



House II

Organized Crime

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Introduction

Although recently most of America's crime-fighting efforts have focused on terrorism, organized crime remains a potent and significant threat to American security, both at home and abroad.

In America's biggest cities, organized gangs continue to hold power, staking out territory (or "turf") and engaging other gangs in prolonged battles that often claim the lives of innocents caught up in the conflict. Additionally, domestic organized crime is responsible for much of America's drug and prostitution trades.

Internationally, organized crime remains an enormous threat to American foreign policy. In some parts of the world – especially the drug-heavy regions of Central and South America – organized crime has destabilized the regions' governments to the point where fighting these criminal groups is often impossible. This problem ought to be of specific concern for US lawmakers – nations attacked by organized crime are often America's allies, and their destabilization at the hands of anti-American organized crime groups bodes poorly for US national security.

Summary of the Problem

Obviously, crime in general has its problems – when innocents are being killed or otherwise harmed, something must be done. Organized crime is a particularly pervasive form of crime because it attains the sophistication and ruthlessness to thwart lawmakers in their attempts to combat it. Organized crime also has unwelcome side effects – drug use, prostitution, and other socially problematic crimes often accompany gangs and other organized crime. Finally, organized syndicates at an international level can stymie governments weaker than the United States', rendering them unable to fight back against organized crime and destabilizing key US allies.

Recent Developments

Mexico

No story better exemplifies the challenges and dangers of fighting organized crime than a recent drug raid in Mexico. On December 17th, 2009, Mexican President Felipe Calderón ordered his nation's navy to attack a complex run by drug lord Beltrán Leyva, an organized crime kingpin on Mexico's most wanted list.

Calderón ordered the strike because of an increase in both drug-related violence and the drug trade itself – many believe this rise is caused by a dire economic situation that leaves Mexican youth nowhere to turn except for organized crime. The strike, at face value, was successful – Leyva himself was killed, as well as six others involved in organized crime.

Leyva's death, unfortunately, did not destroy his gang. His enforcement arm, called the Fuerzas Armadas de Arturo, had long had a reputation for ruthlessness even in the cutthroat world of organized crime. Gruesome proof of their continued operation came less than a week after Leyva's death. Hours after the funeral of Ensign Melquisdet Angulo Córdova, a Mexican navy man who was killed in the raid, gunmen broke into his family's home and killed his mother and three family members. As *The New York Times* reports, the murder "appeared to be intended as a clear warning to the military forces on the front line of President Felipe Calderón's war against Mexico's drug cartels: not only you, but your family is a target as well."

The strike starkly shows the problems American allies face in confronting organized crime. Mexico's inability to protect the ensign's family – and, six months earlier, to avoid the deaths of twelve police officers shot by gunmen in retaliation for a drug cartel leader's arrest – demonstrates that fighting organized crime will always be fraught with peril.

Italy

Halfway across the world, Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi is faced with the difficult task of confronting the mafia, a group of organized criminal "families" that have long haunted Italy and, more recently, the United States. On December 24th, 2009, Berlusconi pledged that his nation would eliminate the mafia by 2013 – a tall task, given the group's sophistication and experience avoiding the law.

In recent months, hundreds of people suspected of mafia connections have been arrested. It is important to note that the mafia in Italy operates very differently than drug cartels in Mexico – the relative strength of the Italian government means the mafia cannot openly operate with impunity, as drug lords do, and are forced instead to run a complex underground network of arms dealers, drug traffickers, and extortionists. The mafia's subtlety, however, makes it no less dangerous – hundreds if not thousands of Italians have been killed in mafia activity over the last three decades.

The United States

In America, little progress has been made in combating domestic organized crime. Newly-elected president Barack Obama has chosen other priorities for his first months in office, trying to combat terrorism and focusing on urban renewal, which his proponents say will decrease organized crime by giving youth an alternative to gangs. However, Obama and his staff have been keenly interested in international organized crime, providing strategic assistance to allies, such as Mexico, in their attempts to combat such gangs.

Focus of Debate

Conservative View

Conservatives continue to support hard-hitting action against organized crime, and are likely to criticize President Obama for what they see as inaction on this front. They support increased funding in programs that confront crime directly.

Liberal View

In contrast, liberals are more likely to support programs that they believe go to the "root of the problem" – poverty, a lack of upward mobility, and a culture that glorifies criminals.

They are also likely to emphasize international cooperation in fighting organized crime, and are more willing to provide foreign aid for countries buckling under its threat.

Presidential View

Barack Obama remains committed to fighting organized crime, but would tend to side with liberals as to the appropriate means of doing so. In terms of international cooperation, Obama has pledged support to many leaders, including Calderón, that the US will assist the rest of the world in battling the threat of organized crime.

Questions to Consider

Policymakers should consider these questions in framing the debate:

Which form of organized crime – domestic or international – is a bigger threat to American security? Are the two forms linked? What role should the US play in assisting other countries with their fights against organized crime? Is it better to deal with the root of organized crime, or to combat it as it happens? How does technology play into the changing face of organized crime? In what sense are organized crime and terrorism related, if at all?

Conclusion

The issue of organized crime is a complex and multifaceted one, and legislators need not feel they must address the entire issue at once. It is, however, crucial that you, as members of the House of Representatives, do everything you can to combat this increasingly pervasive threat.

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