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Terrorists Next Door? A Comparison of Mexican Drug Cartels and Middle Eastern Terrorist Organizations

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Drawing from interviews, surveys, and other forms of research conducted in Lebanon, Gaza and the West Bank, and Mexico, this article compares Mexican cartels to Hamas and Hezbollah. The similarities between them are striking: these are all by necessity territorially specific organizations tied to relatively defined geographic locations, and have deep and sophisticated relationships with the states within which they operate. However, there are critical differences between Mexican drug cartels and Hamas and Hezbollah as well, the most important (according to an analysis of multiple definitions of terrorism) being the presence of political and ideological motivations. This analysis illustrates the conceptual challenges and classificational ambiguity involved in analyzing terrorism and organized crime.

Keywords criminal networks, drug cartels, Mexico, Middle East, terrorism

If you look at the definition of a terrorist, that's what they are. They cut heads off and they're burning people alive.

—U.S. Congressman Michael McCaul, in reference to Mexican drug cartels[1]

Rebranding the violent activities of Mexican drug cartels[2] as "terrorism" is useful both legally and politically; so useful, in fact, that cartels themselves have labeled rival cartels as terrorists in order to gain popular support.[3] In 2010 Mexican lawmakers approved legal reforms that could classify the violent and extortionist acts of drug trafficking organizations as terrorism,[4] and in 2011 legislation was introduced in the U.S. Congress (HR 1270) to designate six Mexican drug cartels as foreign terrorist organizations. Legally, these changes would allow Mexican judges to assign drug traffickers longer prison sentences, and would allow the United States government to freeze assets, restrict travel, and impose harsher penalties on those providing material support to cartels. Politically, labeling cartel activities as terrorism is a useful strategy employed by both the Mexican government and the Gulf cartel[5] to capitalize on popular anti-terrorist sentiment and weaken the Mexican public's tolerance for the cartels' operations.[6]

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But how do cartels compare to other organizations the U.S. government has labeled as terrorist organizations? In the case of Mexican drug cartels, is the label merely a rhetorical tool, or is it actually useful as a descriptor? If the terrorist label is meaningful, why would non-ideological groups like drug cartels employ terrorist tactics? This article explores those questions by comparing the activities of Mexican drug cartels to several government definitions of terrorism, and comparing Mexican cartels to the Middle Eastern "terrorist" organizations Hamas and Hezbollah.[7] Mexican drug trafficking organizations are compared to Hamas and Hezbollah for several reasons. First, similar to Hamas and Hezbollah (but unlike more mobile, networked organizations such as al-Qaida), Mexican drug cartels are, by necessity, territorially specific organizations tied to relatively defined geographic locations.[8] While this is not characteristic of most types of organized crime groups,[9] Mexican drug cartels have an interest in controlling specific territory in order to preserve drug trade routes and maintain access to rural, mountainous terrain that provides advantage in evading authorities. Second, both Mexican drug cartels and Hamas and Hezbollah have deep and sophisticated relationships with the states within which they operate. Hamas and Hezbollah both have political wings and hold democratically elected office, in essence becoming part of the state and giving them important influence over the state's activities. In contrast, drug cartels' relationships with the Mexican government are characterized by high degrees of corruption and sometimes violence.[10] However, these tactics give cartels a great deal of influence over the activities of politicians and the bureaucracy. Through these tactics Mexican drug cartels exercise sufficient control over the state that experts warn of state capture,[11] with Sullivan and Elkus going so far as to warn that Mexico is becoming "a criminal-state largely controlled by narco-gangs."[12] While the relationships between Hamas, Hezbollah, Mexican drug cartels, and their respective states certainly fall into quite different categories, this influence and control makes Mexican drug cartels more similar to Hamas and Hezbollah than to truly clandestine terrorist organizations such as al-Qaida.

The readership of *Terrorism and Political Violence* can be assumed to have greater familiarity with politically motivated organizations like Hamas and Hezbollah than with organized crime groups like Mexican drug cartels. Thus, this article will give greater attention to the characteristics of Mexican drug cartels while contrasting them to Hamas and Hezbollah, and exploring if the "terrorism" label is an appropriate descriptor for these organizations' activities. Data for this comparison comes from a variety of sources. The information on Hezbollah in Lebanon is based on existing literature, interviews conducted with members of Hezbollah and other experts in Lebanon in 2005-2006, and content analysis of publications and publicity materials produced by Hezbollah. The information on Hamas is based on the extant literature and data from oral surveys conducted with over 1,000 low to moderate income individuals in Gaza and the West Bank. The information on Mexican drug cartels is based on existing literature, content analysis of Mexican newspaper articles, and expert interviews.

Defining Terrorism, Defining Cartel Violence

Academic, legal, and political definitions of terrorism abound. For the purposes of this examination we will concern ourselves with the ways in which terrorism is defined by a variety of government agencies and international organizations. As we see in Table 1, definitions differ even among government agencies in the same

Table 1. Definitions and descriptions of terrorism by select governments and international organizations

