DESPITE ITS SIREN SONG, HIGH-VALUE TARGETING DOESN'T FIT ALL: MATCHING INTERDICTION PATTERNS TO SPECIFIC NARCOTERRORISM AND ORGANIZED-CRIME CONTEXTS

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Introduction

Over the past decade, decapitation, particularly high-value targeting (HVT), has come into vogue and is being increasingly applied in a variety of counterterrorism, counterinsurgency, and anti-organized crime settings around the world. There are several reasons for this widespread adoption of high-value targeting as a dominant interdiction pattern.

First, there is a long tradition of interdiction focused on high-value targeting in counternarcotics efforts in Latin America, which features some key successes, such as those against the Medellín and Cali cartels. Second, over the past decade, HVT delivered some crucial successes in counterterrorism efforts – such as against al Qaeda in Iraq,[1] where the HVT policy was crucially supplemented by mobilizing Sunni tribes to break with Al Qaeda; and in Pakistan against al Qaeda Core. In Pakistan, HVT has been conducted both by controversial bombings, including from unnamed platforms, and to a lesser extent by land-based interdiction teams against presumed high-value al Qaeda and associated militant group operatives. Whatever its complex side-effects in terms of civilian casualties, the growth of anti-Americanism among Pakistanis, and an overall worsening of U.S.-Pakistan relations, these interdiction operations dramatically degraded the capabilities of al Qaeda's original and most lethal core that had the greatest capacity to conduct terrorism with global reach and hit far-away targets. There are other historic antecedents and renowned successes of the use of high-value targeting by specialized interdiction units (SIUs) in counterterrorism and counterinsurgency contexts, such as the capture of Abimael Guzmán, the leader of the Shining Path. His capture critically contributed to the demise of a vicious and potent Communist insurgency in Peru.[2]

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[1] Stanley McChrystal, *My Share of the Task: A Memoir* (New York: Penguin, 2013).

[2] For details on the Shining Path, Guzmán's role, and the impact of his capture and other counterinsurgency and counternarcotics policies in Peru, see Vanda Felbab-Brown, *Shooting Up: Counterinsurgency and the War on Drugs* (Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution, 2010), chapter 3; David Scott Palmer, ed., *Shining Path of Peru*, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994) and Gustavo Gorriti, *The Shining Path*: *A History of the Millenarian War in Peru*, Robin Kirk, trans. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999); Carlos Iván Degregori, *Sendero Luminoso, lucha armada y utopía autoritaria* (Lima: Instituto de Estudios Peruanos, 1986); Gordon H. McCormick, "*From the Sierra to the Cities: The Urban Campaign of the Shining Path* (Santa Monica: RAND, 1992): 22; Cynthia McClintock, "Peru's Sendero Luminoso Rebellion: Origins and Trajectory," in Susan Eckstein, ed., *Power and Popular Protest* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001): 78-9; Otto Guibovich, *Shining Path: Birth, Life, and Death* (Camberley: Staff College, 1993): 18.

"High-value targeting," though not always truly focused on top-level operatives, has also been enthusiastically embraced by the United States in Yemen and Somalia for striking presumed al Qaeda or Shabab targets – the HVT tactic itself often elevated to the level of strategy in the absence of a broader policy approach.

Third, the mantra of fighting narcoterrorism by eradicating illicit crops turned out to be highly problematic. Eradication did not deliver on its siren song of bankrupting militants; counterproductively, it strengthened the bonds between local populations and militants and undermined intelligence-gathering and hearts-and-minds efforts. Interdiction thus came to look as a far more appealing alternative.

Fourth, the bonanza of intercepts of communications among targeted criminals and militants that signal intelligence has come to provide over the past decade in Colombia, Mexico, Iraq, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and other parts of the world has also strongly privileged the focus and predominance of HVT.

Indeed, as detailed below, dropping eradication as a primary tool to combat narcoterrorism has been a positive evolution of policy. Embracing interdiction often makes sense since it avoids many of the counterproductive effects of eradication and can disrupt logistical chains of organized crime groups and militants.

However, high-value targeting has proven effective only under some circumstances. In many contexts, such as in Mexico, high-value targeting has itself been ineffective and in fact counterproductive; and other interdiction patterns and postures, such as middle-level targeting and focused-deterrence, would be more effective policy choices.

The analysis below first details why eradication of drug crops is ineffective in fighting the nexus of militancy and the illegal drug trade, using the presumed success story of Colombia as illustration. It then reviews interdiction operations in Colombia both against the *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia* (or FARC) and against the Colombian cartels. This is followed by a discussion of why transplanting such interdiction approaches to Mexico has proven deeply problematic, and an explanation of why middle-level targeting would be a better interdiction posture for Mexico. Fourth, the analysis points out the difficulties of implementing both high-value and middle-level targeting in counternarcotics and anti-Taliban operations in Afghanistan and the easy slippage of policies into indiscriminate broad-brush targeting patterns. Next there is a description of how the growth and successes of signal intelligence have further encouraged the predominance of high-value targeting. Sixth is an exploration of the challenges and pitfalls of standing up specialized interdiction units focused on high-value targeting in contexts of high corruption and poor quality police forces, such as in West Africa. The analysis concludes with a set of policy recommendations designed to shape interdiction postures and patterns to specific threat contexts; it sketches out such targeting patterns for anti-organized crime and counterterrorism contexts, and for the specific cases of Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Central Asia; Mexico and Central America; and West and East Africa.

The Ineffectiveness of Eradication in Combatting Insurgent and Terrorist Groups Involved in the Drug Trade[3]

The conventional view of the nexus between illicit economies and military conflict holds that terrorist and insurgent groups who become involved in drug trafficking derive large financial profits from the illicit trade. With these profits, they then fund substantial increases in their military capabilities. As their physical capabilities grow, there is a corresponding decrease in the

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[3] For details and evidence, see Vanda Felbab-Brown, *Shooting Up:* chapters 1, 2, and 6.

relative capability of government forces. Consequently, the conventional prescription goes, governments should focus on eliminating the belligerents' physical resources by destroying the illicit economies on which they rely – specifically, eradicating the illicit crops and destroying the drug trade in their area of operation.

This is a very elegant view. The only problem is that the scenario has not yet panned out anywhere. This is because it underestimates the difficulty in shutting down belligerents' money flows, especially by doing so through the eradication of illicit crops, and underestimates the ability of militants and terrorists to switch to alternative forms of financing. Essentially, in the past sixty years, not one single belligerent group has been severely weakened or defeated through the eradication of illicit crops which it taxed or the drug trade in which it participated.

Moreover, the conventional view not only fails to deliver on its central promise – severely degrading the physical capabilities of belligerents by disrupting their financing through the eradication of illicit crops – it is directly counterproductive to efforts to defeat the militants. Critically, it fails to recognize that belligerents derive much more than simply large financial profits from their sponsorship of illicit economies. They also obtain freedom of action and crucially, legitimacy and support from the local population – what I call *political capital*. Belligerents who attempt to destroy the illicit economy suffer on both accounts.

The political capital that belligerents gain from sponsoring the illicit economy is frequently critical for their survival and the crux of their support. Even when other sources of legitimacy fade, such as ideology, or they become too brutal, thus turning off the population, the support they derive from sponsoring the illicit economy can keep them going. Unlike anything else, sponsoring the drug economy allows terrorists and insurgents to deliver real time immediate economic improvements to the lives of the populations among whom they operate.

With the regulatory and protection services belligerents provide to illicit economies and populations dependent on them, they develop the capacity to transform themselves from ragtag bands of insurgents into protostates. One of the key manifestations of the belligerents' political capital is the unwillingness of the population to provide intelligence on the belligerents to government.

Four factors largely determine the extent to which belligerents can benefit from their involvement with the illicit economy: the state of the overall economy; the character of the illicit economy; the presence (or absence) of thuggish traffickers; and the government response to the illicit economy.

- The state of the overall economy – poor or rich – determines the availability of alternative sources of income and the number of people in a region who depend on the illicit economy for their livelihood.
- The character of the illicit economy – labor-intensive or not – determines the extent to which the illicit economy provides employment for the local population.
- The presence (or absence) of thuggish traffickers and the government response to the illicit economy (which can range from suppression to laissez-faire to legalization) determine the extent to which the population depends on the belligerents to preserve and regulate the illicit economy.

In a nutshell, supporting the illicit economy will generate the most political capital for belligerents when the state of the overall economy is poor, the illicit economy is labor-intensive, thuggish traffickers are active in the illicit economy, and the government has adopted a harsh strategy, such as eradication. In other words, in countries where large populations are dependent on labor-intensive illicit economies – cultivation of poppy or coca – for their economic survival

and human security, the worst policy that a government can adopt toward the illicit economy and one that will most hamper its efforts against the insurgents or terrorists is eradication of the illicit crops.

This is the case even in Colombia which under the U.S.-sponsored Plan Colombia undertook one of the most extensive eradication campaigns in history[4] – arguably surpassed only by Mao's eradication drives in the 1950s and 1960s and Myanmar's eradication campaigns in the 1990s. In fact, eradication did not cause significant financial losses to the FARC's income to really weaken them substantially.

