



COMBATING TERRORISM CENTER AT WEST POINT

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FEATURE ARTICLE

Lessons from the Global War on Terror for the Cartel Fight

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A VIEW FROM THE CT FOXHOLE

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FROM THE EDITORS

This month, the United States will mark 25 years since the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. That tragic day set into motion a long and arduous Global War on Terrorism, the impacts of which are still being felt today. To reflect on the lessons learned from the GWOT and how they might apply to the United States' current fight against cartels, we turned to terrorism expert Brian Michael Jenkins who has been studying the phenomenon for more than 50 years. "While the circumstances differ significantly," he writes, "the campaigns against al-Qa`ida and its Taliban allies, its affiliates, and its successors are instructive. They also offer some cautionary notes."

We also sought insights from leading terrorism scholar Dr. Martha Crenshaw, whose academic career spans more than five decades. She discusses the evolution of the terrorism studies field since 9/11 and reflects on its current focus. "Over the intervening years, we have, if not eliminated, at least severely diminished, the particular threats from al-Qa`ida and ISIS. At the same time, we can always be taken by surprise," she explains. "It's critical to avoid complacency."

Peter Bergen examines the long history of concern surrounding terrorist use of weapons of mass destruction in the post-9/11 years and considers whether, given the current accessibility of extraordinary technologies and capabilities, that concern is more justified today than ever before. "History suggests that terrorists could not deploy true weapons of mass destruction because the barriers to entry were so high," he writes. "But will those barriers be lowered now that we are in the age of AI and synthetic biology?"

Sandra Pellegrini provides a data-driven overview of the shifting criminal landscape in Mexico. She finds that "between January and August 2026, non-state armed group violence decreased by 19 percent nationwide compared to the same period in 2025." But she cautions that security operations have corresponded with uneven shifts in patterns of violence in the country, and "in some states, they have likely contributed to violence spreading or even intensified criminal competition. Elsewhere, reduction in violence likely reflects criminal adaptation rather than the dismantling of criminal organizations and networks."

On a final note, we wish to dedicate this issue of *CTC Sentinel* to the memory of those we lost on September 11, 2001, and in the months and years that followed in the Global War on Terrorism. We dedicate it as well to the professionals who work daily—in a variety of capacities, in ways known and unknown—to keep us safe from terrorism.

Don Ressler and Kristina Hummel, Editors-in-Chief

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Cover: A military vehicle patrols near the border wall between Santa Teresa, New Mexico, and Ciudad Juarez, Chihuahua, Mexico on August 28, 2025. (Herika Martinez/AFP via Getty Images)

From Kandahar to Jalisco: Lessons Learned from the Global War on Terrorism for U.S. Efforts to Degrade Latin America's Cartels

By Brian Michael Jenkins

As Operation Inherent Resolve—the 12-year campaign against the Islamic State—comes to an end this fall, the focus of U.S. counterterrorism strategy has already shifted to destroying Latin America's drug cartels. Islamist-jihadi terrorist groups have dominated the attention of the U.S. military since the 9/11 attacks 25 years ago. The Global War on Terrorism that followed proved to be a complicated endeavor involving a constellation of separate, but overlapping, asymmetrical, irregular conflicts that included conventional, counterterrorist, and counterinsurgency campaigns, special and covert operations, and law enforcement activities carried out in multiple places under varying circumstances. It challenged U.S. intelligence, law enforcement, diplomatic, and military capabilities and can teach us lessons—and warn us of dangers—in what promises to be an even more complicated campaign against the hemisphere's drug traffic.

The 2026 U.S. Counterterrorism Strategy makes eliminating drug cartels from the Western Hemisphere the nation's highest priority. This is not new territory. It follows decades of law enforcement, diplomatic, and military campaigns to address the threats to U.S. security posed by international terrorism and the transnational drug traffic.

In 1971, President Nixon declared drug abuse as “public enemy number one,” launching a campaign that aimed at interdicting the foreign drug supply while treating domestic addiction. The media called it the “war on drugs,” although it did not involve U.S. military operations. It later turned into a continuing national effort involving law enforcement and support for foreign military operations against drug cartels in Latin America and Asia.

As U.S. consumption of illegal drugs more than doubled during the 1970s, U.S. efforts to reduce drug production at the source intensified, especially in Mexico, which in the 1970s supplied 70-90 percent of the high potency marijuana¹ and 75 percent of the heroin² consumed in the U.S. market. This led to increasing U.S. pressure on the Mexican government, which in 1976 launched Operation Condor, a joint effort by the Mexican police and Mexican army, supported by the United States, to destroy cannabis and opium plantations and arrest farmers and traffickers.³

U.S. efforts against Mexico's drug cartels escalated in 1985 when the Guadalajara Cartel kidnapped and murdered a U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency agent. In response, the Reagan administration gradually shut down the southern border, exerting tremendous economic pressure on Mexico to identify and apprehend the cartel

leaders responsible. Two of the cartel leaders were apprehended later that year.⁴ One evaded arrest until 1989.⁵ As of 2026, two remain in prison—one in Mexico, one in the United States. The third served a 40-year sentence and was released in 2025.

The 2026 Counterterrorism Strategy coincides with another anniversary. Thirty years have passed since President Clinton signed the Antiterrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act that enabled the U.S. government to formally designate and impose sanctions on “Foreign Terrorist Organizations.” Initially, the United States approached terrorism as an international phenomenon and sought to prohibit certain tactics and targeting through international conventions.⁶ It did not see the U.S. mission as taking on the world's terrorist groups. The 1996 act focused counterterrorism efforts more on directly targeting the groups. The United States designated al-Qa`ida as a foreign terrorist organization in October 1999, after bombing it in an attempt to kill Usama bin Ladin who had directed the group's attacks on the American embassies in Africa.

The Trump administration made the war on drugs part of the war on terrorism in 2025 when the State Department added six Mexican cartels and two other criminal groups to the list of foreign terrorist organizations. Two more groups in Mexico were added in 2026.

This year also marks the 25th anniversary of the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the United States and the U.S. declaration of the Global War on Terrorism (GWOT). Although the GWOT label was retired in 2013, the counterterrorist campaign has not ended. U.S. forces continue to carry out targeted military strikes on terrorist leaders and networks and are involved in worldwide counterterrorism training missions and support operations. The 2026 Counterterrorism Strategy addresses still active al-Qa`ida and Islamic State fronts as “Legacy Islamist Terrorists,” although it positions them as a second priority after the cartels.

As the United States pivots to action against Latin America's drug cartels, what lessons might be learned from America's long experience in combating the jihadi groups that have commanded U.S. attention for the past quarter-century? While the circumstances differ significantly, the campaigns against al-Qa`ida and its Taliban

Brian Michael Jenkins is a former Green Beret. In 1972, he initiated one of the nation's first research programs on terrorism. His books and monographs include International Terrorism: A New Mode of Conflict; Aviation, Terrorism and Security; Unconquerable Nation; Will Terrorists Go Nuclear?; The Long Shadow of 9/11; Paths to Destruction; and Plagues and Their Aftermath.

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*A burned taxi, allegedly set on fire by organized crime groups in response to an operation targeting the leader of the *Cártel de Jalisco Nueva Generación*, is seen on the Mexican side of the U.S.-Mexico border in Tijuana, Mexico, on February 22, 2026.
(Guillermo Arias/AFP via Getty Images)*

allies, its affiliates, and its successors are instructive. They also offer some cautionary notes.

The purpose of this article is not to challenge the idea that the United States could push harder to break the grip the drug cartels and other criminal groups have on a number of Latin American countries. Given the unarguable devastation caused by drugs, visible on American streets and across communities, millions of Americans—including this author—would support a more effective campaign. Rather, it considers the application of lessons learned from the GWOT to the current campaign against the cartels.

The essay proceeds in four parts. Part I looks at the strategic approach. The *2026 Counterterrorism Strategy* does not lay out a specific course of action for going after Latin America's drug traffickers. However, an overall approach can be discerned from the document, public pronouncements, and recent U.S. actions. Part II examines the broad similarities between the GWOT and a campaign against the cartels—and points out the important differences. Part III goes deeper and catalogues specific lessons from the GWOT and discusses how each might—or might not—apply to the campaign against the cartels. Part IV offers some final observations.

Part I: How Does the United States Intend to Go After the Cartels?

The *2026 Counterterrorism Strategy* “prioritizes the neutralization of hemispheric terror threats by incapacitating cartel operations until these groups are incapable of bringing their drugs, their members, and their trafficked victims into the United States.”

The commander of the U.S. Southern Command, General Francis Donovan, expanded on the approach in an August video: “We will locate, close with, and destroy these threats ... We will apply total systemic friction to these organizations ... We are now changing the game.”⁷ “Friction” is a Clausewitzian term. In contemporary military terminology, it means intentionally creating resistance across an adversary's entire network.