Source	Definition and/or description of terrorism (*emphasis added to key themes of the definition)	Key themes
Arab Convention for the Suppression of Terrorism	Any act or threat of violence, whatever its motives or purposes, that occurs in the advancement of an individual or collective criminal agenda and *seeking to sow panic among people, causing fear* by harming them, or placing their lives, liberty or security in danger, or seeking to cause damage to the environment or to public or private installations or property or to occupying or seizing them, or seeking to jeopardize national resources.	**Goal**: Create atmosphere of fear/terror and intimidation
European Union (Art.1 of the Framework Decision on Combating Terrorism, 2002)	This provides that terrorist offences are certain criminal offences set out in a list comprised largely of serious offences against persons and property which: given their nature or context, may seriously damage a country or an international organization where committed with the aim of: *seriously intimidating a population*; or *unduly compelling a Government or international organization to perform or abstain from performing any act*; or seriously destabilizing or destroying the fundamental political, constitutional, economic or social structures of a country or an international organization.	**Goal**: Create atmosphere of fear/terror and intimidation
Mexican government	The use of toxic substances, chemical or biological weapons, radioactive materials, explosives or firearms, arson, flooding, or any other means of violence against people, assets, or public services, *with the aim of causing alarm, fear*, or *terror* among the population or a sector of it, of attacking national security or *intimidating society*, or of *pressuring the authorities into making a decision.*	**Goal**: Create atmosphere of fear/terror and intimidation **Goal**: Influencing government actions or decisions

(*Continued*)

Table 1. Continued

Source	Definition and/or description of terrorism (*emphasis added to key themes of the definition)	Key themes
United Nations General Assembly (Resolution 49/60, 1994)	Criminal acts intended or calculated to *provoke a state of terror* in the general public, a group of persons or particular persons *for political purposes* are in any circumstance unjustifiable, whatever the considerations of a political, philosophical, ideological, racial, ethnic, religious or any other nature that may be invoked to justify them.	**Goal**: Create atmosphere of fear/terror and intimidation **Motivations**: Political/ideological
United Nations Security Council (Resolution 1566, 2004)	Criminal acts, including *against civilians*, committed with the intent to cause death or serious bodily injury, or taking of hostages, with the *purpose to provoke a state of terror* in the general public or in a group of persons or particular persons, *intimidate a population* or *compel a government or an international organization to do or to abstain from doing any act*.	**Tactic**: Target civilians **Goal**: Create atmosphere of fear/terror and intimidation **Goal**: Influencing government actions or decisions
United States Army (Field Manual No. FM 3-0, Chapter 9, 37 2001)	Calculated use of unlawful violence or threat of unlawful violence *to inculcate fear*. It is intended to *coerce or intimidate governments or societies . . . [to attain] political, religious, or ideological goals*.	**Goal**: Create atmosphere of fear/terror and intimidation **Motivations**: Political/ideological
United States Department of Defense (Dictionary of Military Terms)	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*.	**Goal**: Create atmosphere of fear/terror and intimidation **Motivations**: Political/ideological
United States Federal Criminal Code. (Title 18 Section 2331 of	Activities that involve violent . . . or life-threatening acts . . . that are a violation of the criminal laws of the United States or of any State and . . . appear to be intended (i) to *intimidate or coerce a civilian*	**Tactic**: Targeting civilians **Goal**: Create atmosphere of fear/terror and intimidation

(*Continued*)

Table 1. Continued

Source	Definition and/or description of terrorism (*emphasis added to key themes of the definition)	Key themes
Chapter 113(B))	*population*; (ii) to *influence the policy of a government by intimidation or coercion; or (iii) to affect the conduct of a government by mass destruction, assassination, or kidnapping; and . . . occur primarily within the territorial jurisdiction of the United States . . .*	**Goal**: Influencing government actions or decisions
United States Federal Bureau of Investigation	The unlawful use of force or 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.*	**Tactic**: Targeting civilians **Motivations**: Political/ideological **Goal**: Create atmosphere of fear/terror and intimidation
United States Patriot Act of 2001	Threatening, conspiring or attempting to hijack airplanes, boats, buses or other vehicles; threatening, conspiring or attempting to commit *acts of violence on any ''protected'' persons, such as government officials*; any crime committed with ''the use of any weapon or dangerous device,'' when the intent of the crime is determined to be the endangerment of public safety or substantial property damage rather than for ''mere personal monetary gain.''	**Tactic**: Targeting public officials

*Parts of this table are adapted from a list originally complied by Arizona Department of Emergency and Military Affairs.

country. Nonetheless, among the ten definitions and descriptions listed, some similar themes emerge. Common to all but one of the definitions is the perpetrator's goal of creating an atmosphere of fear, intimidation, and terror among the general population or a specific group. Other common themes shared by the definitions are a goal of influencing government actions or decisions, political or ideological motivations, and targeting civilians or public officials as tactics. Each of these themes will be discussed below, examining how the characteristics of Mexican drug cartels align with the themes and comparing cartels' characteristics to those of Hamas and Hezbollah.

Characteristics of Hamas, Hezbollah, and Mexican Drug Cartels

Before examining the ways in which Hamas, Hezbollah, and Mexican drug cartels are similar and whether the activities of Mexican drug cartels resemble terrorism, it is useful to provide some basic background information on each of these organizations.

