

**Gangs and Terrorists in the Americas:
An Unlikely Nexus**

by

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Introduction

Gangs in the United States cultivate links to terrorist operatives abroad and threaten US homeland security. Recent press reports offer this proposition as fact, and some scholars and other gang and terrorism analysts implicitly support the argument. The assertion that local Hispanic gangs are linked to al Qaeda raises urgent public policy questions, and the facts and arguments on which it rests demand close scrutiny. This paper argues that the nexus between al Qaeda and local US gangs is unlikely; it also illustrates how homeland security policies based on that assumption have potentially serious, unintended consequences.

In September 2004, the *Washington Times* and other media reported that a top al Qaeda operative met with leaders of the Hispanic criminal gang *Mara Salvatrucha* in Tegucigalpa, Honduras (Seper 2004). Adnan El Shukrijumah, a Guyanese national born in Saudi Arabia and one time legal US resident, remains the subject of a worldwide manhunt by the FBI and CIA. According to US officials he is wanted in connection with specific terrorist threats against the US and his ties to Al

Qaeda before 9/11. Meanwhile, the gangs colloquially known as MS13, with thousands of members in at least 27 US states, engage in widespread criminal activities and maintain strong ties in Mexico and throughout Central America. If the details of the meeting between Shukrijumah and MS13 leaders are true, it could indicate al Qaeda has access to well-established smuggling networks and widely dispersed gang members in the United States. More importantly, the implication of this gang-terror nexus raises ominous homeland security concerns and policy questions.

The *Washington Times* article culminated months of reporting from the foreign press about Shukrijumah's activities in the region. It likely heightened concerns among some officials in Washington and caused a revisiting of the gang-terror nexus, prominently raised by the 2002 detention of Jose Padilla. The FBI continues to detain Padilla, a US citizen, because they believe he conspired to commit a terrorist act against the United States using a radiological or "dirty bomb." A previously convicted felon, Padilla is also alleged to be an ex-member of another Hispanic gang, the Latin Kings. Reporting on the link between gangs and terrorists is not unique to the US and Hispanic gangs. Press reports from around the globe assert such a relationship exists. Even scientists who "model" terrorist-related phenomena see an analog between gangs and terrorists.

The alleged link between al Qaeda and MS13 is critically examined below, drawing on what we know about gangs in the United States and Central America, while acknowledging the new and necessarily intense concerns for homeland security caused by the terrorist attacks of September 11th. Although logical and prudent to ask if a possible connection between gangs and terrorists exists, the paper argues that the link described by the press is unlikely. It suggests that gangs and terrorists are conceptually linked when local groups like MS13 are loosely characterized or defined; it discusses how governments in the Central America agreed to confront gangs prior to 9/11, without any mention of a terrorist relationship. The post 9/11 tendency to link virtually every transnational threat to terrorism plays an important role, one that has broad bureaucratic and policy implications. Thus, pressing homeland security issues are raised if the relationship between al Qaeda and *Mara Salvatrucha* (MS) is accepted at face value.

The Links

The startling details in the article “Al Qaeda seeks tie to local gangs” sent many analysts scrambling to re-examine any possible connection between local MS13 gangs and al Qaeda. The article implicitly links MS13 gang members in the Washington, DC metropolitan area with the al Qaeda operative Shukrijumah, also known as Jafar Tayar and “Jafar the pilot.” Citing “law enforcement authorities,” and repeating other regional press accounts, Shukrijumah allegedly transited Panama and Nicaragua in July 2004, before “being spotted” in Honduras. There the terrorist reportedly sought meetings with MS gang leaders about possible illicit entry routes into the United States, which MS uses to smuggle gang members through Mexico and into the US. The author adds that al Qaeda operatives had been in Honduras planning attacks against US, British and Spanish embassies (Seper 2004). The article is unclear on what authorities (US or Honduran) provided the information on the presence of al Qaeda operatives or who spotted “Jafar” the terrorist in Honduras.

