

Terrorism, Gangs, and Weapons of Mass Destruction: A Futures Assessment Of a Potential Nexus



SSA Darell Dones, Ph.D.
Christian Bolden, Ph.D.
Michael Buerger, Ph.D.

Futures Working Group White Paper Series

November 2013

Acknowledgments

The authors and the Futures Working Group (FWG) express their deep thanks to the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), the FBI Academy, and the Behavioral Science Unit for their continued intellectual and material support of these efforts. We are also indebted to the Society of Police Futurists International for its direction and support for these white papers and other products of the FWG. This specific white paper would not have been possible without the efforts of several members of the FBI Behavioral Science Unit. In particular, we wish to acknowledge the direction and editorial assistance provided by the Behavioral Science Unit Chief, Bradley Bryant and the Chair of the FWG, Dr. John Jarvis. Similarly, editorial and logistical assistance provided by Ms. Amber Scherer, also of the Behavioral Science Unit, was critical to the production of this paper.

Foreword

This work represents an ongoing effort to contribute to a continuing series of white papers authored by members and affiliates of the Futures Working Group. These papers are intended to spark ideas and incite creativity in responding to the future challenges and opportunities that the law enforcement and criminal justice community must confront. As with most white papers, this is not intended to be the final word or definitive perspective concerning the topics discussed. Rather, these papers are designed to foster further discussion and consideration of possible, probable, and preferable future directions for law enforcement. In this vein, the current paper offers provocative thoughts and perspectives pertaining to the dynamics of a potential future terrorism threat. We hope you find this white paper and others of the Futures Working Group to be useful.

John P. Jarvis, Ph.D.
Futures Working Group
Chair

Suggested Citation:

“Terrorism, Gangs, and Weapons of Mass Destruction: A Futures Assessment of a Potential Nexus” by Darell Dones, Christian Bolden, and Michael Buerger. Futures Working Group. July 2013.

Release Date: September 30, 2013.

The opinions and statements expressed throughout this white paper are those of the individual authors and should not be considered an endorsement or a reflection of the official position of either the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the Society of Police Futures International, or any other institution for any policy, program, or service.

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements	2
Foreword	3
Executive Summary	5
Prelude	6
Introduction	7
Terrorism	9
Gangs	9
Weapons of Mass Destruction	10
The Terrorists-Gangs Nexus	11
Question #1: Is it likely for gangs or gang members to be recruited by terrorist organizations?	13
Question #2: Would gangs, or gang members, recruited by terrorists be used to deploy WMDs, or other forms of attack?	18
Question #3: How beneficial would a connection with gang members be to a terrorist organization?	20
Alternative Possibilities	25
Potential Implications	27
Conclusion	28
References	29

Executive Summary

This white paper examines the likelihood of a nexus between major gang organizations and terrorist groups to deploy weapons of mass destruction. This effort was initiated by the Futures Working Group (FWG), a research collaboration of academics and law enforcement professionals created through a Memorandum of Understanding between Police Futures International and the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), signed and approved by the FBI Director in March 2002. This working group met and considered the possible, probable, and preferable futures associated with the potential threat of a direct association between terrorist-sponsored Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMDs) and gang activities. The evidence garnered from this effort suggests that there are many complexities that need to be considered in assessing such a threat. Chief among these are: 1) which specific terrorist groups may be pursuing such collaborative efforts; 2) which gang groups may have the capacity to become involved in such activities; and 3) the specific logistics that may be associated with deploying a major WMD. Considering these complexities, the subject matter experts assembled discussed these matters, and concluded the likelihood of al Qaeda or Taliban terrorist involvement with a major gang organization to deliver a WMD is not a major current threat but may have much more potential as a future threat. However, the nature of the future threat may vary significantly with regards to the actors involved, the weapons potentially utilized, and the logistics of how such a future incident might unfold. The principal future threat may lie more with individual actors (perhaps loosely affiliated with criminal or terrorist groups) utilizing conventional weapons rather than a WMD. Of course, many nuances to this general conclusion exist, as the possibility remains that future efforts by both gangs and terrorist groups may alter the current assessment. The most

significant of these efforts may be domestic terrorist or extremist groups leveraging imprisoned populations to further their anti-government agendas.

Prelude

Violent crime in our communities is not a new issue. At the close of the 20th Century, the most visible evidence of violent crime was the incidence and prevalence of gang activity occurring across many cities and towns in the United States (U.S.). The opening of the 21st Century saw the World Trade Center and Pentagon attacks, which focused fears on the threat that the homeland could be attacked again by terrorists. Accordingly, the need arose for further vigilance by national security agencies and public safety agencies to prevent such future threats.

The FWG has undertaken an effort to examine the threat gang violence poses to the U.S. along with the threat terrorist groups pose to the U.S. and ask the question: “What if these threats were combined into a nexus that would create an even greater threat to the safety and security of the American public?” The following white paper represents the deliberations and thoughts gleaned from a conference of academics, practitioners, law enforcement officials, and others that was convened in 2011 to examine such a possible intersection of threats. This effort, led by Supervisory Special Agent (SSA) D. Darell Dones, was part of an extensive and comprehensive examination of these dynamics and also contributed to a dissertation he produced for George Mason University (Dones, 2012). The following is a summary white paper that outlines the contours of this potential threat.

This paper raises questions and provides potential answers that may help to assess the nature and viability of a threat emanating from an inter-connection of gangs, terrorism, and WMDs. As this work relies upon open source data and experiences, it should be regarded as only a framing document for national security and public safety personnel to debate and

scrutinize in the hope of preventing such threats from ever being realized. The goal is not to provide a singular definitive answer but, rather, to raise awareness of possible futures in public safety. With this goal in mind, we hope this white paper, like preceding FWG products, will serve as a spark for further dialogue concerning the challenges that a potential intersection of gangs, terrorism, and WMDs may pose for not only national security and law enforcement but also the safety and security of the communities we serve.

