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Mexico Bleeds over the Border

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Although most journalists and pundits admit that the drug violence afflicting Mexico has become very bad indeed, many of them also argue that there is no evidence of a spillover into the United States. Gabriel Arana, [writing in the *Nation*](#) ^[3], typifies that view, contending that if dire reports “are to be believed, an Armageddon-like rash of drug-related violence” has “crossed from Mexico into the United States.” He responds that “the numbers tell a different story.” And until recently, Arana and other analysts had a point, since violent crime rates in El Paso and other southwestern U.S. cities remained relatively low, and the trend did not differ from cities in other parts of the country. Nevertheless, there are growing indications that the spillover effect is not a myth.

There have been ominous signs for some time. Mexican drug organizations had established close connections with domestic gangs in some two hundred fifty U.S. cities—and all fifty largest cities—by mid-2008. The increasing Mexican domination of all phases of the drug trade in the United States carries with it the obvious risk that the turf battles in Mexico between rival cartels could become proxy wars in U.S. communities. There is

evidence that such struggles are already underway. In at least three cases, members of La Familia kidnapped competing drug dealers [4] in Houston and held them for ransom. Similar events have occurred in Phoenix, Las Vegas and other U.S. cities.

Cartel hit men have not only killed victims—including Americans—in Mexico, but they have apparently struck at individuals inside the United States. During 2008 and 2009, seven individuals were killed execution style in Laredo, Texas, across the Rio Grande from Nuevo Laredo—a major arena in the turf wars between the drug gangs. Authorities arrested and convicted two Gulf cartel enforcers for the string of executions. In October 2008, a Las Vegas child was kidnapped because a relative owed money [5] to one of Mexican drug gangs.

In September 2009, three armed men dragged Sergio Saucedo, a resident of Horizon City, Texas, out of his home and shoved him into an SUV. Saucedo's wife, as well as school children in a packed bus, witnessed the abduction. His body was found several days later [6] in Ciudad Juárez, with its arms chopped off and placed on the chest. U.S. Border Patrol agents arrested four men, including two who were U.S. citizens, the following February in connection with the crime.

The drug lords are now bold enough to put Americans living in the United States, including law enforcement personnel, on target lists for execution. Police in Nogales, Arizona went on heightened alert in June 2010 after receiving a threat, relayed through an informant, that officers would be targeted if they continued to carry out off-duty drug busts. Apparently traffickers considered it within the rules of the game for police to engage in such raids as part of their job when they were on duty, but that it was a gratuitous affront to do so on other occasions. When off duty, the cartel warned [7], police were to look the other way and ignore any drug shipments that came across the border, if they valued their lives. The warning occurred just days after two off-duty police officers seized four hundred pounds of marijuana while horseback riding outside the city. What was especially chilling about the cartel warning is that it specifically named the officers who were off-duty in the area of the drug bust that day. The Nogales police chief instructed his officers to keep weapons with them at all times and to frequently communicate their whereabouts to the department. He also encouraged them to wear body armor even when they were off duty.

Perhaps the most jarring incident occurred in early August 2010, when reports surfaced that a Mexican cartel had put a \$1 million bounty on the life of Arizona sheriff Joe Arpaio, the chief lawman in Maricopa County (which includes Phoenix and many of its suburbs). The threat originated in Mexico and was conveyed via a disposable cell phone—standard operating procedure for all of the drug gangs. There is no doubt that the Mexican drug cartels loathe the man, since his department is one of the most active in the southwestern states in intercepting drug shipments. Consequently, state and federal law enforcement agencies took the threat against Arpaio's life quite seriously. They did so perhaps even more than usual in the summer of 2010, because just weeks earlier, the DEA had warned that the cartels were about to take their war from Mexico north of the border and attack U.S. law enforcement personnel [8].

Sometimes, the spillover of Mexico's violence is graphic and direct. Officials and residents in El Paso were badly shaken in late June when seven bullets struck the upper floors of

city hall. Fortunately, no one was killed or injured, but if the incident had occurred earlier in the day when more people were in the building conducting business, the outcome might have been different. Apparently, the shots came from an altercation across the border in Juárez, and the incident was a graphic reminder that Mexico's violence was not necessarily confined to Mexican territory.

Fear and anger is spreading well beyond the southwestern states. A scathing editorial in the influential conservative newspaper *Investor's Business Daily* scorned President Obama's assurance that our southern border is more secure today than at any time in the past twenty years. If that's true, IBD's editors asked ^[9], "why is El Paso's City Hall taking fire from Mexico?"

The editorial went on to argue that events along the border "suggest bottoms dropping out, with horrors unimaginable in the past becoming the new norm." It then listed a series of alarming developments.

! The U.S. has lost control of actual U.S. territory to drug and migrant smugglers as much as eighty miles inland in Arizona. Any American who enters this area risks getting shot dead.

! The Falcon Dam on Texas' lower Rio Grande was targeted for destruction by a Mexican cartel to destroy a rival's drug smuggling route. Had the foiled plot succeeded, 4 million people could have ended up downriver with mass casualties and deaths.

! Arizona now has the second-highest kidnapping rate in the world, behind only Mexico City, with all of it due to drug and migrant smugglers and their quests for cash and territory.

! Mass graves have been discovered in New Mexico, believed by lawmen to be the work of cartels.

The editorial closed by accusing the Obama administration of exhibiting no sense of urgency about the danger and, in fact, showing a "can't-do attitude."

Jitters mounted in early October when an American, David Hartley, was killed while jet skiing on Falcon Lake, which straddles the border between Texas and Mexico. Hartley's horrified wife, Tiffany, watched the incident unfold. The perpetrators were apparently ^[10] members of the Zetas, perhaps the most violent of the Mexican trafficking organizations. That thesis gained further strength a few days later when the lead Mexican police investigator in the case was found decapitated ^[11]—a trademark of drug gang executions.

The alarm that *Investor's Business Daily* expresses may be excessive—and some of it may even reflect a cynical strategy of taking political potshots at a liberal Democratic president. Most of the evidence suggests that the spillage of violence over the border is not yet at a crisis point. Nevertheless, it would be a mistake to view it as a minor problem, much less as a myth.

Some chilling indicators of the extent of the danger emerged in August 2010, when the

federal government began posting signs ^[12] along a sixty-mile stretch of Interstate 8 between Casa Grande and Gila Bend, Arizona, more than one hundred miles north of the border with Mexico. The signs warn motorists that they are entering an “active drug and human smuggling area” where they may encounter “armed criminals and smuggling vehicles traveling at high rates of speed.” Pinal County sheriff Paul Babeu, whose jurisdiction is in the heart of that smuggling route, goes even a bit further than the federal warning signs, contending that he and his deputies are totally outnumbered and outgunned. “Mexican drug cartels literally do control parts of Arizona,” Babeu stated.

Such developments are a worrisome harbinger of the deterioration of the security situation on our southern border. It is almost inevitable that Mexico’s troubling violence will increasingly impact the United States as well. The only surprise is that it has taken this long.

(Photo by Codo)

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[5] <http://www.banderasnews.com/0811/edat-mexicoswar.htm>

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[10] <http://www.kens5.com/news/Falcon-Lake-shooting-suspects-believed-to-be-members-of-Zetas-104769189.html>

[11] <http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Americas/2010/1012/Murder-of-Mexican-investigator-in-Falcon-Lake-probe-reveals-drug-cartels-reach>

[12] <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2010/aug/31/signs-in-arizona-warn-of-smuggler-dangers/>