Based on this reporting, the journalist implies that Shukrijumah actively seeks ties to MS13 members in the Washington D.C. area. Gang activities have proliferated in the D.C. suburbs, raising concerns among officials and residents. This has resulted in the funding and operation of a number of regional gang task forces. The report correctly notes that MS13 members committed numerous murders, robberies, burglaries, carjackings, extortions, rapes and aggravated assaults throughout the US, and at least seven recent murders and a machete attack in the DC suburbs (Seper).

No evidence is offered, however, that these activities are connected in anyway to terrorism or al Qaeda. Furthermore, nothing appears in the article to definitively establish a link between the local MS13 gangs and those in Honduras. The journalist does accurately portray Shurkijumah as one of the many suspected terrorists cited by the US Attorney General and the FBI as a threat to homeland security. “Jafar,” like Jose Padilla in 2002, is also a suspected terrorist seeking re-entry into the United States (Castillo 2004).

Jose Padilla, the “dirty bomber,” enjoyed great notoriety because of his alleged links to a prominent US gang and al Qaeda. Padilla was detained at Chicago’s O’Hare Airport in June 2002 after returning from Pakistan. Abu Zubaydah, a top al Qaeda operative captured after 9/11, implicated Padilla in a plot to obtain radiological materials and detonate a bomb in a US city. Prior to his detention Padilla was in Pakistan

receiving explosives and other training from al Qaeda, according to press reports. Additionally, US authorities shrouded Padilla's detention in secrecy, raising important legal questions about the rights of US citizens implicated in terrorist activities (McCaffrey 2003).

Padilla's gangster past is equally murky. Padilla was allegedly a Latin King, involved in a gang-related murder and confined as a juvenile offender in Illinois, but his criminal record has remained sealed. (Again, US officials cite security concerns for keeping the details of his case secret). Florida authorities later arrested and convicted Padilla on charges related to a "road-rage" shooting incident. A Florida court sentenced Padilla to jail for one year, where he may have converted to Islam (BBC 2002).

Eighteen years passed between Padilla's gang activities in Chicago and his 2002 detention for an "offense" that could be best described as suspicious acts to further a terrorist act. Press reports do not intimate that Padilla remained active in the Latin Kings, and his conversion to Islam in the 1990s suggests otherwise (BBC 2002). Without further information it is impossible to conclude from Padilla's case alone that active Latin King gang members have associated with al Qaeda.

Following Padilla's imprisonment in 2002, the *Chicago Sun Times* and other media reminded readers that El Rukn gang leader, Jeff Fort, was convicted in 1987 of conspiring to commit an act of terrorism against the United States. In this case, the gang leader from the South Side street gang in Chicago was offered a \$2.5 million payment from Libyan operatives to commit a terrorist act (BBC; Sadovi 2002).

The cases of Fort and Padilla raised concerns among some that the ganglands of US inner cities and prisons serve as fertile recruiting ground for Islamic terrorists. Terrorist sympathizers can find the most disenfranchised of American society there, all of whom identify with the norms and morals of the criminal underworld. Proponents of this theory say Islamic converts in prison and gang members on the streets "lack some sort of support system" which a terrorist group provides (Scherer & Marks 2002). This argument ignores, among other things, the significant literature on domestic gangs that suggests that providing a psychosocial support system is one of the primary functions of the gang itself (Knox 2000:313). One gang expert succinctly challenged the argument on another front. "Al Qaeda is made up of a lot of upper-middle-class Saudis who are religiously offended by the American way of life. The boys in the hood are not offended by it. They want a piece of the American way of

life” (Scherer & Marks 2002).

Media and scholars around the globe voiced concerns about the gang-terror alliance in their regions. In 2002 the Italian Political Science Association considered “the emerging and increasing links between organized crime gang and terrorist groups, “phenomena which although having different objectives and methods, tend to form alliances with more and more ease” (IPSA 2002).