As coca cultivation declined between 2000 and 2004, FARC resources were hurt to some extent. But the guerrillas adapted by switching to other illicit economies, including extortion and kidnapping and even some efforts to trade in low-grade uranium.[5] As the 2000s progressed, the FARC also increasingly penetrated – as did various criminal groups – illegal logging and coal and gold mining in Colombia. No doubt, these illicit economies have a host of inconvenient aspects as compared with the drug trade from the perspective of the guerrillas. One of them is that kidnapping and the so-called "fishing" expeditions (kidnapping along roads) they engaged in greatly antagonized the population because kidnapping thus came to affect only not rich people, but also the poorer population.

But coca cultivation rebounded and many of the FARC *frentes* relocated to areas of new or revived cultivation where they continued profiting from coca cultivation. In June 2007, the U.S. Office of National Drug Control Policy estimated that Colombia's anti-drug efforts reduced the FARC's overall profits per kilogram of cocaine from a range of $320 to $460 in 2003 to $195 to $320 in 2005.[6] The upper and lower ranges are in fact the same. The overall conclusion was that the FARC's income fell by about one third – from $115 million a year to $65 million a year.[7] $65 million per year is still a very large amount of money for an insurgency. And this amount does not take into account other sources of the FARC's funding – extortion, oil smuggling, etc., which has always constituted at least 50% of the group's funding. Thus, eradication efforts, especially after the coca rebound, hardly significantly weakened the FARC in terms of its physical resources.

At the same time, eradication significantly antagonized local populations and particularly the coca leaf growers, or *cocaleros*, from the government and drove them into the FARC's hands. Even as the FARC's popularity and support from the population during the 2000s crashed, the *cocaleros* remained the FARC's key support base. That is the case even today, as the recent Catatumbo protests against eradication have shown.

Yes, through various eradication policies such as aerial spraying and zero-coca approaches, the government of Colombia has after two decades succeeded in driving coca numbers down to 48,000 hectares – levels comparable to the mid-1990s. Peru has once again surpassed Colombia as the world's number one cultivator of coca.[8] But these results followed,

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[4] For detailed evidence for this section, see Felbab-Brown, *Shooting Up*: chapter 4.

[5] Author's interviews with Colombian government officials and independent analysts who interviewed captured FARC members, summer and fall 2008. For more information on the cache of 66 pounds of low-grade uranium that the FARC has apparently tried to sell, see, Frances Robles, "Uranium Cache Linked to FARC Rebels," *Miami Herald*, March 27, 2008.

[6] United States Government Accounting Office (GAO), *Plan Colombia: Drug Reduction Goals Were Not Fully Met, but Security Has Improved; U.S. Agencies Need More Detailed Plans for Reducing Assistance,* October 2008: 25.

[7] ONDCP study cited by Juan Forero, "Colombia's Low-Tech Coca Assault," *Washington Post*, July 7, 2007.

[8] United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), *Colombia: Coca Cultivation Survey 2012*, June 2013, https://www.unodc.org/documents/crop-monitoring/Colombia/Colombia_Coca_Cultivation_Survey_2012_web.pdf.

not preceded the degrading of the FARC's military capabilities, and eradication hampered, not enabled the counterinsurgency effort.

Despite the multifaceted gains that belligerents get from participating in illicit economies, such as the drug trade, governments can and have prevailed against militants without disrupting the economy. In fact, not disrupting the economy has frequently been key for defeating belligerents. A policy that has frequently proved more effective with respect to the objectives of defeating terrorists and insurgents has been interdiction.

That has been the case in Colombia, too. Military encirclement of FARC units and localized counternarcotics interdiction operations within the encirclement zones did cause significant income losses for the FARC within these zones. It also prevented the resupply of FARC *frentes* operating outside of coca areas: these *frentes* relied on their coca counterparts for financing and logistics. Indeed, there is definitive evidence from captured computers and guerrillas that some FARC *frentes* suffered a significant resource crunch and that their physical capabilities have been greatly degraded: combatants lacked ammunition and other supplies, including essential clothing, for example. FARC *jefes* and rank-and-file fighters who spoke of this resource crunch in 2007 and 2008 found this new development dramatically different from the abundance of the 1990s, even though there was significantly less coca in Colombia at that time than in 2006 and on. What caused these resource declines were direct military actions by the Colombian military against the FARC that disrupted their communications and logistical channels.

It is important to note that the resource declines were especially acute for FARC *frentes* that operate outside of the coca areas because military action prevented the resupplying of those *frentes* from the *frentes* in the coca areas.[9] Although since the mid-1990s, individual *frentes* were supposed to be more or less independently financed, there was nonetheless logistical and resources reallocation among the *frentes,* with supplies from *frentes* operating in drug regions going to *frentes* operating in non-producing regions. Military operations by the Colombian government in the 2000s disrupted these logistical channels, and many of the *frentes* are essentially cut off.

Similar military encirclement and pin-down operations hampered the financial income of even the *frentes* operating in the coca areas. What deserters revealed is that in some coca-growing areas, including key FARC bases such as in Guaviare, the FARC would have to resort to giving the farmers IOUs ("*bonos*") for their coca paste and could no longer pay them in cash because counternarcotics interdiction and military pin-down operations disrupted the FARC's cash flow. The *cocaleros* even complained about excess stocks of coca paste, as the FARC insisted on having a monopoly on trading but could not get coca paste to traffickers.

The Complexities of High-Value Targeting "Success" in Colombia

Interdiction efforts structured around high-value targeting have also been portrayed as a great success story in Colombia's efforts against its famous Medellín and Cali cartels, and Colombia has been keen to export its model around the world. The Colombian government finally decided to go after the Medellín cartel with its gloves off in the early 1990s after a decade of on-and-off confrontation and negotiations with its leader, Pablo Escobar, and his cohorts. During the decade, Escobar progressively escalated violence— killing scores of judges and

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[9] Author's interviews with Colombian military officials in the war zones and officials of the Ministry of Defense, Bogotá, Colombia, summer 2008.

prosecutors, assassinating leading politicians, and blowing up an airliner and major government security agencies.[10]

The focus of Colombia's anti-crime policies in the early 1990s was to break up the two large drug trafficking organizations (DTOs) – the so-called Medellín and Cali cartels, that until then had dominated Colombia's and the Western Hemisphere's drug trafficking – into smaller drug trafficking groups. By about 1996-1997, the Colombian government did indeed accomplish the goal. None of the smaller groups, such as the Norte de Valle cartel, managed to accumulate the same level of coercive power and corruption capacity that the Medellín and Cali cartels had. Subsequent and repeated targeting of the new groups weakened them, too. Yet the success story is hardly one without complications.

Critical to the success against the Medellín cartel was cooperation from the Cali cartel, which provided intelligence and eliminated many of Escobar's people. Although neither DTO was a true "cartel" in the sense of controlling the market price of cocaine, and both operated more as two large franchises under whose umbrella smaller DTOs and traffickers functioned, the market was essentially dominated by the two groups. The Cali cartel, always far less violent and far more integrated into Colombia's political and business circles than the Medellín cartel, expected that after the demise of its rival, it would be able to take over most of Colombia's drug market. Since there was no other significant DTO to challenge it when the Medellín cartel was destroyed, the Cali cartel was in fact for a while the unchallenged cocaine supplier. It was only the revelation that the Cali cartel contributed vast sums of money to the presidential campaign of Colombia's President Ernesto Samper and the great pressure from the United States on the Colombian government that ultimately motivated the Samper administration to target the Cali cartel as well.[11]

But drawing incomplete or distorted lessons, glossing over the great complexities of the Colombian story and its many far-from-rosy elements, and ignoring particular contexts can deeply undermine the effectiveness of the emulated policies and at times even backfire. To a large extent, that happened in Mexico, which during the administration of President Felipe Calderón was one of the eager buyers of the Colombia way.

Its strategy against Mexico's organized crime was based on the premise that the threat posed by organized crime would be reduced from one of national security to one of public safety if Mexico's DTOs were broken up into smaller groups as they were in Colombia, and that the way to accomplish this was to arrest the groups' key leaders – i.e., high-value targets. As part of the strategy, Mexico's law enforcement institutions were to be reformed, cleansed of corruption and strengthened in their capacity. Meanwhile, the military was sent to the streets of Mexico to replace or reinforce, depending on local circumstances, the overwhelmed police.

When President Felipe Calderón decided to take on the DTOs, the Mexican drug market did not have such a neat "bipolar" structure of being divided into two predominant groups. Instead, there were at least six large DTOs. Thus Mexican law enforcement moves against the groups weakened them but did not clearly transfer power to either the state or another criminal group. Instead, the state's actions disturbed the balance of power among the DTOs and their

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[10] For background on the Medellín and Cali cartels, see Rensselaer W. Lee III, *The White Labyrinth: Cocaine and Political Power* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1989); Patrick L. Clawson and Rensselaer W. Lee III, *The Andean Cocaine Industry* (New York: St. Martin's, 1996); Mary Roldán, "Colombia: Cocaine and the 'Miracle' of Modernity," in Paul Gootenberg, ed., *Cocaine: Global Histories* (London: Routledge, 1999): 165-182; Scott B. MacDonald, *Mountain High, White Avalanche* (New York: Praeger, 1989); and Mark Bowden, *Killing Pablo: The Hunt for the World's Greatest Outlaw* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2001).

