens and political opponents. In his book, *Inside Terrorism*, Hoffman describes the phenomenon during this period as state sanctioned or internal political violence directed against domestic populations.¹⁹ Hence, there is a strong degree of continuity in terrorism from the late eighteenth century through the early twentieth century.

That began to change, however, in the late twentieth century. Of course, state sponsored terror directed against its own citizens did not disappear. Nevertheless, perceptions of terrorism began to evolve after the Second World War into characteristics that are familiar to most people in the twenty first century. This evolution was largely a result of post war indigenous nationalist movements.²⁰ Often times, these national self-determinist movements began in non-European regions that were under European control

or influence. Unable to challenge imperial control through direct military action, these movements resorted to terrorist tactics to undermine imperial control. The indigenous nationalists also sought to gain local and international popular support for their movement. In order to accomplish this, they needed to avoid the pejorative label of terrorist. Thus, these national liberation movements deemed themselves to be “freedom fighters,” “revolutionaries,” or “urban guerillas.”²¹

Organized movements eschewing the terrorist label became the norm during this period. Past anti-government movements, such as the nineteenth century anarchists, proudly proclaimed themselves to be terrorists and their tactics as terrorism.²² Today, however, terrorist organizations routinely seek to obscure any identification with terrorism. Instead, they cast themselves as victims who act only in self-defense against an oppressive regime or state. Their self-perception is one of the reluctant warrior driven to violence out of desperation against a repressive and predatory government.²³ This also contributes to the difficulty in defining terrorism and the potential political fallout from saddling an organization with the terrorist label. Certain ideologues, such as communists or anarchists or revolutionaries would readily admit, and often revel in being labeled as a communist, anarchist, or revolutionary. Bruce Hoffman states, “the terrorist, by contrast, will never acknowledge that he is a terrorist and moreover will go to great lengths to evade and obscure any such inference or connection.”²⁴

Further compounding the difficulty in defining terrorism is the lack of consensus among government agencies charged with combatting and preventing acts of terrorism. For example, the FBI utilizes a definition of terrorism based on its investigative functions under the Code of Federal Regulations that focuses on the use of violence. The

Department of Homeland Security, however, usually follows the definition found in the Homeland Security Act of 2002, which offers a broader definition that may not even include violent acts. For its part, the U.S. Department of State holds that terrorist violence must be politically motivated. The Patriot Act, on the other hand, does not require the violence to have political motivations. U.S. Federal Code in Title 22 restricts terrorism to non-state actors. Meanwhile, the U.S. Federal Code in Title 18 has no such limitation. Moreover, the list of incongruities goes on, as additional definitions are uncovered.

Below is a list of 23 definitions of terrorism from a variety of respected sources. One of the goals of this study is to uncover the salient characteristics of “terrorism.” Through a thorough examination of the definitions below, certain themes or commonalities should be evident. While a new textbook narrative definition may be useful, of more use to this study would be to find the distinguishing characteristics that will help to provide a logical and common sense framework for identifying terrorism.

Table 1. Definitions of Terrorism	
Source: United States National Counterterrorism Center, <i>Intelligence Guide for First Responders</i> .	Definition: Terrorism is defined as “premeditated, politically motivated violence perpetrated against noncombatant targets by subnational groups or clandestine agents, usually intended to influence an audience.” Theme: Method is politically motivated violence against noncombatants.
Source: United States House of Representatives Bill 3401, also known as the Enhanced Border Security Act, as introduced by Representative Connie Mack.	Definition: Terrorist insurgency is defined as “extreme displays of public violence...to influence public opinion and to undermine government control and rule of law in order to increase the control and influence of the organizations.” Theme: Method is extreme public violence, and motivation is to undermine governmental institutions.
Source: United States Federal Code Title 22, Chapter 38, Section 2656(f).	Definition: Terrorism is defined as “premeditated, politically motivated violence perpetrated against noncombatant targets by subnational groups or clandestine agents.” Theme: Method is violence against noncombatants, and motivation is

	political ideology.
Source: United States Immigration and Nationality Act, Section 212(a)(3)(B).	Description: Terrorist activity is described as the following actions conducted for reasons other than monetary gain; hijacking or sabotage of a conveyance; seizing and making violent threats against an individual to compel a third party; political assassination; use of biological, chemical, or nuclear weapons. Theme: Method is the use of violence for a reason other than monetary gain.
Source: United States Code of Federal Regulations Title 28, Chapter 1, Section 0.85(l).	Definition: Terrorism is defined as “the unlawful use of force and violence against persons or property to intimidate or coerce a government, the civilian population, or any segment thereof, in furtherance of political or social objectives.” Theme: Method is the use of violence, and motivation is to coerce government or civilians to achieve political or social objectives.
Source: United States Federal Code Title 18, Section 2331.	Description: International terrorism is described as violent acts intended to intimidate or coerce the civilian population or the government. Theme: Method is the use of violence, and motivation is to coerce government or civilians.
Source: Department of Defense Joint Publication 3-07.2, <i>Joint Tactics, Techniques, and Procedures for Antiterrorism</i> .	Definition: Terrorism is defined as “the calculated use of violence or threat of violence to inculcate fear; intended to coerce or to intimidate governments or societies in the pursuit of goals that are generally political, religious, or ideological.” Theme: Method is the use or threat of violence, and motivation is to coerce government or society to achieve ideological objectives.
Source: Department of Defense Joint Publication 1-02, <i>Department of Defense Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms</i> .	Definition: Terrorism is defined as the “use of violence or threat of violence to instill fear and coerce governments or societies.” JP 1-02 continues to describe how these acts of terrorism are “motivated by religious, political, or other ideological beliefs and committed in the pursuit of goals that are usually political.” Theme: Method is the use or threat of violence, and motivation is to pursue ideological goals.
Source: United Nations Security Council, 2004.	Description: Terrorism is described as violent acts committed with the purpose of provoking a state of terror, intimidating a population, or compelling a government. Theme: Method is violence, and motivation is to compel or intimidate government or civilian population.
Source: United Nations General Assembly, 1994.	Definition: Terrorism is defined as “criminal acts intended or calculated to provoke a state of terror in the general public, a group or persons, or particular persons for political purposes.” Theme: Motivation is political gain.
Source: Bard E. O’Neill, <i>Insurgency and Terrorism: From Revolution to Apocalypse</i> .	Definition: Terrorism is defined as “the threat or use of physical coercion primarily against noncombatants, especially civilians, to create fear in order to achieve various political objectives.” Theme: Motivation is to achieve political objectives.

Source: National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and the Responses to Terrorism.	Definition: Terrorism is defined as “the threatened or actual use of illegal force by non-state actors, in order to attain a political, economic, religious, or social goal, through fear, coercion, or intimidation.” Theme: Motivation is to achieve an ideological goal.
Source: Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI).	Definition: The FBI uses defines terrorism the same as the United States Code of Federal Regulations, Title 28. However, it does distinguish between international and domestic terrorism. Theme: Method is the use of violence, and motivation is to coerce government or civilians to achieve political or social objectives.
Source: USA Patriot Act, United States House of Representatives Bill 3162, Section 802.	Definition: Terrorism is defined as mass destruction, assassination, or kidnapping intended to intimidate, coerce, or influence the civilian population or the government. Theme: Method is the use of violence, and motivation is to coerce government or civilians.
Source: United States Homeland Security Act of 2002.	Definition: Terrorism is defined as any activity that is a violation of criminal law and is dangerous to human life or potentially destructive to critical infrastructure or key resources. These acts are intended to intimidate, coerce, or influence the civilian population or the government by mass destruction, assassination, or kidnapping. Theme: Method is violence or any activity that could be potentially destructive, and the motivation is to coerce government or civilians.
Source: United States Department of Homeland Security, Domestic Terrorism and Homegrown Violent Extremism Lexicon, 2011.	Description: The Department of Homeland Security uses the same definition from the Homeland Security Act of 2002. However, in this publication, the agency attempts to make a distinction between terrorism and extremism. According to this published pamphlet, “a domestic terrorist differs from a homegrown violent extremist in that the former is not inspired by and does not take direction from a foreign terrorist group or other foreign power.” Theme: Method is violence or any activity that could be potentially destructive, and the motivation is to coerce government or civilians.
Source: United States Department of State, Bureau of Counterterrorism, <i>Country Reports on Terrorism 2011</i> .	Definition: Terrorism is defined as “premeditated, politically motivated violence perpetrated against non-combatant targets by subnational groups or clandestine agents.” Theme: Method is violence against noncombatants, and motivation is political ideology.
Source: United States Department of Homeland Security, <i>National Infrastructure Protection Plan: Partnering to Enhance Protection and Resiliency 2009</i> .	Definition: Terrorism is defined as the “premeditated threat or act of violence against noncombatant persons, property, and environmental or economic targets.” The intent of these acts is “to induce fear, intimidate, coerce, or affect a government, the civilian population, or any segment thereof, in furtherance of political, social, ideological, or religious objectives.” Theme: Method is violence against noncombatants or property, and motivation is political, social, or religious.

