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TERRORISM, INSURGENCY, AND CRIMINAL INSURGENCY IN LATIN AMERICA

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Latin America has been fertile ground for irregular warfare since its independence from the Spanish monarchy in the early 19th century. With few inter-state wars, the military history of the region has been dominated by conflicts between governments and irregular adversaries. The motivation, shape, and tactical range of these actors—from bandits and insurgents to vigilantes and drug traffickers—have been extremely diverse, but all of them shared the view of the “state” as the enemy and the use of unconventional means to defeat it.

The evolution of insurgency and violence in Latin America can be traced through a set of waves of violence resulting from clashes between governments and irregular groups. Whether profit-driven criminals or politically motivated rebels, the key strategic fault lines fueling conflict in Latin America have always run between government and anti-state forces.

This chapter analyzes the evolution of irregular threats in Latin America, describing the context in which non-state violent actors emerge and operate. It will discuss the differing motivations and military capabilities of the various groups, focusing on El Salvador’s Farabundo Martí Liberation Front (FMLN), Peru’s Shining Path, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia, and Mexico’s Los Zetas. The chapter also touches on the activities of Islamist terrorist organizations in Latin America, specifically Hezbollah and the Islamic State.

The Latin American strategic context

The profile of Latin America’s irregular armed actors and their occasional success—such as in Cuba in 1959 and Nicaragua in 1979—has much to do with the context in which they have emerged and operated. In this respect, Latin America’s physical landscape has played a vital role. The region has sharp contrasts in terms of population and wealth distribution. Latin America contains several megacities, each near large empty spaces such as the Andes Mountains or the Amazon rainforest. The contrast is even clearer when comparing population density. Bogotá, for example, concentrates 4,277 inhabitants per square kilometer, while the department of Putumayo in Colombia’s south has 14.2.¹ Regional wealth inequality is also extreme. The gross domestic product per person in Mexico City is \$20,782 but just \$3,146 in the state of Chiapas.²

The combination of huge, densely populated cities and extensive and empty rural spaces has obvious strategic implications. Both present significant obstacles for economic development and governance. Cities include high-crime areas such as gang-controlled slums and enclaves of radicalization at some universities.

Rural areas include deep jungles and rugged mountains that present governments with challenges on the provision of basic services and security while providing effective sanctuary for guerrillas and criminals.

The strategic relevance of these spaces has changed over time. While jungles and mountains have partially lost their value as safe havens due to improvements in intelligence and mobility of the state security forces, Latin American cities have become more difficult to control due to the complexity and thickness of the physical and human terrain.

The human factor fueling rebellion has also evolved. In the earlier years, the urban middle class served as drivers for insurrection. They provided leaders, ideologues, and cadres for the region's various revolutionary attempts, from Fidel Castro and Ernesto Che Guevara for Cuba's July 26th Movement in the 1950s to Abimael Guzman for the Shining Path in the 1980s.³ Even when the number of militants of middle class origin was small, their political and strategic roles were critical. This was the case with the FARC, a group mainly composed of peasants whose political and military strategy was disproportionately influenced by a small core of urban intellectuals close to the Colombian Communist Party.

Although Latin America's urban middle classes have remained fertile ground for the emergence of revolutionary cadres, other social sectors have played an increasing role in political violence. Middle and large landowners have provided some leaders to the vigilante groups—defined as private security militias—that developed illegal counterinsurgent campaigns in Central America and Colombia starting in the 1980s.

Bandits and criminals have also fed the ranks of violent extremist groups. Many of the leaders of the Colombian paramilitary movement that founded the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia were drug traffickers. Likewise, the FARC recruited criminal gangs to beef up some of its key units, such as the Daniel Aldana Mobile Column operating in the Colombian port of Tumaco.⁴

Insurgent and vigilante leaders have used a variety of networks as bridges between their armed organizations and their social bases to provide militants, supporters, and financiers. During the 1980s, the Colombian Communist Party served that role in some regions where it enjoyed strong political influence. Educational institutions have also become hubs for mobilization, such as the National University of San Cristóbal de Huamanga from where Shining Path leader Guzman led the initial effort to expand the reach of the group in the Central Andes.⁵ Likewise, landowner associations have played key roles as networks to organize and finance vigilante groups. The Rural Association of Farmers and Ranchers of Magdalena Medio, for example, provided support for the creation of vigilante groups in Colombia in the 1980s.⁶

Beyond these established networks, the sustainability of long-term armed activity—such as the Colombian and Central American insurgencies and more recently the systematic violence displayed by the Mexican cartels—would not be possible without the existence of social bases that provide a continuous flow of foot soldiers and sympathizers.