Brief History and Context

Hamas is an armed Sunni Islamic organization in the Palestinian Territories well known for its ongoing armed struggle against Israel. Hamas has the expressed goal of replacing Israel and the Palestinian Territories with an Islamic Palestinian state.[13] In 2006 Hamas won a majority of seats in the Palestinian Parliament through an open election[14] and since then has gained control of several ministries of the Palestinian Authority. In addition to its military and political role, Hamas is an important provider of public services in the Palestinian Territories, running an array of charities, hospitals, schools, orphanages, and summer camps.[15]

Hezbollah is an armed Shiite Islamic organization in Lebanon that is active as a paramilitary force, a political party, and a health and social service provider. Outside of Lebanon Hezbollah perhaps is best known for its armed resistance against the Israeli occupation of southern Lebanon.[16] In 2000 Israel withdrew from most of the regions it occupied, and since Hezbollah had so thoroughly incorporated military resistance into its identity and mission some scholars predicted that Hezbollah would dissolve as a political party.[17] However, Hezbollah remains a primary actor in the Lebanese political system, continuing to win a number of key seats in parliamentary and municipal elections, and engaging in armed attacks against Israel as recently as 2006.[18] While Hezbollah has never espoused a goal of overthrowing the Lebanese state, its relationships with other political parties and religious sects in Lebanon are often tense. Some members of Lebanese society, including Prime Minister Saad Hariri and the head of the Lebanese Forces Samir Geagea, consider the organization a threat to the country's stability and democracy.[19]

For the purposes of this article, "Mexican drug cartels" refers collectively to the six predominant drug trafficking organizations operating in Mexico: the Arellano Félix Organization, the Beltrán Leyva Organization, the Gulf Cartel, La Familia Michoacán/Knights Templar, Los Zetas, and the Sinaloa Cartel. Though they often will be referred to collectively, it is important to make clear that these cartels are distinct organizations with distinct leadership. The relationships among the cartels are dynamic; organizations face rifts and split from one another (notably, Los Zetas was formerly the protection arm for the Gulf Cartel), or occasionally form temporary alliances when economically or strategically useful. The groups are largely non-ideological[20] and are engaged in the lucrative activity of drug smuggling and drug production. The cartels interact with the Mexican state through bribery, corruption, political relationships, and violence as necessary to ensure business can operate free of the constraints of law enforcement.[21]

Finances, Training, and Weaponry

Albeit for different reasons, all three of these groups of actors engage in violence, and on the whole all three are relatively well armed and well trained militarily. This may not be surprising to hear about groups like Hamas and Hezbollah, which are

recognized as having formal military wings. Both Hamas and Hezbollah are said to receive a great deal of funding, weapons, and training from Iran and Syria.[22] According to Cohen and Levitt,[23] Hamas smuggles small arms, explosives, fertilizer, rocket-propelled grenades, and rockets into the Palestinian Territories through Egypt, the amount of which has increased since Hamas began governing the Gaza Strip in 2007. While most rockets used by Hamas are locally produced, an influx of more and better materials has increased the quality of these weapons, and new Iranian-produced rockets with increased range have been used by Hamas in recent years as well.[24] Hamas also receives military training from Iran, Hezbollah, and others. However, in spite of Hamas' fairly well-developed military structure, experts agree that militarily Hamas is far less prepared than the Israeli military in terms of intelligence gathering, weaponry, and training. The conflict between Israel and Hamas in Gaza in late 2008 raised additional doubts about Hamas' combat capabilities.[25]

Like Hamas, Hezbollah also receives significant support from Iran, reportedly up to $200 million per year.[26] This figure is substantially more than the $50 million maximum estimate of funding to Hamas from Iran.[27] By most accounts Hezbollah is the better funded, better equipped, and better trained of the two organizations. In fact, Hezbollah itself provides funds to a number of organizations in Palestine, including Hamas, and Hezbollah and Iranian experts are said to train terrorist organizations throughout the region. Sophisticated weaponry is flown into Syria from Iran, and then transported overland the short distance to Lebanon's Hezbollah-dominated Beka'a Valley.[28] Hezbollah primarily targets its violent activity toward Israel, and the organization touted its 2006 war with Israel as a military victory. While Hezbollah has not yet targeted the Lebanese state with violence, the organization has significant ability to interfere in the Lebanese political process, paralyzing the government in 2006 by withdrawing from the cabinet, erecting a tent city in downtown Beirut, and occupying various ministries.[29]

Like Hamas and Hezbollah, Mexican drug cartels are also quite technologically advanced and well trained, with some experts asserting that these drug trafficking organizations have better weapons and armor than Mexican or U.S. law enforcement.[30] In 2006 drug cartels reportedly smuggled up to $25 billion into Mexico for laundering,[31] and drug sales in the United States bring as much as $39 billion to Mexican cartels each year,[32] giving the cartels resources that are likely enviable even to groups like Hamas and Hezbollah. As part of a multi-billion dollar drug trade, the cartels have access to, as one local expert described, "a bottomless flow of arms and a bottomless flow of money."[33] In addition, many drug cartels have extremely skilled employees. Perhaps most notably, Los Zetas is made up primarily of former Mexican Special Forces soldiers who were lured from the more poorly paid Mexican military to lucrative careers protecting the drug cartels. As Longmire and Longmire note, these individuals "maintain expertise in heavy weaponry, specialized military tactics, sophisticated communications equipment, intelligence collection, and countersurveillance techniques."[34] Supporting this assertion, several Mexican experts interviewed for this research project took special precautions in their communications due to concerns that their phone calls and e-mail might be monitored by cartels.

Motivations: Economic or Ideological?