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Source: United States Federal Emergency Management Agency, "Emergency Management-Related Terms and Definitions Guide, 2007."	Definition: Terrorism is defined as "the calculated use of unlawful violence or threat of unlawful violence to inculcate fear; intended to coerce or to intimidate governments or societies in the pursuit of goals that are generally political, religious, or ideological." Theme: Method is violence against society or government, and motivation is political or religious ideology.
Source: North Atlantic Treaty Organization, "NATO Glossary of Terms and Definitions."	Definition: Terrorism is defined as "the unlawful use or threatened use of force or violence against individuals or property in an attempt to coerce or intimidate governments or societies to achieve political, religious or ideological objectives." Theme: Method is violence against people or property, and motivation is political, religious, or ideological.
Source: Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, <i>National Military Strategic Plan for the War on Terrorism</i> .	Definition: Terrorism is defined as "the calculated use of unlawful violence or threat of unlawful violence to inculcate fear; intended to coerce or to intimidate governments or societies in the pursuit of goals that are generally political, religious, or ideological." Theme: Method is violence, and motivation is political, religious, or ideological.
Source: David J. Kilcullen, "Countering Global Insurgency."	Definition: Terrorism is defined as "politically motivated violence against non-combatants with the intention to coerce through fear" in an effort to change the status quo. Theme: Method is violence against non-combatants, and motivation is political ideology.
Source: Bruce Hoffman, <i>Inside Terrorism</i> .	Definition: Terrorism is defined as "the deliberate creation and exploitation of fear through violence or the threat of violence in the pursuit of political change." Hoffman continues by describing terrorist acts that are designed to have far-reaching psychological effects beyond the immediate victims. All terrorist acts, according to Hoffman, involve violence or the threat of violence. Theme: Method is violence or threat of violence with a target audience differing from the initial victim, and motivation is political ideology.

Source: Created by author using data from Interagency Threat Assessment and Coordination Group, *Intelligence Guide for First Responders*, 2nd ed. (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2011), 105; United States House of Representatives, Bill 3401, <http://www.govtrack.us/congress/bills/112/hr3401/text> (accessed 19 December 2012); United States Code of Federal Regulations, 22 USC 2656(f), <http://uscode.house.gov/download/pls/22C38.txt> (accessed 28 November 2012); United States Immigration and Nationality Act, Section 212(a)(3)(B), <http://www.uscis.gov/ilink/docView/SLB/HTML/SLB/0-0-0-1/0-0-0-29/0-0-0-2006.html> (accessed 28 November 2012); United States Code of Federal Regulations, 28 USC 0.85(l), <http://cfr.vlex.com/vid/0-85-general-functions-19677030> (accessed 22 November 2012); United States Code of Federal Regulations, 18 USC 2331, <http://uscode.house.gov/download/pls/18C113B.txt>

(accessed 29 October 2012); Department of Defense, Joint Publication (JP) 3-07.2, *Joint Tactics, Techniques, and Procedures for Antiterrorism* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1998), I-1, 313; United Nations Security Council, 2004, Resolution 1566, <http://daccess-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N04/542/82/PDF/N0454282.pdf?OpenElement> (accessed 28 October 2012); United Nations General Assembly, 1994, Resolution 49/60, <http://www.un.org/documents/ga/res/49/a49r060.htm> (accessed 28 October 2012); Bard E. O'Neill, *Insurgency and Terrorism: From Revolution to Apocalypse*, 2nd ed. (Dulles: Potomac Books, Inc., 2005), 33; Gary LaFree and Bianca Bersani, "Hot Spots of Terrorism and Other Crimes in the United States, 1970 to 2008," http://start.umd.edu/start/publications/research_briefs/lafree_bersani_hotspotsofterrorism.pdf (accessed 22 September 2012), 9; United States Department of Justice, Federal Bureau of Investigation, Counterterrorism Division, *Terrorism: 2002-2005* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2006), iv-v; USA Patriot Act of 2001 (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2001), 105; United States Homeland Security Act of 2002 (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2002), 2141; United States Department of Homeland Security, Office of Intelligence and Analysis, *Domestic Terrorism and Homegrown Violent Extremism Lexicon* (Washington, DC: United States Department of Homeland Security Publication, 2011), 1; United States Department of State, Bureau of Counterterrorism, *Country Reports on Terrorism 2011* (Washington, DC: United States Department of State Publication, 2012), 269; United States Department of Homeland Security, *National Infrastructure Protection Plan: Partnering to Enhance Protection and Resiliency* (Washington, DC: United States Department of Homeland Security Publication, 2009), 111; United States Federal Emergency Management Agency, *Guide to Emergency Management and Related Terms, Definitions, Concepts, Acronyms, Organizations, Programs, Guidance, Executive Orders, and Legislation* (Washington, DC: United States Federal Emergency Management Agency Publication, 2008), 1173; North Atlantic Treaty Organization, *NATO Glossary of Terms and Definitions* (Brussels: NATO Allied Publication, 2008), 2-T-5; United States Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, *National Military Strategic Plan for the War on Terrorism* (Washington, DC: Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Publication, 2006), 37; David J. Kilcullen, "Countering Global Insurgency," *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 28, Issue 4, August 2005, 603-604; Bruce Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism*, rev. ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 40-41.

Table 1 demonstrates there are diverse definitions for terrorism. However, common characteristics emerge from an analysis of the definitions. The most common trait, found in 18 of the definitions above described terrorism as an act intended to create an atmosphere of intimidation, fear, or coercion. There are two common traits that occur within 17 of the definitions. One is that the intention of terrorism is to influence some

segment of society. Many of the definitions are more specific with regard to which segment of society and identify the government as the intended target. In addition, out of 23 definitions, 17 specified that terrorism be an act of violence. Those definitions that did not specify the use of violence typically characterized terrorism simply as criminal acts or the destruction of critical property. The next common characteristic is that terrorism has some sort of ideological motivation. Usually, the definitions focus on a political motivation, but some include religious or social ideologies as well. A total of 16 of the 23 definitions use ideological motivation as a descriptor.

All other characteristics noted are common in less than half of the definitions. For instance, eight of the examples conclude that the violence must be premeditated or organized. Six definitions state that the targets of violence are non-combatants. Four definitions find that terrorists are non-state actors. One contends that terrorist acts must be committed in public. Lastly, one definition presents a list of acts conducted for other than monetary gain to define terrorism.

The definitions above offer a valuable list of characteristics to identify terrorism. At the very basic level, it is a violent criminal act outside the bounds of accepted conventional military conduct. The intention of the violent act is to create an air of intimidation in order to influence a third party. In simpler terms, the victim of violence is still a victim of terrorism, but the intended audience is typically a government or a larger segment of society that goes beyond the immediate victim.²⁵ Therefore, since the immediate victim is not the primary audience, victims of terrorist violence are frequently non-combatants and perpetrators may target them indiscriminately.²⁶ Terrorists justify not discriminating between legitimate military targets and random innocent targets due to

their numerical, financial, and firepower inferiority compared to the state.²⁷ Another defining aspect of terrorism is its organizational structure. While insurgents normally have a centralized and recognizable chain of command, terrorists often operate in small, decentralized, and often isolated cells.²⁸ Furthermore, society classifies violent acts of terrorism as illegal. In other words, terrorism is a criminal act or an act of violence that does not adhere to traditional boundaries of warfare.²⁹

In *Insurgency and Terrorism*, O'Neill summarizes that terrorism is simply a tactic, or means, to achieve the goal of an organized insurgency.³⁰ Kilcullen agrees and determines nearly all terrorism is in support of an insurgency.³¹ Nevertheless, there are terrorists, such as Timothy McVeigh, who have no connection to an insurgency and seem to be nothing more than aberrant misfits of society with tremendous psychological and moral issues.³² Their objectives are either non-existent or seemingly irrational.³³

In spite of efforts to differentiate between insurgency and terrorism, most literature sees the two phenomena as synonymous. Kilcullen specifically notes this and finds the common use of the word terrorism is primarily a propaganda label designed to cast illegitimacy on an insurgency.³⁴ Thus, distinguishing between the two activities is difficult. It is, however, a useful pursuit in an effort to gain a better understanding of the issues and origins of each, as well as how to combat them.