While many aspects of the strategy against the drug cartels are familiar, the 2026 strategy is new in elevating a direct U.S. military role. The tone of the document is more bellicose, reflecting the tenor of public discourse in the current political climate. It communicates greater readiness to use U.S. military force against the cartels. The biggest change, however, is reframing the effort as a continuation of the Global War on Terrorism rather than the continuation of a long-running—and clearly not successful—campaign against the illicit trafficking of drugs into the United States.

This change was previewed when President Trump, on his very first day in office, designated various drug cartels and criminal gangs as foreign terrorist organizations (FTOs).⁸ This had a subtle, but significant effect. It could thereby allow the U.S. government to employ tactics and weapons it has deployed against terrorists, including unilateral military action and targeted killings outside of immediate conflict zones. U.S. policy to counter the drug traffic has been slowly moving in a military direction for decades. If fully implemented as advertised, however, the new approach would represent a sharp break with the past.

The United States has stopped and boarded vessels on the high

seas, seizing cargos and arresting smugglers. The United States has contracted private pilots to fly crop eradication missions.⁹ The United States has supported police and military operations against traffickers with training, equipment, and intelligence, coming close to directing specific operations. U.S. personnel have been present at raids, arrests, and interrogations of suspected growers and traffickers.¹⁰

But until recently, the United States has stopped just short of direct, kinetic U.S. military engagement with the drug traffickers. This changed in 2025 when the United States began bombing boats and crews suspected of smuggling drugs. The *2026 Counterterrorism Strategy* formalizes the change as a new strategy, and it underscores the contrast with the past. The rules of engagement are now the rules of the GWOT.¹¹

The change is not merely rhetorical. New organizational structures are being created to implement the strategy. In August 2026, the U.S. Southern Command created a new headquarters, Joint Task Force Western Hemisphere, to coordinate operations against the region's drug cartels, although official announcements suggest that this would be done in cooperation with regional allies.¹²

Military strikes on drug facilities. Attacking cocaine laboratories and other facilities associated with illicit narcotics production has been a part of efforts to counter drug trafficking for decades. U.S. Army personnel and DEA agents supported the destruction of labs in Bolivia and Peru in the 1980s and 1990s, and in Colombia in the early 2000s. In those cases, the actual destruction was carried out by local forces. Between 2017 and 2019, the United States used American airpower to directly attack heroin and methamphetamine labs in Afghanistan as part of its efforts to cut off Taliban sources of revenue.¹³ Afghan drug kingpins were also apprehended and brought to trial in the United States. The operations in Afghanistan were viewed as part of the GWOT, not part of the global campaign against drug trafficking. The campaign ended when the United States initiated peace talks with the Taliban.¹⁴

Direct U.S. attacks on drug facilities are now very much part of the proposed strategy against Western Hemisphere cartels. The *2026 Counterterrorism Strategy* calls attention to Operation Midnight Hammer, a June 22, 2025, U.S. air and naval strike on key Iranian nuclear facilities as an example of greater American willingness to use its military power to achieve national security objectives.¹⁵ President Trump has raised the idea of direct U.S. attacks on drug facilities in Mexico reportedly in 2020 and again in 2025.¹⁶

In August 2025, the president signed an executive order directing the U.S. military to take action against the cartels, and in November 2025, he proposed U.S. military involvement to help take out Mexico's cartels—the president of Mexico rejected the proposal.¹⁷ There were no immediate attacks on drug processing labs, but in September 2025, the United States began sinking rather than stopping and boarding suspected drug boats in the Caribbean. And on December 28, 2025, the president said that the United States had destroyed a drug boat-loading facility in Venezuela.¹⁸

Interdiction. The *2026 Counterterrorism Strategy* mentions “interdiction” only once, and then in the context of targeting the Russian shadow fleet. However, the document refers to the “dozens of strikes by the Department of War against cartel drug boats, resulting in a more than 90% decrease in maritime drug smuggling into the United States.” For decades, the United States

has attempted to reduce smuggling by interdicting boats suspected of carrying drugs. In recent years, the U.S. Coast Guard, often working with British, Canadian, and Dutch naval vessels,¹⁹ carried out hundreds of stops and seizures a year in the Caribbean, 73 percent of which resulted in significant seizures and arrests.²⁰ The difference now is that in addition to law enforcement operations, the United States is conducting direct military attacks to sink suspected vessels. (The attacks have caused some European allies to pull back on intelligence sharing.²¹)

Targeted killings. During the GWOT, targeted killings became a major component of U.S. efforts against al-Qa`ida, Islamic State, and their affiliates. Framing drug cartels as terrorist organizations facilitates applying the same tactic to cartel kingpins and gang leaders. The *2026 Counterterrorism Strategy* does not specifically mention direct action to capture or kill cartel leaders, but President Trump has publicly stated that the United States provided critical intelligence support to the February 2026 operation that resulted in the death of the leader of the Jalisco New Generation Cartel,²² although Mexico stated that U.S. personnel played no physical role in the actual operation.²³

In June 2026, however, President Trump announced that a U.S. missile strike killed the leader of the Tren de Aragua gang in an operation coordinated with the Venezuelan military. The president said the gang leader's death was retribution for violent crimes committed by gang members illegally in the United States.²⁴

President Trump concludes his foreword to the *2026 Counterterrorism Strategy* with the warning, “If you hurt Americans, or are planning to hurt Americans, ‘We Will Find You and We Will Kill You.’” The threat recalls President Reagan's 1985 warning to terrorists after U.S. fighter aircraft intercepted a civilian airliner carrying terrorists who had hijacked a cruise ship in the Mediterranean and murdered an American citizen. “You can run, but you can't hide.”²⁵ (Reagan credited prizefighter Joe Louis as the original source of the quote.)

Targeting drug traffickers is not a new idea. In 2009, the Pentagon added 50 Taliban-connected drug traffickers to the “kill or capture” priority target list.²⁶ It is not known how many of these named traffickers were ultimately killed or captured—the Pentagon treated Afghanistan as a war zone and did not report detailed statistics. Both the Obama and Trump administrations extensively used targeted killings as a counterterrorist tactic.

U.S. involvement in targeting killings of drug traffickers goes back to efforts to kill or capture Medellín Cartel leader Pablo Escobar in Colombia. In an attempt to force Colombia to cancel its extradition treaty with the United States, Escobar led a terrorist campaign targeting both Colombian officials and U.S. targets in Colombia, which included a car bomb attack on the U.S. Embassy in 1984 and the sabotage of a Colombian commercial airliner in 1989—two U.S. nationals were among the 109 passengers killed in the crash. The United States provided direct intelligence support to the Colombian police operation that resulted in Escobar's death in 1993.²⁷

Removal of complicit state leaders. The *2026 Counterterrorism Strategy* mentions the 2026 Operation Absolute Resolve that resulted in the capture and removal of Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro—described in the *2026 Strategy* as a “narco-terrorist outlaw.” Maduro is in the United States where he currently faces drug trafficking charges. The event is offered as a demonstration of U.S. determination and military prowess.

Immediately after the removal of Maduro, President Trump publicly warned Colombian President Gustavo Petro, who he described as “an illegal drug leader,”²⁸ that “he’ll be next.”²⁹ The two presidents patched things up in a subsequent phone call. A new president of Colombia has since taken office, and joined Shield of the Americas, a U.S.-led military and political coalition aimed at sharing intelligence and coordinating operations against the hemisphere’s drug cartels and transnational gangs.

The removal of Maduro has a historical precedent. In 1989, President George H. W. Bush ordered a military operation to invade Panama and arrest its *de facto* ruler, General Manuel Noriega. Noriega, who earlier had been indicted in the United States on drug trafficking charges, was the target of continuing U.S. efforts to remove him. Events in December 1989 triggered the invasion. The Panamanian government declared that a state of war existed with the United States. The following day, Panamanian forces killed a U.S. Marine officer and wounded another on their way to dinner in Panama City. In a separate incident, a U.S. Navy officer was arrested and beaten by his captors. Protecting the lives of American citizens was given as the first reason for the invasion, followed by defending democracy and combating drug trafficking.³⁰

The U.S. Assistant Attorney who wrote the legal opinion arguing that President Trump had the constitutional authority to order the extraordinary rendition of President Maduro in 2026 relied on an earlier legal opinion written in 1989 by William Barr, then an Assistant Attorney General, arguing that President Bush had the authority to order the invasion of Panama and arrest of Noriega.³¹

Interruption and preemption. President Trump signed an executive order in December 2025 that designated fentanyl and its precursor chemicals as weapons of mass destruction.³² This designation does not change the U.S. criminal code. However, although the penalties for drug trafficking are already high, if U.S. courts accept that “illicit fentanyl is closer to a chemical weapon than a narcotic,” as President Trump has asserted, it theoretically could apply the higher criminal penalties more broadly.