The specific profile of these social niches has evolved as the nature of the armed groups has changed, but they have always been characterized by collective dispossession and frustration. They are usually marginalized groups whose options for social mobility have been dashed in the face of a variety of obstacles, including lack of access to property, inadequate education, ethnic discrimination, or poor economic prospects. Consequently, many have remained trapped in poverty with little hope of progress, a situation that has made outreach from illegal groups more attractive.

At the same time, the failure of the government to provide basic services such as justice or security has produced ungoverned social spaces. The result has been a power vacuum from which armed groups have profited. This combination of factors facilitated the recruitment of FARC among informal settlers and coca growers in southeastern Colombia, as well as the rapid growth of the Shining Path in the marginalized indigenous communities of the Peruvian department of Ayacucho. The same could be said with the enlistment of young slum dwellers by self-defense groups and criminal gangs in Central America, Mexico, Colombia, and Brazil.

The development of Latin American armed organizations has also required a strategic roadmap frequently provided by Marxist-Leninist revolutionary doctrine. This was the case with Che Guevara's

foquismo (foco theory), which guided the 1960s insurrectionist wave, and the Maoist people's warfare theories that led to the rebellions of the 1980s, from El Salvador to Peru.

These theories defined two different approaches to revolution. On the one hand, foco theory proposed that a small armed vanguard could act as a catalyzer for general insurrection even when there are no socio-political preconditions for revolution.⁷ On the other hand, the concept of Maoist people's warfare argued the importance of building an extensive structure of professional cadres as a tool for political-military mobilization and emphasized the need for adapting revolutionary strategy to preexisting social conditions as a key factor for success.⁸

These doctrines played critical roles in providing guidelines for organization, popular mobilization, and campaign design. Without these ideas, Latin American rebels would have been just partisans without political direction. With them, they became the heads of well-organized political-military movements conducting an assault against the state.

The influence of leftist revolutionary techniques went beyond the politically motivated groups. Marxist militants and common criminals who joined forces while in Candido Mendes prison in Rio de Janeiro in the 1970s created the notorious Brazilian gang "Red Command."⁹ Likewise, the Peasant Self-Defense Groups of Cordoba and Uraba, a Colombian vigilante organization, expanded rapidly in the 1980s by recruiting a group of former Maoist guerrillas who brought with them broad experiences in organization building and mass mobilization.

Nevertheless, the most transformative factor in the evolution of Latin American armed organizations has been booming illicit economies, including drug trafficking, illegal mining, oil theft, kidnapping for ransom, and extortion. The emergence of this economic opportunity provided armed groups with strategic autonomy, since they could self-finance their operations, and it gave them the possibility of developing a base of popular support among the social sectors connected to the illegal economies, such as coca growers or informal miners.

The illicit business also changed the nature of Latin America's violent groups.¹⁰ The flow of criminal money modified the drivers shaping the behavior of the irregular fighters, replacing ideological zeal with hunger for profit. The profile of militants mutated progressively, with middle-rank positions within the insurgent organizations becoming occupied by individuals less committed to the group's original political ideology and more interested in crime for profit.¹¹

The best example of this transformation is how the FARC filled its ranks with figures involved in the drug business to the extent that the leadership of communist origin became increasingly isolated from the rest of the organization. Similar processes of criminalization took place in other groups such as the Colombian National Liberation Army, the remains of the Shining Path, and other smaller groups such as the Paraguayan People's Army.

At the same time, a new generation of armed criminal organizations emerged as key players in a fresh wave of anti-state violence that most of the region has experienced since the mid-1990s. These new criminal enterprises were still motivated by profit, but they progressively developed military-grade capabilities and performed para-state functions such as security and justice in the communities under their control.

The combination of economic motivation, political functions, and military capabilities applies to groups such as the Brazilian First Command of the Capital, the Mexican Jalisco New Generation Cartel, and the Colombian Gulf Clan, which are best described as "criminal insurgencies."¹²

Insurgents, vigilantes, and criminal insurgents: organization and tactics

The three key types of irregular armed actors in Latin America—political insurgents, vigilantes, and criminal insurgents—have been driven by three different motivations: revolution, defense of the status quo, and illegal profit. Their differences, however, have gone beyond these motivations and include two other key issues: organizational structure and strategic behavior.