[11] Russell Crandall, *Driven by Drugs: U.S. Policy Toward Colombia* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 2002).

ability to control territory and smuggling routes and project power to deter challengers. This lack of clarity about the balance of power on the criminal market tempted the DTOs to try to take over one another's territory and engage in internecine warfare. It has also given rise to highly fluid and unstable alliances among them. Continued hits by the state against the DTOs without much prioritization have also led to the splintering of the DTOs, giving rise to many new offshoots and new DTOs. They too have been drawn to the fight to survive and expand their power and territorial control. Many have also diversified their operations into other illegal rackets and extortion. The outcome has been that the groups may be smaller, but the criminal market is far more violent.

Moreover, in neither the Colombian case nor the Mexican case did the state effectively fill in the vacuum left in the wake of the drug trafficking organizations. In Colombia, the state continued to be unable and often uninterested in providing security and other public goods to its many marginalized citizens. The deficiencies in multifaceted state presence in large parts of country and the power vacuum in the criminal market were filled by other violent non-state actors – the paramilitaries who later in the 1990s created an umbrella political organization, *Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia* (AUC), and the aforementioned leftist guerrillas, the *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia* (or FARC). The two groups were able to take over Colombia's cocaine market, with many independent drug traffickers buying positions of power and military commander titles in the AUC. They also escalated Colombia's civil war to one of its bloodiest phases ever during the latter half of the 1990s and early 2000s.

Today, the *bandas criminales,* the criminal groups that emerged from and after the demobilization of the paramilitaries in the middle of the 2000s decade, such as the *Aguilas Negras*, *Organización Nueva Generación* (ONG), the *Rastrojos*, "*Boyacos*", and "*Pepes*"[12] are along with the FARC the principle drug trafficking organizations in Colombia. Formed from both previously demobilized paramilitary members as well as new recruits, these groups total between 5,000-10,000 combatants.[13] Increasingly, however, Mexican drug trafficking groups also operate at least in a limited form as middlemen and via franchises in Colombia.

The lesson that Mexico should have drawn from the Colombian case is that merely breaking up the cartels is insufficient; the state needs to increase its presence in a multifaceted fashion and strengthen not only its authority, but also its legitimacy.

Although with U.S. assistance Colombia made major strides in its counterinsurgency effort during the past decade; dramatically degraded the FARC's capacity, ending its momentum and pushing it into periphery areas; and turned the entire strategic outlook of the country around, its efforts to bring state presence to periphery areas traditionally neglected – its so-called Consolidation Plan – have been stalled.[14] The government's negotiations with the FARC, initiated by President Juan Manuel Santos, represents perhaps the country's greatest chance to end sixty years of conflict and perhaps also provide a platform for strengthening state presence in vast traditionally underdeveloped areas of poor public safety and inadequate state presence.

Similarly, the simplistic notion that the Medellín cartel was destroyed when Escobar was dramatically shot on the city's rooftops reinforced Mexican security officials' fondness for high-

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[12] See, for example, International Crisis Group, *Colombia's New Armed Groups*, Latin America Report N. 20, May 10, 2007.

[13] The government of Colombia gives the lower number; independent research groups in Colombia state the higher one.

[14] Adam Isacson, "Consolidating 'Consolidation,'" WOLA, December 2012, http://www.wola.org/files/Consolidating_Consolidation.pdf

value-target (HVT) decapitation. Also practiced in counterterrorism and counterinsurgency operations in Iraq and elsewhere, HVT interdiction is based on the assumption that the destruction of a group's key leadership will make the group lose its operational capacity. Yet there are two flaws present in this assumption and its application to Mexico's anti-crime efforts. One is that the ability of DTOs to replace fallen leaders is far greater than the ability of insurgent and terrorist groups to do so, in part because the leadership requirements for a drug trafficker tend to be far lower than for a terrorist or insurgency leader. A DTO's capacity to regenerate leadership is great. Second, the Medellín cartel was destroyed well before Escobar died. Colombian security forces, the Cali cartel, and *Los Pepes* (an anti-Escobar militia and a core of the future paramilitaries) killed hundreds of Escobar's lieutenants and foot soldiers before they got Escobar. Essentially, the entire middle-level of the Medellín cartel was eliminated beforehand.

Transplanting Colombia's HVT Lessons to Mexico
        Yet Mexico's President Felipe Calderón eagerly embraced the high-value targeting narrative. The challenge to public safety and the authority of the state that the Mexican drug trafficking groups posed at the beginning of Calderón's term was large and reducing their power, impunity, and brazenness was important. But with its preoccupation on high-value targeting, lack of prioritization, and lack of operational clarity, the Calderón administration's strategy inadvertently greatly escalated crime-related violence. During Calderón's six-year rule, between 47,000 and 60,000 people died as a result of the drug violence in Mexico (12,366 in 2011[15] and also over 12,000 in 2012) and over 25,000 disappeared.[16] Mexico's National Institute of Statistics and Geography (*Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía*) put the total number of all homicides (drug-related and others) between 2007 and 2011 at 95,646, with 27,213 in 2011 alone.[17] Such phenomenally-high levels of violence significantly surpass those in Afghanistan and Iraq, two countries caught up in insurgency and civil war. Per capita homicide levels in several Central American countries are higher than in Mexico, but that does not negate the fact that the intensity and gruesomeness of the Mexican violence has been aberrant even by criminal market standards.[18]
        For years, the Calderón administration dismissed the violence, arguing that it was a sign of government effectiveness in disrupting the drug trafficking groups. It often paraded captured *narcos* in front of cameras, highlighting that during its reign, 20 out of 26 top *capos* were arrested or killed. Yet the arrests or killing of top *capos* splintered the DTOs and set off internal succession battles among ever-younger *capos*. The decapitation policy also sparked external

[15] Mexico's newspaper *La Reforma,* which until November 30, 2012 reported drug related homicides on a weekly basis, puts the total number through November 2012 at 47,253. The government of Mexico often provided higher estimates, such as over 60,000 killed in drug-related violence since 2006, with 16,000 in 2011 alone. See, for example, Alfredo Corchado, "Violence Levels off in Some Parts of Mexico, but Spreads to Others," *Dallas Morning News*, February 4, 2012.
[16] Nick Miroff, "A Quieter Drug War in Mexico, But No Less Deadly," *Washington Post*, February 1, 2013; and Ana Laura Magaloni Kerpel, "La Revisión del Pasado," *La Reforma*, December 15, 2012.
[17] *Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía*, deaths by homicide data set, http://www.inegi.org.mx/sistemas/olap/proyectos/bd/continuas/mortalidad/defuncioneshom.asp?s=est&c=28820&proy=mort_dh.
[18] United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, *Global Study on Homicides: Trends, Contexts, Data*, 2011, http://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/statistics/Homicide/Globa_study_on_homicide_2011_web.pdf.

power competition among the drug trafficking groups in a complex multipolar criminal market where the DTOs have struggled to establish stable balances of power and territorial control.

The vast majority of the dead have been members of drug trafficking organizations or youth gangs increasingly hired by the DTOs to conduct hits or control drug-distribution *plazas*. Inevitably, however, the violence has affected the broader communities. It might well be that criminals are shooting at other criminals, as Calderón's officials used to point out, but as long as the bullets are flying on the streets of a city, the public is scared away from gathering places, and business elites, as well as ordinary citizens, may feel compelled to pack up their assets and leave. Northern Mexico and Acapulco in particular have seen the most extensive departure of business elites as well as lower-class Mexicans.[19] Moreover, as the homicides absolutely overwhelmed Mexico's law enforcement and getting away with crime became easy, other types of crime have also greatly increased, such as robberies, kidnappings, and generalized extortion, creating an atmosphere of fear.[20]

Overall, high-value targeting against criminal groups have often yielded far less effective and more problematic outcomes than HVT in counterterrorism settings. One reason is that the ability of criminal groups to replenish top managers arrested or killed by government forces is great in absolute terms, and far greater than in the case of insurgencies and terrorist organizations, since the leadership and organizational skills required of terrorist and insurgent leaders tend to be far greater than those of drug traffickers. The history of the drug trade is one of new traffickers and organizations reemerging each time law enforcement agencies appeared to have struck a decisive blow to the previously most active groups. However, while the regenerative capacity of the drug trade is immense and new DTOs and traffickers will always emerge as long as the illicit drug market exists – and will persist even in legal drug markets as long as law enforcement capacity is weak[21] – not all the organizations and leaders are equally violent and powerful.

In Mexico, the high-value targeting policy also resulted in increasingly younger relatives or lieutenants, often in their mid-twenties or early thirties, rising to the position of *capos* while being socialized to lead solely through violence. Their youth and the fracturing of criminal groups has led them to believe they need to prove themselves vis-à-vis their subordinates and rival groups by being more violent and brutal than their rivals. Managing illicit markets through negotiations and bargaining has not been a prominent feature of their accession to power, unlike in the case of Mexico's older drug *capos* such as Chapo Guzmán.