The executive order also reframes the threat posed by drugs as a matter of national security as opposed to law enforcement, thereby justifying military action. The U.S. decision to invade Iraq in 2003 was in part based on the rationale that it was necessary to remove Saddam Hussein in order to prevent Iraq from developing weapons of mass destruction. Although the executive order has not explicitly made this point, the United States theoretically could now make a similar case that, in accord with the 2002 “Bush Doctrine,”³³ the United States can take unilateral, pre-emptive military action or wage preventive war to prevent terrorists (a category that now explicitly includes drug cartels) or rogue states (such as Venezuela under Maduro) from acquiring or using weapons of mass destruction (which the United States has declared now includes fentanyl and its precursor chemicals).

The executive order, coupled with the FTO designations, could also expand the range of defendants facing criminal prosecution or civil liability. The penalties for drug trafficking are severe, ranging from five years to life, depending on the substance, quantity, and number of previous convictions. The penalty for material support to a designated terrorist organization ranges up to 20 years. However, many low-level drug traffickers facing light sentences could now potentially face harsher material support sentences.

Companies that knowingly do business with cartel companies that engage in a variety of legitimate businesses from avocado

exporting to transportation could find themselves charged with providing material support to terrorists. Under the Justice Against Sponsors of Terrorism Act,³⁴ they could theoretically also be held liable for harm done to U.S. citizens injured by the cartel/terrorist actions. Would this extend to victims of drug addiction?

No U.S. “boots on the ground.” The 2026 *Counterterrorism Strategy* emphasizes that the United States will not repeat the failed “forever wars” of past administrations. It could be inferred from this that the United States envisions limiting direct military involvement to one-off U.S. strikes on facilities, joint operations to capture cartel leaders, and unilateral targeted killings, while avoiding large-scale military deployments and anything that resembles counterinsurgent operations or nation-building.

However, Secretary of War Pete Hegseth announced recently that Colombia, Guatemala, and Honduras had agreed to allow the United States to carry out joint military operations against criminal groups on their soil, following the example of Ecuador where a small number of U.S. Special Forces are embedded in Ecuadorian units.³⁵ It is “boots on the ground” similar to current U.S. deployments in Africa, but still short of deploying independent U.S. combat units as the United States did in Afghanistan and Iraq.

An anti-cartel coalition. To expand cooperation throughout the hemisphere, the United States has created a new alliance. On March 7, 2026, President Trump announced the creation of the Shield of the Americas, a U.S.-led military and political coalition aimed at sharing intelligence and coordinating operations against the hemisphere’s drug cartels and transnational gangs. Its operational arm is the Americas Counter Cartel Coalition (ACCC or AC3), which is located at the headquarters of the U.S. Southern Command in Doral, Florida. “The heart of our agreement,” said President Trump, “is a commitment to using lethal military force to destroy the sinister cartels and terrorist networks.”³⁶

The Shield of the Americas builds on previous U.S. efforts to create effective international and hemisphere alliances against drug trafficking organizations. These include the 1988 UN Anti-Drug Convention, the 1990 Cartagena and 1992 San Antonio Summits, the Summit of the Americas, U.S. support for Colombia’s operations against the cartels, and the later U.S. partnership with Mexico in the 2007 Mérida Initiative.

The Shield of Americas currently has 19 members, including Colombia, which joined the alliance on August 12, 2026. Notably absent are Mexico, a major producer of illicit drugs whose cartels increasingly dominate the global drug traffic, and Brazil, a major depot for the transshipment of illicit drugs.³⁷ The two countries account for more than half of Latin America’s total population and approximately 60 percent of Latin America’s combined GDP. Canada, a number of the island nations, and European countries that administer territories in the Caribbean have not joined the Shield of the Americas.

The “Donroe Doctrine.” While the Shield of the Americas elicits the cooperation of Latin American countries in taking on the cartels, Washington has made it clear the United States will not hesitate to act unilaterally to defend its interests throughout the Western Hemisphere. To justify the military to capture Maduro, President Trump invoked the 1823 Monroe Doctrine, warning European powers not to meddle in American affairs. He referred to it as the “Donroe Doctrine.”³⁸

Part II: Similarities and Differences

As every infantry officer learns at Fort Benning, the right answer to almost every question is, 'It depends on the situation and the terrain.' Drug cartels use terrorist tactics to intimidate governments and to terrorize politicians, police, the local population, and each other. Calling them terrorists is not inappropriate. However, they differ from traditional terrorist groups in that their motives are not political but profit oriented. The political and social terrain in Latin America is also very different from the main theaters of the GWOT. Part II examines the similarities, and more importantly, the differences between these two challenges.

A diverse collection of organizations and roles. Both the GWOT and the war against the cartels involve global networks. Latin America's cartels and criminal gangs may comprise an even more complex and diverse collection of global and local actors. The term *cartel* is used in the 2026 *Counterterrorism Strategy* (and here) as a generic label for all criminal groups involved in drug trafficking, but the term can be misleading. The criminal enterprises engaged in drug trafficking and related criminal activities number in the hundreds, ranging from local gangs to large criminal conglomerates under centralized command. Enterprises operating in some countries produce, process, and traffic drugs through family clans and crime groups, but do not resemble Mexico's cartels.³⁹

Other countries are involved as *entrepôts* in the global drug traffic. Paraguay, for example, is South America's largest marijuana producer and distributor, but it is also a major hub for cocaine (as well as arms and tobacco) smuggling.⁴⁰ According to the 2025 Global Organized Crime Index, "reports indicate a significant rise in money laundering" in Paraguay.⁴¹ Taking advantage of endemic corruption, some criminal kingpins and corrupt politicians view the tri-border area as a financial services center for transnational organized crime⁴² where cartels, terrorist groups such as Hezbollah, mafias, and corrupt bankers can come together to do business. The point here is that combating the drug traffic will be different and more complicated than attacking drug traffickers and drug labs.

Cartels and drug-trafficking gangs seek safe havens in areas with weak or no government control. They compete with each other to dominate territory and populations where they engage in a variety of criminal as well as legitimate business activities. Some provide various forms of social assistance, but none have sought to directly govern territory and populations as the Islamic State, or al-Nusra's successor Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham, did in Syria, Hezbollah in Lebanon, or Hamas in Gaza. These are (or were) terrorist proto-states with governing structures and even a measure of political recognition.

The cartels are motivated by profit, not by ideology or religious belief. They do not proselytize, although they bask in the narcoculture that has arisen around them. Their politics are limited to self-protection. Their violence, even when it deliberately creates atrocities, is not just performative, but also pragmatic. It is intended to dominate or expand market space, deter interference by officials, protect turf against rival criminal enterprises, engage in extortion, and ensure loyalty and obedience.⁴³

Illicit drug producers and traffickers could attempt to survive assaults by laying low, increasing operational security, or escalating violence to deter continued operations. The question is whether a protracted assault will bring about their collapse and extinction or instead transform criminal syndicates into more cohesive political insurgencies capable of contesting central government authority.

"Both the GWOT and the war against the cartels involve global networks. Latin America's cartels and criminal gangs may comprise an even more complex and diverse collection of global and local actors."

Some terrorist groups have ascended to proto-states. Can criminal cartels seize central power or become regional states-within-states? Or might they evolve from criminal gangs into permanent, politically powerful undergrounds that co-exist with state power?

Integration in local economies. Both terrorist and criminal organizations are economic predators. Terrorist groups rob banks, kidnap for ransom, run protection rackets, and take over legitimate businesses—some engage in drug production and trafficking. Cartels also engage in criminal activities, but the drug traffic is more integrated into local economies. They extract wealth, but they also bring in money and jobs that would be lost if the cartels were destroyed.⁴⁴ Revenues from the cultivation, processing, and transport of illicit drugs rarely account for more than a few percentage points of national GDPs, even in the major drug-producing countries. Drug production and trafficking is estimated to account for about 4.2 percent of Colombia's economy⁴⁵ and, depending on the source, between six-tenths of a percent and 1.6 percent of Mexico's GDP.⁴⁶

However, it can be a source of income in impoverished rural areas—a more lucrative cash crop for subsistence farmers, a source of jobs for youth with few other options, and for some willing to gamble their lives for a shot at unimagined wealth and notoriety. The livelihood of more than three million people in Mexico depends on the drug traffic.⁴⁷ This also means that destroying cartels can be economically disruptive and destabilizing, leaving behind economic voids, social disruption, political instability, and higher levels of violence.

