

Terrorist Tactics by Criminal Organizations: The Mexican Case in Context

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Abstract

In the past 10 years in Mexico, more than 100,000 people have been killed in violence related to organized crime. Some attacks have left horrific scenes, meant to send messages to the public or government. Debate continues about how to characterize this violence, and some observers describe it as “terrorism” or its perpetrators as “terrorists.” This article emphasizes that Mexico has experienced terrorist tactics by criminal organizations. This implies that while the perpetrators are better thought of (and dealt with) as criminal groups, some of their violence at least partially fulfills the criteria to be defined as terrorism. The use of terrorist tactics by criminal groups is an understudied aspect of the crime-terror nexus because more research examines crime by terrorist groups. The article discusses three tactics seen in Mexico: bombings, violent communication, and attacks against politicians. It then presents comparable examples from other countries, such as Brazil, Colombia, Italy, and Russia. Similarities and differences between criminal groups and terrorist groups are discussed. The violence in Mexico is relatively unique for its scale, for the number of people killed, but in general the use of terrorist tactics by criminal organizations is not new.

Keywords: Terrorist tactics, terrorist groups, organized crime, Mexico

Introduction

Car bombs send shrapnel through crowded urban areas, detonated remotely by cell phone. Tortured bodies displayed with threatening messages to the public or government. Politicians gunned down because of their work.

These scenes might evoke modern-day Syria or Afghanistan, or Northern Ireland during The Troubles, but they have occurred in recent years in Mexico, as criminal organizations fight the government and each other for the lucrative market of US-bound drugs. The violence in Mexico has left more than 100,000 dead, 30,000 disappeared, and is often shocking for its brutality.[1] A growing line of research seeks to understand the causes of the crisis.[2] However, important questions remain regarding how to categorize the violence, especially the most horrifying acts, and how to classify the non-state groups carrying out the carnage.

What is the best way to understand the violence in Mexico? Do we see acts of terrorism, as commonly defined? Is it helpful to describe the violent subnational groups as terrorist organizations? The literature is mixed on these questions. For example, Campbell and Hansen argue that we see “terrorism” in Mexico, while Longmire and Longmire assert that the drug trafficking organizations should be labelled “terrorist groups.”[3]. Other scholars, such as Flanigan and Williams, dispute these characterizations.[4] Williams argues that the violence is not terrorism because it lacks a political motivation, and is usually more selective than indiscriminate. He presents several explanations for the extreme criminal violence, including the notion

of strategic competition where violence is a “continuation of business by other means.”

These questions are important for reasons beyond the Mexican case. Scholars of political violence increasingly study groups typically characterized as criminals.[5] In the broader “crime-terror nexus” literature, one can identify three main areas of investigation: a substantial line of work on crime by terrorist groups, some research on alliances between criminal and terrorist groups, but less on potential terror by criminal groups. [6] On Makarenko’s crime-terror continuum, one of the stages is criminal groups using “terrorist tactics for operational purposes” – but less is written about this topic than other elements on the continuum.[7]

Beyond academic discussions, politicians and the press are inconsistent in their descriptions of such violence. This suggests policymaking challenges. News media accounts sometimes refer to attacks in Mexico as “terrorism” or “narco-terrorism,” and the previous Mexican president described perpetrators as “terrorists.”[8] The frameworks used by policymakers are important because if a problem is misdiagnosed, it is not likely to receive the appropriate treatment. For example, the Salvadoran government declared groups such as MS-13 “terrorist organizations,” authorizing extraordinary judicial powers, which some analysts suggest is problematic.[9] Counterterrorism or counterinsurgency approaches can backfire when used against criminal groups. [10]

This article contributes to these debates by building on work by Williams and others, emphasizing that Mexico is experiencing terrorist tactics by criminal organizations. This implies that the violent groups are not “terrorist organizations” as typically defined, but they use tactics that have a great deal in common with more politically motivated actors. This focus suggests that while full-scale counterterrorism is unlikely to be effective, some lessons from counterterrorism can be carefully employed to address certain tactics. It is also emphasized that terrorist tactics by criminal groups are not unprecedented. After discussing examples of terrorist tactics in Mexico, the article describes similar tactics used by criminal groups in countries such as Brazil, Colombia, El Salvador, Italy, and Russia. The Mexican case is unique for the scale of its violence, but most of the tactics are part of a repertoire that appears repeatedly in the history of organized crime.