Table 2 is a useful way to categorize the individual characteristics of an insurgency and terrorism as individual terms. It encompasses the multiple definitions previously listed in this chapter as well as some distinguishing characteristics from respected experts in this field of study.

Table 2. Defining Characteristics of “Insurgency” and “Terrorism”		
	Insurgency	Terrorism
Organized or Spontaneous	Organized	Organized
Command Structure	Centralized	Decentralized
Motivation	Political	Political or some other form of ideology
Objective	Overthrow government	Influence government or society but not necessarily overthrow
Means	Violence through conventional conflict, guerrilla warfare, or terrorism	Violence and intimidation
Target	Traditional combatants such as military, police, and security forces	Both traditional combatants and non-combatants such as civilians
Support of population	Yes	No
Operate within defined geographic boundaries	Yes	No
Size	Medium sized units, such as an army company or battalion	Small isolated cells
Method of attack and intention	Small scale attacks to gradually erode enemy resiliency and legitimacy	Spectacular and noteworthy attacks to coerce and intimidate

Source: Created by author.

Section Two: History and Current State of Mexican Drug Cartels

This section will provide a brief overview of the major Mexican drug cartels. It will offer insight into current cartel dynamics and use the data to determine if the cartels meet the defining characteristics of a terrorist insurgency.

Prior to the 1970s, Mexican drug traffickers harvested homegrown marijuana to be smuggled into the United States. Mexican trafficking organizations used their ties to U.S. organized criminal syndicates to smuggle their product north of the border.³⁵ In spite of this cross border criminal activity, most Mexican drug trafficking could be described as relatively small scale or low-level operations.³⁶ The Trans-Border Institute suggests, “by the 1970s, the emergence of the U.S. counter-culture movement and the breaking of the ‘French connection’ for heroin trafficking in the late 1960s produced a significant increase in demand for illicit drugs from Mexico.”³⁷ Much of the new demand was for cocaine. This led to the rise of the powerful Colombian drug cartels who smuggled their contraband into the U.S. via the Gulf of Mexico and the Caribbean. However, U.S. counter-narcotics efforts were successful in deflecting the trafficking away from those areas. In the 1980s, Colombian cartels began to rely heavily on Mexican smuggling networks in order to access the illegal drug consumer market in the U.S. The lucrative nature of cocaine smuggling began the metamorphosis of the Mexican drug traffickers from small time smugglers into more powerful criminal organizations.³⁸

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, Colombia, with U.S. assistance, effectively undermined the powerful Colombian drug cartels. To the growing Mexican drug trafficking organizations, this represented an opportunity to become more than simply a smuggling network in the employ of Colombian cartels. With the conditions set, Mexican

cartels quickly emerged as the dominant power in the drug trade of the Western Hemisphere and the hub of illicit trafficking into the U.S.³⁹

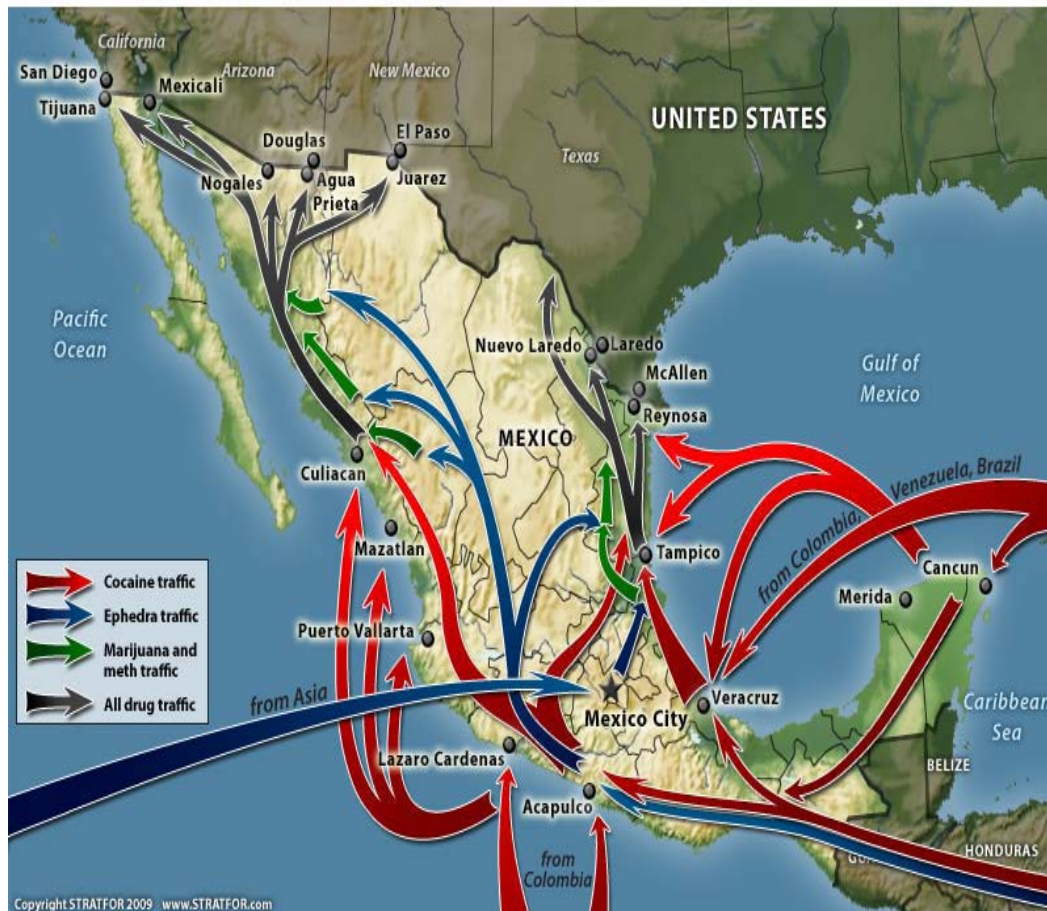


Figure 1. Drug Smuggling Routes

Source: STRATFOR Global Intelligence, “Mexican Drug Cartels: Two Wars and a Look Southward,” [http:// www.stratfor.com/analysis/20091216-mexican-drug-cartels-two-wars-and-a-look-southward](http://www.stratfor.com/analysis/20091216-mexican-drug-cartels-two-wars-and-a-look-southward) (accessed 21 December 2010), 10.

Aiding the growth of drug trafficking organizations was the existence of one party rule in Mexico. The Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) maintained a monopoly on power from approximately 1930 to 2000. The PRI headed a highly centralized power

structure that tended to not only be permissive in dealing with drug crime, but also accepted bribery and corruption of government officials as a normal way of business.⁴⁰ Corruption infected some of the highest ranks of government bureaucracy and trickled down to the lowest officials. This allowed criminal organizations, which could afford the bribes and kickbacks, to operate with a high degree of protection and impunity within a defined geographic area.⁴¹ Furthermore, governmental protection of drug traffickers as a result of bribery had the effect of squelching violence and competition between rival cartels.⁴²

The relative stability pieced together by a corrupt government and growing drug cartels did not last. In the late 1990s, Mexico showed a gradual trend toward political pluralism at the state and local levels.⁴³ At the national level, the emergence of the conservative National Action Party (PAN), and the presidential election of its candidate Vicente Fox in 2000, accelerated the erosion of informal government-cartel cooperation. Fox emphasized virtuous and transparent government while targeting organized crime in Mexico. Fox's successor to the presidency, PAN candidate Felipe Calderón, escalated the efforts to diminish the power of the cartels. His primary political agenda centered on aggressively targeting the cartels with the full force of the Mexican government to include its military forces. Calderón, like Fox, sought to remove a system of cooperation and corruption by breaking the long established ties between elected officials and bureaucrats and the drug cartels. In sum, the dissolution of the one party political system led to a new era of conflict and competition.