In Asia, just months after September 11th, journalists and policy makers in Nepal debated the relationship between criminal gangs and terrorist organizations. The issue was particularly pressing there, as the weakened government battled a decimated economy, official corruption and both a Maoist insurgency and growing presence of criminal gangs. According to some analysts the gangs threatened to destabilize the Nepalese government and even the entire sub-continent. A US State Department official was quoted as saying: “Counter-terrorism involves activities more than those that bear a counter terrorism label.” The quote seemingly supported the idea that the fight against criminal gangs and terrorists were one and the same in Nepal (Sharma 2001).

A year later, scientists at Sandia National Lab argued that gang studies offer an important “analog” on which they can model terrorist groups and activities. Lacking sufficient empirical data on terrorist groups, the scientists turn to the literature on street gangs for insight. Limiting their argument to the theoretical, they point out that gangs and terrorists both engage in criminal and violent behavior and challenge “peacekeeping” interests. The authors cite the sociological and psychological theoretical approaches used to study gangs, and suggest similarities between gang members and terrorists in their disenfranchisement and search for structure and “moral” order in the world (Turnley & Smrcka 2002). It is difficult to grasp the relationship without at least a few real-world hypothetical examples to support their assertion on the similarities between gangs and terrorists.

Scrutinizing the Argument

The attacks of September 11th 2001 demonstrate that virtually any terrorist threat, such as an alleged link between al Qaeda and MS13 gangs in the US, is within the realm of possibility. Different analytic perspectives from the intelligence, academic and homeland security communities prove useful in challenging the argument that gangs in the United States pose a threat to homeland security because of their possible links to terrorist operatives.

Most academic analysts begin their assessments by carefully defining the variables (in this case “gang” and “homeland security”) before drawing conclusions about their correlation. The assertion that a relationship between local gangs such as MS-13 and al Qaeda represents a threat to homeland security is improbable if the terms gang and homeland security are carefully defined.

The academic literature offers numerous definitions of a gang, but one may best capture the nature of *Mara Salvatrucha* in the Washington area.

A youth gang, as a sub-unit of a street gang, is a group of 12 to 24 year-old members, variable in size and organization, engaged in violent behavior, and characterized by communal or symbolic and often economic considerations, such as drug trafficking, burglary, robbery, and auto theft (U.S. Department of Justice 1994).

Some superficial commonalities between gangs and terrorists appear in this definition, such as engaging in violence and symbolic acts, but the overarching distinction is clear. US gangs are primarily concerned with and engage in criminal activities for economic gain, while the objective of terrorist groups is to inflict massive casualties and crippling economic harm on the US.

If the gang-terror link proved true, and another attack on the US was successful, the gangs would in essence destroy some of the customers (drugs) and victims (robbery, auto theft) on which they depend to make money. In addition, the vast majority of MS-13 or other Hispanic gang members in the US are Roman Catholic, not members of the Islamic Radical Groups who engage in terrorist activities. At this level of analysis the gang members are as much an enemy of the *jihad* as the rest of US society.

Homeland security is clearly aimed at combating terrorist groups, not gangs, as the definition below illustrates. It is by bureaucratic happenstance, not more precise definitions, that the bureau for Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), within the sprawling Department of Homeland Security, maintains part of the federal anti-gang mission. To illustrate, the *National Strategy for Homeland Security* states:

Homeland Security is a concerted national effort to prevent terrorist attacks within the United States, reduce America’s vulnerability to terrorism, and minimize the damage and recover from attacks that do occur (Office of Homeland Security 2002).

Aside from the definitional issues, other analytic and conceptual problems undermine the assertion that US gangs are linked to al Qaeda. For example, intelligence officers scrutinizing the al Qaeda-MS13 link may look to the reliability of the sources providing the information and whether they have a proven history of reporting. Equally important, the intelligence analyst may ask if any other credible accounts of the al Qaeda link to local gangs exist. Analysts know that reliance on other intelligence or law enforcement assessments alone, such as those cited in the press about the al Qaeda-gang relationship, often lead to “circular” reporting. The report becomes true because another agency reported it, not because the source of information is credible.