The next section discusses terrorism, terrorist tactics, and terrorist groups. Then, examples of Mexican criminal groups’ terrorist tactics are discussed. Three variations are considered: bombings, violent communication, and attacks on politicians. After this, historical examples are discussed of criminal organizations in other countries using these same tactics. The conclusion presents some policy suggestions, as well as implications for the study of terrorism and crime.

Terrorism, Terrorist Tactics, and Terrorist Groups

The definition of terrorism is of course widely debated. However, there are criteria that appear in many or most definitions. Schmid and Jongman’s survey of more than 100 definitions indicates that three elements appear in the majority of terrorism definitions: (1) violence, (2) fear or terror is emphasized, generally toward a wide audience, and (3) a political motivation.[11] Many definitions mention other elements, such as civilian victims (discussed below), but these three elements are the only to appear in the majority of definitions surveyed by Schmid and Jongman.[12]

The first element, violence, is probably the least controversial. Terrorism is violence, perpetrated or threatened. The second element is the notion of fear, or the namesake terror. Terrorism is not only violence to damage or destroy a target but *communicative* violence, to influence third parties. Definitions mention creating an environment of fear, threats, psychological effects, or other related dynamics. For this reason, some definitions explicitly mention civilians as targets of terrorism, while others specify the broader grouping of non-combatants. Terrorism is shocking, in some ways unpredictable, because it is generally designed to strike fear into the wider population. The specific audience is often the general public, which could be at the national or international level. Additional potential audiences include the government or particular ethnic or religious groups.

The third element is crucial to the discussion regarding Mexico and comparable cases: terrorism is *political* violence. Motive is an essential element of the terrorist definition, and violence without such a motive is likely to be considered more common crime. There is something perhaps intuitive, to many scholars at least, that there is a unique category of violence that seeks to disrupt or replace governments, to create nation-states, or to change foreign policy.[13] If the objective of an act of violence is to allow its perpetrators to continue to conduct illegal business, this is more commonly thought of as crime. Political objectives imply a different type of violence. One reason political violence deserves its separate category is that violence with political motivations often has political solutions. Thus, there are policy reasons to focus on terrifying violence with political motivations separately from that which has other motivations, such as pure profit-seeking.

The requirement of a political motive suggests that the violence we see in Mexico is not usually “terrorism” as traditionally defined. The perpetrators do not act with a political motivation – such as imposing a particular ideology or religion on the government – but instead usually a purely criminal motivation. Their primary objective is to make money. Their fundamental relationship with the state is that they want it to leave them alone. Beyond the lack of political motivation, the violent groups in Mexico do not usually direct their communicative violence at the general public, as terrorism typically does. The groups seem to be communicating more to rival groups than other actors, as is discussed below.[14]

While most of the drug-related violence in modern Mexico is not terrorism as usually defined, there are actions that could be considered *terrorist tactics*. I would contend that any actions that have the first two elements are terrorist tactics, violence to strike fear into others beyond the immediate victims. Even if an action is not technically terrorism (according to many authors) because it lacks the political motivation, it still could make sense to categorize it as terrorist-like violence. This is consistent with the characterization that a Mexican international affairs expert, Mauricio Meschoulam, has used for certain shocking acts of criminal violence in Mexico, “quasi-terrorism.”[15]

The use of the phrase “terrorist tactics” for violence that does not fully meet the definition of terrorism is found in other contexts. For example, many scholars specify that terrorism is non-governmental or subnational violence – by individuals or groups. This is because similar state violence has other names (e.g., human rights violations, war crimes) and legal structures, and often has diverse causal explanations. Nonetheless, scholars still find it useful to talk about “terrorist tactics by governments” when discussing states intentionally targeting civilians.[16] This is consistent with Tilly’s contention that a broad range of actors, including organized crime, use terror as a strategy. He argues: “From Mafiosi to ruthless governments, people who operate

protection rackets intermittently deploy terror against enemies and uncertain clients.”[17]

If the Mexican criminal organizations use terrorist tactics, are they terrorist organizations? It is not clear that this label makes sense due to the primary motivations of the groups. This is probably why – although there is debate – many contend that it makes more sense to think of the drug-trafficking groups as criminal organizations, not terrorists or insurgents.[18] Shelley and Picarelli notably argue that it is motives that separate terrorist and criminal groups, even if they sometimes use similar or the same methods.[19] This is consistent with definitions of “terrorist groups” in the literature, which have been defined as “subnational *political* organizations that use terrorism (emphasis added).”[20] Prominent databases of terrorist groups assembled for the study of terrorist group lethality or longevity do *not* include groups such as the Medellín Cartel or drug-trafficking groups in Mexico.[21] The idea of considering attributes of groups – and not simply their actions – is consistent with Sánchez-Cuenca and De la Calle’s argument that there are “actor” and “action” notions of terrorism.[22]

