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Iraq & the Americas: 3 GEN Gangs Lessons and Prospects

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Iraq & the Americas: 3 GEN Gangs Lessons and Prospects

Robert J. Bunker & John P. Sullivan

Gangs and Iraqi insurgents, militias, and other non-state groups share common origins based on tribalism, and therefore, it is expected that they will exhibit similar structures and behaviors. It is our belief that further insight into Iraq's present situation and future prospects may be derived from a perspective utilizing 3rd generation gang (3 GEN Gangs) studies which present lessons learned from the emergence and spread of gangs within the United States, and other parts of the world, over roughly the last four decades. (1) Basically, from a 3 GEN Gangs perspective, three generations of gangs have been found to exist: turf based, drug based, and mercenary based. The first generation gangs, comprising the vast majority, focus on protecting their turf. These gangs, the least developed of the three generational forms, provide both protection and identity to their members and little more. While some drug dealing is evident, it tends with these gangs to be a sideline activity.

The more evolved second and third generation gangs provide more tangible economic- and, later, political- based rewards to their members. Far fewer second generation gangs exist in relation to first generation gangs and, in turn, an even smaller number of third generation gangs exist in relation to second generation gangs—at least with regard to gangs found in the Americas. Second generation gangs focus on drug market development and exploitation and are far more sophisticated than turf based gangs. Third generation gangs are the most politicized, international in reach, and sophisticated of the gang generational forms. They will readily engage in mercenary endeavors and actively seek political power and financial gain from their activities. Certain terrorist groups (such as the Red Brigades in Italy), drug cartels, and local warlords all have attributes and organizational structures akin to third generation gangs. (2)

From a 3 GEN Gangs perspective, Iraq has been essentially overrun by 3rd generation gangs and their criminal-soldier equivalents. This is reminiscent of the nightmare scenario for the US already starting to develop in Central and South America (and, to a lesser extent, within the US) with the emergence, growth, and expansion of Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13) and other Maras. In many ways, the 'Gangs of Iraq' are a prelude to the 'Gangs of the Americas' that we will be increasingly facing in the Western Hemisphere.

Gangs emerge, prosper, and solidify their position as a viable social organizational form in housing projects, neighborhoods, prisons, slums, cities, urban regions, and even entire countries that have undergone (or are undergoing) varying forms of societal failure. The rise of newer forms of tribalism leading to gang emergence may be derived from combinations that include lack of jobs, high levels of poverty and drug abuse, low educational levels, an absence of functional families, along with high levels

of crime and lawlessness, including that generated by domestic internal strife, which result in a daily threat of bodily injury. Further, newer forms of tribalism may readily mingle with older pre-existing forms of tribalism based on kinship, clan, and other extended family groupings.

Iraq's current situation, at least for the middle and southern sections, is far from hopeful. Currently some where between 1,000 and 5,000 people are now being killed throughout Iraq each month because of sectarian violence, gang wars, and rampant criminal activity. Total post-invasion deaths in Iraq taking place during the American and allied stability and support operations (SASO) period ranges anywhere from 50,000 to +100,000. (3) Societal strife generated by ethnic and religious intolerance— derived from older forms of Middle Eastern tribalism— has resulted in neighborhood ethnic cleansing and the emergence of fortified enclaves. Extra-judicial killings and torture (i.e. street justice) have become the norm as have home invasion robberies, carjackings, petty theft, assaults, and kidnappings for ransom. Shifting coalitions of former regime loyalists, foreign Jihadi fighters linked to al Qaeda, Shia and Sunni militiamen tied to local clerics, criminal gangs of numerous types, competing Iraqi ministries and even active military and police units, along with foreign operatives promoting the interests of Iran, Hizballah, and Syria make for a chaotic and ever-changing threat landscape.