In terms of organization, two factors have defined the shape of the armed actors: the level of centralization/decentralization of their command and control system and the mix of full-time, uniformed combatants and part-time, clandestine collaborators within each group. Traditional insurgents developing a guerrilla strategy have tended to build more centralized organizations and have a higher proportion of full-time militants, even if their ranks have always included part-time collaborators. The best example of this model has been the FARC, which kept a considerable level of unity of action and a high proportion of uniformed combatants during most of its history until the years before its partial demobilization in 2016.

At the other end, vigilante groups and criminal gangs have been characterized by a highly decentralized structure and a major proportion of part-time, clandestine collaborators. This tendency is a result of the informal leadership of these actors; the key role of family, clan, and community ties to maintain internal cohesion; and the type of violence practiced, usually involving terrorism. This characterization omits some exceptions, but overall the majority of these groups—from the Salvadorian “death squads” to the Medellín Cartel—operated according to the described model of decentralized networks.

Between both extremes, criminal insurgents have evolved toward hybrid organizational models that involve three different interconnected rings: a hardcore of militarized followers under the direct control of the leadership, a second layer of clandestine networks of collaborators, and a final ring of allied gangs. Even if these three components have been common in many Latin American armed groups, the mix among them is more balanced in the criminal insurgency-type organizations. This is a result of the hybrid nature of these actors who have integrated some military capabilities—brought by former members of insurgent organizations or government security forces—into ordinary gang-style groups.

This has been the case with the infamous Los Zetas cartel, which was created as a paramilitary organization by former Mexican military personnel, but it is also true with the Jalisco New Generation Cartel and Gulf Clan.

In terms of tactical repertoire, Latin American irregulars have employed a broad variety of lethal and non-lethal tools. With force application, they have combined guerrilla, terrorist, and mass violence tactics to varying degrees depending on their capabilities and the operational context. During the 1980s and 1990s, guerrilla warfare was the dominant option, with terrorism playing a secondary role; the main effort of the revolutionary groups took place in the rural areas, and the vigilante gangs limited the majority of their actions to attacks against civilians accused of being insurgent sympathizers or members of leftist parties.

There were some significant exceptions to this pattern, however. The Shining Path transitioned from a declining rural insurgency to an intense urban terrorist campaign that nearly brought the Peruvian state to the brink of collapse. In parallel, a coalition of Colombian self-defense groups created the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia and built a vigilante army that combined terrorist and guerrilla tactics in a set of successful offensives against FARC and National Liberation Army insurgents.

Latin American anti-state violence has changed significantly during the past two decades. Rural insurgencies have declined, while revolutionary organizations have taken a more urban approach. That has been the case of the Colombian National Liberation Army, which has maintained a significant presence in rural areas, but it has emphasized its operations in large cities. This is also true for the more recent and smaller groups such as the Chilean anarchist cells that carried out a set of terrorist attacks against urban infrastructure between 2005 and 2019.¹³ This change in setting has been accompanied by a shift in tactics, particularly an emphasis on terrorism and violent protests.

As a result, political violence has returned to Latin American cities. The bombing of the police academy in Bogotá in 2019 that killed 23 people is an indication of this change.¹⁴ Likewise, the set of violent protests in Quito, Santiago, and Bogotá between 2019 and 2020 evinced the capability of groups of extremists to disrupt social life, radicalize peaceful demonstrators, and destabilize governments.¹⁵

At the same time, the emergence of criminal insurgencies has been accompanied by dramatic changes in terms of force application. These groups have been able to sustain irregular warfare not only through the

recruitment of former members of insurgent groups and security forces but also by the introduction of new military hardware. This has included anti-materiel rifles (rifles designed for use against military equipment as opposed to people), anti-tank rockets, improvised armored vehicles, and drones.

The combination of military expertise and new equipment has produced exponential growth in tactical capabilities. Mexican cartels, for instance, are able to coordinate swarming maneuvers with columns of armored sports utility vehicles and execute commando raids against key rivals.¹⁶ Their tactical resources have provided them with clear superiority over local law enforcement agencies and some state police forces. This has created ever-expanding “no-go” areas that remain beyond government control.

On a more limited scale, a similar scenario is emerging in Brazil, where some gangs have gained control over the periphery of some cities, but instead of superior equipment, they combine terrain exploitation with a certain degree of popular support to keep security forces away.

As a complement to violence, Latin American irregular armed actors have made extensive use of non-lethal tools such as propaganda and political action. During the 1980s and 1990s, the FARC built a complex propaganda apparatus including publications and a network of regional radio stations. At the same time, the organization maintained political ties with the Communist Party and developed a number of front organizations.