A different social and political terrain. Although many Latin American countries have long histories of political violence, government institutions tend to be more durable than those in Afghanistan, Syria, Iraq, Yemen, Somalia, Lebanon, Libya, and West Africa—the major battlegrounds of the GWOT. They are not fragile states.

Latin American countries have been independent for more than 200 years. Most Latin American nations are functioning—although, in some cases, flawed—democracies challenged by corruption and weak legal systems. Some have political systems that combine democratic practices with authoritarian elements.⁴⁸ Only two countries—Cuba and Nicaragua—are outright dictatorships. National borders have changed little since the wars of the 19th century, when the biggest change was the U.S. annexation of more than half of Mexico in 1848.

High levels of violent crime in drug producing countries. It is a paradox that some of the most economically advanced countries in Latin America are also some of the most violent countries in the world. Four Latin American countries—Mexico, Chile, Colombia, and Costa Rica—are members of the Organization for Economic

Cooperation and Development (OECD). Three more—Argentina, Brazil, and Peru—are in the formal accession process. Economic progress has not always diminished criminal violence.

Colombia in 2025 had a homicide rate of 26 per 100,000; Brazil, 19; Costa Rica, 17; Mexico, 15; and Peru, 11. (By way of contrast, Haiti had a rate of 68 per 100,000 and Ecuador, 51.⁴⁹) The global homicide rate is about 5.6 per 100,000; the current U.S. rate is 4.1 per 100,000.

Past assaults on cartels resulted in soaring homicide rates. Mexico's murder rate more than doubled during the first five years of President Calderón's war on the cartels, reaching 24 homicides per 100,000 in 2011. In the state of Chihuahua, it increased to 131 per 100,000.⁵⁰

That was then; this is now. Perhaps the most important difference between the GWOT and a future military campaign against the drug cartels is the passage of a quarter century. The world today is different from the world that existed on that fateful day in 2001.

The United States was then seen by many—especially in Washington—as the world's sole superpower. Its reputation for military mastery, although battered in Vietnam, had been at least partially restored by the successful mini-invasion of Panama, the First Gulf War, and reasonable success in the Balkans. The United States is still the world's dominant military power, capable of extraordinary military feats. But it faces an array of challenges that did not exist in 2001.

In 2001, Russia, although presided over by President Putin, had not yet embarked upon its revanchist crusade. Instead, it was battling Chechen separatists. U.S.-Russian relations reached a high point immediately after 9/11. Russia today is an aggressive adversary attempting to roll back neighboring democracies. The war with Ukraine has transformed Russia into a wartime economy and placed it at the forefront of drone warfare modernization.

There were tensions with China in 2001, but China supported the GWOT and U.S.-China economic cooperation improved as the United States granted China normal trade relations. It was not until after the ascension of Xi Jinping in 2013 that China embarked upon its aggressive military buildup in the South China Sea and returned to a more belligerent posture toward Taiwan with President Xi instructing China's military to be ready to invade the island by 2027.⁵¹

NATO was a more unified alliance in 2001, and former communist bloc countries were anxious to join the alliance by demonstrating their willingness to support U.S. military efforts in the GWOT. American attitudes toward Western allies have changed as have allies' attitudes toward America. The United States cannot anticipate the degree of international support it had, at least initially, in the GWOT. Both Russia and China will see strategic benefits from the diversion of U.S. military attention to military operations in the Western Hemisphere.

The U.S. fiscal situation in 2001 was also different. After several years of budget surpluses, the U.S. national debt was under \$6 trillion, roughly 32 percent of the GDP. Today, the gross national debt of the U.S. exceeds \$40 trillion and is close to 100 percent of GDP.⁵²

Attitudes in the United States also have changed. Politically, the United States is more polarized now than it was 25 years ago. Bipartisan agreement appears only in opposition to U.S. involvement in forever wars. The American public shows little

“Perhaps the most important difference between the GWOT and a future military campaign against the drug cartels is the passage of a quarter century. The world today is different from the world that existed on that fateful day in 2001.”

patience for even comparatively shorter conflicts, especially as it faces economic difficulties at home.

The rise of social media early in the century has made national unity more difficult to achieve while creating vulnerabilities that hostile information operations can readily exploit. Trust in the federal government over the past 25 years declined from 51 percent in 2001 to 17 percent in December 2025.⁵³ Today's national leadership must anticipate a deeply fractured, suspicious public.

Part III: Observations and Lessons Learned from the GWOT that Could Apply to the Cartel Fight

What can the Global War on Terrorism, which dominated U.S. national security concerns for much of the past quarter century, teach us that might apply to possible military operations against drug cartels? This third part of the essay catalogues lessons learned—certainly not all—during the GWOT, and how they may apply to a military campaign against the hemisphere's drug cartels.

Before we address the lessons derived from the GWOT itself, which began just nine days after the 9/11 attacks, it is necessary to set the scene with two observations regarding the initial environment. The first is that the “Global War on Terrorism” was not an American initiative; it was an American response to a terrorist attack unprecedented in scale.

The nation reeled in shock on the morning of 9/11. Tens of thousands were feared to have been killed. That figure declined as more people were discovered to have successfully evacuated from the twin towers before they collapsed, but at the time of President Bush's speech to Congress on September 20, more than 4,000 people were still missing or presumed dead.

Intelligence officials had been worried about what al-Qa`ida might be up to, but there had been no public warning. Americans did not know how many more 9/11-scale attacks were on the way. The number of bomb threats soared and had to be taken more seriously. National Guardsmen were deployed at airports, transit hubs, bridges, and tunnels. Discussions of imminent terrorist attacks and alarming scenarios filled the airwaves. Terrorist scenarios deemed far-fetched the day before 9/11 became operative presumptions the day after. No threat could be dismissed. The public demanded and supported action.

The longer-term and more broadly distributed harms from narcoterrorism have not had the same effect. Public health authorities can correctly point to more than a million deaths from drug overdoses and the destruction of families caused by addiction in the past quarter century—the mathematical equivalent of more than a dozen World Trade Center attacks every year. It is a sad statistic, not an event. There is no 9/11 to galvanize the nation,

already weary of war. In 2001, the country was instantly united in grief and anger. It is deeply divided today.

The second observation is how the effort was framed. Calling it a “war” was appropriate in some respects, but it also created confusion and unrealistic expectations. Why it was a war was often misunderstood. In an essay published five days after 9/11 by the *San Diego Union Tribune*, a paper with a large military audience, I wrote:

We have crossed a threshold ... Previous terrorist attacks on the United States were tragedies, but they were remote and somehow seemed tolerable -- the price America paid for being a superpower in a hostile, violent world. We denounced terrorism, we threatened, we arrested some terrorists, we imposed sanctions on state sponsors. And on a few occasions, we responded with a single calibrated military attack. Then life returned to normal. We slept.

*Now, we are going to war -- “war” in bold print, in italics, underlined to distinguish it from our previous wars on terrorism.*⁵⁴

But what made it war? Clearly, it would require a national effort, a whole-of-government approach. Previous terrorist attacks had already shown al-Qa`ida to be an organization capable of large-scale operations. The 9/11 attack confirmed al-Qa`ida’s determination, audacity, and capability. Immediate military action was required to disrupt its central command and disperse its camps.

The argument for calling it a war was not just about words. It was about the necessity of a fundamental change in thinking. In responding to past terrorist attacks, the United States had carried out a single retaliatory attack to demonstrate that going after the United States would have costs. The response to the 9/11 attacks could not be a single attack. It had to be a continuing campaign aimed not at deterrence, but at the destruction of capability.

Finally, like many Vietnam veterans, I carried some personal baggage. If the country was going to put young soldiers, sailors, Marines, and airmen in harm’s way, we owed it to them to demonstrate that they had the nation’s support, expressed through its elected officials—the equivalent of a declaration of war.

The word war prompted criticism. How could war be waged on terrorism—a tactic? In fact, that was not the case. The Authorization for the Use of Military Force passed by Congress on September 18, authorized the president to “use all necessary and appropriate force against those nations, organizations, or persons he determines planned, authorized, committed, or aided the terrorist attacks that occurred on September 11, 2001, or harbored such organizations or persons.”⁵⁵ It defined the enemy broadly—nations, organizations, persons—but it was not against a tactic.

Some instead argued that *war* meant a narrow focus on military operations. However, from the beginning, government officials from President Bush down understood that while military operations would be an essential component of the effort, the GWOT would involve intelligence, law enforcement, military operations, and diplomacy. The biggest challenge turned out to be intelligence.

A major problem of perception in 2001 was that many Americans view war as a finite undertaking, with a precise beginning and a precise end. This is still the case. The 9/11 attacks provided a precise beginning, but a precise end to the GWOT—an armistice,

capitulation by the enemy, a peace treaty ending hostilities—seemed unlikely. I do not think anyone at that time envisioned Usama bin Ladin signing a surrender document on the decks of a U.S. battleship.