It is true that criminal groups use violence with some political implications, such as killing politicians (discussed below), and many observers describe the Mexican groups as seeking to “control territory.” However, violence against the state is usually with the ultimate aim of being left alone – not because the criminal groups want a particular ideology or religion represented in government. Furthermore, “territorial control” when it comes to criminal groups refers to being permitted to freely conduct business, and not a desire to be responsible for public goods provision in a geographic area, for example, or writing legislation about school curricula.

Additionally, in terms of policy, it has been noted that given the distinct motivations across group types, some counterterrorism tactics are unlikely to have the desired effects on criminal groups. This explains why tactics such as leadership removal have distinct consequences depending on whether the target is a criminal group or a more politically motivated group.[23] Overall, for theoretical and policy-based reasons, the label of “terrorist group” is not helpful for these groups. The conclusion discusses more differences between these groups types, but their tactical similarities are worth examining in detail.

Terrorist Tactics by Mexican Criminal Organizations

Criminal organizations in Mexico have used a number of terrorist or terrorist-like tactics. This section focuses on three tactics often associated with terrorism: bombings, violent communication, and violence against politicians. These tactics are chosen because they have been widely observed in Mexico, and seem to match up with behavior commonly used by traditionally-defined terrorist organizations. These are not the only terrorist tactics that exist, of course. However, the three tactics mentioned are those that have occurred most commonly in Mexico.

Bombing in Mexico

Although terror can be wrought with any weapon, perhaps none conjures up the image of “terrorism” as well as a bomb. The invention of dynamite in the 1860s is said to have helped usher in a new type of terrorism, giving a powerful tool to Russian anarchists or nihilists seeking to make a mark.[24] Attacks with explosives

have drawn international headlines after attacks such as Oklahoma City 1995, Omagh (Northern Ireland) 1998, and the London transit system in 2005, to say nothing of countless vehicle-borne and roadside bombs in Iraq and Afghanistan in recent decades. One analyst argued that bombings remain the “most likely terrorist method of inflicting mass casualties.”[25]

Car bombs are one type of explosive tactic that Mexican criminal organizations have employed repeatedly over the years, although fortunately the devices have not killed many people. More than 20 car bombs exploded or were disarmed by police between 2010 and 2012, according to Bunker and Sullivan.[26] The most notorious device was in Ciudad Juárez in 2010, which was rigged to kill first responders rushing to a false report of a killed police officer. A dead person was in the car wearing a police uniform, but as emergency personnel approached it, a cell phone-activated device detonated, killing two police officers, one paramedic, and a civilian.[27] Car bombs are not new in Mexican organized crime. Bunker and Sullivan report several car bombings in the 1990s, including one intended to kill “El Chapo” Guzman in 1992, and another in 1994 that killed at least five people and wounded 15. Criminal organizations keep using car bombs, or at least try to. In 2015, in the border city of Ciudad Juárez, authorities found a Volkswagen Beetle containing enough explosives to produce a 40-meter blast radius.[28]

While Mexican criminal organizations use a number of types of explosives, they frequently use hand grenades in particular.[29] One of the most terrorist-like attacks by criminal groups in Mexico, involved cartel members throwing hand grenades into the crowded main square of the city of Morelia during Independence Day celebrations in 2008. The attack killed eight people and wounded more than 100. The precise motive behind the attack is unclear, and two rival criminal organizations blamed each other.[30] The lack of a claim for the massacre makes for an interesting comparison with terrorist organizations, which often claim their attacks. Furthermore, some experts believe the attack was one of many intended to *calentar la plaza* (heat up the turf), where one group carries out an attack to draw authorities’ attention on a rival.[31]

Hand grenades have been used in other attacks, as military fragmentation grenades are often stolen from the military. Criminals have used hand grenades during attacks on newspaper offices, and as recently as a 2017 attack in Cancún on the state’s attorney general.[32] Beyond hand grenades, in 2015 cartel members used a rocket-propelled grenade to shoot down a Mexican Army helicopter.[33]

Criminal organizations in Mexico, like terrorist organizations, have been prolific with explosives, but it is important to note that the targets of criminal group bombings are often different from the typical targets of terrorist groups. Mexican criminal organizations usually target the authorities or rival groups, while terrorist groups are known for attacking random civilians. These distinctions are not completely clear cut, as the grenade attack in Morelia illustrates. Furthermore, many terrorist groups target security forces and rival groups. However, the typical targets of each group type are distinct.