This classical use of communication tools as a part of an insurgent campaign has evolved as technology has offered new channels to reach key audiences. In particular, insurgent groups have displayed an increasing presence in social media and expanded their political messaging to topics such as environmentalism or gender issues to gain influence over the urban youth.¹⁷

Criminal groups and gangs have also developed communications efforts. Mexican cartels have deployed a systematic effort to shape the information environment. To this end, they have systematically intimidated and attacked journalists and media outlets to control information. Furthermore, cartels have developed their own means to disseminate messages, such as the so-called *narcocorridos* (popular songs on the drug business) and *narcomantas* (banners used by the criminal groups), through which they launch threats, send messages, and explain actions. Likewise, they release videos—from public statements to gruesome executions—through conventional and social media with the objective of reasserting their power and sowing fear among communities and security forces.

Among non-lethal means, corruption has become a key ingredient as insurgents and vigilantes have a long tradition of exploiting graft and treason to their gain. During the 1990s, the Colombian National Liberation Army enjoyed the complicity of local officials to develop a scheme of extortion and embezzlement in the department of Arauca.¹⁸ In parallel, vigilante gangs partnered with businesspeople to profit from corruption in public works in the neighboring department of Casanare.

The strategic importance of corruption has grown dramatically after its “weaponization” by cartels and gangs. In fact, its systematic use has had three key effects. First, it has operated as a defensive layer protecting criminal structures. Second, it has damaged the credibility of the government and reduced its popular support. Finally, it has facilitated the efforts of criminal groups to expand their economic interests and political influence.

Cases such as those involving bribes by the Sinaloa Cartel to Genaro Garcia Luna, Mexican secretary of public security under President Felipe Calderon, are the best illustration of the critical impact of corruption.¹⁹

From Marxists to drug kingpins: the evolution of Latin American anti-state violence

The emergence of Latin America’s criminal insurgencies is the latest chapter in a long history of internal violence. Successive groups have profited from previous experiences while introducing changes to better

adapt to the evolving strategic scenario. This section will profile several key insurgent and vigilante groups that played a critical role in the evolution of irregular warfare in Latin America in recent decades.

Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front: the last Cold War insurgency

Any analysis of the recent evolution of anti-state violence in Latin America must start with the insurgent campaign launched by the FMLN in El Salvador between 1980 and 1992.²⁰ Created as a coalition of four different groups, the FMLN would become the most sophisticated version of Cold War-era Latin American guerrillas. El Salvador presented some serious challenges for an insurgent campaign. The small size of the country and the high population density reduced the maneuver space for any rural-based armed group.

At the same time, the Salvadorean armed forces, initially characterized by poor training and unrestricted violence, became an increasingly professional counterinsurgent force under the intense training and equipment program developed by the U.S. government in the 1980s.²¹

In this context, the FMLN enjoyed two advantages. First, it received a massive amount of support and technical assistance from the Soviet Union and other Eastern Bloc countries. Allies provided large quantities of weapons, including assault rifles, rocket launchers, machine guns, mortars, and, during the last period of the war, surface-to-air missiles.²² They also provided critical communications gear and medical equipment. Furthermore, the FMLN developed a significant capability to manufacture improvised weapons such as landmines and anti-air rockets.

Second, the FMLN had safe havens in Cuba and Nicaragua that played key roles as logistical hubs and training bases. Cuba, and on a smaller scale Vietnam, also provided training and advisory assistance.

This allowed the Salvadorean insurgents to build a sophisticated guerrilla army. FMLN recruited, trained, deployed, and sustained a number of full-time semi-regular combat battalions and developed the capability to plan and coordinate a nationwide strategy. In parallel, they built commando-type units—known as “Special Purpose Forces”—and used them as a spearhead for complex operations such as assaults on military bases and area ambushes.

These military tools allowed the FMLN to develop an extremely effective campaign that did not cause the collapse of the Salvadorian armed forces only due to sustained support from the United States. The resulting strategic stalemate led to peace negotiations between the insurgents and the Salvadorean government, ending in an agreement that established the disarmament of the FMLN in exchange for its legalization as a political party and the drafting of a new constitution.

Shining Path: drug trafficking and urban terrorism

As the Salvadorian civil war progressed, the Shining Path in Peru tested a completely different insurrectional model. While it has gone down in history as a particularly extremist and brutal group, the Maoist organization introduced two key innovations in its strategic behavior that made it possible to challenge the Peruvian state even if it had limited resources and was internationally isolated: the development of an autonomous economic base and the transition from a rural guerrilla project to an urban terrorist network.