Common to several of the definitions in Table 1 and to most academic definitions of terrorism is an organization's ideological motivation and goal of political, religious,

or social change. The activities of terrorist groups and organized crime may overlap. In some instances organized crime may adopt terrorism as a tactic, as is discussed at length in this article. Similarly, terrorist groups like Hamas and Hezbollah often have some involvement in organized crime.[35] Hamas' primary criminal activities are counterfeiting and money laundering,[36] complemented by counterfeiting merchandise such as software, CDs and DVDs, clothing, and cosmetics. Hamas is also reported to have some involvement in drug trafficking.[37] Hezbollah raises funds through substantial drug production and trafficking, illegal car sales,[38] fraud, selling pirated software, smuggling cigarettes and other goods, and the illegal diamond trade.[39]

When terrorist organizations engage in criminal activity, it usually is fairly apparent that crime is used as a means to reach sociopolitical ends. The goals of militant groups employing terrorism are typically ideological, and their criminal activities are normally conducted with the goal of financing their ideological goals. In contrast, the goals of organized crime groups like drug cartels are primarily economic. As Longmire and Longmire note,

> Mexican DTOs *(drug trafficking organizations)* do not wish to remove the Mexican Government and replace it with one of their own. They are not religious zealots wishing to convert the Mexican people or the rest of the world. They simply want to maximize their profits and keep government and law enforcement out of their business.[40]

While they may have other motivations as well, the ideological motivations of Hamas and Hezbollah are clear. Both are religious organizations that express a strong adherence to Islamic teachings and use their own interpretations of those teachings to mobilize supporters and justify their activities, including violence.[41] Both organizations view themselves as representing a repressed minority group; Hamas the Palestinian people, and Hezbollah the Shiite population in Lebanon which historically has been economically and politically disenfranchised.[42] Both organizations have a shared political goal of liberating territory that they consider to be unfairly occupied by the state of Israel, and both organizations are active in national politics, holding important elected offices.[43]

Mexican drug cartels, on the other hand, do not have clear ideological goals. As Hazen argues, drug cartels take what actions are necessary to ensure they can continue to profit from their illegal activities without interference from law enforcement, but they do not seek political goals or aim to destabilize the Mexican government. As she notes, "They *(Mexican drug cartels)* threaten democracy certainly, yet they demonstrate no interest in causing state failure; that would be bad for business."[44] Mexican drug cartels may target state actors and attempt to influence government decisions, as will be discussed later, but this is done only for the utilitarian purpose of maximizing profits, not for political or ideological purposes.

An exception to this may be La Familia Michoacán, a cartel that disbanded and then reconfigured itself as the Knights Templar in early 2011. La Familia has a religious orientation and also presents itself as a representative and protector of the people of Michoacán. Communications from the cartel suggest that La Familia claims to be a representative voice for citizens in Michoacán, addressing the economic, political, and social grievances of the people, not unlike the efforts of Hamas or Hezbollah to represent and address the needs of Palestinians or the Shiite

population. In a newspaper advertisement La Familia posed the question, "Who are we?" answering, "Workers from the Tierra Caliente region in the state of Michoacán, organized by the need to end the oppression, the humiliation to which we have constantly been subjected by people who have always had power."[45] La Familia, who often communicates with the public through newspapers or publicly displayed banners, also has insisted that the organization will disband once the Mexican government demonstrates that it will adequately address the needs of the people of Michoacán.[46] While La Familia is not proposing to enter mainstream elective politics, these statements nonetheless have a political premise that is unlike the motivations of other cartels in Mexico.

La Familia also has a decidedly religious orientation. Members of the cartel reportedly attend church regularly, carry bibles, and distribute bibles in local government offices.[47] La Familia leader Nazario Moreno Gonzalez is said to be a Jehovah's Witness convert who has penned his own book of religious teachings, sometimes referred to as a "bible."[48] One expert describes this book as a "religious self-help tome mixed with old-time social justice sloganeering."[49] Moreno Gonzalez is reportedly highly influenced by John Eldredge, an American evangelist and author of the self-help best-seller *Wild at Heart*, who promotes a highly masculine, "muscular" form of Christianity.[50] The book is reportedly studied, in Spanish translation, at La Familia training camps.[51] The cartel's leaders haze recruits by requiring them to engage in particularly bloody and gruesome acts so they are "prepared to do the Lord's work—that is, safeguarding women, combating competing cartels, and preventing the local sale of drugs,"[52] and leaders justify executions as "orders from the Lord."[53] While it is not clear the degree to which La Familia members or the public adhere to this particular Christian philosophy, La Familia leaders certainly have used religion as a rhetorical strategy to justify some of their most brutal acts.

Targeting and Influencing Government

Hand in hand with political ideology often comes a desire to target the government and influence the government's actions or decisions, and this is a characteristic that emerges in several of the definitions of terrorism in Table 1. How do the activities of Mexican drug cartels compare to those of Hamas and Hezbollah when interacting with states? How and why do organized crime groups engage in "terrorist-like" activities such as targeting the government in the absence of ideological motives?

As has been mentioned previously, Hamas and Hezbollah both have a sophisticated involvement in mainstream politics within their respective states, and thus they are able to influence the actions of the Palestinian Authority and the Lebanese state in democratically legitimate ways. However, these groups are best known outside the region for their use of violence as a tactic to influence government decision making. Hamas has targeted the Israeli government with violence primarily through attacks on the Israeli military and on individuals deemed to be collaborators with the Israeli state,[54] as well as targeting both Israeli and Palestinian civilians. Hamas' goal is to create a Palestinian Islamic state and it targets the Israeli government as a means of coercing the state to make decisions that align with that goal. The exact nature of the actions Hamas would like to pressure Israel to take can vary. While at times the organization's leaders state Hamas will accept nothing less than the full eradication of the state of Israel, at other times Hamas says it will cease violence if Israel adheres to the border designated by the 1948 Armistice Agreement, or the borders designated following the 1967 Six-Day War.