Introduction

In April 2011, members of the FWG and other invited experts participated in a three-day meeting at the FBI Academy in Quantico, Virginia. The purpose of this focus group meeting was to examine a possible future scenario involving an interaction of terrorist groups, gang activity, and the potential use of a WMD. This effort was chaired by SSA Dones of the Behavioral Science Unit (BSU), an experienced gang investigator, whose career has brought him in contact with both violent gang members and terrorists. In addition to an FWG contingent, other participants included FBI Special Agents, academic researchers, and state and local police officers with extensive field background in gangs, terrorism, and/or WMD investigations. In all, a 40-member group of subject matter experts examined the dynamics of this possible nexus with a specific focus on the probability of such a future event.

Without question, gangs, terrorism, and WMDs all pose serious threats to the security of the U.S. What is in question is whether these threats can be exacerbated through a connection with one another. This question was addressed in the conference by obtaining expert opinions on the matter through a modified Delphi study and supplemented afterwards with face-to-face

interviews with other subject matter experts¹. While there were some clear thoughts and beliefs regarding this potential threat, most of the results were mixed as to the threat's viability now and in the future. However, these variable results provide a basis for examining potential likelihoods of such a threat occurring, possible reasons why the inter-connections have not occurred to date, and what can be done to deter such a nexus from ever developing.

As noted earlier, the specific question posed to the subject matter experts was to examine the potential threat of a direct association between terrorist-sponsored WMDs and gang activities. To further this assessment, the threat was defined to focus upon three well-established criminal gangs operating in the U.S.: Mara Salvatrucha or MS-13; Crips Nation (Crips); and Gangster Disciples Nation. Each of these gangs was selected due to their reputed international reach and mobility, as well as their likelihood to have the capability to conduct such acts (OJJDP, 2013; Howell & Moore, 2010; Rafael, 2007). Al Qaeda and the Taliban were the specific terrorist groups identified as potential recruiters and sponsors of WMD importation and deployment, due to their history of involvement with these kinds of weapons and their visibility as current terrorist threats (Toukan and Cordesman, 2009). Financial gain, prison recruitment, and radicalization (both in prison settings and in the community) were identified as the primary vehicles for forging terrorist-gang allegiances to introduce foreign-source WMDs to U.S. shores. This issue is appropriate for a futures orientation because, although there is no specific evidence linking terrorist organizations with gangs for those purposes, a number of building blocks for just such an occurrence have already been observed. Similarities in what is known about the causation, behavior, and mindsets of both terrorists and gangs, suggest the possibility of a future intersection, though surface similarities (particularly their motivations for committing acts of

¹ A Delphi study is characterized by convening recognized experts to debate issues and extract a consensus viewpoint pertaining to the dynamics of a particular problem being studied. See Creswell (1994) for a more detailed description of this methodology.

violence) may mask underlying distinctions that are important to understanding the dynamics of any potential connections.

Terrorism

The literature on terrorism ranges from work grounded in social science and law enforcement experience to speculative diatribes based on little more than unthinking stereotypes and jingoistic ideology. For the purposes of this document, the definition of terrorism found in federal regulations (28 CFR Section 0.85) was employed and reads as follows: “The unlawful use of force and violence against persons or property to intimidate a government, the civilian population, or any segment thereof in furtherance of political or social goals.” In this context, terrorists’ goals may include establishing regional autonomy from a controlling “foreign” interest, winning religious autonomy or dominance in an area, or repelling western cultural and economic influences from an area or region. Because there is a controlling ideology behind the criminal acts of violence, terrorism is distinguished from violence intended to overthrow governments and create anarchy, even though the methods employed may be very similar.

Terrorists like al Qaeda are engaged in asynchronous warfare. There is no territory to be gained, save that which already shelters them. Their interest is in the removal of foreign influences so that their radical ideology may be imposed (or re-imposed, in the case of groups like the Taliban) without outside interference. Theirs is a long-term strategy, without any equivalent of Blitzkrieg or D-Day. Their main objectives are the slow erosion of their opponents’ will and the undermining of their opponent’s authority (Nyatepe-Coo & Zeisler-Vralsted, 2004; see also German, 2007).

Gangs

Gangs have been a part of the U.S. landscape (and literature) since at least the early 19th century (Howell & Moore, 2010). Gangs are distinguished from mobs and other anti-social groups by their relative permanence, leadership and organizational structure, and continuing enterprise (OJJDP, 2013; Barrows & Huff, 2009). However, “leadership” and “organizational structure” are relative terms, with varying degrees of cohesiveness under either title. While social science literature documents a wide range of gang types, including pro-social and self-defense “gangs,” the law enforcement focus is naturally on the evolving criminal aspects of street gangs, prison gangs, and others committing criminal acts (Barrows & Huff, 2009; Klein, 1995).

Though it is a broad overstatement of a more nuanced set of conditions, gangs tend to live in the present and, at most, the short-term future. While gang activities, historically, have in many ways been akin to criminal organizations involved in illegal activities, in many respects, they are believed to dominate their “turf,” despite occasional encroachments by law enforcement. Like other criminal enterprises, stability rather than disturbance serves their long-term financial interests. Gang organizations are able to survive the periodic law enforcement crackdowns that beset them, and relative permanence is expected in most cases (Esbensen, 2000).

