

THE WAR ON TERROR- AND-DRUGS TURNS INWARD

The Treasury Department named the US-Central American gang Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13) a Transnational Criminal Organization, meaning it can apply terrorist-type financial sanctions against the group and its members.

This strikes me as a worrying new precedent. Previously, Treasury had sanctioned Los Zetas, Brother's Circle, the Camorra, and two Yakuza groups. While all operated in the US—Los Zetas has significant operations—MS-13 was first formed in the US, in Los Angeles, with close ties to El Salvador. Treasury says Immigration and Customs Enforcement has arrested 4,078 MS-13 gang members, so this affects a significant number of Americans.

In other words, this will repeat and probably escalate what we saw after 9/11—asset freezes of American citizens with little due process—in such a way that disproportionately affects one ethnic or religious group.

I also wonder whether this move intends to give additional legal cover for DEA's operations in Central America—backed by Special Forces—particularly Honduras. At a time when many of the leaders of the countries that will be targeted are increasingly opposed to the war on drug, we're ratcheting up the legal framework to make it look just like terrorism.

Maybe this is all very smart law enforcement. But it's the creeping application of intelligence-based enforcement without much debate about whether such an approach infringes on Americans' rights.