President Trump has not *declared* war on the cartels. However, in a confidential memorandum to Congress in October 2025, he reportedly “declared that the United States is in ‘armed conflict’ with drug cartels and will treat their members as ‘unlawful combatants.’”⁵⁶ International law allows countries in armed conflict to kill or detain enemy fighters without trial.

The declaration changes the legal framework for dealing with the drug traffic.⁵⁷ The president did not specifically name which organizations the United States is in armed conflict with, but it presumably includes the cartels and gangs designated as foreign terrorist organizations. And he did not seek—and seems unlikely to seek—a congressional Authorization for the Use of Military Force, which, absent some significant violent action by drug traffickers, he would not likely get.

As with the GWOT, military operations against the hemisphere’s drug cartels are unlikely to reach a clear-cut ending. Clear, achievable objectives will have to be defined for whatever military task the United States assumes. Or the United States must accept that victory in the military sense is unachievable, but that efforts to combat the drug traffic must nonetheless continue. If that is the case, the mode and level of effort must be sustainable.

Lessons Learned: Changing Expectations and Goals

1. The goals of the GWOT were continuously redefined. The GWOT did not start out to be what it became. In hindsight, its trajectory proved unpredictable. Initially, the GWOT was envisioned as a narrowly defined campaign against those responsible for 9/11 and those who harbored them, but the mission quickly expanded.

In his first State of the Union speech in January 2002, President Bush introduced the term “Axis of Evil” to describe regimes sponsoring terror and pursuing weapons of mass destruction (WMDs). He named three countries: Iraq, Iran, and North Korea. The United States had already designated the three as sponsors of terrorism. All three were suspected of developing weapons of mass destruction.

The elision of 9/11 and weapons of mass destruction reflected American apprehension. Between the rise of contemporary terrorism in the 1970s and the 9/11 attacks, terrorists had escalated their attacks by two orders of magnitude, from killing tens in their bloodiest attacks in the 1970s to killing thousands on 9/11. Extrapolating to future threats, officials feared that terrorists would further escalate to attacks causing tens of thousands or even hundreds of thousands of casualties, a level of violence that could only be achieved with the use of WMD.

The fears were understandable. Al-Qa`ida was known to have made attempts to acquire fissile material in the 1990s, and in an interview two months after 9/11, Usama bin Ladin claimed to have chemical and nuclear weapons.<sup>58</sup> Documents and other material found in al-Qa`ida training camps confirmed the group’s interest in WMD,⁵⁹ although they also revealed its limited capabilities.⁶⁰

Given concerns about Iraq’s WMD program and interpretations of Saddam’s ties to terror organizations, taking down Saddam Hussein became part of the GWOT.

Meanwhile, the list of terrorist groups targeted in the GWOT also expanded. In 2002, when asked whether the GWOT would

include going after Hezbollah, the Deputy Secretary of State responded affirmatively: Hezbollah had American blood on its hands. The United States would take it down ... the United States would take down *all* terrorist groups, one after another.⁶¹ It was the high point of American hubris. Nemesis struck back.

America's invasion of Iraq in 2003 provoked a fierce resistance and reinvigorated al-Qa`ida, creating a new challenge for the GWOT. Additional U.S. troop deployments and the enlistment of Iraqi tribal fighters ultimately suppressed the insurgency, but that diverted resources from a growing Taliban resurgence in Afghanistan. By 2008, the situation had reached a dire state. A U.S. troop surge in 2009 temporarily stabilized the conflict, but did not reverse its trajectory, leading to a bloody stalemate.

In 2011, the United States faced new challenges in Libya and Syria where the Arab Spring had led to civil war and growing terrorism. Determined not to send American ground forces into Libya, the United States contributed to the overthrow of the Qaddafi regime with air and naval power. In Syria, the United States supported selected rebel formations, but with more experienced fighters and ample resources, Islamists increasingly dominated the rebellion.

The rapid expansion of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and its sweep across Syria and Iraq in 2014 made it the greater threat. U.S. policy pivoted from bringing down Assad to defeating the newly created Islamic State. Washington assembled an international coalition to assist the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), an assemblage of armed groups comprised mostly of Kurdish fighters who would do the fighting on the ground supported by coalition airpower. Several thousand U.S. forces were also deployed to support SDF operations. Five years of hard fighting with heavy casualties borne by the SDF ultimately dismantled the Islamic State.

In sum, the original goals of the GWOT expanded from routing the Taliban and destroying al-Qa`ida, which saw temporary success. The United States expanded the scope of its campaign to bringing down *all* terrorist organizations, but that ambition was interrupted when the United States pivoted to eliminating the threat that rogue states or terrorist organizations might acquire weapons of mass destruction. At the same time, U.S. goals were also expanded to include nation-building and democracy promotion.

A deteriorating situation in Iraq required U.S. additional resources, but then the United States had to turn back to Afghanistan to halt an advance by Taliban insurgents. It then had to intervene in Iraq and Syria again to crush the Islamic State. By the time the last Islamic State stronghold fell in Syria, Americans had tired of the war. Withdrawal became the paramount U.S. goal.

These shifts resulted from America's overconfidence, the unforeseen consequences of U.S. actions, external events that altered strategic calculations, the emergence of new threats, and shifts in American attitudes and policy. From the invasion of Afghanistan to the capture of Baghdad, the United States had the strategic initiative. After that, we mostly reacted to events.

Taking down Latin America's drug cartels and gangs will take years. It will likely transcend several presidential terms. The geographic scale of the hemispheric battleground and the dimensions and diversity of the drug traffic suggest a multifront, multidimensional, multi-year campaign. As opportunities arise and as unforeseen events occur, priorities will necessarily shift. Flexibility is not drift, but it is important that the United States has agreed-upon, clearly articulated, and achievable long-term

“By designating Latin America’s drug cartels and criminal gangs as foreign terrorist organizations and describing military efforts to destroy them as part of the current counterterrorism strategy, the United States is portraying the anticipated campaign as a continuation of the GWOT, addressing a new set of foes.”

objectives to guide its efforts to counter cartels.

2. The GWOT was an exceptionally long campaign. Officially, the Global War on Terrorism lasted 11 years and eight months, from the 9/11 attacks on September 11, 2001, until May 23, 2013, when President Obama declared “Beyond Afghanistan, we must define our effort not as a boundless ‘global war on terror,’ but rather as a series of persistent, targeted efforts to dismantle specific networks of violent extremists that threaten America.”⁶² The administration decreed that henceforth U.S. military efforts against terrorists would be referred to as Overseas Contingency Operations.

The GWOT was actually a series of long wars, including in Afghanistan (2001-2021), combat operations against Abu Sayyaf in the Philippines, Iraq (2003-2011) and later against affiliated Islamic State networks active in the country, and Operation Inherent Resolve (2014-2026).^a It is likely that contingency operations against terrorist organizations in Africa and Asia will continue beyond in the years ahead. The Global War on Terrorism Expeditionary Medal continues to be awarded.

Some would argue that current hostilities against Iran, although strategically different in many respects, are part of a long arc of hostilities that began with Iranian-sponsored acts of terrorism beginning in 1979, persisting through the identification of Iran as a member of the Axis of Evil after 9/11, and continuing today. The conflict in Iran may also be viewed as the continuation of counter-proliferation efforts that led to overthrow of Saddam Hussein in Iraq, the attempt to bring down the Iranian-supported Assad regime Syria, and most recently U.S. attacks on sites associated with Iran's nuclear program.

The military campaign against the terrorists who carried out the 9/11 attacks, their successors, their affiliates, their allies, and the acolytes they inspire abroad has lasted a quarter of a century, five administrations, and four presidents.

By designating Latin America's drug cartels and criminal gangs as foreign terrorist organizations and describing military efforts to destroy them as part of the current counterterrorism strategy, the United States is portraying the anticipated campaign as a continuation of the GWOT, addressing a new set of foes. That gives relevance to learning lessons from the GWOT thus far.

a The complete list of defined operations/Overseas Contingency Operations (OCO) during the GWOT is much longer than what is mentioned here. For more, see “Defense Casualty Analysis System,” U.S. Department of Defense, n.d.

Looking at future U.S. military action against the hemisphere's drug traffickers as a new phase of the "War on Drugs" initiated 55 years ago makes it equally important to review that effort's even longer history for applicable lessons. (My article in *CTC Sentinel* a year ago was a first cut at outlining some of these lessons and related implications.⁶³)

Americans are a practical people who understandably oppose "forever wars." But forever or very long military contests are not exceptional. What may be exceptional is the American notion of finite wars.