Weapons of Mass Destruction

The category of WMDs, while often associated with nuclear weapons, also includes “dirty bombs,” defined as conventional explosives that spread radioactive material over a wide area; biological and chemical weapons; and any destructive device, such as a bomb, grenade, missile, rocket, mine, etc. Though law enforcement still considers the possibility of a “dirty bomb” attack viable, stringent controls are in place over most existing stocks of weapons-grade radioactive material, and the difficulties of moving vulnerable stocks over long distances without

detection are considerable. However, biological and chemical stocks exist naturally and have legitimate uses in the U.S., and conventional destructive devices can be obtained with relative ease. For those reasons, the WMD portion of this discussion focuses primarily on the most accessible, and thus most likely, weapons to be deployed. These weapons may be either improvised destructive devices that utilize conventional explosive materials or other chemical or biological agents that are repurposed for use as a weapon.

For instance, in August 2011, *The New York Times* reported on efforts by Yemen-based al Qaeda cells to acquire castor beans to manufacture and deploy the nerve agent ricin. The article quoted a State Department official reporting the effort “continues to demonstrate [al Qaeda’s] growing ambitions and strong desire to carry out attacks outside its region” (Schmidt & Shanker, 2011). Similar plans were thwarted by British and French operatives in London in 2003. Furthermore, the unrelated Aum Shinrikyo sarin gas attack on the Tokyo subway in 1995 serves as a vivid reminder of what is possible if these agents are utilized as weapons. Each of these examples illustrates reported cases involving the attempted use of weapons of mass destruction. Other scenarios are, of course, possible, some potentially involving gangs or gang members. The likelihood of such events occurring, however, is subject to on-going debate.

The Terrorists–Gangs Nexus

The question of whether or not terrorists might reach out to U.S. street gangs to perform acts in facilitation of a WMD attack on U.S. soil is an exercise in futures thinking. Sufficient data will be presented to consider such a possible future event, but whether it is likely to occur depends on the interpretation of ambiguous evidence. For example, prior to the events of September 11, 2001, few would have given credence to the possibility that a small group of terrorists would successfully skyjack four jetliners in American air space for suicide missions

against symbolic American targets. Consider also a claim in 2005 made by El Salvador President Antonio Saca and Honduran Security Minister Oscar Alvarez that al Qaeda and MS-13 members were meeting to form an alliance. While these claims were later determined to be trumped up for political advantage rather than having any actual truth, the possibility and implications of such an alliance in the future began to be considered (see Barnes, 2007).

At present, no solid evidence documenting a terrorist-gangs nexus exists. The expert panelists clearly agreed on the possibility of the inter-related connections emerging but were less clear on the plausibility of it happening. The following section is an examination of the potential scenarios, possible reasons the scenarios have not taken place to date, and steps that can forestall or prevent these situations from happening. The questions focus specifically on the Crips, Gangster Disciples, and MS-13 street gangs, but it is not too far of a stretch to extrapolate the data to include other street gangs as well.

The fact that a WMD incident involving a terrorists-gangs collaboration has not been reported to have occurred does not mean that it cannot. Nor does the fact such an incident could happen mean it will. However, the possibility demands some attention from both law enforcement and other national security and public safety agencies, including the Department of Justice (DOJ) and the Department of Homeland Security (DHS). The terrorists-gangs nexus is not entirely speculative, as some anecdotal evidence exists. There have been several antecedent attempts at creating exactly such a relationship, though each one has qualifying or mitigating circumstances. The research data and the limited existing examples reveal that the possibilities may not be straightforward, but rather complex in nature. As such, a number of general and specific questions arise when examining this complex relationship. The next section will present these questions and provide some general evidence pointing toward some potential answers.

Question #1: Is it likely for gangs or gang members to be recruited by terrorist organizations?

Answer #1: It does not currently appear plausible for an entire gang to be successfully recruited by a terrorist organization, particularly not for the overt deployment of WMDs. “Supergangs” such as the Crips, Gangster Disciples, and MS-13 are not consolidated organizations; rather, they are large, loosely-affiliated groups that share the same name and identifying symbols, but little else. In fact, there is considerable criticism of the term “supergangs” as being largely a media creation (Felson, 2006). In the case of the Crips and MS-13, there is no overarching hierarchical leadership, and the separate sets (distinct localized groups using the larger name as an identifier) are autonomous, balkanized, and occasionally rogue. Some Crip gangs have notorious rivalries with other Crip gangs. To a lesser extent, the MS-13 subsets are also now believed to be starting to compete among themselves.

The Gangster Disciples are one of the few remaining gang affiliations with an identifiable figurehead. Larry Hoover fills that role and is serving six life sentences in the federal maximum-security prison in Florence, Colorado. Even with his nominal leadership of the gang, the Gangster Disciples are still largely fractured, and many sets remain outside the auspices of any recognized hierarchical authority.

The premise of terrorist-gang alliances has been considered and rejected as a current threat by the subject matter experts who were convened. Regardless of the reason for such an alliance, whether due to radicalization or financial gain, the linkage of a U.S. gang to a terrorist attack on U.S. soil would lead to the gang’s rejection and possible demonization by all, and its

livelihood (i.e. drug markets, etc.) would be either destroyed or under serious threat from law enforcement and/or vigilante retaliation.

Answer #2: It is plausible for a terrorist organization to target individual, disaffected gang members for recruitment (see Dones, 2012: pp. 127). Supporting this notion, research conducted by Klein (1995, pp. 200-202) suggests that U.S.-based street gangs feel they are not an integral part of the U.S. and are often cut out of the social-economic equation for success. Criminal organizations such as gangs may envision the U.S. as their social and economic oppressors. As a result, gang members' anti-social ways of thinking may potentially afford terrorists opportunities to recruit them.