Hezbollah has targeted a number of state actors, foremost the Israeli military. Hezbollah's targeting of Israel is based not only on its desire to pressure Israel to retreat from Lebanese territory, but also to retreat from the Palestinian territories and from Jerusalem.[55] Hezbollah also is reported to target Israeli interests outside Lebanon, such as the Israeli embassy bombing in Argentina in 1992. Additionally, Hezbollah targeted the French and U.S. military in Lebanon in the early 1980s as well as U.S. Embassy staff, achieving their objective of coercing the French and U.S. governments to withdraw troops from the region during the Lebanese Civil War.

In contrast to Hamas and Hezbollah, who target states in pursuit of distinct political and ideological objectives, Mexican drug cartels target the state with the goal of engaging in their economic activities unhampered by government intervention. Mexican cartels direct much more violence toward one another than they do toward the state,[56] and they most often shape the behavior of the state through substantial corruption that grants them control of the bureaucracy.[57] However, drug cartels also direct violence toward the Mexican state, particularly by way of targeting public officials. Drug cartels engage in assassinations of law enforcement and local and federal government officials; according to Longmire and Longmire, "As many as one or two dozen assassinations occur throughout Mexico in any given week."[58] Between 2004 and 2010 twenty-seven mayors were killed by drug cartels, and in 2010 thirteen candidates for governorships were killed by organized crime, presumably due to these officials' refusal to allow cartels to operate without obstruction.[59] According to Hazen, this may be a strategy on the part of cartel leaders to reduce officials' readiness to take posts in violent areas, thereby causing posts to go unfilled or to be filled by individuals more willing to accommodate the cartels for the sake of survival.[60] Cartel members have also engaged in car bombings aimed at local and federal police, and have killed U.S. Consulate staff along the U.S.-Mexico border. While not explicitly political in nature, these attacks have the goal of influencing the state by intimidating Mexico's government into suspending its efforts to defeat the cartels. The cartels' efforts against the state are substantial enough that media outlets, academic experts, and U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton have referred to the cartels as an "insurgency," and warn of an impending "failed state" in Mexico.[61] Others such as Hazen insist that cartels pose a real threat to democratic accountability within the state, but assert that predictions of an insurgency or failed state are exaggerated.[62]

Using Violence and Generating Fear: Tactics, Targets, and Goals

The most common theme in the definitions and descriptions of terrorism shown in Table 1 is an organization's intention of creating an atmosphere of fear, terror, and/or intimidation through its acts. Many are familiar with the idea that terrorism is theater; as Cohen notes, "Terrorism is a spectacle produced for viewers, many of whom live apart from the violent staged events."[63] Given this, it is not surprising that terrorist groups like Hamas and Hezbollah successfully create an atmosphere of fear in the societies they target with violence. The tactic of targeting civilians, also found as a theme in Table 1, can be particularly useful for generating an atmosphere of terror. Both Hamas and Hezbollah launch rockets into communities in Israel and at times hit civilians, though the organizations often claim this as accidental. The risk of a wayward rocket hitting one's home or workplace is a powerful producer of fear and serves as an effective means of gaining attention to one's political cause. Hamas

and less frequently Hezbollah also have engaged in suicide bombing, targeting state installations or civilians at large, such as in buses or public markets. The use of suicide terrorism is particularly effective as a tactic for instilling public fear.[64] Grisly and unexpected events such as suicide attacks, car bombings, and the like draw attention that not only creates fear, but attracts media attention and helps gain support for one's cause. As Bloom[65] notes, violence—specifically suicide attacks—may resonate with individual members of an organization and has been shown to increase popular support for organizations that use the tactic. In this context one may witness an increase in violence as groups compete for power and popular support. Support for one's cause may come not only from those sympathetic to an organization's political goals, but indirectly from the citizen targets of violence who may pressure the state to give way to the perpetrators in order to regain security.

These violent strategies are logical for ideologically motivated groups, but why would organized crime groups like Mexican drug cartels engage in similar behavior? By many experts' accounts, they should not, or at least not with much frequency. Hazen notes that while organized crime groups do have the capacity to use violence, "violence is not their primary tool of the trade,"[66] because less violence is typically better for business and violence is costly, reducing profitability. A recent Stratfor report asserts that organized crime groups that use terrorist-style tactics risk losing the public support essential for maintaining the extensive network of policemen, bankers, politicians, businessmen, and judges necessary to provide them protection.[67]

Yet we have seen in Mexico in recent years gruesome acts of violence that have certainly created an atmosphere of fear and terror in the country, so much so that in winter 2010 the Mexican government warned Mexicans in the U.S. to travel home for the Christmas holiday only in groups and during daylight hours.[68] While in the past cartel violence typically involved the quick execution of rivals in a remote location, the violent activities of cartels have become increasingly grisly and public. Some experts suggest that much of these new forms of violence originated with the Zetas, with rival cartels then pressured to engage in similar activities.[69] With violent acts seeming to be quickly matched by rival cartels, Mexico may provide another context for the application of Bloom's strategic competition thesis, with rival cartels outbidding one another with increasingly gruesome acts.[70]

Cartels have begun using road blockades, car bombs, and improvised explosive devices. Groups like La Familia Michoacán first gained national repute when members dumped five severed human heads onto the dance floor of a night club.[71] Further decapitations have taken place around the country, becoming a preferred method of intimidation among prominent cartels.[72] Burned and tortured bodies are left in public with message from the cartels; banners and bodies are hung from bridges; internet videos have been posted of torture and killings.[73] These acts, ghastly in nature and showcased in public locations like nightclubs, bridges, or the internet, are clearly performed for an audience. The result is a palpable sense of fear among the Mexican population, particularly in geographic areas where the death toll is high.[74]