In the present case, the reliability of the sources is unclear. Because one US law enforcement source asserts, based on a single uncorroborated meeting in Honduras, that a terrorist relationship exists, does not make it true in the broadest phenomenological terms. Furthermore, there are indications that political and law enforcement leaders in Central America have a vested bureaucratic interest in establishing a link between al Qaeda and their indigenous gangs. Such a link would likely lead to increased US assistance, under the auspices of the Global War on Terrorism (GWOT), to those Central American countries. The same officials are cited as sources in some of the press reports.

Regional Responses

Gangs like *Mara Salvatrucha* have long attracted the attention of US law enforcement agencies. Since the mid 1990s MS activities have been well documented, including many indications and warnings that the transnational gangs engaged in numerous illicit activities could soon pose a serious public security threat throughout Central America. In 1996 the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms (BATF), Intelligence Division released a lengthy report on *Mara Salvatrucha* activities in the US (BATF 1996). Many other gang experts in law enforcement, such as members of the California Gang Investigators Association, have detailed records and intimate understanding of MS13 stretching to the 1980s.

By the late 1990s policymakers and diplomats in the United States and Central America recognized that domestic and multilateral actions were necessary to combat the growing transnational gang problem. In 1999 serious discussions began in the Organization of American States (OAS), Inter-American Drug Abuse Control Commission (CICAD) aimed at developing a multilateral strategy to

combat transnational youth gangs in the Americas. The 34 member states reached a consensus to take action against transnational gangs.

In 2000 many of the thirty-four OAS member states participated in two anti-gang conferences. The first, "Combating Transnational Drug-related Gangs and Violence," provided a forum for countries and anti-gang professionals to exchange information on transnational gangs in the Americas.¹ The countries identified effective national prevention policies to confront the gang problem as the most pressing. These programs would be carried out in local communities, focus on high-risk populations, involve school, family and community members, and integrate health, education, social and law enforcement services. They promoted the important role of the local police in combating gangs, not only through control activities, but also prevention, conflict resolution, outreach and other community oriented activities.

Their priorities at the multilateral level were less ambitious, and included the exchange of information on gang statistics, as well as anti-gang programs, models and strategies in each country. Countries sought anti-gang training, technical assistance, criminal intelligence on gangs, and funding from the international community to support training for innovative local programs such as the rehabilitation and social reinsertion of gang members. The approach went far beyond the traditional law enforcement and security cooperation models.

In December of 2000 the second conference addressed the need to increase local social services to gang members.² Participants from six countries in the region (as well as the U.S. Embassy), drawn from the public security, health, education, foreign relations, non-governmental and other sectors in El Salvador, attended. The meeting brought the diverse entities together and urged them to develop a specific collaborative strategy. The participants formed an "inter-institutional" committee to focus on the related gang, drug and violence problems in El Salvador, and invited a few others from the Central American region.

The well-articulated need for anti-gang programs to incorporate multiple sectors of society, and to stretch across international borders, fell out of favor as some post 9/11 responses in Central America focused on more repressive domestic measures. Casting the gang problem as part of the GWOT implicitly supports the ongoing gang enforcement programs such as *Mano dura* in Honduras, *Zero tolerancia* in El Salvador and *Escoba* in Guatemala. The situation so dramatically changed in 2004 that the OAS Inter-American Commission on Human Rights and other groups, such as the Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA),

criticized the gang programs in these countries (OAS 2004).

Despite the definitional problems, suspect logic and an established record of addressing the gang problem across disciplines and international boundaries, a host of factors came together to make the gang-terror nexus an attractive argument in late 2004. The preceding paragraphs demonstrate that the MS13-al Qaeda link is not supported by the evidence and has not been rigorously analyzed by journalists who offer it is fact. The remaining paragraphs examine some of the pressing homeland security policy issues raised by the gang-terror nexus.