Terrorists practicing radical ideologies have similar attributes as U.S.-based gang members, who also exploit belief systems to justify their criminal means (see Knox & Papachristos, 2002). If individuals in these groups do not consider themselves an intricate part of the U.S. status quo, some gang members, like terrorists, may conclude that the U.S. is their enemy. A part of this mindset may be a belief that the only way to survive against their U.S. oppressors is through extreme violence and war (Brotherton & Barrios, 2004; see also Dones, 2012: p. 9).

If terrorist groups are willing to capitalize on the criminal mindset of U.S.-based gangs, it is conceivable that terrorist-gang recruiters could potentially turn gang members into dangerous weapons against the U.S. The recruitment is likely to take place in prisons and focus on the ideological conversion and radicalization of the street gang members more than on monetary enticement. While it is a common belief that gang members will do anything for money, this behavior is sometimes limited by factors beyond money including honor, respect,

and loyalty to the gang. As such, a monetary incentive is devoid of commitment to a cause and is therefore vulnerable to counteroffers or rewards for exposing terrorist plots. Individual conversion to terrorist ideologies seems a more likely route, especially in the limited confines of a prison, and this conversion is perhaps necessary to garner the trust needed to complete part of a terror attack. In the wake of the 9/11 tragedy, several real examples of a conversion scenario demonstrate these arguments and reveal even more complexities.

The first example was the arrest of Jose Padilla in 2002 for colluding with al Qaeda to plan a “dirty bomb” attack. Though he had a documented history with the Maniac Latin Disciples, Padilla was older (31 years old at the time of his arrest), an ex-gang member, and had a history of several terms in prison (including a manslaughter conviction as a juvenile). In essence, the Padilla case involved the recruitment of an individual, not a gang. Admittedly, at initial glance, this calls into question the relevance of his case as an example of a terrorist-gang connection (Papachristos, 2005; Ripley, 2002). However, the psychosocial factors such as the need to be valued by the group, a sense of disenfranchisement from society, and the need to feel important, led Padilla into not only gang life but also made him ripe for radicalization post-incarceration. Furthermore, the planned event did include a recognized WMD, a radiological bomb, lending credence to the possibility of such a nexus. This incident is also consistent with recent contentions by Dones (2012) regarding the plausibility of a terrorist group targeting an individual, disaffected gang member for such activities. Presumably, the arrest of Padilla would not dissuade the al Qaeda leadership from continuing to search for another such potential foot soldier.

The next example is the 2005 case of Kevin James, who was affiliated with the 76th Street Crips. James became radicalized while serving a prison sentence for robbery. He began

proselytizing about violently attacking the U.S. government and soon garnered his own charismatic following in prison (Ballas, 2010). Some of his followers were also gang members, but significantly, James' group [known as the Jam'iyyatt Ul-Islam Is-Saheeh (JIS) group] included members of gangs that were enemies to his Crip set. Upon release, the group planned to attack a U.S. Army recruiting office but was caught during a series of robberies committed to gather resources for the attack. This is a case of a disenfranchised individual who became a gang member and later radicalized in prison. The direct recruitment by an external terrorist agent was not an element of the case. His prison radicalization was sufficient to create a new, autonomous terror cell with ambitions that concurred with al Qaeda's general desires. The inclusion of gang members who were former enemies into the radicalized JIS set demonstrated that conversion to an ideology can supersede previous gang affiliation (U.S. Attorney's Office, 2009).

Each of these examples highlights, at least in part, the dynamics that psychosocial factors can play, both directly and indirectly, in both self-selection of recruits and targeting of individuals by terrorist or extremist organizations to be recruited as followers or operatives.

Answer #3: Terrorist groups may not need to recruit gangs if they co-opt or subvert them.

Although gang members may generally be resistant to explicit solicitation by terrorists, they may be very susceptible to indirect manipulation. In the Kevin James case, there is no clear evidence that the 76th Street Crips were knowledgeable about James' intentions, much less supportive of them. However, he was able to use his connections with the group to pass messages (known as "kites") from prison and relay phone calls from prison (Hamm, 2008). The 76th Street Crips may have aided in terrorist plotting unwittingly, as James exploited the gang infrastructure.

This opens the possibility that the more salient threat may lie not in the recruitment of gang members, but in a terrorist being “recruited” into a gang. In this scenario, no conversion process is necessary, and the terrorist could not only gain access to expansive criminal networks but could also operate inconspicuously, using the gang as camouflage. Individual influence from within the gang’s structure may make the gang an unwitting proxy for terrorist activities, criminal activity to distract law enforcement attention away from specified areas of interest to terrorists, or inspiration to attack law enforcement officials.

Prison recruitment of criminals into existing gangs is well-documented in U.S. prisons (Welling, 1994), as are terrorist efforts to radicalize the disaffected among the immigrant communities (Gorowitz & Gorowitz, 2002). Whether these separate tracks could intersect, with terror suspects incarcerated for long periods of time radicalizing prison inmates with earlier release dates, remains an unanswered question. The reasons for joining prison gangs, which may largely rest upon the need for protection inside the prison, are different from the reasons for committing to a radical ideology, particularly one with violent anti-government sentiments and intentions. Therefore, determining if such conversion attempts are successful remains difficult.

Similar to the arguments offered in answer #2 above, this is complicated by the actual value of a prison-radicalized gang member to terrorist groups not being clear or certain. Though prominent cases of enduring gang leadership from prison exist (Larry Hoover of the Gangster Disciples, King Blood of the Latin Kings, and numerous Mafia capos), the decentralized nature of most street gangs creates a fluid leadership dynamic. A member returning from prison may find his gang dominated by a completely new, younger cast of leaders who are not prone to give him deference, much less surrender their control of the gang’s day-to-day activities. Being disenfranchised from the gang, or at least consigned a reduced status within its contemporary

leadership structure, might produce a degree of alienation that would leave a gang member vulnerable to, or perhaps amenable to, recruitment into an organization that offers greater validation and reward.