The intent of such shocking murders is to frighten rival cartels, the government, and the public. Violence may be targeted toward competitors or used internally to maintain discipline. Much like in the case of Hamas or Hezbollah, violence may be used to discourage the government's current actions, in this case, Mexico's drug war. Organized crime rarely targets non-associated individuals, and as such, until recently there has been little evidence of indiscriminate killing of civilians by

Mexican drug cartels. However, some experts believe those numbers have begun to escalate.[75] In that case the intent of violence, much like the targeting of civilians in the Middle East, may be to diminish public support for the government's efforts against the cartels in order to return to a period of calm. There is ample evidence that public sentiment aligns with this intent, with tens of thousands of people protesting in Mexico City in May 2011 asking President Calderon to withdraw from the battle with cartels.[76] While there is a lack of systematic reliable data on casualties that would allow one to assess changes in the number of civilian targets,[77] particularly disturbing are recent accounts of mass graves discovered in northern Mexico in early 2011. As of April 2011 at least 177 bodies of bus passengers had been found in two dozen hidden graves near the town of San Fernando in the border state of Tamaulipas; a number had been raped or burned alive. Cartel gunmen are believed responsible.[78] While the hidden graves suggest that these murders were not intended to send a public message, it provides a disconcerting example of civilian targeting by Mexican drug cartels.

Conclusion

How do Mexican cartels compare to other organizations the U.S. government has labeled as terrorist organizations, such as Hamas and Hezbollah? Is the label merely a political and legal tool, or does it have greater meaning? Looking at Table 2, we see that based on several themes from government definitions of terrorism, the key difference between Mexican drug cartels and Hamas and Hezbollah is the presence of political and ideological motivations. Hamas and Hezbollah are motivated ideologically by both politics and religion, and see themselves as representatives of oppressed groups. Mexican drug cartels are businesses whose motives, much like those of large corporations, are defending markets, expanding market share, and ultimately, maximizing profit.[79]

How important is Mexican drug cartels' lack of ideological motivation? A number of academics[80] and some of the government agencies listed in Table 1 would say this difference is at the crux of what makes a terrorist organization different from any other armed group. However, more than half of the definitions in Table 1 did

Table 2. Goals, motivations, and tactics of Hamas, Hezbollah, and Mexican drug cartels Compared to definitions and descriptions of terrorism

Key themes from definitions of terrorism	Hamas	Hezbollah	Mexican drug cartels
Goal: Create atmosphere of fear/ terror and intimidation	Yes	Yes	Yes
Goal: Influencing government actions or decisions	Yes	Yes	Yes
Motivations: Political/ideological	Yes	Yes	No (exception *may* be La Familia Michoacán)
Tactic: Target civilians	Yes	Yes	Yes
Tactic: Targeting public officials	Yes	Yes	Yes

not include ideology as an essential component, and some would argue that the semantic debate matters very little for citizens on the ground in communities experiencing violence. Longmire and Longmire assert,

> Mexican drug traffickers are more than criminals. They are terrorists. And that's not hyperbole. The tactics, strategy, organization, and even (to a limited extent) the goals of the Mexican drug cartels are all perfectly consistent with those of recognized terrorist organizations.[81]

This analysis illustrates the conceptual challenges and classificational ambiguity involved in analyzing terrorism and organized crime. There is a great deal of commonality among the activities of both types of groups. Criminal activity justified by ideological intent nonetheless remains a crime; illegal activity aimed at profit maximization may necessitate violence that targets government and strikes fear in the hearts of citizens. Arguably all terrorist groups employing violence are engaged in some form of criminal activity, and this article demonstrates that, although perhaps less often, criminal organizations may choose to use terrorism as a tactic in their pursuit of profit. To the extent that the activities of these two types of entities overlap, perhaps one key element in determining which label to apply is a matter of proportion. Is an organization engaged in 90% terrorist activity and 10% criminal activity? Or vice versa? As groups' activities and tactics shift, as in the case of Mexican drug cartels, does their label shift as well? If so, where is the tipping point at which an organized crime groups becomes a terrorist organization? Ultimately, perhaps the most useful technique for labeling violent groups is the practical strategy already in use by some law enforcement, legal prosecutors, and security policy makers: applying the label that under current conditions provides the most powerful tools for curtailing an organizations' activity.[82]

Notes

1. Satara Williams, "Congressman McCaul Discusses Strategies to Combat Drug Cartels," *The Sun*, April 6, 2011, http://www.houstonsun.com.2011/04/.

2. It is worth noting that some experts and government agencies prefer the term "drug trafficking organizations" to "drug cartel" because "cartel" often refers to price-setting groups, and it is not clear that Mexican drug cartels are involved in this practice; Colleen W. Cook, *CRS Report for Congress: Mexico's Drug Cartels* (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2008). However, because the term "drug cartel" still dominates, that is the term that will be used in this article.

3. Stratfor, *Mexico: Rebranding the Cartel Wars*, http://www.stratfor.com/analysis/20101223-mexico-rebranding-cartel-wars.