Some Homeland Security and Defense Implications

Adherents of the “gangs as a threat to homeland security” proposition fail to consider some of the serious policy consequences that could result if the argument is accepted at face value. Conceivably gang enforcement and prosecution activities could come to resemble anti-terrorism efforts. Gangs would be elevated to a status similar to terrorists, which could in turn diminish the special attention now given to the al Qaeda and other Islamic Radical Groups pursued in the GWOT. As a result fewer known terrorists would be targeted, tracked, captured, prosecuted or killed.

In the Americas, focusing on gangs could divert the attention of US and allied law enforcement and intelligence agencies away from other regional organized crime groups more likely to be linked to al Qaeda. Multiple press reports suggest that sophisticated weapons smugglers, money launderers and Islamic sympathizers, such as those in the “tri-border” region of Paraguay, Argentina and Brazil, represent higher value targets than do gang members (CNN 2002; Junger 2002).

Linking US gangs to al Qaeda essentially forces a change in a number of policies. To reconcile the fact that the transnational gangs are linked to terrorists, do policymakers elevate *Mara Salvatrucha* and other gangs to the State Department terrorist list? If so, do gang members on the list become subject to terrorist prosecution if they are arrested on drug charges? Are they sent to Guantanamo? These are but a few of the questions left unanswered by the journalists, pundits and analysts who propagate the “gangs as terrorist” argument.

In addition, policymakers in Washington could allocate scarce homeland security and defense assets against a transnational gang threat that is overstated and misunderstood. If gangs and terrorists are not linked, as argued here, then these homeland security resources are better spent thwarting known adversaries and threats. Department of Defense

and some Department Homeland Security plans, policy and budget processes rely on threat scenarios as the basis of making decisions. An inaccurate depiction of the transnational gang and terrorism phenomena could lead to wasted resources in both departments. None of these “real world” consequences are considered in the cursory analyses suggesting gangs and terrorists are linked.

Conclusion

The terrorist attacks of September 11th demonstrate that the United States can ill afford to discount any terrorist scenario, no matter how improbable. The post 9/11 realities suggest the planning, policy and budget processes in the Departments of Defense and Homeland Security require analyses that point to the most likely and catastrophic terrorist scenarios we will face. These analyses require more than the uncorroborated accounts, improbable links and suspect logic offered by recent press reports asserting a relationship between al Qaeda and local *Mara Salvatrucha* gangs in the US.

A nexus between al Qaeda and US gangs would represent a serious challenge to homeland security. This paper argued that the relationship between al Qaeda and MS13 is unlikely, not impossible, given the available open source data. Vigilant homeland security efforts require analyses that go beyond superficial reporting, and thoroughly examine the definitions, history and nature of the relationships that are being offered as fact. Our national efforts to prevent terrorist attacks within the United States, reduce America’s vulnerability to terrorism, and minimize the damage and recover from attacks that do occur, demand no less.

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End Notes:

¹ October 10-11, 2000, at Florida International University, Miami Florida.

² “Conferencia CentroAmericana Para Enfrentar El Problema de Jovenes en Alto Riesgo, Maras y Abuso de Drogas,” San Salvador, Salvador December 4-7, 2000.

Special Note:

The author is solely responsible for the content of this article and the views expressed do not reflect the positions of the institutions with which he is or was affiliated or those mentioned herein.

ERRATA:

Please note that the Volume 14, Number 1, Fall 2006 issue of the *Journal of Gang Research* contains an error on page 27. In the second to the last paragraph on page 27, where it currently reads “The fourth symbol was a placebo, but 24.5 percent said it would be banned”, it should read: “The fourth symbol is a symbol used by the Aryan Nations, and about a fourth of the respondents (24.5%) said that it would be banned”.