Based on a particularly radical version of Maoism that accused the Chinese Communist Party of betraying Mao's legacy, the Shining Path could not rely on foreign support to acquire the resources required for revolution. As a consequence, Shining Path leader Abimael Guzman and his followers opted for a low-tech insurrection based on the mobilization of the indigenous communities of Ayacucho armed with makeshift weapons and a continuous supply of dynamite diverted from the extensive and poorly controlled Peruvian mining industry.

This lack of resources—a key difference compared to the FMLN—remained a permanent handicap for Guzman's plan to escalate the war against the state. The expansion of insurgent operations toward the Upper Huallaga Valley, an area with extensive coca plantations, provided an alternative source of financing

to the Shining Path. The Peruvian Maoists took on the role of regulators of the drug business, guaranteeing a minimum price to the coca growers. They also offered military protection to the Colombian traffickers, allowing the Shining Path to profit from both sides of the market.²³

Furthermore, the Colombian connection provided a source of modern weapons that were badly needed.²⁴ But getting involved with drug trafficking was a mixed blessing for Guzman. It became a key source of much-needed money and weapons, but it also had a deleterious effect on the group's cohesion by providing financial autonomy to the insurgent columns operating in the Upper Huallaga region.

Even with the additional resources, the Shining Path's campaign in the rural areas faced increasing difficulties. The organization's attempts to impose its radical platform in the rural areas under its control stirred up hatred among the indigenous communities that sought government support to expel the insurgents from their territories. The result was the creation of state-sponsored Self-Defense Committees and the progressive weakening of the Shining Path in the rural areas.²⁵ Guzman's response was to turn the group's main effort on the capital, Lima.²⁶

Two factors facilitated this transition. First, many of the Shining Path's cadres were from cities and familiar with the urban operational environment. Second, the rural terror campaign caused a massive displacement of population toward Lima, which led to the emergence of new settlements in the cities. These emerging neighborhoods became perfect environments for the infiltration of rural guerrillas or the recruitment of new militants. In this context, Guzman launched a terrorist escalation in Lima that stoked fear among the population and cornered the government.²⁷

Nevertheless, the Shining Path's organizational structure was too weak and its social base too narrow to win its war against the Peruvian state. The arrest of Guzman in Lima in 1992 dealt a decisive blow to the organization. It collapsed quickly and remained reduced to a small group isolated in the coca-growing regions.

FARC: a new model of insurgency

During the 1980s and 1990s, the FARC's expansion in Colombia was the result of a combination of the FMLN's operational sophistication and the Shining Path's financing model. In particular, the FARC's military modernization was closely connected with their learning from the Salvadorian experience.

As part of its Seventh Conference in 1982, FARC insurgents approved the so-called "New Form of Operation." As such, the group made a leap from guerrilla-style operations to mobile warfare, including the execution of complex actions such as assaults on fortified bases and area ambushes.²⁸ To develop these capabilities, the FARC took inspiration from the FMLN's modernization. This involved the formation of battalion-size units called "Mobile Columns" and the creation of special forces groups such the "Teófilo Forero Mobile Column."

A key step in this modernization was the creation of the "Hernando González Acosta Military School" in which future middle-rank commanders received training, some of it developed by Chilean and Salvadorean insurgents.²⁹ The result of these efforts was clear during the 1990s when the FARC launched a general offensive that destroyed a set of key army bases in the south and the east of Colombia, allowing the "de facto" control of extensive areas of the country.³⁰

This military escalation would have been impossible without the involvement of the FARC in the drug business, which dramatically improved its financial resources. In this respect, the FARC's strategy was similar to the Shining Path: the search for financial autonomy to sustain its insurgent campaign.

Initially, the FARC operated as a regulator of the industry and a provider of military protection, taxing coca growers and receiving payments from drug traffickers.³¹ But the incentives for Colombian guerrillas to become more deeply involved in the production of narcotics grew as they sought to maximize profit and prevent the vigilante groups, such as the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia, from attacking their intermediaries and disrupting their access to the market.

As a consequence, some FARC units developed their own cocaine laboratories and became fully embedded in the drug business by the mid-1990s. Additionally, the FARC, like other Colombian groups, turned to kidnapping for ransom as a source of income, kidnapping more than 1,000 people at its peak in 2000.³²

As in the case of the Shining Path, drug trafficking was a mixed blessing. It made the FARC one of the wealthiest armed groups in the world and allowed it to acquire huge amounts of military equipment in the black market.³³ But it also unleashed a rapid process of criminalization that weakened the internal cohesion of the group and diminished its military effectiveness.³⁴ Some guerrilla commanders began to increasingly operate independently and became more concerned about keeping drug money flowing into their pockets than fighting government troops.