4. Ibid.

5. In the case of the Gulf Cartel, the goal was to use anti-terrorist rhetoric to weaken support for rival cartel La Familia Michoacán. In September 2008 a grenade attack in the capital of Michoacán, ostensibly by the cartel La Familia Michoacán, was one of the first instances of indiscriminate killing of civilians in Mexico's drug war. Shortly thereafter the Gulf cartel posted banners in several cities condemning the attack and offering a $5 million reward for the capture of those involved. Banners called the attack an act of terrorism, and accused La Familia of "fundamentalist Islamic practices"; STRATFOR, *Mexico Security Memo*, http://www.stratfor.com/node/125267/analysis/20081013_mexico_security_memo_ oct_13_2008).

6. STRATFOR (see note 3 above).

7. Labeling groups as terrorist organizations is by nature contentious, political, and subjective. For discussions of this, see Michael V. Bhatia, "Fighting Words: Naming Terrorists,

Bandits, Rebels and Other Violent Actors,'' *Third World Quarterly* 26, no. 1 (2005): 5–22; and Leonard Weinberg, Ami Pedahzur, and Sivan Hirsch-Hoefler, ''The Challenges of Conceptualizing Terrorism,'' *Terrorism and Political Violence* 17 (2005): 1–18. Different individuals, populations, and governments disagree about whether they consider Hamas and Hezbollah to be terrorist organizations, and some governments differentiate between these organizations' military, political, and charitable arms; see Shawn Flanigan and Mounah Abdel-Samad, ''Hezbollah's Social Jihad: Nonprofits as Resistance Organizations,'' *Middle East Policy* 16, no. 2 (2009): 122–137. I refrain from taking a normative stance on the activities of these two groups, and use the term ''terrorist'' here in reference to the U.S. Department of State's identification of Hamas and Hezbollah as Foreign Terrorist Organizations (see http://www.state.gov/s/ct/rls/other/des/123085.htm).

8. It should be noted that Hezbollah is reported to operate outside Lebanon, in locations as far flung as Argentina and Thailand. However, Hezbollah's espoused goals are based on territorial claims—liberating southern Lebanon from Israeli occupation—and as such, much of the organization's activities are geographically based. Even when Hezbollah is reported to operate outside Lebanon, it does so, typically, with the goal of attacking Israeli interests.

9. Jennifer M. Hazen, ''Drug Cartels and their Fiefdoms: What Challenge to the Mexican State?'', Paper presented at the annual convention of the International Studies Association, Montreal, Canada, March 17, 2011.

10. Ibid.

11. Ibid.; Local experts, interviews with author 2010–2011.

12. John P. Sullivan and Adam Elkus, ''State of Siege: Mexico's Criminal Insurgency,'' *Small Wars Journal* (2009): 1–12, p. 1.

13. Hamas, *The Charter of Allah: The Platform of the Islamic Resistance Movement* (Hamas, 1988).

14. This election was deemed fair and legitimate by independent observers, which proved problematic because the U.S. had worked hard to convince the Israeli government to allow Hamas members to stand for election.

15. Matthew Levitt, *Hamas: Politics, Charity and Terrorism in the Service of Jihad* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006).

16. Shawn Flanigan and Mounah Abdel-Samad, ''Hezbollah's Social Jihad: Nonprofits as Resistance Organizations,'' *Middle East Policy* 16, no. 2 (2009): 122–137.

17. Howard Vincent Meehan, *Terrorism, Diasporas, and Permissive Threat Environments: A Study of Hezbollah's Fundraising Operations in Paraguay and Ecuador* (Monterey, CA: Naval Postgraduate School, 2004).

18. Flanigan and Abdel-Samad (see note 16 above).

19. ''Geagea: Hezbollah's Arms Hinder Solutions,'' *The Daily Star*, May 13, 2011, http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Politics/2011/May-13/Geagea-Hezbollahs-arms-hinder-solutions.ashx#axzz1mNh4clmr.

20. There is some evidence that La Familia Michoacán, reconfigured as Knights Templar in early 2011, has some ideological orientation as will be discussed later in the article. It is unclear as of yet whether the newly configured Knights Templar shares this ideological orientation.

21. Hazen (see note 9 above).

22. Rachel Ehrenfeld, *Funding Evil: How Terrorism Is Financed—and How to Stop It* (Chicago: Bonus Books, 2005).

23. Yoram Cohen and Matthew Levitt, *PolicyWatch #1484. Hamas Arms Smuggling: Egypt's Challenge* (Washington, DC: The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2009).

24. Ibid.

25. Yoram Cohen and Jeffrey White, *Policy Focus #97. Hamas in Combat: The Military Performance of the Palestinian Islamic Resistance Movement* (Washington, DC: The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2009).

26. United States Secretary of Defense, *Unclassified Report on Military Power of Iran* (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, 2010).

27. Matthew Levitt, *Iranian State Sponsorship of Terror: Threatening U.S. Security, Global Stability, and Regional Peace. Testimony before the House Committee on International Relations, Subcommittee on the Middle East and Central Asia, and the Subcommittee on International Terrorism and Nonproliferation* (Washington, DC: House Committee on International

Relations Subcommittee on the Middle East and Central Asia and Subcommittee on International Terrorism and Nonproliferation, 2005).

28. Ibid.

29. Magnus Norell, *Policy Focus #98 A Victory for Islamism? The Second Lebanon War and Its Repercussions* (Washington, DC: The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2009).

30. Sylvia 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): 35–52.

31. Colleen W. Cook, *CRS Report for Congress: Mexico's Drug Cartels* (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2008).