Americans, once universally hailed as liberators except by the most hardened former regime loyalists, are now viewed by many Iraqis at best as unwanted foreigners that will hopefully leave soon and at worst as hated crusaders that should be actively singled out, tortured, and killed. The northern Kurd-dominated region of the country is far more stable and supportive of American forces than the two other sections of Iraq but still is not free of sectarian violence in the urban centers and sabotage, improvised explosive device (IED) attacks, suicide bombings, and assassinations occur throughout the region.

Insight can be gained by juxtaposing strife ridden Iraq with the US and other regions of the world, specifically Central and South America, with their high levels of gang emergence and activity. Gangs are very much a social cancer within American society and are a by-product of the new form of tribalism that has emerged nationally—possibly as a partial result of the demise of the older melting pot culture and an overemphasis on cultural relativism and heterogeneity.

As a consequence, gangs have spread at an alarming rate throughout American society. In the US, about 58 cities had gangs in 1960. By 1992, the number of cities with gangs had jumped to 769. (4) Luckily, the vast majority of gangs in the US are composed of the relatively less-evolved Turf gangs—though second generation drug gangs have been common for decades now and third generation mercenary gangs, in the current form of the Maras, have just recently started to appear within our borders.

Still, even though most gangs in the US are Turf-based gangs, gang-related homicides in our country have probably totaled about 100,000 over the last 20 years. This is an educated guess based on an extrapolation of Los Angeles county gang homicide data as no national gang homicide statistics exist. (5) The daily attrition rate on America's streets due to gang violence has either gone unrecognized or is not yet viewed as a national security threat by our federal government. To its credit, however, FBI led national task forces to contend with the criminal activities and atrocities (e.g. torture and machete attacks) committed by MS-13 and other violent gang members have now been put in place. (6)

In Central and South America, gangs are now nothing less than out of control. Honduras, El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Guatemala are all being directly threatened by the Maras. (7) In addition, Brazilian society was recently brought to its knees by a powerful prison gang that instigated a limited duration state wide insurgency that resulted in numerous civilian and law enforcement deaths and temporarily paralyzed the national economy. (8) Mexico, furthermore, is seeing a fusion of its powerful drug cartels and gangs with an ensuing drug war that is resulting in numerous killings and decapitations—much like the ritual Jihadi

beheadings witnessed in Iraq. (9) No statistics or even estimates for the number of gang-related homicides that have taken place in Central and South America exist but they must surely be on par, if not far greater, than those that are estimated to have taken place in America over the last twenty years. If this is the case, gang killings for all of the Americas would now number, at the very least, in the low hundreds of thousands for that time span.

Of direct interest is the continuum of environmental modification represented by gang activities in the US at one extreme and in parts of the Americas and Iraq at the other. Even the most basic level US gangs will attempt to culturally influence and modify their surroundings with drive-by shootings, the use of gang graffiti to mark their territory, and the take over of selected public spaces. Iraqi gangs and groups, on the other hand, are engaging in full out ethnic cleansing, neighborhood takeovers, and direct political control of those individuals living within their sphere of influence. Early intervention can prevent gangs from taking over a neighborhood, city, urban region and other environments. However, if allowed to evolve and engage in unchecked activities for too long they promise to replace legitimate political authority. As such, 3 GEN Gangs readily fill the vacuum left by the absence of legitimate authority.

Iraq's future prospects, given this scenario are bleak. The domination of Iraq by 3 GEN Gangs and other non-state entities (e.g. insurgent and terrorist groups, the militias of the clerics, and renegade police, military, and private security forces) has destroyed any chance of a free and democratically unified country emerging anytime soon, or possibly even for decades to come. The Iraqi operational environment has now seen the total blurring of crime and war. Perhaps, it is now even too far gone to salvage from a traditional policing or military perspective—only time will tell in this regard. (10)

This brings us some measure of concern with regard to the future prospects vis-à-vis the gang situation in the Americas. As more and more 3 GEN Gangs begin to emerge, thrive, and expand their networks in the Western Hemisphere the long term prospects for large regions of the Americas may very well, at some point, also come into question. Currently, 3 GEN Gangs have already take control in slums and other urban no-go zones, prisons, and some provinces and territories of various states including Brazil, Colombia, Honduras, Nicaragua, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Mexico. That such gangs are now starting to emerge within the United States should also give pause for concern. These developments in global context may ultimately cause us to re-examine our policies in the Americas and elevate our concerns over the "Gangs of the Americas" to the same level as that currently afforded the "Gangs of Iraq."