The FARC leadership implemented a set of measures to prevent the dissolution of the group, including strict rules to maintain control over the narcotics money as well as harsh punishment for any member found guilty of embezzlement. These efforts, however, could not prevent the increasing decentralization of the organization, which ultimately led to its fragmentation and the emergence of a set of dissident gangs after its top commanders signed a peace agreement with the Colombian government in 2016.

United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia: between vigilantism and organized crime

In parallel to the FARC expansion, the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia emerged as a hybrid actor: half criminal enterprise, half vigilante group. The roots of the organization were in the Medellín Cartel and the internecine war between its infamous leader, Pablo Escobar, and a dissident faction that became known as “Persecuted by Pablo Escobar” (or “Los Pepes”).³⁵ This infighting contributed to the death of Escobar and the dismantling of his network of collaborators, but the winning side reshaped the cartel’s operations.

With a more militaristic view on how to control the drug business, this group of former Medellín Cartel members built an illegal army to assault the main coca-growing areas that remained under guerrilla control. This project increased its military force and geographical reach with the incorporation of vigilante groups created by big landowners in some Colombian regions to protect their interests and fight the guerrillas. This mix of criminal gangs and illegal anti-guerrilla groups was the cornerstone of the United Self-Defense Forces and defined its composition and strategic behavior.³⁶

As a way to grow in stature and political influence, the United Self-Defense Forces leadership emphasized its profile as a political force with the use of uniforms, the dissemination of propaganda, and the development of a political platform. Even if these efforts did not change the fact that the group was composed of gangs driven by criminal motivations, it cannot be ignored that the organization played the role of an armed wing of the Colombian extreme right in much the same way as the Salvadorian “death squads.”³⁷

After its creation in the mid-1990s, the organization grew quickly as it integrated groups from different areas of Colombia. The result was a loose coalition of very different actors, including urban criminal networks such as “The Terrace” in Medellín and rural armed groups such as the Peasant Self-Defense Groups of Córdoba and Urabá. This organizational diversity resulted in a broad variety of operational behavior. In many Colombian regions, the United Self-Defense Forces behaved as a traditional vigilante gang, executing terrorist attacks against both individuals suspected to be guerrilla sympathizers and members of legal leftist parties.

In other parts of the country, however, the group executed more complex operations involving the deployment of hundreds of combatants in offensive operations to take over key areas for drug production and trafficking. At the same time, the organization used corruption and coercion to gain control over government bodies. In particular, it developed a massive scheme of voter fraud through which it guaranteed the election of a number of rightist representatives and gained significant influence over the Colombian Congress.³⁸

Ultimately, the organization went into a crisis as a result of the contradictions within its leadership and reached a demobilization agreement with the government in 2005.³⁹ The reintegration of its members into civil life was considerably difficult, however, since many of them were common criminals. Consequently, a significant proportion of the group left the organization to join the criminal gangs that took its place in the Colombian drug business.⁴⁰

Los Zetas: the rise of a criminal army

The United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia's role as a hybrid actor—a criminal coalition operating as a political player in Colombia's internal conflict—offered a clear precedent for a new generation of Latin American armed actors that combined the control of an extensive illegal economy, a strong military apparatus, and a significant level of political influence. This new model of armed organized crime became visible with the creation of the Los Zetas cartel in Mexico in the late 1990s.

Los Zetas was initially formed by the Gulf Cartel as a military arm to fight rival gangs. Its founding group consisted of former special operators belonging to the Mexican Army's Airborne Group of Special Forces and then expanded with defectors from other security agencies. Inevitably, the growth of Los Zetas led to a conflict with their bosses in the Gulf Cartel and its consolidation as an independent criminal enterprise.⁴¹

In this process, the organization introduced two key changes to the Mexican drug business. First, it increased the sophistication and intensity of the violence in the fight against rival gangs. Los Zetas brought their military expertise on issues such as intelligence and direct action to the Mexican cartel wars but also displayed a complete disregard for human life—committing atrocities on a scale like never before.

Second, they expanded their economic portfolio much beyond drug trafficking to include extortion, kidnapping, human trafficking, and other illegal business. At the same time, Los Zetas developed a broad network of corruption involving police chiefs, prosecutors, and high-ranking officials, particularly in the states of Tamaulipas and Coahuila. According to some sources, this involvement in politics included the illegal funding of political campaigns.⁴²

Although Los Zetas became the most powerful Mexican cartel in the early 2010s, two factors led to the group's decline. First, the notoriety of the organization and its use of extreme violence made it a priority target for the Mexican authorities and, particularly, the army. Second, a set of internal disputes led to the group's fragmentation. As a result, Los Zetas was reduced to a set of independent and rival networks by 2015.

