

Terrorism in Latin America (Part Two): The Threat from Human Trafficking

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Hypothetical scenarios often dominate the storyline of possible collusion between organized crime and jihadists in Latin America. The elaborate web of networks woven by drug cartels and Islamists adds to the confusion. A wide range of U.S. adversaries have conducted successful human smuggling operations, posing an immediate threat to U.S. national security.



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It Is All about Networks. Complicated networks of fringe supporters, associate funders and full-time operators help connect criminal and terrorist elements from hot spots around the globe. These webs help them facilitate each other's illicit behavior. Hezbollah — a militant Islamist group based in Lebanon and proxy force of Iran — works with powerful Colombian and Brazilian drug syndicates to move tons of cocaine into Africa and Europe. Meanwhile, networks of loosely affiliated criminal organizations facilitate the paid covert transfer of terrorists over international borders.¹

The fluidity of this network, however, poses a problem for counterterrorism and interdiction efforts. Navy Admiral Kurt Walter Tidd explained that “what’s true about [a network] today... isn’t necessarily true tomorrow.” Understanding the complexities of the international connections linking organized crime with terrorist organizations can be confusing since they remain in constant flux, he said.²

Terrorism expert Douglas Farah offers a more static picture of networks, breaking them down into three essential elements: fixers, super fixers and shadow facilitators.³ Local fixers are business elites that profit from connecting seedy organizations to otherwise difficult to penetrate local financial networks, while the super fixers do something similar on a regional or global scale. The shadow facilitators, Farah writes, specialize in moving weapons and commodities, in addition to having access to fraudulent documents and money-laundering services.⁴

The Benefits of Networks to U.S. Adversaries. The threat from jihadists to the homeland falls within a spectrum of intent to capability. U.S. security services generally consider those with ability and incentive to do harm to the continental United States as priority threats. Those with intent but little capability are considered less of a threat.

The outsourcing of work inherent in these networks has provided lesser-known actors capabilities typically reserved for nation-states. Former Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) Chief of Operations Michael Braun told the House Financial Services Committee, “...most transnational criminal and terrorist organizations do not possess organic money laundering capacity; they have to outsource that requirement.”⁵ This outsourcing is crucial to successful human smuggling operations, and the availability of support means virtually anyone can create one.

When a relatively inexpensive operation (in this case, human trafficking) becomes accessible to many, the small-time Islamist

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thousands of miles away is a significant threat. The problem for U.S. security is that networks in Latin America specialize in human smuggling.

Evidence of Organized Crime Helping Terrorists. Financial transactions from countries of concern in the greater Middle East to Mexico point to highly developed networks that facilitate the movement of people into the United States. Indeed, approximately 30,000 migrants from countries of terrorist concern crossed the U.S. southwestern border in 2015 — 10 percent of the illegal smuggling for that year, according to one report.⁶

According to the Arizona Attorney General's Office, a disproportionate amount of wire transfers come from the Middle East or from individuals with Middle Eastern names to specific border cities in Mexico:

- The majority of wire transfers originating from the greater Middle East region or from Middle Easterners arrive in Tapachula — a city on Mexico's southern border and a major hub for human smuggling.
- The second-highest amount goes to the northern city of Nogales, located just over the border from Arizona.⁷
- Neither city appears to have a notable immigrant population, which might otherwise warrant such significant transactions.

In August 2014, four Turkish men who claimed to have ties to terrorist organizations were detained after crossing the border into Texas. The four flew directly from Istanbul to Mexico City and a Turkish-speaking contact sheltered them in a safe house for a month before their cross-border transit into Texas from Reynosa, Mexico. Each man paid a mere \$8,000 to be shuttled across to Mission, Texas, where they stayed in another safe house before their apprehension.⁸ Putting that cost in perspective: Hezbollah operatives have laundered as much as \$200 million *a month* in cocaine revenue for some Latin American drug cartels.⁹

Judicial Watch sources reported in 2015 that two ISIS cells were known to be operating west of Ciudad Juárez, just over the border from El Paso, Texas. The same report claimed the cartel associates had willingly and knowingly smuggled ISIS members through the weakly manned corridor between Acala and Fort Hancock, Texas.¹⁰ These activities relied partly on financial arrangements between ISIS member Mahmood Omar Khabir and the Sinaloa Cartel — an international drug trafficking syndicate based in Mexico.

A former Al Qaeda instructor expelled from Kuwait for extremism, Khabir claims to have traveled back

and forth across the border from his hideout in northern Mexico near El Paso to scout targets with the help of narcotraffickers. He says he trained other militants in Mexico, and that they could carry out a devastating attack just over the Texas border within a few hours.¹¹

These networks extend to other countries in Latin America. Sharafat Ali Khan pled guilty in April 2017 to smuggling illegal immigrants from Afghanistan, Pakistan and Bangladesh through an elaborate underground railroad that originated in Brazil.¹² One of those smuggled Afghans was later tied to a plot to attack the United States and pled guilty in April 2017.¹³

Shifting Priorities Could Overcome Enforcement Challenges. Illicit reciprocity binds otherwise disparate groups. But confusing overlaps between criminal and terrorist activities within networks creates uncertainties of jurisdiction for the military and law enforcement. One solution could involve a shift in focus — prioritizing the activity rather than the actor.

Trying to stop the range of illicit activities of one criminal organization can lead down multiple paths and spread law enforcement thin. Instead, the U.S. government could concentrate on human trafficking in Latin America and counter the activity regardless of the actor. This will require clear lines of delineation between law enforcement and military roles, but it can be done.

To supplement this strategy, the U.S. government could adopt a version of former DEA official David Braun's idea of helping Latin American countries craft powerful conspiracy laws. The capability to indict associates, leaders and supporters alike is arguably the most efficient and effective way to dismantle criminal networks. The Racketeering Influenced and Corrupt Organizations (RICO) Act — a law that targets the command and control of organized crime — proved successful in taking apart the once impenetrable American mob after its passage in October 1970. RICO allowed prosecutors to try organized crime leaders and associates for ordering or facilitating a criminal act, whether or not they personally committed the offense.

Conclusion. The complex and confusing network of illicit relationships between organized crime and jihadists can create an endless stream of scenarios. But human smuggling should be a priority. The U.S. adversaries who have infiltrated Latin America have proven capable and willing to move people into position to attack American communities.

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Notes

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