Violent Communication in Mexico

Regardless of the weapon used, a great deal of violence by Mexican criminal groups could be qualified as terrorist tactics because of its public and communicative nature. Violent, public communication by criminal groups is surprising because criminal organizations, unlike terrorists, are said to avoid publicity and not care about affecting public opinion.[34] Yet we see many examples of public messaging. Perhaps the first attack

that put Mexican criminal violence on the radar of the international media was a horrific 2006 spectacle by La Familia, a group in the southern state of Michoacán. About 20 black-clad armed members of the group entered a nightclub after midnight, fired shots into the ceiling, and threw five human heads on the dance floor. Along with the heads, they left a note saying that they were carrying out “divine justice,” and asserting that they do not kill women or the innocent.[35] This display is remarkable not only for the deployment of human heads in a crowded establishment, but because the group went to such lengths to send a message, to speak out to the community.

The use of decapitation has been shockingly frequent in the drug war, with the Mexican government reporting 1,303 decapitated bodies in the country between 2007 and 2011.[36] Many of the decapitations led to gruesome public displays, for example when 49 headless bodies were dumped along the highway near the city of Monterrey in 2012. Interestingly, the use of this tactic took off around the same time that groups in Iraq were using similar methods to draw attention with Internet videos.

One author suggested that ISIS learned about publicizing decapitation from Mexican groups.[37] This is unlikely. The first publicized display of heads in 21st century Mexico was apparently in 2006, while ISIS predecessor al Qaeda in Iraq decapitated American Nick Berg in 2004, in a video that was widely distributed online.[38] It is likely that there was some co-evolution, with both types of groups learning from each other’s online butchery as the years went on. This emulation and diffusion of terrorist tactics between terrorist groups and criminal groups is worthy of additional research.

Mexican criminal organizations have spread messages in a number of other ways. A prominent tactic has been the *narcomensaje*, or literally “narco-message,” the use of banners or signs hung in public places with a note from a criminal group to the public. The banners are sometimes accompanied with a human body, or body parts. The text of the narco-messages can include threats to government officials or rival groups, warnings not to inform to the police, or declarations of territorial control. Thousands of narco-messages have been found since 2006. In an interesting contrast with traditional terrorism, these narco-messages are not usually intended for a national or global audience. One study found that they are addressed to rival groups more than any other type of actor.[39]

The narco-message banners are just one part of criminal group publicity campaigns, as they also have used graffiti and social media to spread their messages to the public.[40] This type of public communication is noteworthy because terrorist organizations use similar types of messaging strategies. For example, terrorist groups in Northern Ireland have painted murals to warn rivals and show control over territory.[41] Both types of groups use public messages such as banners or graffiti for many types of messages, as is discussed below.

An additional way that criminal groups in Mexico have drawn public attention to send a message is when they simultaneously block multiple main roads or highways in a city. This is referred to as *narcobloqueos*, or narco-road-blocks. The *narcobloqueos* apparently began in 2010 with armed men forcing motorists out of their cars, and leaving the cars blocking the roadway.[42] On many occasions, the cars have been lit on fire. Sometimes this tactic is used simply to slow the arrival of authorities, to allow crime to proceed unimpeded. Frequently, however, crime groups shut down streets to send a message about who controls the city, or as a show of force. In July 2017, a *narcobloqueo* was employed for the first time in Mexico City. After the leader

of a local gang was killed in a shootout with Marines, three buses and a dump truck were set on fire in busy intersections, blocking central streets.[43]

Politicians Attacked in Mexico

In spite of the less-political nature of criminal organizations, compared with insurgents or terrorists, their violence clearly often affects politics and politician. One direct indication of this is attacks on politicians. Like the use of the bomb, attacking politicians is an age-old terrorist tactic. From the Zealots two thousand years ago to the anarchists who attacked Austrian Archduke Franz Ferdinand and U.S. President William McKinley more than 100 years ago, killing politicians is a sure way to draw attention and try to affect politics. Campbell and Hansen mention criminal groups' struggles for regional control as part of the reason that they think that some of the violence in Mexico is "narco-terrorism." [44] Criminal organizations generally kill politicians not to affect politics for the same reasons insurgents do, such as changing the national government or its ideology, but to get the government to not interfere in their business. This has been the case in Mexico.