Nevertheless, the group's strategic legacy has had a critical influence on Mexico's security environment. After Los Zetas, all of the other criminal organizations were forced to develop a more effective military apparatus. The diversification of the criminal economy became a new normal, with cartels and gangs going beyond the drug business into a variety of economic activities.

Likewise, even if drug-related corruption preceded Los Zetas, its weaponization to gain control over parts of Mexican territory became a more extended practice. This combination of military sophistication, diversification of the economic portfolio, and massive use of corruption has been the recipe for strategic success pursued by the criminal groups that have replaced Los Zetas as the main threat to Mexico's stability today.

The global dimension: Islamic terrorism in Latin America

The anti-state violence in Latin America has been mainly the result of regional dynamics more than global tendencies. Latin American irregular actors have enjoyed international support, and outside terrorist and criminal groups have developed connections with the region for political, financial, or logistics reasons, although they have usually refrained from attacks on its soil. That has been the case for both the Provisional

Irish Republican Army and the ultranationalist Basque organization Euzkadi Ta Askatasuna. The same can be said about criminal networks such as the Calabrian Ndrangheta or the Russian mafia.

Hezbollah has been the main exception to this pattern, executing three major terrorist attacks in a short period of time: the bombing of the Israeli Embassy in Argentina in 1992 (resulting in 29 deaths), the suicide van bombing of a Jewish center in Argentina in 1994 (resulting in 85 deaths), and the blowing up of Alas Chiricanas Airlines Flight 901 in Panama the same year (resulting in 21 deaths).⁴³

This series of attacks underscored the extent of Hezbollah's infrastructure in Latin America as well as its role as a proxy for Iran, which has used the Lebanese terrorist group as a tool for foreign action. As the subsequent investigation demonstrated, the bombings in Buenos Aires were purportedly authorized by Iran as a reprisal for the decision of the Argentinian government to suspend nuclear cooperation.⁴⁴

Operationally, Hezbollah proved its capabilities by executing three suicide attacks thousands of kilometers away from its bases in Lebanon and closely coordinated two of them. This was partly possible due to Hezbollah's ability to build an international network leveraging the Lebanese diaspora scattered all over the world.⁴⁵ In the case of Latin America, the key hub was the Tri-Border Area, a region where the boundaries among Argentina, Paraguay, and Brazil converge and where there is a well-positioned Shia community.

Since the attacks, Hezbollah's presence in the region has only grown. Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez and his successor, Nicolas Maduro, not only assisted Tehran in the development of political relations in Latin America but also made Venezuelan territory available for a broad set of Iranian-sponsored projects.

As a result, Venezuela became a new operating area for Hezbollah in Latin America, as Hezbollah could count on the support of the Venezuelan government.⁴⁶ The former Venezuelan vice president and current minister of petroleum, Tareck El Aissami, has been central to this relationship. El Aissami is a dedicated Chavista with extensive family connections in the Middle East and has been sanctioned by the U.S. Treasury Department for his involvement in drug trafficking and money laundering.⁴⁷

Consequently, Hezbollah found a favorable environment to expand its activities. It maintained its illegal economic infrastructure in Paraguay, as the arrest of Assad Ahmad Barakat in Brazil in 2018 proved.⁴⁸ At the same time, it took advantage of its presence in Venezuela to expand its operations in the Caribbean basin, including drug trafficking and money laundering.⁴⁹

In this respect, Operation Titan in 2008—executed jointly by Colombian and U.S. law enforcement agencies—revealed the relations between the Shia group and a Medellín-based drug trafficking ring known as the Envigado Office. Further investigations revealed that individuals connected to Hezbollah developed a scheme to transfer Colombian cocaine to the Los Zetas cartel in Mexico and then laundered the profits through the Lebanese Canadian Bank.⁵⁰

As a part of Hezbollah's Latin America strategy, Venezuela became a hub for terrorist financing and training. The Shia Islamic Center, several travel agencies, and other types of companies in Caracas and Margarita Island became a network used for money laundering and the recruitment of sympathizers who were brought from all over Latin America for ideological indoctrination on Venezuelan soil and, if selected, further training in Iran.⁵¹ Additionally, the Venezuelan National Office of Identification and Foreigners, in charge of the issuance of national identification, provided passports to Middle Eastern individuals with Hezbollah ties and other violent extremist organizations.⁵²