Since the drug war began, the cartels have been in constant flux, internally trying to stabilize leadership conflicts within their respective organizations. In addition, they

must continually evolve to cope with a fluid external environment marked by rivalries between competing cartels and disruptive law enforcement efforts. This unstable environment has led to the splintering of major drug cartels. Prior to the Mérida Initiative, there were four primary cartels. Today there are seven. However, those seven are not the monolithic organizations with centralized hierarchies that their predecessors were. Today, there are fractures or sub-organizations within most of the major cartels. Some analysts estimate there are as many as 20 national level organizations.⁴⁴ Beyond those organizations are numerous regional and local gangs. However, it is difficult to assess and individually describe the multitude of local criminal organizations through open source research. Current information is available through open source material regarding the seven main cartels. This following section will provide a brief summary of each.

Sinaloa Federation

Many analysts consider this the most powerful Mexican drug cartel. It is the second largest cartel and it controls an estimated 45 percent of the Mexican drug trade.⁴⁵ In addition, it has a presence in at least 50 other countries throughout Europe, Africa, and Southeast Asia.⁴⁶ It is a loosely run federation of cooperating subordinate groups. Each subordinate group is effectively its own independent trafficking network.⁴⁷ Joaquín “El Chapo” Guzmán, the world’s most wanted man, heads this organization. Many observers consider Guzmán a throwback type of drug king who does not relish the violence inherent with his occupation.⁴⁸ Currently, the Los Zetas Cartel is their primary competition. However, the Sinaloa Cartel is also at war with the Juárez Cartel for control of the lucrative region south of El Paso, Texas. This cartel has tortured, dismembered, and executed several rival cartel members in the past. In spite of episodes of violence, the

cartel prefers bribery and political influence to achieve its aims.⁴⁹ Similar to other cartels, the Sinaloa Cartel has expanded into other illegal activities such as human smuggling. It also plays a significant role in the profitable oil and fuel theft business.⁵⁰

Los Zetas Cartel

This cartel is currently the largest in terms of the geographic area they control. Most analysts consider it the most brutal and violent cartel.⁵¹ It is infamous for abusing Central American immigrants traveling through Mexico to get to the U.S. Frequently, they forcefully recruit the migrants to carry drugs into the U.S.⁵² Refusal has led to deaths of many migrants who were later discovered in hidden mass graves.⁵³ In addition, this cartel has a reputation for brazen commando-style raids on prisons to free select personnel.⁵⁴ They also have a documented history of kidnapping and murdering individual police officers and journalists.⁵⁵ Originally, the Gulf Cartel recruited them from Mexico's Special Operations Forces, known as Grupo Aeromóvil de Fuerzas Especiales, to work as enforcers.⁵⁶ Their specialized military training and knowledge of current weapons and military technology allowed them to strong arm most law enforcement officials.⁵⁷ In 2010, the Zetas broke away from the Gulf Cartel and began their own independent operations. Since then, the Zetas have been the primary security concern of the Mexican government.⁵⁸ The Mexican government has been successful in disrupting the Zetas' ties with South American cocaine suppliers. As a result, the Zetas branched out into other profit making ventures such as kidnapping, smuggling other drugs, extortion, piracy, and fuel theft.⁵⁹

Beltrán Leyva Cartel

Four brothers founded this cartel and originally worked as enforcers for the Sinaloa Cartel. They split from the Sinaloa Cartel in 2008. Mexican marines killed the leader of the cartel in 2009, and law enforcement officers arrested two of the other brothers shortly thereafter. This led to a leadership vacuum within the organization and a significant amount of internal fighting. The factions vying for control of the cartel battled each other and conducted gruesome public displays of mutilated and executed bodies.⁶⁰ Leading the most successful faction is one of the original four brothers. He does not have complete control over the remnants of the Beltrán Leyva Cartel, but is trying to consolidate power under the name of the new Pacífico Sur Cartel. Due to the splintering of this group, some analysts no longer consider this a national cartel. Instead, many see it as a lesser or regional cartel fighting for its survival.⁶¹

Knights Templar Cartel

This cartel emerged in 2011 as a successor to the destroyed La Familia Michoacana Cartel. This cartel maintains a stronghold on the Mexican state of Michoacan, but controls little territory outside of that state. While some experts consider it a regional cartel, the Knights Templar is a well-known organization, because of their violent propaganda and alleged religious convictions. They frequently display enemy corpses in public and attach propaganda messages to the bodies. The messages typically promote their cartel as a safeguard of the people.⁶² They describe themselves as a necessary evil to carry out divine justice against other predatory cartels, specifically the Zetas Cartel.⁶³ In other words, it seeks to portray itself as a religious vigilante group protecting the people of Michoacan from other drug cartels.⁶⁴ While its religious beliefs

are unknown, it appears the cartel may only use religious propaganda as a means to recruit and gain public support.⁶⁵ The Knights Templar Cartel specializes in the production and trafficking of methamphetamines into the U.S. Their war with the Pacífico Sur Cartel in the area near Acapulco has destroyed much of that town's tourist industry.⁶⁶

Gulf Cartel

This cartel traces its roots to the bootlegging era of the 1920s.⁶⁷ It rose to national prominence due to its ties to the Colombian Cali Cartel and its control of the eastern coast of Mexico on the Gulf.⁶⁸ At the end of the twentieth century, this was the most powerful Mexican drug cartel with the Sinaloa Cartel as their main rival. They recruited Mexican Special Forces personnel to act as their enforcers. These enforcers became known as Los Zetas, and they eventually became more powerful than their parent organization and broke away to form their own cartel. In 2003, Mexican law enforcement arrested the leader, and the cartel's power has waned since. However, they still control lucrative smuggling routes into southeast Texas. Because of their control of key entry points into the U.S., they are able to collect "tolls" from other cartels who wish to smuggle their contraband through Gulf Cartel controlled areas.⁶⁹

Juarez Cartel

Some people label this cartel the Vicente Carrillo Fuentes Cartel, after its leader. It is in a battle with the Sinaloa Cartel for control of the area south of El Paso, Texas. To assist in their fight against one another, both the Sinaloa Cartel and the Juarez Cartel have recruited numerous street gangs in Ciudad Juarez. Thus, while the violence between the

two rival cartels has abated, violence between competing street gangs continues to be a problem around Ciudad Juarez. While not entirely defeated, the Juarez Cartel has taken a back seat to the more dominant Sinaloa Cartel in the area of drug trafficking within the state of Chihuahua. In order to survive, the Juarez Cartel has diversified into other illicit activities such as prostitution, kidnapping, vehicle theft, and murder for hire.⁷⁰ In addition, in the urban areas where it still maintains a strong influence, it acts as a toll collector for other organizations to move their contraband.⁷¹ This organization is also infamous for being the first Mexican cartel to successfully deploy an improvised explosive device.⁷² The blast killed four Mexican security forces personnel and wounded several more.⁷³

Tijuana Cartel

Originally founded by a corrupt police officer, some people refer to this organization as the Arellano Félix Cartel. At its height, it allegedly paid out over one million dollars per week in bribes.⁷⁴ By 2008, the Mexican government had arrested most of the cartel's top leaders. The resulting power vacuum led to severe internal turmoil and tremendous factionalism, which had a negative impact on its operational capability as a trafficking organization.⁷⁵ Sensing this weakness, the Sinaloa Cartel moved in to control most of the rural areas of the Baja California Peninsula. Because of this encroachment on their previous territory, the Tijuana Cartel now only plays a minor role in drug trafficking as a toll collector.⁷⁶ Similar to its declining counterparts, it has diversified into kidnapping, extortion, and human trafficking to make up for lost drug revenues.⁷⁷