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[19] Estimates of the number of people internally displaced in Mexico as a result of the drug violence has varied greatly – between thousands and hundreds of thousands – and monitoring has not been systematic nor often well documented. For a comprehensive discussion of the scale of drug-violence related displacement and its patterns, see Internal Displacement Monitoring Center and Norwegian Refugee Council, *Mexico: Displacement due to Criminal and Communal Violence: A Profile of the Internal Displacement Situation*, November 25, 2011, http://www.internal-displacement.org/8025708F004BE3B1/(httpInfoFiles)/59056C1DECFC954BC1257953004FDFA2/$file/Mexico+-+November+2011.pdf.

[20] For details on the evolution of Calderón's security and anti-organized crime policies, see Vanda Felbab-Brown, "Calderón's Caldron: Lessons from Mexico's Battle Against Organized Crime and Drug Trafficking in Tijuana, Ciudad Juárez, and Michoacán," *Latin America Initiative Paper Series,* The Brookings Institution, September 2011, http://www.brookings.edu/~/media/research/files/papers/2011/9/calderon%20felbab%20brown/09_calderon_felbab_brown.pdf.

[21] For reasons why, see Vanda Felbab-Brown, "Organized Criminals Won't Fade Away," *The World Today*, 68(7), August 2012, http://www.brookings.edu/research/articles/2012/08/drugs-crime-felbabbrown.

Second, without a clear strategy and an anticipation of reverberations in the illicit market from the weakening of particular DTOs, just a blanket opportunistic decapitation strategy, implemented as information becomes available on some traffickers, will simply lead to greater turmoil in the market and further turf battles among and within the remaining trafficking organizations. Consequently, strategic analysis by the analytical branches of law enforcement, such as analytical sections of specialized interdiction units, is as important as information gathering. However, more often than not, high-value targeting stimulates two kinds of violence. It can lead to succession struggles and internal infighting. It can also tempt other criminal groups to seek to violently take over the group's territory and corruption networks. Thus, such struggles generate severe externalities for surrounding communities.

Focusing law enforcement on the middle layer of criminal groups tends to be more effective in incapacitating groups and reducing violence. Arresting as much of the middle layer as possible at once limits the leadership regeneration capacity of the group, more severely diminishes its operational capacity, and may allow subsequently for more effective prosecution of the top bosses (if plea bargains with middle-level operatives can be struck in exchange for evidence against the high-value targets). And if interdiction of the targeted group stimulates a takeover attempt by another group, it is likely to be less violent because the criminal group whose middle layer has been gutted will have a greatly reduced capacity to resist the takeover of its territory and networks.

Indeed, an interdiction focus on the middle layer is highly prominent in U.S. and British interdiction operations precisely to prevent an easy and violent regeneration of the leadership of the targeted criminal group. Thus, U.S. interdiction operations often run for months or years and the goal is to arrest as much of the middle layer as possible at once – often hundreds of people are arrested in one sweep.

But adopting middle-layer targeting is challenging in the context of highly corrupt and inadequate police forces. This is because middle-layer and network targeting takes a lot of time, during which law enforcement or military forces need to sit on intelligence to develop a comprehensive network picture. The chance that intelligence will leak is great: far simpler to conduct swift HVT hits based on signal intelligence. The Mexican government, for example, has been deeply challenged in conducting interdiction based on middle-level targeting.

Even the government of President Enrique Peña Nieto, who came to power disavowing Calderón security policies and emphasizing violence reduction as his key priority, has found that breaking away from a key driver of violence – high-value targeting – is very difficult and HVT remains seductive.[22] For middle-layer network targeting the government of Mexico continues to lack both tactical and strategic intelligence on the DTOs. It is also afraid that sitting on intelligence to develop a comprehensive network picture will result in hot signal-intelligence leads going cold or leaking. In addition to the moral problems of risking that a brutal criminal *capo* could escape from justice if intelligence leaked while the government tried to expand the intelligence picture to also capture the middle operational layer of the DTO in one sweep along with the *capo*, Peña Nieto's government also fears that escaped *capos* would expose his Institutional Revolutionary Party (*Partido Revolucionario Institucional* or PRI) government to criticism of his being soft on criminals. Thus, his administration has been slipping into the same HVT policy of his predecessor, as recently evidenced in a series of prominent *capo* captures,

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[22] For details on Peña Nieto's policies, see Vanda Felbab-Brown, "Peña Nieto's Piñata: The Promise and Pitfalls of Mexico's New Security Policy," *Foreign Policy @ Brookings Paper Series*, February 2013, http://www.brookings.edu/research/papers/2013/02/mexico-new-security-policy-felbabbrown.

including most dramatically the arrest of Miguel Ángel Treviño Morales, leader of the most brutal *Zetas* cartel.

The Challenges of Applying Middle-Layer Targeting on the Afghanistan Battlefield and Keeping Interdiction Selective and Focused

While middle-layer targeting is in many ways highly effective and has been successful particularly in U.S. and European domestic law enforcement operations, its implementation can be complicated, as not just Mexico, but also Afghanistan shows.

Since 2002, U.S. counternarcotics policy in Afghanistan went through several phases during which eradication – compensated or not – alternative livelihoods, or interdiction were alternatively emphasized, reflecting both dissatisfaction with the results of previous counternarcotics policies and the evolving understanding of the relationship between counterinsurgency and counternarcotics. Here I want to focus on how interdiction has evolved and what outcomes it produced.[23]

The initial objective of the U.S. intervention in 2001 was to degrade al Qaeda capabilities and institute a regime change in Afghanistan. Dealing with the illicit economy was not considered to be integral with the military objectives. Thus until 2003, U.S. counternarcotics policy in Afghanistan was essentially *laissez-faire*. The U.S. military understood that it would not be able to obtain intelligence on the Taliban and al Qaeda if it tried to eradicate poppy. Meanwhile, it relied on key warlords who were often deeply involved in the drug economy since the 1980s not simply to provide intelligence on the Taliban, but also to carry out direct military operations against the Taliban and al Qaeda.[24]

By 2004, increased *interdiction* was undertaken instead. Its goal was to target large traffickers and processing laboratories. Immediately, however, the effort was manipulated by local Afghan strongmen to eliminate drug competition and ethnic/tribal rivals. Instead of targeting top echelons of the drug economy, many of whom had considerable political clout, interdiction operations were largely conducted against small vulnerable traders who could neither sufficiently bribe nor adequately intimidate the interdiction teams and their supervisors within the Afghan government. The result was a significant vertical integration of the drug industry in Afghanistan.[25]

The other – again undesirable – effect of how interdiction was carried out was that it allowed the Taliban to integrate itself back into the Afghan drug trade. Having recouped in Pakistan, the Taliban was once again needed to provide protection to traffickers targeted by interdiction.[26]

Recognizing the counterproductive effects of eradication, the Obama administration broke with decades of U.S. counternarcotics policies and defunded centrally-led eradication in

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[23] For details on other policies, such as eradication and alternative livelihoods programs, see Felbab-Brown, *Shooting Up:* chapter 5; and Vanda Felbab-Brown, *Aspiration and Ambivalence: Strategies and Realities of Counterinsurgency and State-building in Afghanistan* (Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution, 2013): chapter 10.

[24] See, for example, Anne Barnard and Farah Stockman, "U.S. Weighs Role in Heroin War in Afghanistan," *Boston Globe*, October 20, 2004.

[25] Adam Pain, "Opium Trading Systems in Helmand and Ghor," Afghan Research and Evaluation Unit, *Issue Paper Series*, January 2006, http://www.areu.org.af/publications/Opium%20Trading%20Systems.pdf.

[26] Carlotta Gall, "Taliban Rebels Still Menacing Afghan South," *New York Times*, March 2, 2006.

Afghanistan.[27] Although the United States government continues to provide limited funding and technical assistance to Afghan governors who decide to proceed with eradication, the core components of the Obama administration counternarcotics policy have been *interdiction of Taliban-linked drug traffickers* and *rural development*. Scaling back eradication strongly enhanced the new counterinsurgency policy focus of the Obama administration on providing security to the rural population. However, the successes in reducing instability and the size of the drug economy also depend on the actual operationalization of the strategy.

The Obama administration and ISAF decided to gear the interdiction policy primarily toward Taliban-linked traffickers. Going after these particular traffickers became the sole counternarcotics mandate of ISAF forces, though other international and Afghan counternarcotics units, with U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration assistance, could target other traffickers as well. ISAF's interdiction efforts have sought to reduce the flows of weapons, money, drugs, precursor agents, and improvised explosive device (IED) components to the Taliban, with the goal of degrading the Taliban's finances and physical resources and dismantling its logistical networks. Although hundreds of interdiction raids have been conducted, especially in southern Afghanistan, and large quantities of opium and IEDs have been seized in these operations, it is questionable whether the impact on the Taliban's resource flows has been more than local.