In 2007, veteran politician Juan Antonio Guajardo Anzaldúa was running for mayor of Río Bravo, a border city near McAllen, Texas. He had already been the municipal president twice before. During this third campaign for municipal president, he accused political rivals of being paid off by organized crime. The area around Río Bravo, lucrative for organized crime given its proximity to the United States, was said to be controlled by the Gulf Cartel. During the campaign, he was threatened repeatedly because of his outspokenness against organized crime. A few weeks after the election, as he stood on a sidewalk, two SUVs pulled up alongside him gunshots rang out. Guajardo and the five men with him were all shot dead.[45]

The following year, hitmen came for Salvador Vergara Cruz, the mayor of Ixtapan de la Sal, a resort town about 70 miles southwest of Mexico City. He was driving on the highway when another vehicle pulled up next to his and shooting started. Authorities later counted 13 bullet impacts in Vergara Cruz's body. He was reportedly targeted because he was not letting organized crime extort local businesses.[46] On January 1, 2016, Gisela Mota was sworn in as mayor of a city in the southern state of Morelos. In her inaugural speech, she discussed a number of topics, including her goal to root out corruption. The following day, at least four armed men forced their way into her house and executed her in front of her family.[47] These examples are part of a much wider pattern. Between 2006 and 2012, Mexican criminal organizations killed 18 state officials, 67 mayors, and 47 municipal officials, according to Trejo and Ley.[48] Blume counts more than 200 politicians murdered by Mexican criminal groups between 2005 and 2015.[49] Beyond the deaths of these leaders, hundreds of lethal and non-lethal attacks were carried out against politicians, party officials, and activists across the country. Interestingly, most of the attacks have been against local politicians, as opposed to federal or national officials. This is consistent with criminal violence in other countries, as discussed below.

In the section on explosives by Mexican criminal groups, it was noted that the criminal groups usually target authorities or rival groups – as opposed to the random civilians often attacked by terrorist groups. Similarly, while both terrorists and criminals target politicians, they do so in distinct ways. Terrorist groups often target national-level politicians, since their motivation is usually national or international politics. In Mexico, criminal groups have mostly targeted local politicians. Terrorists attack politicians for their specific political views, and for simply representing the government – a symbolic attack expected to destabilize the country. [50] Criminal groups, however, often attack politicians for refusing to be complicit in business.

The Historical Record of Terrorist Tactics by Criminal Organizations

The above evidence intends to make clear that terrorist tactics have been used widely by criminal groups in Mexico. However, the use of such tactics by groups primarily motivated by financial gains is not unusual. This section presents examples of comparable tactics used by criminal organizations in other countries.

Bombings by Criminal Groups

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, the Medellín Cartel waged a virtual war on the Colombian government and competitor groups to maintain its power as a cocaine producer. Attacks on the government – and the public – were an effort to get the government to stop interfering with its business. The deadliest bombing was the 1989 explosion of a commercial jet, Avianca Flight 203, which killed 110 people.[51] The same year, the Medellín Cartel sent a bus loaded with 500 kilograms of dynamite to the Administrative Department of Security, and the explosion killed 63 people and injured 600.[52] These were some of the more shocking attacks, but the group bombed countless businesses of rival groups, government buildings, and seemingly random targets during the period. There was also a bombing near the U.S. embassy as early as 1984, wounding six people, shortly after the Colombian government announced it would extradite drug traffickers to the United States.[53]

During 1993, the Sicilian Mafia carried out a series of car bombings in Florence, Milan, and Rome, killing 10 people and wounding dozens.[54] Damaged buildings included historic churches and the Uffizi Gallery, the largest repository of Renaissance art.[55] Attacking cultural heritage sites is noteworthy because criminal organizations had used car bomb attacks as an assassination tactic for a long time, but those attacks usually had been directed at single individuals and not random civilians. (Even Youngstown, Ohio, as far back as the 1950s, saw car bombs as an organized crime murder weapon dozens of times.[56]) The Italian attacks in 1993, however, were in tourist-filled areas to coerce the government into stopping their crackdown on organized crime. An anti-Mafia investigator stated at the time, “It is a strategy of terror that is in the Mafia’s interest now.[57]