Question #2: Would gangs or gang members recruited by terrorists be used to deploy WMDs, or commit some other form of attack?

Answer #1: Many subject matter experts indicated the deployment of WMDs by gangs on the behalf of terrorist lacked plausibility. The technical knowledge and capability needed to deploy such weapons are far beyond the abilities of most street gang members. Though the Padilla case would seem to contradict this, there is an important qualifier: Padilla was allegedly trained in foreign countries by al Qaeda. The ability to conduct such training on U.S. soil is far more limited, though not impossible.

Chemical, biological, nuclear, and radiological weapon deployment appeared to be a relatively remote possibility in the opinions of the subject matter experts. The use of improvised explosive devices (IEDs) or other explosive weapons, on the other hand, was thought to be entirely plausible. The 1986 case of the El Rukns gang serves as one historical example (Papachristos, 2005). The El Rukns were largely recognized as the leading inner circle of the Black P-Stone, an offshoot of the Blackstone Rangers with several other consolidated gangs. They were allegedly approached by representatives of Muammar Gaddafi of Libya and solicited to shoot down U.S. airplanes. Two qualifiers are relevant to this event. The first is that the connection was with a state actor rather than with a state-less terrorist group. State-sponsored terrorism lies outside the purview of the scenarios considered here. The second is that this case

occurred prior to the 1988 explosion of a Pan Am airliner over Lockerbie, Scotland, and the first World Trade Center attack in 1993, an era when terrorism had not yet risen to the existing level of concern in the U.S. Current gang members may be less amenable to aiding terrorism (as reflected in the subsequent gang member interviews (Dones, 2012: p. 127 *ff.*). Participating in alliances with terrorists would increase law enforcement and public hostility, as well as drastically reduce a gang's viability.

Answer #2: The possibility that gang members would be utilized in some fashion by terrorist groups to further the delivery of a WMD also open the door to considering the possibility of not delivery but of transportation of components, precursor chemicals, or other materials, as part of a larger effort to construct a WMD. This, of course, could involve either acting with knowledge of forethought or unwitting involvement with the terrorist group and its efforts. While little is known about this specific potential scenario, there is a real possibility of inducing alienated individuals to carry out activities that might seem on their face to be benign or, at least, suspicious but perhaps not overtly part of terrorist plot. In any event, gang members may have knowledge of how to acquire and transport illicit materials that the general public does not. As such, this possibility should not be ignored. In fact, the most likely utility of gang members to terrorist organizations may be as couriers, moving packages of WMD components from one location or agent to another. This type of activity, similar to moving illegal drugs or other contraband, are illicit activities that gangs are known to conduct. For example, according to the *New York Times* article cited earlier, the nerve agent ricin is perishable, and cannot survive in dry, hot climates. A shipment of castor beans creates fewer problems than a shipment of ricin. Shipments of precursor chemicals have a different profile on lading manifests, x-rays, and other

diagnostic media than do assembled weapons. Because most precursors have legitimate purposes (castor beans might be an exception), they do not trigger the same level of concern that an end-product WMD would, if detected. To a street gang approached by an “importer” for help delivering a particular package in return for a sum of money, the unopened package containing castor beans probably would be assumed to be a shipment of illegal drugs. Identifying the package as a ricin base could raise suspicion and alarm, and either offend or threaten the nominal ally. Circumspection would be prudent on the part of the terrorist, who no doubt would have studied the gang in question for a long time before making the overture.

Question #3: How beneficial would a connection with gang members be to a terrorist organization?

Answer #1: Underlying many of these scenarios, whether specific to MS-13, the Crips, or the Gangster Disciples, is whether terrorist organizations have the economic wherewithal and knowledge about U.S. gangs and gang dynamics. That may be a realistic assumption for al Qaeda, which has already demonstrated a command of the underlying dynamics of cultures, and is known to exploit existing Web-based sources for additional knowledge (Der Derian, 2002).

Whether it would extend to other terrorist groups is less certain.

Alliances or recruitment of Crips, Gangster Disciples, MS-13, or other national gang affiliates provide limited benefits to a terrorist organization. There does not appear to be high value in recruiting gang members to terrorist causes, except perhaps as throw-away foot soldiers. Individual gang members may be more psychosocially susceptible to radicalization, but they

come with liabilities that do not make them the most favorable candidates for terrorist groups to utilize.

Radicalization in the U.S. is most often a product of interactions in a prison setting. Any individual with a criminal history already is flagged and subject to more scrutiny in seeking employment, housing, and other routine life events. They also may be automatically barred from certain activities such as working with children, the right to vote, and still other community reservations that may exist if the convicts' record becomes public knowledge. Evidence of radicalization which occurred in prison may aggravate such concerns. Historically, a gang member's social and geographical knowledge outside of prison was limited to the community in which he lived prior to incarceration. Even if this gang member returned to a neighborhood that was in relative proximity to a high-value target, the likelihood that this individual would engage in a mass-casualty terror attack against such a target is reduced, as such actions would put too many of their friends, associates, and family members at risk. Additionally, an ex-con gang member's presence in such high value target environments would likely garner attention, drawing unwanted scrutiny toward actions typically requiring stealth or low profiles.