The result of Venezuela's cooperation with Hezbollah has been an expansion of its clandestine infrastructure in Latin America. The Lebanese group has not been limited to just building its financial and logistical resources; it has also developed plans and preparations to commit terrorist attacks. That was the case with the arrest of Muamad Amadar, a Lebanese citizen connected to Hezbollah, who collected intelligence on potential Jewish and Israeli targets in Lima in 2014.⁵³

The most notorious terrorist plot planned by Iranian agents in the region was the so-called "Cafe Milano Plot" in 2011. It involved an attempt to assassinate Adel al-Jubeir, the Saudi ambassador to the United States, in a bombing in Washington, DC. An Iranian agent connected to a high-ranking officer of

the Quds Force, the branch of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps in charge of external clandestine operations, tried to contact the Los Zetas cartel in Mexico to hire them to carry out the assassination.⁵⁴

The plot was discovered when the Iranian envoy inadvertently contacted a Drug Enforcement Administration confidential informant who notified the agency. The “Cafe Milano Plot,” however, demonstrated the operational potential of Hezbollah’s network in Latin America and how aggressive Tehran’s agents can be when attempting to achieve their objectives.

In comparison with Hezbollah, Sunni terrorist groups have had a lighter footprint in the region. Contradictory news has emerged on al-Qaida’s activities in a variety of Latin American countries, from Honduras to Brazil.⁵⁵ Likewise, there have been indications of contacts between Latin American drug trafficking groups and al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb to guarantee transport and protection for drug shipments coming to Europe through West Africa and the Sahara desert.⁵⁶ Yet the most significant presence of radical Sunni groups in the region is connected to the Islamic State, which engaged in considerable recruitment of individuals from Trinidad and Tobago.

These islands have a long history of Islamic radicalism that includes a coup attempt carried out by the extremist group Jamaat al-Muslimeen in 1990.⁵⁷ After the failed coup, the organization became fragmented and many of its members involved in criminal activities. Radical preachers, however, continued to operate on the island. That was the context in which the Islamic State developed an extremely successful recruitment campaign.

Around 240 citizens of Trinidad and Tobago—including women and children—traveled to Syria and joined the Islamic State’s self-proclaimed caliphate, where they performed a variety of functions but became particularly visible in the propaganda apparatus.⁵⁸ While fighting to retain the group’s now lost territory, more than 65 were killed or remain missing, another 50 or more remain in Syrian and Iraqi prisons, and a few continue in the Islamic State’s ranks.⁵⁹ The future return of some of these militants to the islands and the persistence of their radicalization networks represent a challenge to the security of Trinidad and Tobago and the hemisphere.

Conclusion

The evolution of Latin American anti-government violence in the last 40 years offers some key conclusions. First, there is a blurred line between organized crime and political violence. In case after case, it is possible to identify how politically motivated insurgent groups like the Shining Path or the FARC resort to criminal activities for self-financing, while criminal groups such as the Sinaloa Cartel or the First Command of the Capital assume para-state functions, providing justice and security services to those communities under their control.

At the same time, the movement of people between criminal organizations and extremist groups is frequent. Brazilian leftist insurgents were critical in the foundation of the Red Command, and the FARC recruited criminal gangs to beef up its urban networks in some Colombian cities.

A second key lesson is how tactical and operational knowledge has circulated from organization to organization, overcoming political and geographical barriers and facilitating an ever-increasing sophistication of Latin American irregulars. The methods for inter-group learning have varied, from pure imitation to the incorporation of members of other organizations who brought with them new expertise. The effect, however, has always been similar: the acquisition of new capabilities and the increase of effectiveness and resilience. The role played by the Salvadorian FMLN in the military modernization of the FARC is a good example.

Finally, a third conclusion is the ambiguous nature of the strategies deployed by the Latin American irregular actors. The traditional assumptions that guerrilla warfare and mass mobilization are the weapons of choice of insurgents, while criminals prefer corruption and assassination, are no longer valid. Corruption has become a common tool for insurgent organizations such as the Colombian National Liberation

Army, while organized criminal groups such as the Jalisco New Generation Cartel have demonstrated their capability to execute combat operations and use propaganda effectively.

The result is the emergence of a generation of hybrid actors capable of combining lethal and non-lethal tools into strategies that are more difficult to anticipate and contain. These tendencies should be taken into consideration to understand the future profile of Latin American irregular threats.

Notes

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