In Russia as well, organized crime groups have employed bombing as a tactic on many occasions. Car bombs, for example, have been widely used. The first car bomb to hit Moscow came in 1994, according to the *New York Times*, with a remotely-detonated device that was intended for a business leader but decapitated his limousine driver instead.[58] The tactic continued into the early 2000s.[59] Beyond car bombs, criminal groups in the 1990s in particular regularly used explosives to eliminate and intimidate their opponents. In 1996, a bomb in a cemetery killed 14 people gathered at a memorial service, and there are reasons to believe the blast was related to organized crime.[60] In 2000, a bomb in a market killed three people and injured 11 others. The interior minister at the time said, “This situation doesn’t have any relation to terror in the widely understood sense. This was a local conflict.”[61]

Criminal groups have also used explosives in recent years in a perhaps surprising location: Sweden. The city of Malmö witnessed more than 100 grenade explosions between 2014 and 2016. Local authorities attributed the violence to organized crime, and indicated that the devices generally come from the Balkans.[62] Beyond grenades, a local justice center was bombed twice during 2014. Each attack happened at night, not causing major injuries, but the blasts damaged the entryway and shattered windows of nearby buildings.[63] In 2017,

a similar explosion hit the entrance of a justice center in nearby Helsingborg.[64] Fortunately, these attacks generally did not attack the public randomly, but were generally targeted at specific people or government buildings. This marks a difference between most bombings by organized crime and bombings by terrorist organizations.

Violent Communication by Criminal Groups

Criminal organizations outside of Mexico have also used violence including threats as part of overt, public communication. In Brazil, criminal groups have orchestrated deadly prison riots and shut down cities with burning buses – not unlike Mexican *narcobloqueos* – to intimidate the government and rival gangs.[65] Widespread coordinated prison riots first occurred in the country in 2001, when an uprising began in 29 prisons at noon on February 18. This was a response to the planned separation of imprisoned criminal group leaders.[66] A more substantial uprising occurred in 2006, when prison riots were accompanied by bombings, bus-burnings, and attacks on government buildings in Sao Paulo that left more than 100 people dead. Beyond these large-scale operations, criminal groups in Brazil have printed pamphlets explaining their actions, hung banners, and funded music that celebrates themselves. The overall public communication strategy of the groups has been described by Brazilian military sources as “psychological operations.”[67]

In Central America, criminal groups have also used expressive or communicative violence in ways usually associated with insurgent or terrorist organizations. In Honduras in 2004, gang members used automatic weapons to kill 28 people on a bus – reportedly to get the government to back off its tough-on-crime policies.[68] The attackers were apparently from the group MS-13. In 2015 in El Salvador, MS-13 and Barrio 18 asked the government to negotiate a peace deal with them. When the state indicated that it would not bargain, and further cracked down on organized crime, the gangs demanded that bus drivers go on strike. Around 1,000 buses stopped running, but gang members still burned two buses and killed seven bus drivers who failed to comply.[69]

Milder forms of criminal public communication are also visible. For decades, street gangs in the United States and beyond have openly expressed themselves with graffiti in public places. Graffiti is used to mark territory, but a range of other reasons exist as well, such as memorializing the dead or indicating enemies and allies.[70] Graffiti often threatens violence, even implicitly, such as when one person crosses out another person’s name, or a group’s name, which is usually interpreted as a threat or intimidation.[71]

Beyond graffiti, criminal groups have used other methods of threatening public communication, from press releases to claiming their violence. “The Extraditables” was a public relations operation of Colombia’s Medellín Cartel to convince the government to not extradite cartel leaders. Either as the Extraditables or on its own, the Medellín Cartel frequently claimed attacks and sent messages to politicians and the public with their violence.[72] For example, when they kidnapped the mayor of Bogotá, they sent an explanation to media outlets. Interestingly, in a move reminiscent of terrorists’ indignation about being called “terrorists,” the communiqué uses considerable space to express anger about being called a “mafia.”[73] Overall, the Medellín Cartel was unusual at the time for its public messaging, the communicative nature of its violence, but this behavior would later be replicated and in some ways increased by Mexican criminal organizations.