As noted earlier, certain known behaviors and criminal activities associated with gang members make them less likely to be primary operatives for a WMD attack, while other characteristics make them attractive recruits for support operations leading up to an attack. Gang members have the reputation of being notorious drug and alcohol abusers, which calls into question their trustworthiness and reliability as operators. Radicalization alone cannot guarantee instantaneous sobriety, nor can it provide the skills and social savvy needed for complex actions. Moreover, the prison records of most gang members signify their failure at even simple crime. The lack of successful completion of terror attacks by individuals such as Jose Padilla, Kevin

James, Richard Reid, and others illustrate the risks of using low-skilled operatives. Failures, though, can advance al Qaeda's mission as well as successes by instilling fear, gaining media coverage, or increasing the fiscal expenditures that have to be devoted to combating terrorist acts. However, a WMD strike on U.S. soil would be a high-investment operation and would likely be much more geared toward success than failure in order to advance the terrorist organization's mission. Therefore, it is unlikely that low-skilled, high-risk gang members would be the primary operators in a WMD attack scenario.

Similar to the answers provided earlier to question #1, identifying leaders within gang structures who might be willing to steer the organization toward directions supportive of terrorist activities might also be possible, but successful recruiting of these individuals narrows the window for success. Such recruitment may be discovered by law enforcement authorities, and the opportunity for a successful strike may be fleeting. However, terrorist groups inspired by the al Qaeda ideology, and others, understand the necessity of careful, long-term grooming of recruits for high-profile attacks, and that process should not be ignored

Answer #2: – In particular, alliance with, or recruitment of, MS-13 could provide substantial benefits to a terrorist organization. The subject matter experts considered MS-13 the premiere target in gang-terrorist nexus scenarios because MS-13 has two unique qualities not commonly found in other native street gangs: 1) international reach and 2) mobility. The MS-13 gang was initially comprised largely of immigrants from the Central American countries of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras (Johnson & Mulhausen, 2005; Ward, 2012). U.S. law enforcement dealt with criminality by MS-13 members through mass deportation (HIDTA, n.d.). The gang members were returned to impoverished countries with little efficacy of government, and the

semi-structured violent capacities of the gang soon gave them dominance. Gang members migrated up through Central America and then returned to the U. S. through different ports of entry (Papachristos, 2005). U.S. policy in such cases is still to deport, which has inadvertently created cyclical routes for smuggling and illegal immigration. MS-13 now has significant capabilities in smuggling humans, drugs, and weapons into the U.S. (Arana, 2005; Cruz, 2010).

Should a terrorist organization forge an alliance with MS-13 factions, they would gain a capacity not only to smuggle operatives and weapon components into the U.S., but also a considerable degree of mobility within the country, as MS-13 gang members often move with migrant farm workers throughout the rural U.S. Moreover, rural settings are nearly ideal places for chemical and biological weapons to be produced. Precursor chemicals are plentiful because of their legitimate use in agriculture, and there exists an abundance of isolated or abandoned structures for production and storage (Graysmith, 2003). For these reasons, the subject matter experts consider MS-13 attractive as a potential partner to a terrorist organization in carrying out a WMD attack.

The likelihood that MS-13 members would enter into an alliance with terrorists is perhaps greater than for other groups. Many of the members are not U.S. nationals, so they may have significantly less attachment to either the country or to any particular area they might visit in their travels. Limiting this possibility, however, is the lack of a significant history of antipathy to the U.S. government, unlike many of the native national street gangs. A significant issue in this scenario is structural. There is no centralized leadership over the affiliation, or even within factions. Anthropologist Tom Ward has spent 18 years studying MS-13 and 18th Street gangs in Central America and Los Angeles. He discovered that MS-13 culture is very anarchist and resistant to authority even within the gang (Ward, 2012). As noted earlier, MS-13 sets are very

volatile, and they are prone to splintering and in-fighting. Thus, even though an alliance between MS-13 and terrorists may be more probable, an MS-13 set may lack the stability a terrorist group would likely seek as a group partner or set of co-conspirators. That noted, the lack of cohesion to a single authority perhaps more pervasive in an individual splintered MS-13 set may prove attractive to an opportunistic terrorist group that acquires knowledge of this disillusionment with the overall hierarchy of MS-13.

Another element that may inhibit the appeal of linking with MS-13 is that its notoriety has sponsored unprecedented law enforcement response, including the creation in 2004 of the FBI's MS-13 National Task Force (now referred to as the National Gang Task Force). This is particularly notable as this was the first instance of a task force being formed to combat the actions of a single gang. Operation Shield was mounted against MS-13 in 2005 by Immigrations and Customs Enforcement (ICE), and MS-13 has continued to be the subject of intensified scrutiny by the U.S. Border Patrol. If al Qaeda's aim is to further clandestine operations, there may be little value, and perhaps significant negative consequences for pursuing relationships with a group that is already a top law enforcement priority.

To forge a successful compact, a terrorist organization would have to find the right MS-13 set that is both willing and able to assist. Even if that were to occur, an alliance would have the added dynamic of exposing the terrorist organization to new enemies, like 18th Street, or the drug cartels in Mexico. MS-13 is already embroiled in those struggles, which bring the same overlapping issues of trust to bear in multiple forms. It also seems unlikely that MS-13 members would be ideologically radicalized through interaction with terrorists; their own ideological roots have elements of Satanism and anarchism, fundamentally opposed to some of the terrorist ideologies known to be prevalent (Cruz, 2010). Any partnership would more likely be based on

monetary or other recompense. Mercenaries can be fickle, and gang members are impulsive, especially in MS-13. In a hypothetical scenario in which MS-13 gang members are paid half of the fee up front to deliver a terrorist operative, weapon, or weapon component, there is the genuine possibility the gang might be amenable to either informing or turning the person or materials over to the authorities for a reward. Another possibility is that the deal broker could be robbed, or perhaps even held for ransom from the terrorist organization. The latter is somewhat unlikely, but given the right combination of gang volatility and misreading of the context of the terrorist capacities and intent, it remains within the realm of possibility.