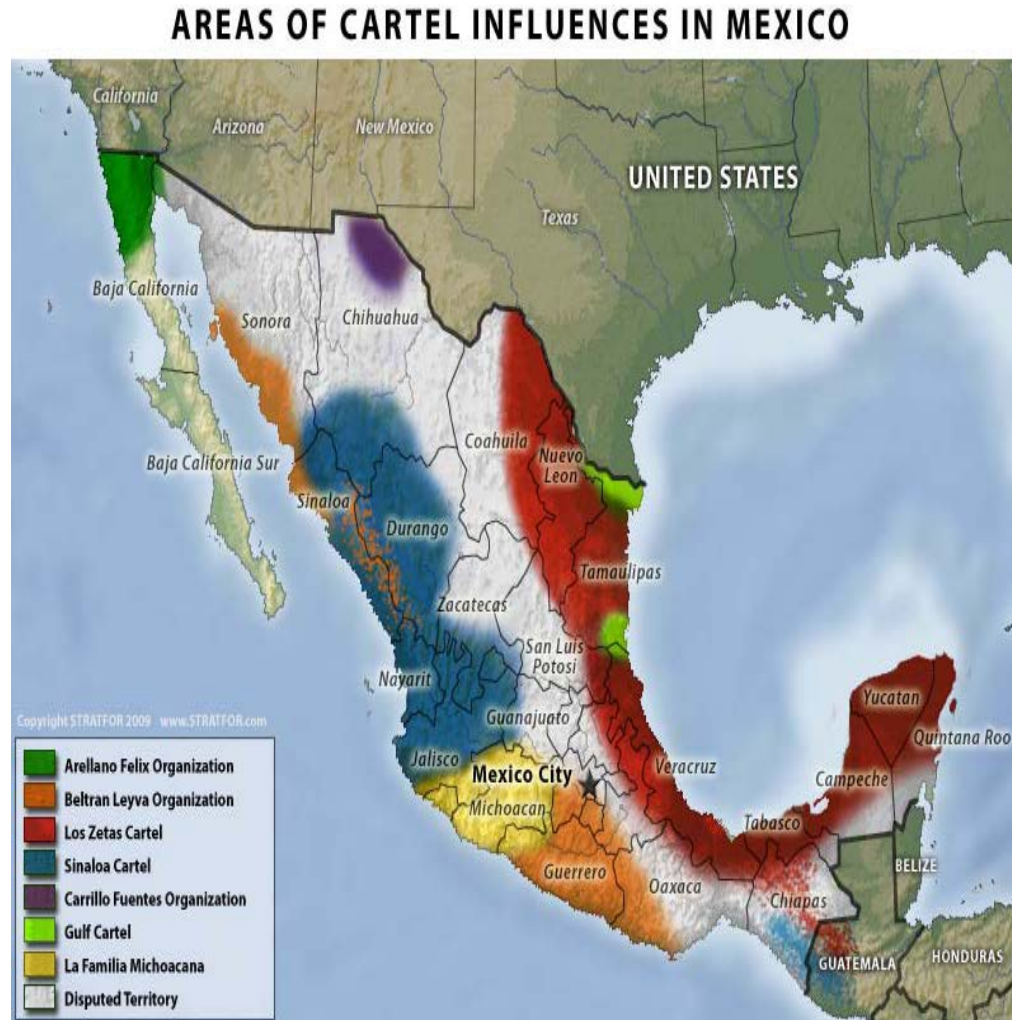


Figure 2. Mexican Drug Cartel Areas of Influence

Source: STRATFOR Global Intelligence, “Mexican Drug Cartels: Two Wars and a Look Southward,” [http:// www.stratfor.com/analysis/20091216-mexican-drug-cartels-two-wars-and-a-look-southward](http://www.stratfor.com/analysis/20091216-mexican-drug-cartels-two-wars-and-a-look-southward) (accessed 21 December 2010), 3.

Section Three: Drug War

Mexico’s drug war escalated following the election of President Calderón in 2006. His campaign platform promised aggressive attacks against the drug cartels. Similar to the strategy used to destroy the Colombian drug cartels, Calderón pursued a kingpin strategy that focused on eliminating organizational leadership. Without

continuity of leadership, it was assumed the cartels would fragment into smaller factions. Calderón and his advisors sought to transform the large, powerful cartels from a national security threat to a more manageable local public security threat.⁷⁸ However, Mexican police did not have sufficient resources to combat the cartels head-on, and the police were one of the least trusted public institutions in Mexico.⁷⁹ Therefore, Calderón sought to employ the Mexican military, one the most trusted public institutions, to assist in combatting the cartels.⁸⁰ The U.S. provided significant monetary assistance to Mexico to aid law enforcement efforts. The so-called Mérida Initiative, and follow-up Beyond Mérida, provided Mexico with additional weapons, technology, and criminal justice infrastructure. Calderón's kingpin strategy had success in dispatching many of the key cartel leaders. Military and law enforcement efforts captured or killed 22 of 37 of Mexico's most wanted drug traffickers.⁸¹

Unfortunately, the cartels responded with an increasing level of violence. Certainly, some level of violence is intrinsic within the illegal drug trade. Narcotics trafficking among competing organizations will often lead to violence. The lack of institutional structures to handle inter-organizational disputes left violence as a common way to settle conflicting interests.⁸² Nevertheless, the scope of cartel violence quickly became legendary for its extreme brutality. Beheadings, mutilations, dismemberment, disemboweling, and flaying alive are just some of the forms of extreme violence the cartels have used. In 2011, the Trans-Border Institute estimated 9.5 percent of drug related homicide victims were tortured before death, and 4.5 percent of victims were decapitated.⁸³ Furthermore, while not the norm, cartels have created videos of their live executions and broadcast them on social media websites.⁸⁴

Contributing to the level of violence is the fragmentation of the major cartels due to the government's kingpin strategy. As military and law enforcement operations removed high-level organizational leaders, there was a disruption of relationships and truces between cartels. Successful government operations also disrupted the tenuous balance of power between cartels. Furthermore, they often damaged the power structure within the cartels leading to the emergence of smaller factions within the organizations and occasionally the emergence of new and independent cartels.⁸⁵ Therefore, some experts conclude the structure of cartels has changed. While previously cartels operated as centrally controlled and strongly hierarchical organizations, they have adapted to become bottom-up organizations.⁸⁶ In other words, cartels have become more horizontal with a high degree of autonomy at lower levels.⁸⁷

This is an important transition, because it gives foot soldiers and street gangs new opportunities to contract out their services and shed their loyalty to one organization.⁸⁸ In such a structure, lower level bosses and street henchmen make organizational decisions that reflect the dissolution of effective top-down command and control.⁸⁹ Also, as previously mentioned, the cartels have diversified into other illicit activities, creating new competitive economic opportunities for cartel members. While cartels still battle other cartels, the multitude of local street gangs and individual gangsters, with their own ambitions and interests, go to battle with one another to carve out their own small empire in drug trafficking, kidnapping, prostitution, auto theft, natural resources theft, or many other areas.⁹⁰ A recent estimate from the Congressional Research Service estimates since 2007, kidnappings have increased 188 percent, extortion by 101 percent, and armed robbery by 47 percent.⁹¹ The evidence indicates a growth in violent activity as local

cartel members gain influence and autonomy and compete with one another for control of small but key geographic areas, known as “plazas.” Unlike national level cartel leaders, local leaders typically do not have the financial resources to bribe and corrupt competitors and government officials. Furthermore, they likely do not fully understand managing the business aspects of a functioning cartel or any of its branches.⁹² Hence, local members are undoubtedly more likely to turn to violence, because it is a familiar and effective tool.⁹³

In sum, the result of drug organization fragmentation and diversification has been a rapid rise of cartel related homicides since 2006. The chart below, in Figure 5, represents the last official numbers the Mexican government released. Unofficial numbers from differing sources estimate the total number of cartel related deaths during Calderón’s six-year presidency range from 60,000 to 100,000. In conjunction with the official statistics, Mexican authorities find that approximately 90 percent of the victims of cartel related deaths are individuals involved or linked to the criminal activities of the cartels.⁹⁴ Another seven percent of victims are Mexican military or police.⁹⁵ The remaining targeted victims are frequently government officials, journalists, business leaders, and key civilians. Of course, some victims are not intended targets, but innocent civilians, or collateral damage.