The Cold War was a continuing contest that comprised a series of armed conflicts on different battlefields. Some of these conflicts, like the Korean War and the Vietnam War, directly engaged U.S. forces. Others were fought entirely through allies and proxies. The shooting wars punctuated a continuing intelligence, political, and information war that lasted four decades. With a hiatus in the 1990s and early 2000s, President Putin's determination to recover Soviet territory and again dominate former Soviet satellites is seen by some as a renewal of the Cold War.⁶⁴ Actually, Putin's own writings reach back further to imperial Russian history and the conquests of previous tsars.⁶⁵

Contemporary warfare in the form of information warfare, cyber warfare, espionage, sabotage, economic warfare, and cognitive warfare is incessant and may be endless. Efforts against ordinary and organized crime do not cease. No one expects the FBI or police departments to one day announce that we have defeated crime and can demobilize.

But while law enforcement is widely viewed as a necessary and enduring task, military hostilities are subject to different calculations based upon perceptions of the threat, casualties, and visible results or lack of progress. Active hostilities start a clock running. If they are forced upon by existential threats or serious attacks on the United States, like 9/11, they prompt unity and elicit support, although it is fragile. It is difficult to sustain national cohesion and public support for prolonged military interventions to achieve distant or uncertain goals or in complex political situations.⁶⁶

Existential wars forced upon us may provoke fewer domestic objections, suggesting caution in initiating wars of choice. Confining military involvement to short engagements avoids portrayal as a quagmire, which was part of the 2026 *Counterterrorism Strategy's* goal of high intensity but short campaigns aimed at the five most dangerous jihadi groups. However, sudden, brief applications of military power may have limited strategic effect. As a result of its experience in Afghanistan and other conflicts in the post-9/11 period, the United States has learned that destruction of the enemy force does not always translate into defeat of the enemy, who can continue the contest in other ways.

Increased efforts to significantly disrupt the drug traffic and reduce the pernicious effects of highly addictive drugs on American society are likely to be supported, but a military campaign against the hemisphere's cartels seems unlikely to be quickly concluded. To achieve transformational results, the effort must be sustainable over a long time span. But in order to mitigate the U.S. public's distaste for prolonged military campaigns, visible progress will be necessary.

Lessons Learned: Organizational Change

3. The GWOT required the United States to reorganize its national security structure and procedures as well as its

intelligence collection and sharing. There were dramatic changes in intelligence collection and analysis, homeland security, and law enforcement during the GWOT. American diplomacy faced new challenges. It had to enlist international support, incentivize intelligence sharing, and gain law enforcement cooperation far beyond America's traditional allies.

U.S. armed forces and the CIA would both be involved in overt and covert operations, sometimes side by side. The United States could draw on prior experience from the Vietnam War and earlier counterinsurgency support operations abroad, although by 2001, the post-Vietnam War reduction in force and deliberate shift in strategy away from irregular warfare had eliminated much of the institutional knowledge. Meanwhile, the passage of time and retirements had wiped out much of the historical memory.

Further reductions came with the so-called "peace dividend" at the end of the Cold War. This included significant reductions in the CIA's clandestine services during that period. These were exacerbated by new guidelines that restricted the employment of sources with poor human rights records. Lack of local cultural knowledge and language capabilities were chronic problems in the military and other federal agencies involved in counterterrorism. The military interventions of the 1990s, and often overlooked experience in going after Colombia's drug cartels in the 1990s, gave the United States more recent experience in dealing with unconventional warfare, but much had to be learned again.

The nature of the terrorist threat allowed no distinction between the front line and the home front. Terrorists made no distinction between combatants and non-combatants. This required the seamless merging of foreign and domestic intelligence and preparing for terrorist-caused disasters at home. Aviation security, border protection, vetting foreign travelers and immigrants, and domestic intelligence collection all became components of national security. They had to improve and be better coordinated while maintaining fundamental civil liberties.

The GWOT also required a reconfiguration of intelligence collection and sharing. The *Congressional Joint Inquiry into the Intelligence Activities before and after the Terrorist Attacks of September 11, 2001* and the *9/11 Commission Report* catalogued a number of failures, including outdated Cold War mentalities, the lack of priority given to terrorist threats, analytical failures, and most famously, a "failure to connect the dots." This led to the most profound reorganization of U.S. intelligence since the National Security Act of 1947.

The CIA's budget was significantly increased after the 9/11 attacks. Barriers to intelligence sharing were lowered. Congress created the Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI) to better coordinate the multiple federal agencies involved in intelligence collection; previously, the Director of the CIA served as the Director of National Intelligence. The National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC) was created to receive intelligence from all sources, and to assemble, analyze, integrate, and pass it on quickly for action.

The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) was created to improve coordination of domestic agencies involved in security and response to natural and man-made disasters, and to act as a bridge between federal intelligence agencies and local police. DHS also encouraged the creation of fusion centers—state-owned entities to collate local and federal intelligence. The 80 fusion centers (FCs) were also connected to the National Network of Fusion Centers.

Fearing that it might be replaced by a new domestic intelligence

agency, the FBI rapidly implemented changes. It elevated counterterrorism and counterintelligence to the top of its priorities. It established a Directorate of Intelligence, which, along with its Counterterrorism Division (CTD) and Counterintelligence Division (CD), was placed under a newly created National Security Branch. (A Weapons of Mass Destruction Directorate was later added.) It created a Counterterrorism Analysis Branch and increased the number of Joint Terrorist Task Forces (JTTFs) to enhance cooperation between the Bureau and police. It also embedded Field Intelligence Groups into each of its field offices to manage and coordinate local intelligence.⁶⁷

While U.S. military forces were dismantling the ability of foreign terrorists to mount new attacks, these changes to intelligence collection, analysis, and dissemination were intended to ensure that the United States would not again be caught off guard in preventing a major terrorist attack on American soil. Some worked better than others.

Over the years, many came to see the ODNI as a needless bureaucratic layer that added little to intelligence analysis and called for its abolition.⁶⁸ The NCTC worked well as hub for analyzing and disseminating intelligence to state and local police departments, but it was limited in handling intelligence pertaining to domestic terrorist threats, which remained the purview of the FBI and FCs.

Relying on undercover operations, U.S. law enforcement was successful in uncovering and disrupting more than 80 percent of jihadi plots in the United States.⁶⁹ This became more difficult as terrorist operations increasingly involved lone operators inspired by jihadi digital content but otherwise unconnected with any organization. There were some civil rights objections to sting operations, alleging that they led to prosecution of aspirations that defendants had no capability of fulfilling.⁷⁰ Prosecutors responded that defendants were prosecuted on the basis of intent, not capability,⁷¹ as is consistent with U.S. law. Police undercover operations were designed to demonstrate, sometimes on video, that suspects were willing to press the button setting off what they believed was a real bomb that would cause mass casualties.

Local police frequently complained that cooperation with the FBI was a one-way street. Fusion centers had mixed results. Some were highly effective, others far less so.⁷² Little information came up through Homeland Security channels. Lateral communications between fusion centers hardly existed.⁷³

Some of the GWOT's experience and legacy will prove useful in going after the cartels. However, in the view of the author, U.S. officials should not see what the United States has now as the prototype. The cartels and drug traffic to the United States differ significantly from the GWOT, and planners must be prepared, as they were in 2001, to make fundamental changes. The counterterrorist infrastructure will provide a starting point, but a campaign against the hemisphere's drug cartels will also require new configurations of institutions, new protocols for intelligence sharing, and new rules of engagement.

The *2026 Counterterrorism Strategy* suggests that the war on the cartels will be waged both abroad and domestically, but beyond indicating that illegal alien criminals will be removed, it does not indicate whether the military efforts abroad will be accompanied by an offensive on domestic drug distribution or escalated efforts to reduce consumption. Nonetheless, a military campaign against drug traffickers abroad will require close coordination with domestic law enforcement:

- to monitor the effects of efforts aimed at interrupting the flow of drugs on the supply and price of drugs in the domestic market and deal with any local increases in violence as a result;
- to discern changes in drug smuggling techniques or routes;
- to prevent traffickers from evading U.S. attacks by relocating synthetic drug production sites to urban locations or in tunnels; and
- to identify and prevent any efforts by cartel operatives to carry out direct attacks in the United States or instigate local gangs to do so.

This will require an efficient two-way sharing of intelligence, allowing immediate feedback to support effects-based operations abroad and informing local law enforcement of any intelligence about cartel operations in the United States.