32. Peter O'Dowd, "Are U.S. Drug Users to Blame for Mexican Border Violence?," *Marketplace*, Wednesday, June 15, 2011, http://www.marketplace.org/topics/life/are-us-drug-users-blame-mexican-border-violence.

33. Local expert, interviews with author 2011.

34. Longmire and Longmire (see note 30 above), 41.

35. Stratfor (see note 3 above); Also, see many of the articles in this Special Issue of Terrorism and Political Violence, particularly those by Victor Asal et al., James Forest, and John Parachini.

36. Aaron Mannes, Amy Sliva, V.S. Subrahmanian, Jonathan Wilkenfeld, *Stochastic Opponent Modeling Agents: A Case Study with Hamas*, http://www.cs.umd.edu/~asliva/papers/SOMAHamas-icccd08.pdf; Erhenfeld (see note 22 above); Levitt (see note 15 above).

37. Levitt (see note 15 above).

38. Stratfor (see note 3 above).

39. Matthew Levitt, *Hezbollah: Financing Terror through Criminal Enterprise* (Washington, DC: Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, 2005).

40. Longmire and Longmire (see note 30 above), 47.

41. Ahmed Nizar Hamzeh, *In the Path of Hizbullah* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2004); Levitt (see note 15 above); Amal Saad-Ghorayeb, *Hizbu'llah: Politics and Religion* (London: Pluto Press, 2002).

42. Flanigan and Abdel-Samad (see note 16 above); Shawn Flanigan. "Nonprofit Service Provision by Insurgent Organizations—The Cases of Hizballah and the Tamil Tigers," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 31 (2008): 499–519.

43. Hamas (see note 13 above); Hamzeh (see note 41 above); Levitt (see note 15 above); Saad-Ghorayeb (see note 41 above).

44. Hazen (see note 9 above), 3.

45. William Finnegan, "Silver or Lead," *The New Yorker*, May 31, 2010, 38–51.

46. Local expert, interviews with author 2011.

47. George Grayson, *La Familia Drug Cartel: Implications for U.S.–Mexican Security* (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, 2010).

48. Local expert, interviews with author 2011; ibid.

49. Ibid.

50. Ibid., Finnegan (see note 45 above), Grayson (see note 47 above).

51. Finnegan (see note 45 above).

52. Grayson (see note 47 above), 35.

53. Ibid., 37.

54. Jeroen Gunning, *Hamas in Politics: Democracy, Religion, Violence* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008).

55. Saad-Ghorayeb (see note 41 above).

56. According to Hazen (see note 9 above), approximately 90% of Mexican drug cartel-related killings involve the cartels themselves, with an estimated 7% of victims being police or military.

57. Sullivan and Elkus (see note 12 above).

58. Longmire and Longmire (see note 30 above), 42.

59. Hazen (see note 9 above).

60. Ibid.

61. Local expert, interviews with author 2011; Longmire and Longmire (see note 30 above); Sullivan and Elkus (see note 12 above).

62. Hazen (see note 9 above).

63. Tyler Cowen, "Terrorism as Theater: Analysis and Policy Implications," *Public Choice 128* (2006): 233–244, p. 233.

64. Mia Bloom, *Dying to Kill: The Allure of Suicide Terrorism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005).

65. Mia Bloom, "Palestinian Suicide Bombing: Public Support, Market Share, and Outbidding," *Political Science Quarterly* 119, no. 1 (2004): 61–88.

66. Hazen (see note 9 above), p. 7.

67. Stratfor (see note 3 above).

68. Daniel Hernandez, "Mexican Expats Warned About Holiday Travel Home," *Los Angeles Times,* November 24, 2010, http://articles.latimes.com/2010/nov/24/world/la-fg-mexico-convoys-20101124.

69. Local experts, interviews with author 2010–2011.

70. Bloom (see note 65 above).

71. Local expert, interviews with author 2011; Grayson (see note 47 above).

72. Stratfor (see note 3 above).

73. Longmire and Longmire (see note 30 above); Hazen (see note 9 above); Ibid.

74. Local experts, interviews with author 2010–2011.

75. Hazen (see note 9 above).

76. Ken Ellingwood, "In Mexico City, Crowds Protest Drug Violence," *Los Angeles Times,* May 8, 2011, http://articles.latimes.com/2011/may/08/world/la-fg-mexican-violence-protest-20110509.

77. Hazen (see note 9 above).

78. Tracy Wilkinson, "Police, Bus Companies Failed to Act as Graves Filled in Tamaulipas," *Los Angeles Times*, April 25, 2011, http://articles.latimes.com/2011/apr/25/world/la-fg-mexico-mass-graves-20110425.

79. For the purposes of this discussion we will disregard the possible ideological and religious motives of La Familia Michoacán/Knights Templar, which are atypical of the major Mexican drug cartels. Also, it is important to consider that the cartels' desire to consolidate power and secure geographic territory is not unlike the goals of many ethnonationalist terror organizations, which Hezbollah and Hamas are sometimes labeled.

80. Brigette Nacos, *Terrorism and Counterterrorism: Understanding Threats and Responses in the Post-9/11 World* (New York: Penguin, 2006).

81. Longmire and Longmire (see note 30 above), p. 37.

82. As previously mentioned, public officials in both Mexico and in the United States have made efforts to apply anti-terrorism law to drug cartels in order to assign drug traffickers longer prison sentences, impose harsher penalties upon those providing material support to cartels, and allow government to freeze assets and restrict travel of those involved in drug trafficking.