Such events could lead to the outcome of terrorists engaging other street gangs for WMD attacks. One such possibility is that the overture to a U.S. gang would be more likely to help mount an attack against the U.S. government, which the gang may perceive as corrupt and racist: a gambit based upon ideology. An alternative, also cited earlier, might be an appeal for help to deliver a package to a particular person or address, an approach based primarily upon financial exchange. Other levels of approach are seemingly possible, but these two were deemed as most likely by the subject matter experts.

Alternative Possibilities

One scenario not explicitly considered by the subject matter expert group was the likelihood of al Qaeda approaching disaffected, anti-government white Americans. Many of the FBI terrorism investigations that have come to the attention of the public media have involved white Americans, not foreigners or racial minorities (see Dones, 2012: pp. 86-94 for documentation of similar cases). There have also been numerous other anti-government events linked to white Americans. Some of these include: 1) a December 1982 standoff with a protestor

who claimed his van was a loaded bomb, and who was shot and killed as he prepared to drive toward the White House, 2) a March 2003 incident involving a protestor who parked his tractor in the middle of a water pool in Washington D.C. and threatened to detonate explosives on the tractor, 3) individuals, who in May 2009, apparently sought to shoot down military planes and bomb synagogues in New York. While these examples do not evidence a direct terrorist nexus, any one of these might have been open to such a possibility.

The “leaderless rebellion” tactics of the white power segment of society were designed to insulate the real leaders of the far right from criminal prosecution and civil lawsuits. They also have the affect of decoupling self-radicalized individuals from any form of group control (Chermak, Freilich, & Simone, 2010). It is entirely possible that such people would be open to overtures from al Qaeda operatives in furtherance of their own schemes, as instances of far-right extremist collaboration with jihadist terrorists have already occurred (see Chermak, et al., 2010 for further delineation of this particular nexus). In a sense, this behavior would be motivated by the notion derived from an ancient Arabic proverb paraphrased here as “the enemy of my enemy is my friend...for the moment.”²

Ideology is a force that should not be underestimated, especially regarding individuals who are dissatisfied with their life course and are looking to project blame onto society or the U.S. government. This paper has focused on recruitment of gang members by foreign terrorist groups and outlined that direct recruitment may not be necessary (as was allegedly the case with Kevin James). Furthermore, it is important not to neglect the potential connection between domestic terrorists and gangs, which was beyond the scope of this examination. Adult white supremacist organizations recruit from skinhead groups of “Neo-Nazi kiddie corps.” These

² This is often attributed to Sun Tzu’s The Art of War but, in fact, finds its origins in both Arabic and Chinese proverbs.

skinhead groups are already believed to be predisposed to hate-based actions against other racial and ethnic groups and are indoctrinated into anti-government sentiments when interacting with the adult white supremacists. Nearly all supremacist organizations propagate a doctrine that the coming Armageddon will be a race war and the U.S. government will be the primary enemy.

Prison gangs such as the Black Guerilla Family (BGF) have explicit doctrines calling for the violent overthrow of the U.S. government. Notably, the BGF has very strong ties to the Weather Underground, Black Liberation Army, and Symbionese Liberation Army (Fleisher & Decker, 2001) all of which are believed to be violent offshoots of the culture wars of the 1960s and have strong current ties with both the Crip and Blood affiliations. Additionally, all three can be traced back in some form or fashion to the Black Panther Party (Chambliss, 1993). Neta, a prison gang with increasing presence on the east coast, calls for the independence of Puerto Rico from the U.S. Further, it has a complex relationship that shifts between the Latin Kings and the Los Solidos street gangs as either friend or foe. Other than street gangs, all the aforementioned groups have political and ideological agendas, which blur the lines between their status as a gang organization and a domestic terrorist entity.

Potential Implications of This Potential Nexus

While hyper-vigilance is certainly expected in the war against terror, there are also some visible preventive measures that can be taken to prevent or deter a possible tragic future scenario involving gangs and terrorists from unfolding. It is generally believed that terrorist organizations are able to bide their time, but time can also be an asset for public safety. One controversial tactic would be to make timelines uncertain. It is clear that radicalization is occurring in U.S. prisons, and many states have sentence-enhancement statutes for gang crimes. Rather than

imposing specific determinate and lengthy sentences, the use of lengthier indeterminate sentences might be more effective in the disruption of prison radicalization (Siegel, 2003). In this scenario, the individual's release is much more uncertain and dependent upon both behavioral conformity in the prison but also closer scrutiny of his (or her) daily activities in the correctional system. Such scrutiny may impact both recruitment efforts inside the prison and curtail efforts to influence gang behavior outside the prison walls. Another tactic is to simply make fighting terrorism the better option by increasing incentives or rewards for reporting terrorist activity. This would decrease the appeal of terrorists reaching out to economically disadvantaged populations.

Conclusion

The connection between gangs, terrorism, and WMDs is a future paradigm that, prior to this effort, had not been explored in detail. Just because there is currently no clear evidence of a gang-terrorism-WMD association developing does not mean that it will not happen in the future. Either way, it is better to be proactive. Any expectation that gangs or terrorists will be bound by our rules and understandings is shortsighted. These adversaries are not bureaucratic, and are generally much more fluid and adaptable to changing environments, challenges, or opportunities than law enforcement. To only interpret and understand information that fits into certain preconceived boxes, and thus to prepare only for those anticipated possibilities, is deemed a risk. One of the aspects of any FWG consideration is to assess paradigm shifts and wild card events. Doing so provides opportunities to receive new information and alter paradigms to better respond to both current and future threats. Of course, the assessments offered here are based upon the data and information that was known at the time that this was conducted. As such, this

potential threat, like all futures assessments, requires monitoring of emerging data and trends that may impact the assessment offered here. In this realm of risk assessment, vigilance in continually examining all available data is essential to identifying both challenges and opportunities for thwarting future threats.