On the other hand, large-scale military operations to clear the Taliban from particular areas, such as Marja, Helmand, had more pronounced effects on the insurgents' funding capacity and resource flows in those particular areas.[28] One reason this is the case is that even when local Taliban funding sources are not disrupted, local level Taliban commanders require additional money from their higher-up commanders in Pakistan to purchase more significant equipment, such as vehicles and heavy machine guns – often a point of contention between local commanders and their bosses in Pakistan.[29] Preventing the Taliban from accessing established funding streams thus complicates the operational capacity of lower-level Taliban commanders, who find it easier to replace personnel than equipment. But so far, the cumulative effects of the narcotics interdiction effort to suppress *financial* flows do not appear to interfere with Taliban activities at the strategic level. This is because the Taliban fundraising policy has long been to tax any economic activities in the areas where the insurgents operate—be it sheep herding in the north, illegal logging in the east, or National Solidarity Program projects in the center.

The strongest effect of focusing interdiction on Taliban-linked traffickers appears to be the disruption, at least temporarily, of its logistical chains, since many of its logistical operatives move IED materials as well as drugs. In combination with ISAF's targeting of mid-level commanders, the shift in the counternarcotics-interdiction focus did probably palpably complicate the Taliban's operations in Afghanistan's south, where both the military surge and interdiction were prioritized.

But in the zeal to disrupt the Taliban's logistical chains and weaken its command structures – especially at the operational middle level, where the Taliban insurgency appears to

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[27] Provincial governors in Afghanistan can choose to engage in their own eradication efforts. During 2010, 2,316 ha were thus eradicated in Afghanistan under this governor-led eradication program. United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), *Afghanistan Opium Survey 2010*, September 2010, http://www.unodc.org/documents/crop-monitoring/Afghanistan/Afg_opium_survey_2010_exsum_web.pdf: 1.

[28] Interviews with U.S. counternarcotics officials and ISAF officers, Kabul, Kandahar, and Washington, fall 2010, winter 2011, and spring 2012.

[29] Leaked report from TF 3-10 Bagram, Afghanistan, *State of the Taliban: Detainee Perspectives*, January 6, 2012: 14.

be highly vulnerable to repeated strikes – the ISAF interdiction policy strayed from the selectivity carefully crafted into the design of the Obama administration counternarcotics strategy.[30] ISAF units often did not have an easy way to ascertain whether someone was a middle-level commander or not. What does it take to be a middle-level commander – being in charge of three, ten, or one hundred Taliban? What does it take to be a Taliban supporter?[31] The dual focus of night raids and house searches on capturing "high-value" (whatever that actually means) targets *and* searching for drugs and explosives blurred the distinction between farmers and high-value drug or Taliban operatives. Does the fact that a household has opium make the household members Taliban supporters? Obviously not, since many rural Afghans do not hold their assets as cash in a bank but rather as opium stocks at home. ISAF house searches that seized or destroyed any found opium, perhaps under the belief that they were destroying Taliban stockpiles, could in fact wipe out the entire savings of a household. Thus, in areas that were subject to intense interdiction raids, such as the Marja or Nad Ali districts of Helmand, the effects of supposedly selective and hearts-and-minds-oriented interdiction could resemble blanket eradication.[32] Indeed, their impact on the economic well-being of a household was often more detrimental than that of eradication because after illicit crop eradication a family still could have a chance to replant, but interdiction forays could wipe out all of the long-term assets of a household in one night. And the effects on stability and the counterinsurgency campaign were the same as from eradication: intense alienation of the affected population from the Afghan government and ISAF forces, and susceptibility to Taliban mobilization.

Although the implementation of the interdiction policy frequently lost its selectivity in distinguishing between small and high-level traders, its selectivity regarding the Taliban connection also generated problematic side-effects. One was to signal to Afghan power brokers that the best way to conduct the drug business in Afghanistan was to undermine Taliban competitors by providing counterinsurgency services, such as intelligence, militias, and real estate property to ISAF, or to align oneself with the Afghan government.

The very hard choice of pursuing only a certain type of trafficker – namely, those linked to the Taliban – may well be necessary and appropriate under conditions of an insurgency and a very extensive drug economy that includes all types of actors, including government officials. But coupling such hard choices with indiscriminate seizure of opium stocks at the level of households (frequently poor households) alienates the population from the government and defines good policy as favoring the powerful ones, thus contradicting public claims of accountable governance.

Moreover, middle-lever targeting has produced other unexpected challenges in Afghanistan. Systematic hits against the Taliban middle layer have clearly hampered the insurgents' operations. Nonetheless, the group has showed great capacity for replacing middle level commanders and shadow governors, sometimes within a few days. Many of the new generation of middle-level commanders are considerably less restrained in the type of violence

30. TF 3-10 Bagram, *State of the Taliban*: 15.

31. For a critique of the raids to target middle-level commanders and the interdiction policy's loss of selectivity, see Open Society Foundations and the Liaison Office, *The Cost of Kill/Capture: Impact of the Night Raid Surge on Afghan Civilians* (New York: September 19, 2011), www.soros.org/sites/default/files/Night-Raids-Report-FINAL-092011.pdf.

32. For details on counternarcotics policies in Helmand, see David Mansfield, "Between a Rock and a Hard Place: Counter-narcotics Efforts and Their Effects in Nangarhar and Helmand in the 2010–11 Growing Season," Case Study (Kabul: AREU, October 2011).

they inflict on local populations; they are deeply committed to the fight, and more strongly embrace the global jihadi ideology, vision, and project.[33]

One driver of middle-level targeting in Afghanistan has been, of course, the fact that much of the Taliban's leadership has been hiding in Pakistan, not easily accessible to interdiction hits even via remotely delivered ordnance and drones.

Moreover, the risks of inadvertently producing a more radical generation of militants apply to both middle-layer and top-layer targeting efforts. The progressive radicalization of Islamist groups in Somalia, for example, has been both a function of their greater engagement with international salafi jihadists as well as of strikes against and suppression of previous iterations of Islamists. After Ethiopia, with U.S. blessing and assistance, pushed from power and severely degraded the Islamic Courts Union (ICU), for example, the counterterrorism policy not only set off a Hawiye insurgency, but also empowered the always more radical al Shabab faction within the ICU.[34]

Indeed, one risk of focusing on high-value targeting in the context of counterterrorism operations is that the group will fracture and the next generation of leadership will not have the capacity to control its ranks and will become even more radical, making a negotiated end to violence more difficult to achieve. In some cases, no negotiated solution may be possible at all to start with, and the negatives of such an approach negligible.

The risk of fracturing and radicalization as a result of interdiction needs to be balanced against the desire to weaken the group's power through interdiction strikes and thus drive it to the negotiating table: Peru's capture of Guzmán, in the context of a tightly hierarchical organization, was a key element in defeating the *Senderistas*. The fact that Guzmán was alive and agreed to call off the armed struggle in exchange for not receiving the death sentence himself and for lenient penalties for other *Sendero* members allowed for a negotiated end to the Shining Path's armed struggle. Even so, two radical factions – one led by "Comrade Artemio" and another by "Comrade Alipio" – plagued Peru for years to come. Similarly, the success of Colombia's national forces – underpinned by U.S. assistance, including the provision of signal intelligence – allowed successive strikes against the FARC top leadership and, along with the reversal of the FARC's broader battlefield fortunes, helped drive the insurgents to the Havana negotiating table.

Signal Intelligence Encouraging High-Value Targeting

The decade's bonanza of signal intelligence (SIGINT) has further reinforced the seduction of high-value targeting. The extraordinary battlefield transparency to signal intercepts and arguably slow adaption of criminal and insurgent groups to the growing signal intelligence capacities have reinforced explicit strategies heavily focused on enemy targeting. These two developments also encouraged resulting response-actions that discount the need to develop an understanding of and ideally a positive relationship with local populations, including to obtain further intelligence. Intelligence gathering has thus often come to be skewed toward very narrow

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[33] For details, see Vanda Felbab-Brown, *Aspiration and Ambivalence: Strategies and Realities of Counterinsurgency and State-building in Afghanistan* (Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution Press, 2013), chapters 3-4 and 11.
[34] For details on the evolution of al Shabab, see Stig Jarle Hansen, *Al-Shabab in Somalia: The History and Ideology of a Militant Islamist Group, 2005-2012* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); and James Fergusson, *The World's Most Dangerous Place: Inside the Outlaw State of Somalia* (Boston: Da Capo Press, 2013).

enemy targeting rather than broader strategic, political and socio-economic intelligence assessments and understandings.[35]

Many of Colombia's counterinsurgency successes came as a result of, yes, great improvements in the Colombian military's fighting and logistical capacities thanks to U.S. training and equipment, but also a flood of signal intelligence that has enabled effective hits against the FARC's top and middle layers. Intercepts of FARC communications provided crucial intelligence even when crop eradication alienated the people from the government and human intelligence flows were thin and dry.

 The ease of communications interception and the extraordinary theater signal transparency also seemed to overcome the difficulties of developing human assets and deploying undercover agents to difficult theaters such as Somalia, Pakistan, or Yemen, where penetration of terrorist or criminal groups by informants or undercover agents is particularly challenging. Thus, in many areas human intelligence assets have been underdeveloped or unreliable – not sufficiently vetted and controlled interlocutors, but individuals inclined to provide self-servicing intelligence outright counterproductive to U.S. objectives. U.S. Darod informants in Somalia, for example, would tend to label any Hawiye clan or business rival as a member of the Islamic Courts Union or Shabab.