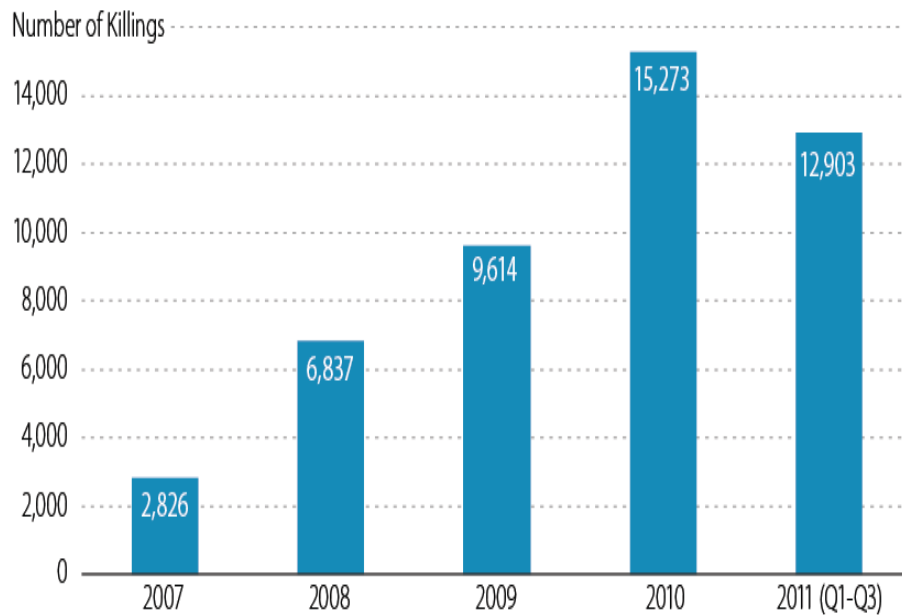


Figure 3. Cartel Related Deaths Reported by Mexican Government

Source: June S. Beittel, *Mexico's Drug Trafficking Organizations: Source and Scope of the Rising Violence* (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 3 August 2012), 25.

The objective of the cartels is another key element to investigate. While it is difficult to obtain accurate information about the monetary value of the illegal trade, the U.S. National Drug Intelligence Center estimates total cartel income is between \$14 billion to \$48 billion a year.⁹⁶ The U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration, however, offers a lower estimate of \$8 billion to \$25 billion per year.⁹⁷ Furthermore, the cartels have recently branched out into diverse new criminal enterprises in order to either expand their profits or make up for eroding drug trade profits due to conflict with the government or rival cartels. Bolstering that statement is a lack of cartel communication regarding other objectives or ideological pursuits. In spite of the ready availability of numerous communication outlets and social media, no cartel has offered another strategic objective

to justify their existence.⁹⁸ Of course, all cartels use violence as a tool to intimidate and influence both rivals and legitimate government. However, they appear to have no interest in causing the collapse of the state.⁹⁹ Indeed, according to the Trans-Border Institute, it is quite the opposite. Their research indicates cartels function better in regions with strong state capacity, because it helps to prevent out of control street gang violence that is widespread in areas of weaker state control.¹⁰⁰ Individual cartels, therefore, seek to divert government attention away from themselves and toward rival cartels. This suggests that while cartels may share similar objectives, they each have their own self-interests to pursue. Even within each cartel, there are competing interests. Thus, there is no cohesive or monolithic effort on the part of the cartels to replace the government or gain some degree of international recognition of legitimacy.¹⁰¹

The cartels also do not seek popular support. However, they do provide jobs. For example, cartels employ or contract out positions such as cultivators of marijuana or truckers within transportation and distribution networks. Some observers estimate the cartels provide over 100,000 jobs.¹⁰² Nevertheless, numbers from the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre limit any social benefit from providing jobs. They estimate 140,000 internally displaced persons within Mexico as a result of drug cartel violence.¹⁰³ Two senior fellows from *Small Wars Journal*, John P. Sullivan and Robert J. Bunker, believe this number is drastically understated. They estimate 230,000 people have fled the city of Ciudad Juarez and an estimated 6,000 businesses have closed due to drug war violence.¹⁰⁴ In addition, in spite of recruitment efforts that glorify the narco lifestyle, cartels often resort to forcibly recruiting individuals, presumably because there is not enough public interest in being a cartel employee. A Pew Research Center Poll

provides additional evidence that the populace does not support the cartels. Of the top five problems in Mexico, the public attributes three of them to the drug cartels: cartel related violence, crime, and illegal drugs.¹⁰⁵ Another Pew poll found substantial public support for the government's use of military troops to fight the drug war.

Public Backs Using Army in Drug War, Despite Mixed Views of Results		
	2011	2012
<i>Use Mexican army to fight drug traffickers</i>	%	%
Support	83	80
Oppose	14	17
Don't know	3	3
<i>Campaign against drug traffickers is...</i>		
Making progress	45	47
Losing ground	29	30
Same as past	25	19
Don't know	1	3
PEW RESEARCH CENTER Q137 & Q138.		

Figure 4. Mexico's Support for Troops in the Drug War

Source: Pew Research Global Attitudes Project, "Opinion of U.S. Improving Despite Doubts About Success, Human Rights Costs, Mexicans Back Military Campaign Against Cartels," 20 June 2012, <http://www.pewglobal.org/2012> (accessed 3 January 2013).

Section Four: Mexico's Drug Cartels as a Terrorist Insurgency?

Given the data within this study, one can now draw a reasonable conclusion to the primary research question: Have the Mexican drug cartels evolved into a terrorist insurgency? As previously noted, there is disagreement in literature regarding

terminology. For the sake of convenience, it may be simpler to break this down into two questions: First, have the cartels evolved into an insurgency? Second, have the cartels evolved into terrorists? The defining characteristics template, created earlier in this chapter, will shed light on the answers.

Table 3. Drug Cartels as Terrorist Insurgency			
	Insurgency	Terrorism	Drug Cartels
Organized or Spontaneous	Organized	Organized	Organized
Command Structure	Centralized	Decentralized	Previously centralized, now decentralized
Motivation	Political	Political or some other form of ideology	Non-ideological
Objective	Overthrow government	Influence government or society but not necessarily overthrow	Self-interest, economic profit
Means	Violence through conventional conflict, guerrilla warfare, or terrorism	Violence and intimidation	Violence and intimidation and bribery/corruption
Target	Traditional combatants such as military, police, and security forces	Both traditional combatants and non-combatants such as civilians	Both traditional combatants and non-combatants such as civilians
Support of Population	Yes	No	No
Operate within defined geographic boundaries	Yes	No	Yes
Size	Medium sized units, such as an army company or battalion	Small isolated cells	Unknown
Method of attack and intention	Small scale attacks to gradually erode enemy resiliency and legitimacy	Spectacular and noteworthy attacks to coerce and intimidate	Spectacular and noteworthy attacks to coerce and intimidate

Source: Created by author.

The table 3 data indicates the cartels do not represent an insurgency. Of the ten categories, there are only three that the cartels have in common with the defining characteristics of an insurgency. Furthermore, overall objectives and motivations of cartels do not resemble those of an insurgent organization. Many experts and definitions consider those essential components. Insurgents have ideological motivations and a long-term objective of grand systematic change at the state level. This is a result of insurgents having deep issues and grievances within society.¹⁰⁶ Drug cartels have no such grievance and no ideological motivation. They wish to neither take over the state nor seek drastic societal reform. Their preference is to conduct their illicit business operations with minimal state interference.

In contrast, table 3 shows commonalities between terrorism and drug cartels among six of the ten categories. There is still a lack of ideological motivation. It is the crux of defining terrorism, according to some academics, such as Bruce Hoffman. Without it, the violence an organization commits is criminal in nature and not terrorism.¹⁰⁷ However, some experts, such as David Kilcullen, recognize that there are some terrorist acts and organizations that do not fit within the traditional boundaries of the definition. They consist of alienated individuals without an apparent link to any ideological movement.¹⁰⁸ In addition, several of the definitions of terrorism presented in section one of this chapter did not include ideological motivations as a necessary component. While it is not clear-cut, it appears the data has the potential to support a case that the drug cartels utilize terrorism as a means to pursue their self-interests.

¹United States Army Training and Doctrine Command, *A Military Guide to Terrorism in the Twenty-First Century* (Ft. Leavenworth, KS: TRADOC), 1-6.

²O'Neill, 33.

³Ibid.

⁴Ibid., 35.

⁵Ibid., 36.

⁶Department of Defense, Field Manual (FM) 3-24, *Counterinsurgency* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2009), 1-1.

⁷Galula, 3.

⁸Ibid., 4.

⁹O'Neill, 15.

¹⁰David J. Kilcullen, "Countering Global Insurgency," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 28, no. 4 (August 2005): 603.