References

- Arana, A. (2005). How the street gangs took Central America. *Foreign Affairs*, 84, 98-110.
- Ballas, D. (2010). Prisoner radicalization. *FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin*, 79, 1-3.
- Barnes, N. (2007). *Transnational Youth Gangs in Central America, Mexico, and the United States*, Center of Inter-American Studies and Programs at the Instituto Tecnológico Autónomo de México, the Ford Foundation and the Kellogg Foundation, Executive Summary, p.1-12. http://www.wola.org/publications/transnational_study_on_youth_gangs. (Retrieved 18 June 2013).
- Barrows, J. & Huff, C.R. (2009). Gangs and public policy. *Criminology and Public Policy*, 8, 675-703.
- Brotherton, D. & Barrios, L. (2004). *The almighty Latin king and queen nation: Street politics and the transformation of a New York City gang*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Chambliss, W. (1993). State organized crime. In W. Chambliss (Ed.), *Making law: The law and structural contradictions*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.
- Chermak, S.M., Freilich, J.D., & Simone, J. (2010). Surveying American police state agencies about lone wolves, far-right criminality and far-right Islamic jihadist criminal collaboration. *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, 33: 1019-1041.
- Cruz, J.M. (2010). Central American maras: From youth street gangs to transnational protection rackets. *Global Crime*, 11, 379-398.
- Der Derian, J. (2002). *9-11: Before, after, and in between*. http://essays.ssrc.org/sept11/essays/der_derian_text_only.htm. (Retrieved 17 January 2012).
- Dones, D.D. (2012). *Terror in Plainview: Terrorist– gang threats of biological weapons usage*. Doctoral dissertation. Fairfax, VA: George Mason University.
- Esbensen, F. (2000). Preventing adolescent gang involvement. Office of Juvenile Justice and

- Delinquency Prevention. https://www.ncjrs.gov/html/ojjdp/2000_9_2/contents.html. (Retrieved 17 June 2013).
- Felson, M. (2006). The street gang strategy, In M. Felson (Ed.), *Crime and Nature*, Pp. 305-324. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Fleisher, M.S. & Decker, S.H. (2000). An overview of the challenge of prison gangs. *Corrections Management Quarterly*, 5, 1-9.
- German, M. (2007). *Thinking Like a Terrorist*. Washington D.C.: Potomac Books.
- Gorowitz, W. & Gorowitz, N. (2002). Dangerous convictions: An introduction to extremist activities in prisons. New York: Anti-Defamation League Institute on Terrorism and Extremism.
- Graysmith, R. (2003). *Amerithax: The hunt for the anthrax killer*. New York: Jove Books.
- Hamm, M. (2008). Prisoner radicalization: Assessing the threat in U.S. correctional institutions. *National Institute of Justice*, 261. <http://www.nij.gov/journals/261/prisoner-radicalization.htm>. (Retrieved 11 September 2012).
- HIDTA. (n.d.) Mara Salvatrucha 13 (MS-13). <http://gangs.umd.edu/Gangs/MS13.aspx>. (Retrieved 2 August 2012).
- Howell, J.C. & Moore, J.P. (2010). History of street gangs in the United States. *National Gang Center Bulletin*. Washington, D.C.: Bureau of Justice Assistance.
- Johnson, S. & Muhlhausen, D.B. (2005). North American transnational youth gangs: Breaking the chain of violence. *Trends in Organized Crime*, 9, 38-54.
- Klein, M. (1995). *The American street gang: Its nature, prevalence, and control*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Knox, G. & Papachristos, A. (2002). *The vice-lords: A gang profile analysis*. Peotone, IL: New Chicago School Press, Inc.
- Nyatepe-Coo, A. & Zeisler-Vralsted, D., Eds. (2004). *Understanding Terrorism: Threats in an Uncertain World*. Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Pearson Prentice Hall.
- Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (2013). Gang Prevention. <http://www.ojjdp.gov/mpg/progTypesGangPrevention.aspx> (Retrieved 17 June 2013).
- Papachristos, A. (2005). Gang world. *Foreign Policy*, 147, 48-55.
- Rafael, T. (2007). *The Mexican mafia*. New York: Encounter Books.

- Ripley, A. (2002). The case of the dirty bomber. *Time Magazine*.
- Schmitt, E. & Shanker, T. (2011). Qaeda trying to harness toxins for bombs, U.S. officials fear. *The New York Times*. <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/08/13/world/middleeast/13terror.html>. (Retrieved 13 August 2011).
- Seigel, L. (2003). *Criminology*. Canada: Thompson Wadsworth.
- Toukan, A. and Cordesman, A. (2009) "Terrorism and WMD: The Link with the War in Afghanistan" Center for Strategic and International Studies, November 2009.
- U.S. Attorney's Office, Central California. (2009). *Man who formed terrorist group that plotted attacks on military and Jewish facilities sentenced to 16 years in federal prison*. News release, FBI Los Angeles Division. 6 March 2009.
- Ward, T.T. (2012). *Gansters without borders: An ethnography of a Salvadoran street gang*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Welling, D. (1994). Experts unite to combat street and prison gang activities. *Corrections Today*, 56, 148-149.