The proliferation of signal intelligence and advances in big-data trawling combined with some highly visible successes of HVT has led to discounting the need to 1) obtain a broad and comprehensive understanding of the population (such as in Afghanistan); 2) establish a good relationship with the local population (Colombia); 3) develop a strategic understanding of the enemy and ability to anticipate response actions of targeted nonstate actors (Mexico); and 4) cultivate intelligence from human intelligence assets. All too often over the past decade, U.S. intelligence has been dependent on and fallen prey to unreliable, self-interested, and problematic interlocutors (especially in Somalia, Nigeria, and Afghanistan).

The Risk of Delivering One-Shoe-Fits-All Specialized Interdiction Units in Highly Corrupt Environments – the Case of West Africa

West Africa has become very much the focus of international attention because of its recent drug trade epidemic[36] and the connections between various illicit economies and militancy and terrorism. Thus, in the pundit discussion, it has become a favorite factoid to wave that Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb leader Mokhtar Belmokhtar has longed smuggled cigarettes and other addictive substances in West Africa and the Maghreb and is now the poster boy of "narco-

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[35] Major General Michael Flynn, Captain Matt Pottinger, Paul Batchelor, "Fixing Intel: A Blueprint for Making Intelligence Relevant in Afghanistan", *Center for a New American Security,* January 2010.

[36] See, for example, James Cockayne and Phil Williams, "The Invisible Tide: Towards an International Strategy to Deal with Drug Trafficking Through West Africa," International Peace Institute, October 2009; Davin O'Regan, "Narco-States: Africa's Next Menace," *New York Times*, March 12, 2012; Davin O'Regan and Peter Thompson, "Advancing Stability and Reconciliation in Guinea-Bissau: Lessons from Africa's First Narco-State," Africa Center for Strategic Studies Special Report, June 2013, http://africacenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/06/SpecialReport-Guinea-Bissau-JUN2013-EN.pdf; and Neil Carrier and Gernot Klantschnig, *Africa and the War on Drugs* (Zed Books: 2012); Kwesi Aning, Sampson B. Kwarkye, and John Pokoo, "A Case Study of Ghana," in Camino Kavanagh, ed., *Getting Smart and Scaling Up*: *The Impact of Organized Crime on Governance in Developing Countries*, New York University Center for International Cooperation, June 2013, http://cic.nyu.edu/sites/default/files/kavanagh_crime_developing_countries_ghana_study.pdf; Summer Walker, "A Desk Study of Sierra Leone," in Camino Kavanagh, ed., *Getting Smart and Scaling Up*: *The Impact of Organized Crime on Governance in Developing Countries*, New York University Center for International Cooperation, June 2013, http://cic.nyu.edu/sites/default/files/kavanagh_crime_developing_countries_sierra_leone_study.pdf.

jihadism." Of course, the region is rife with many illicit economies: whether cars and bicycles stolen in Europe and smuggled into the region, cannabis and cocaine via Morocco heading into Europe, Viagra pills smuggled into Egypt,[37] weapons pouring out of Libya into Mali, Niger, Syria, and Nigeria, or something as seemingly harmless as eggs being smuggled in large quantities out of Tunisia. Many of these illicit enterprises, even potentially the smuggled eggs, do pose very serious and multiple threats to states.

Yet to simply equate West Africa's chronic instability and the Maghreb's current turmoil with the recent drug trade epidemic in the area and its newly visible illicit economies fundamentally misses the deep structural roots of the problems and often leads to inadequate and even counterproductive policy recommendations. Europe's new taste for cocaine, the decline of the cocaine market in the United States, and U.S. interdiction pressure in the Americas all helped reroute drug smuggling into West Africa. However, it was the preexisting institutional and governance deficiencies in the region that resulted in the newly-arrived drug trade being such a potent amplifier of political instability and militancy.

Political contestation in West Africa has long centered on taking over the state to capture rents – decades before Latin American drug traffickers started using West Africa to smuggle cocaine to Europe. Indeed, almost immediately after decolonization (and often predating it), the region has been characterized by a variety of illicit economies and their deep integration into the political arrangements and frameworks of the countries in the region. Such rent-generating legal, semi-illegal, or outright illegal economies have included diamonds (Sierra Leone, Liberia); gold and other precious metals, stones, and timber (Liberia, and Sierra Leone); the extraction, monopolization, and smuggling of agricultural goods, such as cocoa (Cote d'Ivoire); trafficking in humans for sexual exploitation and domestic slavery (Mali, Togo, Ghana); oil (Nigeria); and fishing (often conducted illegally and destructively by international fleets from outside West Africa).[38] Illicit diamond mining – frequently linked to politicians and tribal chiefs in Liberia – vexed the departing British colonial officers as early as the 1950s.[39] Contestation over rents from these economies fueled much of the fighting in Sierra Leone in the 1990s and early 2000s, for example – giving rise to the concept of "greed" wars, supposedly not motivated by political grievances, but mainly by economic interests. In this conceptualization of violent conflict, the distinction between insurgents and criminal actors becomes highly blurred.[40]

Politics in West Africa has for decades been about taking over the state in order to control the main sources of revenue – licit or illicit. In essence, the government has been seen as a means to personal wealth, not service to the people. The state would then define (or redefine) what constitutes illegal economic behavior and selectively issue exemptions from law enforcement and prosecution to families, friends, and its network of clients. Such political arrangements have been so pervasive in West Africa that some scholars have described the environment there as a "mafia-like bazaar, where anyone with an official designation can pillage at will…"[41] Moreover,

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[37] "Trafficking in North Africa," *The Economist,* August 17, 2013.

[38] See, for example, Jean-Francois Bayart, Stephen Ellis, and Beatrice Hibou, *The Criminalization of the State in Africa* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999).

[39] See, for example, William Reno, "Understanding Criminality in West African Conflicts," *International Peacekeeping*, 16(1), February 2009: 52.

[40] See, for example, Collier Paul and Anke Hoeffler, "Greed and Grievance in Civil Wars," October 21, 2001, http://econ.worldbank.org/files/12205_greedgrievance_23oct.pdf; Michael Ross, "What Do We Know about Natural Resources and Civil War?" *Journal of Peace Research*, 31 (3), 2004: 337-356; and Jeremy Weinstein, *Inside Rebellion: The Politics of Insurgent Violence* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

[41] George B.N. Ayittey, *Africa in Chaos* (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 1999): 151.

fearing internal coups and yet facing little external aggression even in the context of very porous borders, many ruling elites in West Africa after independence systematically allowed their militaries and law enforcement institutions to deteriorate. Thus, they have found themselves with institutional arrangements highly susceptible to the drug trade.[42]

Because of the visible nexus of terrorism, militancy, and trafficking, West Africa has become a new focus of U.S. interdiction efforts and assistance to build local specialized interdiction units. Given the high corruption among West Africa's political elites and law enforcement forces, standing up SIUs is appealing and at the same time carries many pitfalls. It is appealing because repeated vetting of specialized interdiction units could insulate them from political corruption pressures and penetration by criminal networks. Given the extent of corruption, one can reasonably posit, what else can one do?

But precisely because of the extent of corruption and often highly limited U.S. presence, controlling SIUs once they are stood up is difficult. There is a substantial danger that with minimal monitoring presence and rollback capacity of the United States and the international community on the ground in contexts like West Africa, U.S. or internationally-trained law enforcement forces will "go rogue" and the international community will only end up training more capable drug traffickers or coup forces. Particularly if SIUs go rogue in this way, they will be the most capable and well-trained and well-equipped criminal groups on the ground with often extensive political power and perhaps even government control. Indeed, the best position a drug trafficker can have, the way to really become a top *capo*, is to be the minister of counternarcotics or the head of a top-level interdiction unit. In fact, there are plentiful examples of top police and counternarcotics officials, including U.S.-favored counternarcotics partners and U.S.-built SIUs going rogue and ending up on the payroll of drug trafficking groups or even as the country's top kingpin – be they Jackie Selebi, South Africa's former national police chief and one-time president of the Interpol; the *Zetas*, Mexico's violent drug trafficking group; General José de Jesús Gutiérrez Rebollo, Mexico's top-ranking interdiction officer in the 1990s; or Vladimiro Montesinos, Peru's former intelligence chief.

Conclusions and Recommendations: Matching Interdiction Patterns to Specific Threat Contexts

To avoid counterproductive side-effects and maximize interdiction effectiveness, interdiction patterns need to be shaped to specific contexts and threat environments both in their design and their objectives, rather than being dished out as a one-shoe-fits-all High-Value-Targeting and Specialized-Interdiction-Units model. In some threat environments, HVT and SIUs may indeed be the most effective interdiction configuration. As the analysis above has shown, in other threat contexts, different interdiction and targeting postures and goals will result in greater effectiveness. Critically, effective interdiction policies will emphasize and seek to enhance deterrence, not solely incapacitation.