More recently, the Internet is also frequently used by organized crime to send violent public messages. In

Italy, criminal groups have threatened politicians by delivering an envelope with a bullet in it, or a box with an animal's head. However, a 2011 report outlines the increase in anonymous blog threats to local politicians. One mayor in Southern Italy indicated that the writers on one blog "know my movements." He also said, "I don't feel safe." [74] In another case in Australia, the leader of an outlaw biker gang used a Facebook fan page to insult police and taunt rival gangs. [75] These Internet examples are more subtle than others mentioned above, but overall the public displays discussed in this section contrast with the notion of criminal organizations keeping a low profile.

Politicians Attacked by Criminal Groups

Attacking politicians is a clearly political consequence of organized crime, even if the criminal groups are not primarily motivated by political ambitions. This behavior has been observed around the world. In Italy, more than 130 local elected officials and administrators have been killed since the 1970s. [76] Beyond local politicians, some national or regional leaders were targeted as well. In 1992, three weeks before national elections, a Mafia gunman on a motorcycle assassinated Salvo Lima, a member of the European Parliament and former mayor of Palermo. [77] When the government responded with arrests of Mafia leaders, two of the country's top prosecutors or magistrates were killed. The Cosa Nostra reportedly also planned to assassinate then-New York Governor Mario Cuomo when he visited Italy in 1992, but called off the hit at the last minute when they realized the governor's security detail was bigger than expected. [78]

Criminal groups in El Salvador have also killed politicians. In 2016, at least two mayors were killed, as well as other party officials. [79] In this country, as in other cases, the line between criminal and political becomes blurry, especially at municipal-level politics. One example is when a mayor reportedly had a pact with a criminal group so that they would not extort local businesses. He allegedly ordered several of the group members to assassinate a political rival, and the group was willing because the victim has not been paying them extortion. [80] A more prominent case was when several national legislators from El Salvador were killed in 2007 while in Guatemala. The corpses of the three politicians were found in a burned car, and the bodies had bullet wounds and signs of torture. Various people were arrested for the crime, but no one was ever convicted. It was believed that the attack was related to drug trafficking. [81] "The motive was not robbery," a representative of the Salvadoran president said at the time. [82]

In Russia in the 1990s, many politicians were killed. It is difficult to distinguish politically-motivated killings from those associated with organized crime, but many killings were widely understood to be connected to criminal groups. For example, in 1994, parliament member Andrei Aizderzis was shot to death at his doorstep shortly after his newspaper printed a list of 266 people alleged to be organized crime figures. [83] The following year, legislator Sergei Skorochkin was kidnapped and killed. In a previous incident, he had killed a man who he claimed was a mafia member attacking him. Prosecutors ruled that Skorochkin acted in self-defense in that case. [84]

Conclusion

How should we characterize the violence that has affected Mexico since 2006? This article has argued that there are important differences between actors primarily motivated by political motivations (terrorist or

insurgent organizations) and actors primarily motivated by illicit economic motivations (criminal organizations). However, the latter often use tactics that could at least be described as terrorist tactics. The Mexico case is an important example of this phenomenon. Three tactics seen in Mexico were discussed: bombings, violent communication, and attacks on politicians. It was also emphasized that the Mexico case is not completely unique, because these three types of violence have been used by criminal groups elsewhere. Examples were discussed in Brazil, Colombia, El Salvador, Italy, and Russia.

Characterizing the Mexican situation as criminal groups using terrorist tactics has implications for policy – in Mexico or in other countries facing similar threats. Labelling the groups as criminal organizations implies that law enforcement approaches are generally the best way to confront them. As noted above, the apparently direct application of counterinsurgency methods has not worked as intended. However, since these groups sometimes use terrorist tactics, some aspects of counterterrorism could be applied to address these specific tactics. For example, a modified version of counter-messaging or counter-narratives could help mitigate the effects of violent communication.[85] Related to this, the roles of the news media and social media should be considered. Such media are essential for spreading the messages desired by those using terrorist tactics.[86] More broadly, research on the challenges of counterterrorism in democracies – and tradeoffs with free speech and other civil liberties, for example – is likely to have important lessons for democratic governments such as Mexico facing criminal groups using terrorist tactics.[87]