Notes

1. For an overview and literature survey of this topic see John P. Sullivan and Robert J. Bunker, "Third Generation Gang Studies: An Introduction," [Journal of Gang Research](#) Forthcoming.
2. A perspective on the Red Brigades as a 3 GEN Gang can be found in Max G. Manóvilas, [Gangs, and Coups D' Streets in the New World Disorder: Protean Insurgents in Post-Modern War](#) Robert J. Bunker, ed. [Criminal-States and Criminal-Soldiers](#), special double issue of *Global Crime*, Vol. 7. No. 3-4. August/November 2006; for drug cartel and warlord similarities to 3 GEN Gangs see John P. Sullivan and Robert J. Bunker, "Drug Cartels, Street Gangs, and Warlords", Robert J. Bunker, ed., *Non-State Threats and Future Wars*, special issue [Small Wars & Insurgencies](#) Vol. 13. No. 2. Summer 2002, pp. 40-53.
3. Actual numbers of Iraqis killed each month and total figures are unknown. Sources are unreliable and typically inflated or deflated in order to benefit the policies or agenda of the group providing the statistics. We can safely say that 1,000 to 2,000 people are being killed each month but the upper limit of 5,000 people is no longer out of the range of possibility given the high levels of violence now generated by the simultaneous insurgency and civil war taking place. Iraqi casualty reports and tracking websites offer total

numbers killed upwards from 50,000.

4. Malcolm W. Klein, The American Street Gang Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995, pp. 92-95.
5. Los Angeles County gang homicide information provided by Sgt. Wes McBride, Los Angeles Sheriffs Department, Retired, Safe Streets Bureau.
6. Statement of Chris Swecker Assistant Director, Criminal Investigative Division Federal Bureau of Investigation Before the Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere House International Relations Committee April 20, 2005.
7. See Ana Arana How the Street Gangs Took Central America Foreign Affairs, Vol. 84, No. 3. May/June 2005, pp. 98-110.
8. See Andrew Downie, "Police Are Targeted in Deadly Attacks, Prison Riots in Brazil", Los Angeles Times, Sunday, May 14, 2006, p. A25; Marcelo Soares and Patrick J. McDonnell, "Inmates Unleash a Torrent of Violence on Brazilian City", Los Angeles Times, Tuesday, May 16, 2006, pp. A1, A16; and Marcelo Soares and Patrick J. McDonnell, "Death Toll in Sao Paulo Rise to 133; City is Calm", Los Angeles Times, Wednesday, May 17, 2006, p. A16.
9. See Lisa J. Campbell The Use of Beheadings by Fundamentalist Islam, Robert J. Bunker, ed., Criminal-States and Criminal-Soldiers, special double issue of Global Crime, Vol. 7. No. 3-4. August/November 2006.
10. The US military seems to think that temporarily raising troop levels in order to neutralize Muqtada al-Sadr's 'Mahdi Army' (Shia militia) and possibly launching an offensive into the Sunni stronghold of Al Anbar province in support of the Iraqi government offer the best hopes for victory. This plan is being debated within the government and already criticized in some quarters. See Julian E. Barnes, "Larger U.S. effort in Iraq is proposed", Los Angeles Times, Wednesday, December 13, 2006, pp. A1, A16; and Maura Reynolds, "Majority support pullout timeline", Los Angeles Times, Wednesday, December 13, 2006, pp. A17.

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