Considerations for Counterterrorism Contexts

In counterterrorism contexts, whether interdiction focuses on the top-layer of a group – its presumed high-value targets – or on the middle layer needs to be based on the following determinations. What is the vision of how conflict will end? Is it solely through kill-or-capture

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[42] For details on the role and evolution of law enforcement in West Africa to fight organized crime and belligerency, see, for example, Vanda Felbab-Brown and James J.F. Forest, "Political Violence and the Illicit Economies of West Africa," *Terrorism and Political Violence,* 24(5), November 2012: 787-806.

incapacitation or will some negotiated deal be a part of the envisioned process? What are the group's capacities for replacing eliminated operatives at the top or middle level and for doing so with operatives as competent as their predecessors? Who is not just more skilled, but also more radicalized and has greater fighting *élan*: the older generation or the replacement younger one? Is the purpose of interdiction in fact to fracture a group, and is such fracturing likely to be associated with increases in violence? Is a group tightly and hierarchically-organized or network-structured?

In other words, *strategic intelligence analysis needs to drive interdiction targeting patterns, instead of letting the seduction of established interdiction patterns drive intelligence collection and analysis.*

It is important to realize that indiscriminate and uniform interdiction approaches – whether external or internal – can generate undesirable outcomes. Such targeting patterns without prioritization and careful considerations of consequences can push several terrorist and militant groups together, as opposed to sowing discord and infighting among them, or drive criminal groups into an alliance with terrorist groups – the opposite of what should be the purpose of law enforcement and especially external policy assistance. Both negative outcomes have repeatedly emerged in various regions of the world as a result of opportunistic, non-strategic drug interdiction policies. Yet neither outcome is inevitable – many criminal groups are as much risk-minimizers as they are profit-maximizers, and will think hard about the consequences of cooperating with terrorists or militants, particularly if law enforcement forces clearly signal and enforce such redlines.

Considerations for Anti-crime Contexts

For many criminal threat situations, including transactional crimes in the United States, a key purpose of law enforcement should be "to make good criminals." In other words, when addressing crimes involving almost indefinite resources, such as illicit drugs, shaping the behavior of criminals to minimize threats posed by their criminal behavior is at least as important as focusing on reducing the incidence of criminal activity. By "good criminals" I mean those who 1) are not very violent; 2) do not have much capacity to corrupt law enforcement and other government institutions; and 3) are as removed from society as possible. For example, to the extent that drug trafficking takes place at all, law enforcement should seek to capture first and foremost traffickers who engage in violence on the street, against local populations, or against law enforcement. Drug trafficking that takes place over the internet, avoids perpetrating violence against the life of a community, and where arrested traffickers accept the authority of law enforcement, is considerably less harmful than drug trafficking that involves shootouts on the street over turf or where traffickers respond to interdiction hits by blowing up police stations and judges.

Minimizing the chance that criminals will corrupt entire state institutions is partially a function of priority targeting of the criminals who are particularly well connected in government and law enforcement institutions. But it is critically also a function of building robust vetting procedures that continue to test officers not only during the recruitment process, but also throughout their entire careers, and then monitoring them once they retire. Fostering effective internal affairs units and diligent prosecution of government officials on the take are key components.

Ensuring that criminals are as removed from society as possible and do not acquire legitimacy among local populations means that the state needs to be better able to provide public

goods than the criminals. That includes developing cooperation from local populations by delivering public safety through community policing as well as designing effective socioeconomic programs to provide legal job and social advancement opportunities. It also includes extending access to contract-enforcement and dispute-resolution mechanisms.

Particularly in the contexts of weak law enforcement capacities or potentially infinite illicit flows, defining anti-crime efforts in absolute terms – that is, dismantling all organized crime or stopping illegal drug flows – will be highly ineffective. Such goals are mostly unattainable and guarantee costly failure. They skew efforts toward an obsession with the extent of seizures and numbers of arrests. More attainable, but also far more important objectives such as reducing the threats and harms associated with the drug trade and other organized crime – the violence, corruption, and erosion of the nation's social fabric and bonds between citizens and the state – are too often largely subordinated or altogether ignored when an obsession with reducing the volume of criminal activity is the dominant driver of the interdiction efforts.

Bottom line: with respect to transactional crimes associated with illicit economies in renewable resources such as the drug trade, reducing the incidence of the crimes per se should be secondary to minimizing the threats and harms stemming from the illicit economy. Instead of trying to suppress the volume of illegal drug flows, governments should seek to minimize the violence and corruption surrounding the drug trade and societal dependence on the drug trade for access to public and socioeconomic goods.

Reducing the violence around drug trafficking and other illicit economies is particularly critical. Societies experiencing chronic and uncontrolled violence tend to have little faith in government and can transfer their loyalties to criminal groups that provide a modicum of safety, albeit perverse safety. Governments that effectively reduce violence often do not rid the country of organized crime but lessen its grip on society, thereby giving citizens greater confidence in government, encouraging citizen cooperation with law enforcement, and aiding the transformation of a national security threat into a public safety problem.

Even when not formally recognizing it, interdiction always generates selection effects, and often counterproductive ones. If targeting is based merely on opportunistic intelligence flows without an accompanying strategic analysis of the pros and cons of particular hits, the most likely outcome will be that the least competent and hence least dangerous criminals will be eliminated, leaving behind criminals who are tougher, meaner, leaner, smarter, more vertically integrated, and best connected to ruling elites. This is the very opposite outcome of what law enforcement should seek to accomplish via interdiction.

However, in the case of other transactional crimes, which either pose massive security threats, such as smuggling in WMD materials, or are associated with highly-depletable resources, such as wildlife trafficking in endangered species, reducing their incidence may well be as important as reducing associated harms.

Interdiction policies emphasizing focused deterrence approaches that seek to deter a specific behavior or action, such as particularly violent crime, rather than all undesirable behavior, such as all crime, and selective targeting strategies often allow for the selection of appropriate priority goals and emphasize the threats associated with particular illicit economies and law enforcement actions to suppress them, and offer attractive alternatives to zero-tolerance approaches.[43] They also tend to be less resource-intensive than zero-tolerance approaches. In the

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[43] For details, see Vanda Felbab-Brown, "Focused Deterrence, Selective Targeting, Drug Trafficking and Organized Crime: Concepts and Practicalities," IDPC-IISS-Chatham House, Modernizing Drug Law Enforcement, Report No. 2, February 2013.

United States, where focused-deterrence strategies have been pioneered, they have produced impressive results. The implementation of such approaches elsewhere in the world, particularly in areas where law enforcement is weak to begin with, has often run into difficulties, and their effectiveness has been comparatively smaller. Nonetheless, even in such settings, they still provide some of the best available policy alternatives. Designers of such strategies will need to grapple with some acute policy dilemmas that cannot be resolved in the abstract and need to take into account local circumstances. However, recognizing the implementation difficulties encountered outside of the United States, and the limitations and policy dilemmas of such strategies, allows for tailoring their design to enhance their policy effectiveness even in less than optimal settings.

Post-2014 Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Central Asia

One area where the United States and the international community will face hard choices with respect to whom to target and how will be post-2014 Afghanistan and its neighboring countries. A far more limited international military presence – if any at all, should Afghanistan and the United States fail to sign a bilateral security agreement permitting and delineating the presence of international troops – will inevitably mean a loss of visibility on the ground and an associated loss of influence. Diminished international oversight and presence will also likely mean some increases in poppy cultivation and heroin smuggling. These increases may not be very large given that the global market in opiates has already been saturated with Afghan opiates for years. Nonetheless, given that any reductions in cultivation have either been acts of nature, such as poppy blights and other diseases, or temporary suppression through force, rather than the outcome of effective and sustainable alternative livelihoods programs, some increases are likely.

With diminished intelligence capacities, reduced interdiction resources on the ground, increasing dependence on Afghan and regional law enforcement forces who tend to be highly corrupt, highly politicized, and often motivated to designate as "drug traffickers" their political opponents, the United States needs to have a clear prioritization of interdiction targets. These should be above all any terrorist or smuggling groups with the capacity and willingness to smuggle WMD materials from the Caucasus or Central Asia. Second, priority targeted groups should be any traffickers or militants directly linked to al Qaeda or other salafi groups with global reach or a capacity to provoke major violent hostilities between Pakistan and Afghanistan. For example, disrupting a local heroin smuggling network between Kandahar and Pakistan would be desirable, but is of lesser importance than disrupting any possible emergent drug smuggling efforts of *Lashkar-e-Taiba* or *Jaish-e-Mohammad*, as well as targeting these groups' other operational capacities.