At a practical level, the campaign against drug cartels will require close coordination of efforts by the Departments of State, Defense, Justice, Treasury, and Homeland Security, and the Intelligence Community; specifically, the CIA, DEA, FBI, OFAC, FinCEN, Coast Guard, and CBP. Military planners will depend on intelligence from an array of sources, not all of whom will be accustomed to working under military command. The bureaucratic contests may exceed the pushing and shoving seen during the GWOT. Given the financial motivation of narcoterror organizations, the intelligence infrastructure created during the GWOT to counter terrorist financing provides a solid foundation for intelligence efforts focused on countering the drug cartels, but new challenges will arise. The cartels have enormous experience in moving large volumes of cash. They also may more easily resort to huge bribes to conceal and facilitate their operations. Revealing the sources of terrorist financing could sometimes embarrass political donors, but the beneficiaries of huge bribes from drug cartels could include high-ranking government officials who can impede investigations. Another challenge is that the vast profits generated by the drug traffic are cycled into the legitimate economy, which provides additional incentives for concealment. The most striking example may be Wachovia Bank's laundering of an estimated \$350 billion for Mexican drug cartels.⁷⁴

Lessons Learned: Execution and Evolutionary Dynamics

4. What began as a global war in name quickly became a truly global contest. President Bush declared the Global War on Terrorism in October 2001. At the time, it was focused primarily on Afghanistan but soon after was expanded to Iraq. But the GWOT became truly global, involving military operations throughout the Middle East, in Western and Southeast Asia, and in Africa as well as covert operations elsewhere. Ultimately, the GWOT and subsequent Overseas Contingency Operations connected with counterterrorism involved military operations in more than 80 countries.⁷⁵

The *2026 Counterterrorism Strategy* envisions actions against the cartels in the Western Hemisphere. Mexico, Central America, the Caribbean, Colombia, Venezuela, Ecuador, Peru, and Bolivia are obvious theaters, but other countries are more involved as smuggling routes and sources of ancillary services. That is already a vast theater of operations; however, Latin America's drug cartels have tentacles reaching across Africa into Europe and operatives in the United States. The campaign against the cartels may also involve efforts to cut off the supply of precursor chemical shipments from China and India. It will truly be a global contest.



*A UH-60 Black Hawk gunner is pictured during a resupply flight in Kandahar, Afghanistan, on May 6, 2021.
(Marcus Yam/Los Angeles Times via Getty Images)*

While it was an understandable and necessary response to 9/11, as it continued over the years, the GWOT evolved into a distraction for the United States, diverting attention and sapping resources from other national security challenges. The war against the cartels, given its global nature, has the potential to evolve into a similar distraction, if not carefully managed. And some U.S. adversaries will attempt to ensure that it does.

5. A global war made allies essential. The United States had allies ready to assist it in 2001. For the first time in its history, NATO immediately invoked Article 5, declaring that the terrorist attacks on the United States would be considered attacks on all. For a while after 9/11, relations with Russia improved, and the attack reduced tensions with China. The United Nations also played a useful role.

Al-Qa`ida itself dispersed its senior leadership cadre to different locations, which necessitated the enlistment of additional allies. In the years following 9/11, its operatives and alumni of its training camps carried out terrorist attacks in Pakistan, India, Tunisia, Yemen, Indonesia, Kenya, Saudi Arabia, Morocco, Turkey, the Philippines, Egypt, and Jordan. Some of these countries were already allies of the United States, but some of the others may not have seen themselves as active participants in the GWOT until terrorist attacks put them on the frontline. As time passed during the GWOT, the United States came to increasingly view and rely on allies and state partners not simply to avoid deploying large numbers of U.S. troops, but also as a more sustainable form of counterterrorism. Both the Biden and second Trump

administrations emphasized counterterrorism burden-sharing.

The GWOT also required alliances with non-state actors. The United States quickly brought down the Taliban in 2001 with U.S. airpower supporting the Northern Alliance (officially the National United Islamic Front for the Salvation of Afghanistan), an assemblage of Afghan minority groups that opposed the primarily Pashtun Taliban.

In 2002 discussions with Pentagon planners about possible force structure after the fall of the Taliban, I argued against a large U.S. military deployment. I had been invited because of my experience with the Civilian Irregular Defense Force, a tribal army created by U.S. Special Forces in Vietnam. No matter how carefully U.S. forces followed the rules of engagement, direct engagements would mean American soldiers killing Afghans, which in Pashtun culture demands retribution.

Instead, I suggested the development of alliances with local tribes, including Pashtuns, who could be organized by smaller contingents of U.S. Special Forces. In Vietnam, approximately 2,000 U.S. Special Forces were able to train and field an army of nearly 50,000 local soldiers who were effective because they were local.⁷⁶ Seth Jones and Arturo Muñoz at RAND argued along the same lines.⁷⁷ The idea was rejected as U.S. planners feared it would only perpetuate ethnic conflict and local warlordism when the objective of the United States was to create a united nation with a national army.

In the invasion of Iraq, the United States was assisted by local allies that included the Kurdish Peshmerga and Shi`a opposition

groups. Struggling against the Iraqi resistance, the United States in 2006 enlisted and armed Arab Sunni tribes that had been victimized by the brutality of the al-Qa`ida-led resistance. Calling themselves the “Sons of Iraq,” tens of thousands of Sunni tribal soldiers enlisted in the effort, which greatly weakened the resistance movement.

In later operations against the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), the United States provided supporting airpower and artillery fire to Kurdish and Arab forces that comprised the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), which fought the ground war and bore the brunt of the casualties. During the four-year campaign, the SDF suffered 11,000 dead and 21,000 wounded.⁷⁸

The alliances with non-state actors often proved to be transactional and temporary. When the United States withdrew from Iraq in 2011, the Sunni tribal forces of Anbar province were abandoned and the Shi`a government left behind failed to live up to its promises. Many of these Sunnis became recruits for ISIS and swelled its ranks in 2014.

A campaign against Latin America’s drug cartels will require local government allies to succeed. The United States has sought to develop the Shield of Americas and Americas Counter Cartel Coalition, a military alliance to dismantle the cartels. Nineteen governments have joined.

Enlisting local non-state actors in a way that does not subvert national unity will be more difficult in Latin America. For example, some communities in Mexico have organized their own defense forces (*auto-defensas*) to protect local populations against the depredations of drug traffickers and criminal gangs. The attitude of the Mexican authorities toward the *auto-defensas* ranges from hostility to attempts to coopt them into broader security arrangements.⁷⁹ There have been similar developments in Peru⁸⁰ and Colombia.⁸¹ In some cases, these have been brutally crushed by the traffickers. In other cases, they have been corrupted, becoming predators rather than protectors. In yet other cases, they are the proxies of wealthy landlords who use them to suppress political opponents. Still, we should not rule out arrangements with local non-government forces as potential proxies.

Yet, it should also be remembered that alliances work better as pronouncements and are often strained when military action starts. Even where Latin American governments and public opinion support action against the cartels, maintaining cooperation will remain a prerequisite to success, and will likely be a continuing diplomatic challenge.

6. The GWOT was a complicated endeavor. It involved a constellation of separate, but overlapping, asymmetrical, irregular conflicts that included conventional, counterterrorist, and counterinsurgency efforts, special and covert operations, and law enforcement activities carried out in multiple places under varying circumstances. Nation-building was part of the effort in Afghanistan and Iraq, but was later abandoned as the United States sought to limit its military role and political objectives.

The semantics signaled the change. What was originally framed as a global strategic effort to destroy terrorist organizations worldwide and alter the conditions that led to terrorism became a series of overseas contingency operations, reflecting the continued necessity to respond to imminent threats or disasters, and a greater determination to bound the level of commitment and avoid open-ended engagements. Over time, the campaign became more

dispersed, more kinetic, and more transactional.

A campaign against the drug cartels will inherit America’s continuing reluctance to make long-term commitments. The preference will understandably be to exploit U.S. military capabilities for sophisticated, sharp, intense applications of military power, that inflict physical damage on drug cartel organizations and disrupt operations. However, military success can translate into permanent gain only if the host country is able to take advantage of the disarray created by U.S. action and permanently alter the situation—or if the United States is able to exploit reductions in the supply of drugs to permanently reduce consumption.

The GWOT also mixed law enforcement with war; it got complicated. The United States got tangled up in legal procedures, then stuck with *ad hoc* solutions that turned out to be permanent headaches. What to do with captured combatants was one. Sending them to Guantanamo created new problems. Some U.S. leaders wanted to extend rules of war into the domestic space, arguing that those arrested in the United States should be treated as enemy combatants, not defendants. Two cases, *Rumsfeld v. Hamdi* and *Rumsfeld v. Padilla* went to the Supreme Court, which reached a different decision in each case. In the case of Hamdi, a U.S. citizen captured in Afghanistan, the court upheld the government’s authority to hold him as an enemy combatant, but ruled that he was entitled to be heard by an independent decision maker. In the case of Padilla, a U.S. citizen arrested in Chicago, the Supreme Court rejected it on technical grounds. A lower court ruled in the government’s favor, but before the case could be appealed to the Supreme Court, the administration turned Padilla over to a civilian court for trial.⁸²

A military-led campaign against cartels and other drug traffickers is likely to be even more complicated. The United States will need to establish the status of its opponents, rules of engagement, and handling of captives.