While this article focused on similarities between criminal and terrorist groups, it is important to emphasize that there are key differences as well. The notion of economic motives vs. political motives has important implications. As noted earlier, policies such as leadership removal have different consequences depending on group type. In another example, the divergent motivations for groups have consequences for groups' relationships with the news media. Criminal groups are especially likely to attack journalists, trying to silence them. [88] Meanwhile, "traditional" terrorists generally have a symbiotic relationship with the press, and depend on the media's coverage.[89] Additionally, as noted, many of the seemingly terrorist tactics are quite distinct from traditional terrorism in that they are not trying to affect politics. As with the case of the grenade attacks in Morelia, the goal was apparently to draw authorities' attention to a rival group. Other attacks are motivated by the simple goal of wanting to be left alone by law enforcement – not a desire to change legislation or foreign policy.[90] Furthermore, a great deal of criminal violence is related to intergroup rivalries, while only a small percentage of terrorist groups have attacked another terrorist group.[91] Overall, while criminal groups sometimes use terrorist tactics, they also operate in ways that are different from traditionally-defined terrorists.

Future research can take a number of steps. First, there is room for more research on criminal groups using terrorist tactics, whether in Mexico or elsewhere. How does the employment of terrorist tactics by criminal organizations vary from group-to-group? Why do only some criminal groups, in certain times, engage in symbolic and shockingly public violence?[92] How else is this violence similar to or different from that of traditional terrorist groups? Research on the crime-terror nexus is increasing, but there has not been much empirical work on the subject by terrorism scholars beyond single case studies.

Examples in this article come from a small number of countries, but organized crime exists throughout the world. Why does organized crime sometimes become extremely violent? Many experts say criminal groups

try to avoid violence and only use it as a “last resort.”[93] Many studies have examined single countries, such as Mexico, but there do not appear to be many cross-national studies looking at why similar patterns emerge in countries as diverse as Italy, Russia, and Brazil. It is also remarkable that the 1990s seemed to have been a critical moment for shocking violence by criminal organizations. These were watershed years for criminal violence in Colombia, Italy, and Russia. Was there a diffusion of tactics? To what extent were these groups learning from each other and/or terrorist organizations? In terrorism studies, it has been argued that terrorism can contribute to certain types of organizational success,[94] so this might explain the usage of tactics by political groups. To what extent can these lessons apply to why criminal groups use terrorist tactics? Why else did terrorist tactics by criminal organizations seem to take off in the 1990s?

Do the determinants of terrorist tactics by criminal organizations compare to the factors that explain terrorism as traditionally defined? The countries examined in this manuscript seem to have some elements in common with countries plagued by terrorism. They are all generally democracies. They tend to have had a history of terrorism proper or civil war. Russia and Colombia experienced terrorism and extreme organized crime violence at the same time. However, these countries also differ in important ways from countries that experience traditionally-defined terrorism. Some of the countries lack a polarized left-right ideological divide, and most lack a great deal of repression against an ethnic or religious minority. Another difference is that these countries all seem to have corruption issues, and corruption has *not* been shown to be important in explaining terrorism.

Regarding the cases discussed, the article examined those with the most visible criminal organization violence. The visibility, however, could be due to the author’s location and reliance on English- and Spanish-language news sources. Future research could attempt to examine other contexts, such as the triads in East Asia and beyond, the yakuza groups in Japan, D-Company in South Asia, or groups in Sub-Saharan Africa such as Nigeria’s confraternities.

Overall, the boundaries between terrorists and criminals are debatable. Conceptual limits are helpful to avoid concepts becoming overly broad and thus meaningless. Nonetheless, the study of organized crime violence would benefit from drawing on terrorism research. Similarly, terrorism scholars should consider studying organized crime, where many familiar tactics occur regularly. The causes might be distinct from the causes of terrorism, but many of the consequences are unfortunately familiar.

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Notes

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- [10] Brian J. Phillips, “How Does Leadership Decapitation Affect Violence? The Case of Drug Trafficking Organizations in Mexico,” *The Journal of Politics* 77, no. 2 (April 1, 2015): 324–36.
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terror emphasized.” While these three attributes are the only to appear in the majority of definitions, many other attributes that are aspects of fear or terror appear in a substantial number of definitions. For example, other common elements are psychological effects and a symbolic aspect.

[12] For example, an assertion of some definitions is that terrorism is only perpetrated by non-state actors; it is subnational or transnational violence. However, according to Schmid and Jongman, this element does not appear in most definitions. This element does not mark a difference between criminal groups and terrorist groups because both are generally considered non-state actors.

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- [91] Of the more than 500 terrorist groups in existence between 1987 and 2005, only about 14% had a violent rival. See Brian J. Phillips “Terrorist Group Rivalries and Alliances: Testing Competing Explanations,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* (forthcoming).
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