¹¹TRADOC, *A Military Guide to Terrorism in the Twenty-First Century*, 1-5.

¹²Ibid., 1-6.

¹³Ibid.

¹⁴Hoffman, 3.

¹⁵Ibid.

¹⁶Ibid.

¹⁷Ibid., 4.

¹⁸Ibid., 14.

¹⁹Ibid., 15-16.

²⁰Ibid., 16.

²¹Ibid.

²²Ibid., 21.

²³Ibid., 22.

²⁴Ibid.

- ²⁵O'Neill, 33.
- ²⁶Ibid., 36-37.
- ²⁷Hoffman, 26.
- ²⁸TRADOC, *A Military Guide to Terrorism in the Twenty-First Century*, 1-6.
- ²⁹Ibid., 1-7.
- ³⁰O'Neill, 33.
- ³¹Kilcullen, 603-604.
- ³²Ibid., 605.
- ³³Ariel Merari, "Terrorism as a Strategy of Insurgency," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 5, no. 4 (Winter 1993): 235-236.
- ³⁴Kilcullen, 604.
- ³⁵Luis Astorga and David A. Shirk, "Drug Trafficking Organizations and Counter-Drug Strategies in the U.S.-Mexican Context," <http://usmex.ucsd.edu/assets/024/11632.pdf> (accessed 28 November 2012), 33.
- ³⁶Ibid., 32.
- ³⁷Ibid., 33.
- ³⁸Michael G. Rogan, "Is the Narco-violence in Mexico an Insurgency?" (Monograph, School of Advanced Military Studies, Fort Leavenworth, KS, 2011).
- ³⁹Ibid.
- ⁴⁰Astorga and Shirk, 33.
- ⁴¹Ibid., 34.
- ⁴²Rogan, 9.
- ⁴³Astorga and Shirk, 40.
- ⁴⁴Beittel, *Mexico's Drug Trafficking Organizations*, 8.
- ⁴⁵Ibid., 10.
- ⁴⁶Ibid., 11.

⁴⁷STRATFOR Global Intelligence, “Mexican Drug Wars: Bloodiest Year to Date,” <http://www.stratfor.com/analysis/20101218-mexican-drug-wars-bloodiest-year-date> (accessed 21 December 2012), 5.

⁴⁸Rogan, 11.

⁴⁹Borderland Beat, “Reporting on the Mexican Cartel Drug War,” <http://www.borderlandbeat.com/2012/01/los-zetas-is-mexicos-biggest-cartel.html> (accessed 20 February 2013).

⁵⁰Eduardo Guerrero-Gutierrez, “Security, Drugs, and Violence in Mexico: A Survey,” [http://iis-db.stanford.edu/evnts/6716/NAF_2011_EG_\(Final\).pdf](http://iis-db.stanford.edu/evnts/6716/NAF_2011_EG_(Final).pdf) (accessed 1 October 2012), 32.

⁵¹Borderland Beat.

⁵²Gutierrez, 33.

⁵³Ibid.

⁵⁴Beittel, *Mexico’s Drug Trafficking Organizations*, 14.

⁵⁵Ibid.

⁵⁶Bob Killebrew and Jennifer Bernal, “Crime Wars: Gangs, Cartels, and U.S. National Security,” http://www.cnas.org/files/documents/publications/CNAS_Crime_Wars_KillebrewBernal.pdf (accessed 3 October 2012), 21.

⁵⁷Ibid.

⁵⁸Borderland Beat.

⁵⁹Ibid.

⁶⁰STRATFOR, “Mexican Drug Wars,” 10.

⁶¹Gutierrez, 36-37.

⁶²Borderland Beat.

⁶³Ibid.

⁶⁴Killebrew and Bernal, 21.

⁶⁵Ibid.

⁶⁶STRATFOR, “Mexican Drug Wars,” 7.

⁶⁷Beittel, *Mexico's Drug Trafficking Organizations*, 14.

⁶⁸Rogan, 11.

⁶⁹Gutierrez, 34-35.

⁷⁰Killebrew and Bernal, 20.

⁷¹Gutierrez, 35.

⁷²STRATFOR, "Mexican Drug Wars," 12.

⁷³*Ibid.*

⁷⁴Astorga and Shirk, 37.

⁷⁵STRATFOR, "Mexican Drug Wars," 11.

⁷⁶Gutierrez, 35.

⁷⁷Killebrew and Bernal, 20.

⁷⁸Molzahn, Rios, and Shirk, 29.

⁷⁹Gutierrez, 12.

⁸⁰*Ibid.*

⁸¹Beittel, *Mexico's Drug Trafficking Organizations*, 1.

⁸²Kan, 42.

⁸³Molzahn, Rios, and Shirk, 20.

⁸⁴Bunker and Sullivan, 137-148.

⁸⁵Astorga and Shirk, 41-42.

⁸⁶Williams, 262-265.

⁸⁷*Ibid.*

⁸⁸*Ibid.*

⁸⁹*Ibid.*

⁹⁰*Ibid.*, 264.

⁹¹Beittel, *Mexico's Drug Trafficking Organizations*, 18.

⁹²Vanda Felbab-Brown, "Calderon's Caldron: Lessons from Mexico's Battle Against Organized Crime and Drug Trafficking in Tijuana, Ciudad Juarez, and Michoacan," http://www.brookings.edu/~media/research/files/papers/2011/9/calderon%20felbab%20brown/09_calderon_felbab_brown.pdf (accessed 11 September 2012), 38.

⁹³Ibid.

⁹⁴Shawn Teresa Flanigan, "Terrorists Next Door?: A Comparison of Mexican Drug Cartels and Middle Eastern Terrorist Organizations," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 4, no. 2 (March 2012): 288.

⁹⁵Ibid., 293.

⁹⁶Gutierrez, 81.

⁹⁷Ibid.

⁹⁸The Knights Templar Cartel is an exception to this, however some scholarship suggests their ideology is nothing more than a recruiting tactic.

⁹⁹Flanigan, 286.

¹⁰⁰Molzahn, Rios, and Shirk, 25.

¹⁰¹Williams, 261-262.

¹⁰²Beittel, *Mexico's Drug-Related Violence*, 11.

¹⁰³Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, "Internal Displacement in the Americas," <http://www.internal-displacement.org/publications/global-overview-2012-americas.pdf> (accessed 19 January 2013), 39.

¹⁰⁴Bunker and Sullivan, 96.

¹⁰⁵Pew Research Global Attitudes Project, "Opinion of U.S. Improving Despite Doubts About Success, Human Rights Costs, Mexicans Back Military Campaign Against Cartels, 20 June 2012, <http://www.pewglobal.rg/2012> (accessed 3 January 2013).

¹⁰⁶Kilcullen, 605.

¹⁰⁷Hoffman, 37-38.

¹⁰⁸Kilcullen, 604.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This chapter contains three sections. The first section provides a brief summary of the data found in the previous chapter. It also draws conclusions regarding the study's primary research question. The second section describes the significance of the study. Finally, the third section offers recommendations for future study in order to advance scholarship on this topic.

Section One: Answering the Primary Research Question

The purpose of this study was to determine if the operations and actions of the various cartels operating in Mexico constitute a terrorist insurgency against the Mexican state. In addressing this issue, the previous chapter answered multiple secondary research questions. First, chapter 4 analyzed numerous definitions of “terrorism” and “insurgency” from a variety of respected sources. Because there are multiple definitions of these terms, it was necessary to conduct a qualitative analysis of these sources in an effort to construct a reasonable list of defining characteristics of a terrorist insurgent organization. Chapter 4 used a theoretical framework to compare against the recent history of the contemporary cartels in Mexico. The source material led to the creation of a template with ten attributes used as defining characteristics of terrorism and insurgency.

Another secondary research question sought to illuminate the recent history of the cartels in order to understand their current activities. This historical background provided an understanding of the relevant actors and significant historical events with regard to the Mexican drug war. This study also separated and identified the major cartels as individual

units instead of a single monolithic organization. In addition, the historical narrative of how the cartels evolved into their current state offered insight into how the cartels responded to the Mexican government's efforts against them. When the Mexican military and police forces pursued a kingpin strategy to eliminate top-level leaders, the cartels fought back by escalating the level of violence. Furthermore, the cartels adapted their structure to become more horizontal organizations, leading to greater autonomy for lower-level cartel members. With less control from senior cartel leaders, local cartel members pursued their own self-interest by branching out into other lucrative crimes. However, this contributed to the escalation of violence as cartel members battled each other for control over prostitution, kidnapping, and many other criminal enterprises within a geographic area.