A third set of targeting priorities should be actors within Afghanistan who critically destabilize the country and may pull it to the brink of another civil war. Such actors would be not only the Taliban, but also government-linked or independent powerbrokers whose thuggish abuses of power, criminal impunity, or tribal discrimination stir up violent conflicts, delegitimize the government, or drive populations into the hands of the Taliban. Obviously, the more limited the interdiction capacity of Afghan or outside security forces, the least likely the third set of actors will be targeted. Many of these will be linked to the Afghan government and many will once again be selling their intelligence and counterterrorism interdiction services to the United States and international community. *Caveat emptor*: it was precisely the reliance on such problematic and self-interested interlocutors – who have often led the United States and the

international community by the nose – that wasted much of the last decade's potential in Afghanistan and brought the country to the precarious brink it will face at the end of 2014.[44]

Mexico and Central America

In highly violent settings, such as in Mexico and Central America, reducing criminal violence is a crucial priority objective. But how a policy goes about reducing violence matters a great deal and critically influences whether the outcome is positive, particularly over the long term. Interdiction targeting, whether incapacitation or focused deterrence approaches, can result in the victory of one criminal group, the establishment of new balances of power on the criminal market, and rapid drops in violence. Examples include the criminal boss Don Berna's establishing control over Medellín criminal markets after 2002 as a result of Operation Orion undertaken by the Colombian government,[45] the decreases in violence in Ciudad Juárez and Tijuana as a result of the Sinaloa victory (combined with particular policing approaches) or in Monterrey as a result of the victory of the Juárez cartel.[46]

The emergence of such a 'narcopeace' is not necessarily detrimental to either the authority of the state or the well-being of a community, as long as the government takes advantage of such a reduction in violence to deepen police presence and reform, institutionalizes the rule of law, and strengthens socioeconomic development for marginalized communities – enhancing law and order and beefing up positive state presence in previously crime-ridden areas and marginalized communities. Of course, during times of intense criminal violence, it is extraordinarily difficult to effectively implement such efforts. Energies of police units become consumed by the need to survive and respond to criminal acts, and deeper institutional reforms inevitably receive fewer resources and attention.

However, to the extent that balances of power in the criminal markets can be reestablished and violence consequently falls off, such an outcome will only be a success for the rule of law – if law enforcement agencies use the opportunity to enhance their deterrence capacity vis-à-vis the criminals. Although law enforcement efforts cannot hope to eliminate all crime or stop drug trafficking, they can teach criminals that certain actions, such as highly violent behavior, are clearly out of bounds and will result in the preponderance of law enforcement power bearing down on them. Law enforcement efforts also need to teach criminals that they must accept such a response and not retaliate by shooting up the local police precinct or the mayor's office. In other words, the criminals need to be made to understand that authority and power lies with the law enforcement agencies.

The big danger with violence reduction being essentially the result of victory by one criminal group rather than of greater effectiveness of law enforcement institutions is that such 'narcopeace' is ultimately vulnerable to additional changes in balances of power in the criminal market. Without strengthening law enforcement and better integrating it into local communities, the 'narcopeace' can be hostage to a criminal group's growth in relative power. New criminal challengers can plunge the market back into violence, while law enforcement institutions

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[44] For details, see Felbab-Brown, *Aspiration and Ambivalence.*

[45] For details, see Adam Isacson, "Medellín: Two Steps Forward, One Step Back," in *Tackling Urban Violence in Latin America: Reversing Exclusion through Smart Policing and Social Investment, WOLA*, June 2011; and Vanda Felbab-Brown, "Reducing Urban Violence: Lessons from Medellín, Colombia," The Brookings Institution, February 14, 2011, http://www.brookings.edu/opinions/2011/0214_colombia_crime_felbabbrown.aspx.

[46] For details, see Felbab-Brown, "Calderón's Caldron;" and Steven Dudley, "Two Mexico Cartel Rivals, Once Reeling, Now Resurging," *Insight Crime*, February 3, 2013, http://www.insightcrime.org/news-analysis/2-mexico-cartels-once-reeling-now-resurging.

continue to lack the deterrent capacity to keep renewed power contestations from again visibly and bloodily spilling out on the city's streets. Thus, to the extent that a crime-peace emerges, law enforcement officials need to focus on expanding law enforcement capacities and anchoring them among the population so that over time they can achieve deterrence strength vis-à-vis crime groups.

Otherwise, a 'narcopeace' can easily unravel, as may be the case in Tijuana. Drops in violence in that border city ensued from the victory of the Sinaloa cartel. Yet a spike in homicides there over the recent weeks highlights the fragility and limitations of abdicating enforcement to criminal groups and not following up with robust and multifaceted strengthening of law enforcement. The verdict on the durability, robustness, and side-effects of the gang truce in El Salvador is also still out. As a result of the gang truce, homicide rates fell dramatically – from a murder rate of 72 per 100,000 before the truce to 36 per 100,000 after – a very important accomplishment.[47] Yet the truce is fully at the discretion of the gangs. It has increased their political capital, other forms of crime have not abetted, and while so-called peace zones have been established where socio-economic programs for youth at risk in particular are being implemented, more effective policing in such permissive zones has not been followed.[48] Thus, should the gangs (for whatever internal or external reasons) renege on the truce, El Salvador's law enforcement and justice apparatus would have little capacity to effectively halt the deterioration in public safety. Moreover, despite the important and dramatic drop in homicides, most El Salvador residents do not report to feel safer.[49]

East and West Africa

In countries with weak institutions, including the law enforcement apparatus, endemic corruption, and long histories of varied forms of criminality and militancy (such as in many countries of East and West Africa), it is unrealistic to expect that outside policy interventions can eradicate all organized crime and illicit economies or, for that matter, all of the drug trade in the region. The priority for the United States and the international community should be to focus on the most disruptive and dangerous networks: those with the greatest links or potential links to international terrorist groups with global reach, those that are most rapacious and detrimental to society and the development of an equitable state, and those that most concentrate rents from illicit economies to a narrow clique of people. These three criteria may occasionally be in conflict, and such conflicts will pose difficult policy dilemmas. In addition to considering the severity of the threat posed to the international community and to the host state and society by such drug trafficking or organized-crime groups, the estimated effectiveness of any policy intervention needs to be factored into the cost-benefit analysis of policy choices.

Overall, in the contexts of weak institutions, pervasive corruption, extensive criminality, and deeply-rooted militancy, the international community and the United States need to engage in law enforcement, counternarcotics, and counterterrorism operations with extreme caution. A do-no-harm attitude and careful evaluation of the side effects of policy actions need to prominently figure into policy considerations.

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[47] Steven Dudley and Elyssa Pachico, "El Salvador's Gang Truce: Positives and Negatives," *InSight Crime*, June 2013, http://www.insightcrime.org/specials/elsalvadorgangtruce.pdf.
[48] For details on the terms of the truce, see Juan Carlos Garzón, "How to Strengthen the Fragile Gang Truce in El Salvador," *InSight Crime*, July 18, 2013, http://www.insightcrime.org/news-analysis/el-salvador-homicides-gang-truce-breakdown.
[49] Ibid.

Yes, dramatic terrorist actions, such as Shabab's horrific attack on the Westgate Mall in Nairobi, expose great vulnerabilities in such settings, highlight the threats to innocent people's lives, and stimulate a policy desire for swift and resolute response. International cooperation and building up counterterrorism and anti-organized crime capacities in such contexts clearly is an important part of the response. Yet equally clearly, there are multiple risks in rushing to action and standing up specialized counternarcotics and counterterrorism interdiction units in such contexts, much as there is clearly a strong need for them. First, there is the danger that with minimal presence of the United States and the international community on the ground, U.S. or internationally-trained law enforcement forces will "go rogue" and the international community will only end up training more capable drug traffickers or coup forces. Second, there is a not-insubstantial risk that some governments will come to see international counternarcotics or counterterrorism aid as yet another form of rent to be acquired for their power and profit maximization, in the same way that they have often seen anti-Communism assistance. Such funds can be diverted for personal profits; or worse yet used to take harmful actions against domestic political opposition, and undermine institutional development and effective and accountable governance in the region.

The United States and the international community can reduce these dangers through several guiding principles. First, international assistance should be carefully calibrated to the absorptive capacity of the partner country. In places where state capacity is minimal and law enforcement often deeply corrupt, an initial focus on strengthening the police capacity to fight street crime, reducing corruption, and increasing the effectiveness and reach of the justice system may be the better initial intervention strategies than immediately establishing specialized anti-organized-crime or counternarcotics units. Only after careful monitoring by outside actors has determined that such assistance has been positively incorporated will it be fruitful to increase assistance for anti-organized crime efforts, including advanced-technology transfers and training. Similarly, careful monitoring of all counterterrorism and counternarcotics programs – including their effects on the internal political arrangements and power distribution within the society and their intended effects on the power of criminal groups and their links to terrorist groups – needs to be consistently conducted by outside actors.

Finally, even the best-structured interdiction rarely is a panacea in such difficult settings. An international assistance package also needs to include a focus on broad state-building and the fostering of good governance. Policy interventions to reduce drug trafficking and to suppress any emergent crime-terror nexus can only be effective if there is a genuine commitment and participation by recipient governments and local populations. After difficult experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan, the United States has become allergic to participating in state-building abroad. Instead, it has embraced the siren song of high-value targeting and elevated this interdiction tactic almost to a singular policy approach in many contexts abroad, supplanting a broader strategic engagement with other countries. Yet while a properly designed interdiction approach is a powerful tool to combat terrorists and criminals, it is rarely a sufficient one.