Another outcome of the fragmentation and diversification of cartels is the re-labeling of the cartels as transnational criminal organizations (TCOs). No longer do these criminal enterprises focus solely on the drug trade and smuggling their contraband across the international border into the U.S. As such, current literature frequently identifies the cartels as TCOs to illustrate their diversity and international ties.

The design of this study was to input the historical data from Mexico's drug war into the defining characteristics template. This would provide an answer to the primary research question: Have the Mexican drug cartels evolved into a terrorist insurgency? Within the template, the more attributes the TCOs had in common with the defining characteristics, the more likely a positive response would be the result. In contrast, fewer characteristics would lead to a negative response. Given the answers from the secondary research questions, this study determined the TCOs share only three, or fewer than half,

of the defining characteristics of an insurgency. Furthermore, the template found that the TCOs had strictly financial objectives and lacked any ideological motivation. While the TCOs battled against each other, they also fought the state. However, their struggles against the state were not a result of legitimate social or political grievances. It was merely an effort to conduct profitable, but illegal, criminal activity without significant state interference. In an insurgency, the capture of the state would be the ultimate prize. To the TCOs in Mexico, however, the state is an impediment. It is an obstacle they must overcome in order to maximize profits. Thus, this study concluded the TCOs have not evolved into an insurgency.

In a similar fashion, the study used the defining characteristics template to determine if the TCOs operated as terrorist organizations. Again, the more attributes the TCOs had in common with the defining characteristics, the more likely the template would indicate a positive response. The TCOs share a minimum of six of the ten categories. Moreover, the template suggests an additional two categories may come close to aligning with the working definition of terrorism. In the “objective” category, the template notes the TCOs seek their own financial self-interest. However, they do seek to achieve their economic goals by influencing government. There is no effort to overthrow the state. TCO operations hope to create favorable conditions by influencing the state to either ignore illegal activity or focus their enforcement efforts against rival TCOs. Hence, the “objective” category may indicate a similarity between terrorism and the TCOs. Furthermore, the “size” category needs additional study. Yet one could extrapolate the restructuring of TCOs into horizontal organizations has possibly led to TCOs now resembling a confederation of many small localized cells rather than one large and

centrally controlled cartel. As such, it is likely that while local groups work for a TCO, at the same time, they are able to plan and conduct their own independent local operations. If that is the case, the “size” category will also align with the defining characteristics of terrorism. This would indicate a total of eight similarities between terrorism and TCOs. As such, the template posits a strong correlation between the two. There is still a lack of ideological motivation within the TCOs. Without it, the TCOs should continue to carry the label of criminal organizations as opposed to terrorist organizations. Nevertheless, given the congruence between the terrorism template and the TCOs, it is clear these criminal organizations use terrorism as a means to an end. It is a tactic they use to achieve their objectives.

Section Two: Significance of This Study

The significance of this study is that it frames part of the operational environment in Mexico with regard to the TCOs in the drug war. Current scholarship debates whether the U.S. should label the TCOs in Mexico as terrorist insurgents. Doing so would bring heightened attention to the issue and, potentially, additional resources to undermine the TCOs. As such, current literature frequently offers solutions or a recommended path forward to fix the problem. This is akin to putting the proverbial cart before the horse. In doctrinal language, they present an operational approach before defining the problem. As David Kilcullen states in regard to the Global War on Terror, “to win this war we must understand it” and avoid trying to turn it into something it is not.¹ This study has sought to aid in this effort by creating a better understanding of the operations, aims, and proper classification of the TCOs. This was possible by analyzing the current situation in Mexico and conducting a comparison between TCO operations and the defining

characteristics of terrorism and insurgency. This study concludes the TCOs operating in Mexico are not insurgents. Rather, they are diverse criminal organizations. They do, however, utilize terrorist tactics in pursuit of their economic self-interest.

This study has contributed to the field of literature by framing the problem. It is clear Mexico has a complex criminal conundrum. Thus, it requires a unified strategic approach that emphasizes the criminal nature of the TCOs. Developing one is no easy task. When large and powerful TCOs use terrorist methods, it compounds the difficulties the state faces in dealing with criminal organizations. Fortunately, the TCOs employ terrorist tactics as a means to maximize their profits, as opposed to being part of a larger insurgent strategy. This is critical to evaluating the efficacy of Mexico's existing strategic war plans. It can also be of paramount importance in developing any appropriate Phase Four stabilizing operations or Phase Five operations designed to return control back to strictly civil authorities.

Section Three: Recommendations for Future Study

This study has two recommendations for continued investigation. First, this study illustrates that "terrorism" is a difficult concept to define. Moreover, authors frequently use the word interchangeably with the term "insurgency." While this study offered a list of defining characteristics of both terms, developing a universal definition of terrorism that is completely distinct from insurgency is unlikely. Nevertheless, developing an accepted definition of terrorism within a limited group of stakeholders for a common purpose is achievable and useful.² In a recent *Small Wars Journal* article, U.S. Marine Corps Captain Eric Chase notes, "terrorism must be defined to provide governments, government agencies, and security practitioners a common reference point for developing

effective counterterrorism strategy.”³ In simpler terms, for states fighting a common enemy, agreeing on a definition of terrorism is the first step in developing effective counter measures and strategic goals. The creation of a singular and distinct definition could have positive consequences for Mexico and its financial partner in the drug war, the U.S. A consensus definition would facilitate a clear prioritization of strategic missions and funding between the two neighboring countries.⁴ Framing the problem and the mission should be part of developing a coherent and coordinated strategy. Without common definitions, however, simply defining the problem within the operational environment becomes a frustrating exercise. Policymakers in both countries need to align their instruments of national power with the appropriate military and law enforcement operational approach. Having terms such as “terrorism” succinctly defined should be of invaluable assistance to this effort.

A second recommendation, if adopted, would increase the depth of understanding of the drug war’s impact on Mexican society. This study recommends future scholarship provide a bottom-up point of view. Most current works, this study included, tries to illuminate the big picture. In other words, they explain national level political and policing strategies or TCO leaders and organizational violence. It is mostly a top-down assessment of the dynamics of the drug war. Unfortunately, such an approach can marginalize the nameless masses of the Mexican people. These people represent an often forgotten third party. The drug war affects them, but they also influence the drug war. Furthermore, while studies debate national strategy or the appropriate label to place upon TCOs, the Mexican population tries to survive in the midst of escalating violence. It is not certain if common people in Mexico care if the TCOs are insurgents, terrorists, or

criminals. Thus, it is imperative that future studies provide some measure of insight into the contemporary environment's impact upon the culture, traditions, and day-to-day lives of ordinary people. For instance, such knowledge should lead to a better understanding of the consequences of governmental policy in combatting the TCOs in Mexico. Another example might be how the local population influences cartel organization and operations. In sum, a bottom-up approach to appreciating the dynamics of Mexican society during a tumultuous period, would offer a broader and more accurate picture of the drug war.

Section Four: Conclusion

To Mexico, the TCOs represent a complex criminal problem. The continuing drug-related violence is a result of the government's direct confrontation plan against the TCOs and the structural evolution of once hierarchical cartels into horizontal networks engaged in progressively diverse criminal activity. Moreover, the TCOs operating in Mexico lack any desire to replace the current government or cause state failure. They do not possess identifiable political goals. While most violence takes place among criminals, at times, they target state actors, key government officials, and other non-combatants in spectacular attacks designed to influence or intimidate. While not explicitly political in nature, this violence seeks to deflect the government's attention away from one TCO and toward a rival criminal element. They employ these terrorist tactics for the utilitarian purposes of maximizing profits and surviving longer than the competition.

¹Kilcullen, 597.

²Eric Chase, "Defining Terrorism: A Strategic Imperative," *Small Wars Journal*, 24 January 2013, <http://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/defining-terrorism-a-strategic-imperative> (accessed 29 January 2013).

³Ibid.

⁴Shawn Reese, *Defining Homeland Security: Analysis and Congressional Considerations* (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 8 January 2013), 2.

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