The GWOT combined military operations and law enforcement. More importantly, it was easier to separate them with the military assuming the lead in overseas contingency operations and law enforcement engaged in domestic operations. (Indeed, it became more complicated in practice, particularly regarding how captures, interrogations, and custody changed hands.)

Attacking the cartels is not simply warfare against a different foe. It will require a more integrated effort abroad and a stronger home game in order to maintain support for counter cartel operations both here and overseas.

Lessons Learned: Impacts, Costs, and Outcomes

7. What the GWOT achieved is still being debated. The results are mixed. The invasion of Afghanistan, rapid defeat of the Taliban forces, and dispersal of al-Qa`ida fighters reduced the immediate threat of further al-Qa`ida attacks. The initial assault bought time for efforts to improve intelligence, enlist allies, and make al-Qa`ida’s operating environment more dangerous. The effort decimated al-Qa`ida’s leadership—in the first six months after the invasion, al-Qa`ida lost 16 of its 25 key leaders, the Taliban lost 21 of its top 25 people.<sup>83</sup> The invasion also deprived al-Qa`ida of training camps in a safe sanctuary where it had been able to attract and prepare thousands of recruits, who provided a continuing supply of talent available to the organization’s operational leaders. Even with its command element in hiding or on the run, al-Qa`ida was able to instigate or inspire further terrorist attacks across the globe,

“The most significant similarity will be the challenge in translating military operations into measurable or even visible achievements ... The strategy will require clear objectives and meaningful metrics.”

but these were all pre-9/11 scenarios—bombings, armed assaults, attempts to shoot down or sabotage commercial airliners.

The continuing assault also enabled the United States and its allies to harden targets and improve domestic intelligence collection to thwart foreign-instigated and local terrorist plots. Although these measures made America far safer than it appeared to be in the immediate shadow of 9/11, it took longer for Americans to feel safer.⁸⁴ Success or failure was a matter of perceptions, but the absence of any attack in the United States approximating 9/11 is convincing criterion of success.

Subsequent U.S. operations succeeded in capturing or killing al-Qa`ida leaders, including bin Ladin and then his successor 11 years later. These attacks complicated communications and disrupted command, but the organization has survived through its affiliates, progeny, and supporters abroad.

Books and articles describing our failures began to appear in the early 2000s, some just months after the GWOT began.^b Critics argue that the GWOT did not eliminate the threat. The GWOT inflicted heavy costs on their organizations, but it did not dent their determination. Although currently embedded in local insurgencies in Africa and Asia, al-Qa`ida and the Islamic State remain resilient, adaptive, and opportunistic as demonstrated by their ability to exploit the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, the Arab Spring in 2011, and local conflicts in Africa where jihadi groups are expanding. We can be sure that the jihadi enterprise will exploit any new events to make a comeback.

U.S. efforts to create functioning democracies in Afghanistan and Iraq have failed. Its removal of tyrants in Iraq and Libya led to chaos. America lost the war in Afghanistan, which is again under an oppressive Taliban government that gives al-Qa`ida sanctuary. Iraq remains divided along ethnic and sectarian lines; pro-Iranian militias remain politically, economically, and militarily powerful.⁸⁵ In Syria, the United States has recognized the de facto government led by the group Washington had designated as a foreign terrorist organization. The United States has abandoned—some would say betrayed⁸⁶—its Kurdish allies in both Iraq and Syria. The civil war rages on in Yemen, where al-Qa`ida continues to operate. Al-Shabaab continues to wage an insurgency in Somalia.

In my view, our biggest failure in the GWOT was not creating durable security arrangements capable of protecting society and ensuring political stability. This failure was illustrated by the rapid

collapse of the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces shortly after the U.S. withdrawal in 2021 and the rapid rise of the Islamic State in Iraq after the U.S. departure in 2011. (The same failure was evident in the collapse of South Vietnam in 1975, and the reasons are probably the same.)

The United States creates large Western-style, highly centralized armed forces dependent on advanced weapons systems. They are often beyond what the recipient country can afford without continued U.S. assistance or defense contractor support. To a degree this is understandable as the United States wants to support strong democratic nations, avoiding the risks of tribalism or warlordism, but there is a built-in tendency to create clones of the U.S. military. Lobbying by defense contractors adds pressure to equip military assistance recipients with weapons systems that will require continuing technical support.

Lack of government legitimacy, cronyism, and corruption are additional reasons for failure in recipient countries. Ghost soldiers pad payrolls. Corrupt officers make poor commanders. Soldiers lack the will to fight. Due to unrealistic timelines and domestic political reasons, the United States also tends to pull out too fast, too soon, leaving behind fragile structures that create a pernicious sense of abandonment. The rapid collapse of the Afghan national forces was not any more surprising than the fall of South Vietnam in 1975.

Why was it so difficult to translate military power into transformative achievements? While avoiding a broader debate about the limits of military power versus diplomacy in bringing fundamental permanent political change, there were some obvious difficulties.

The political terrain on which the United States fought the GWOT—Afghanistan, the Middle East, Africa’s Sahel, and Somalia—had a long history of turmoil. Iron-fisted tyrants could impose order, but these regions were traditionally theaters of continuous or recurring armed conflicts. Autocratic rule alternated with civil war and anarchy. American ambitions to create liberal democracies would require far more resources and more time than the United States was willing to invest, and even then, might not take root.

The social terrain was divided along ethnic and sectarian lines. The absence of trustworthy public institutions preserved tribal loyalties. Ideologies based on religion created hostility toward non-believers, infidels, heretics, apostates. Religious fanaticism created fighters undeterred by death—their duty was to God, their sole constituent. They could be killed but not easily deterred.

Latin American countries have nominally democratic governments, although they have also experienced lengthy periods under dictators and military regimes. They have more developed economies, although in some countries, these have coexisted with insurgencies and powerful drug cartels.

Latin America’s cartels are not driven by fanaticism, but by profit, which can nevertheless be an equally persistent drive. The lure of unimaginable wealth and power, even if only for a brief moment, in societies that offer little material reward can also turn out young men willing to kill and die young. Some of the drug cartels’ *sicarios* are traumatized and desensitized to be psychopaths.

The most significant similarity will be the challenge in translating military operations into measurable or even visible achievements. This relates to the strategic objectives. Is the goal the reduction of the drug traffic, resulting in the reduction of illicit drug consumption in the United States? Or is the goal breaking the

^b Peter Bergen’s just published book, *All the Presidents’ Wars: Twenty-Five Years of America’s War on Terror* (W. W. Norton & Company), is the latest contribution to the corpus of work examining the legacy of the GWOT. Bergen describes inadequate planning, strategic blunders, miscalculations, missed opportunities, and unintended consequences.

growing power that cartels exercise over governments—reversing state capture, while preventing gangs in the United States from expanding their power? The strategy will require clear objectives and meaningful metrics.

8. The GWOT was an expensive undertaking with long-term economic consequences. According to the Costs of War Project, in addition to the human toll, the total U.S. budgetary costs of the GWOT by 2021 surpassed \$8 trillion.⁸⁷ This figure includes the costs of military operations, homeland security, projected obligations for veterans care, and interest on borrowed money.⁸⁸

In contrast to previous wars, the costs were not covered through budget reallocations, increased taxes, or sale of war bonds, but primarily by government borrowing, thereby increasing the national debt. The growth of global capital markets made it easy to borrow money, initially at low rates. There was no politically inconvenient separate war budget. Instead, Congress allocated the money through a continuing series of emergency funding measures outside the normal budgeting process.⁸⁹ Instead of belt-tightening or tax increases that would alienate voters, the national deficit grew.

In 2001, the United States was in a good financial position. The national debt had been significantly reduced. The country actually ran budget surpluses between 1998 and 2001,⁹⁰ which it used to pay down the national debt. U.S. debt represented about 55% of GDP then. Today's publicly held debt represents 123% of GDP, surpassing the percentage just after World War II, but the global economy is very different today.

By avoiding large-scale troop deployments and focusing on limited kinetic strikes and military assistance, the costs of military operations against Latin America's cartels can be kept down. The costs of drug interdiction operations in the Caribbean and Eastern Pacific and military operations in Venezuela are in the neighborhood of \$5 billion.⁹¹

If efforts against the cartels avoid large U.S. troop and naval deployments and large-scale use of costly ordnance, the financial costs should be comparatively low. If, however, retaliatory actions by the cartels obliged the United States to commit troops, then costs could increase significantly.

9. The effects of the GWOT on military organization, roles, and readiness were resisted in the military. Many in the military saw counterterrorism as an inappropriate mission for the armed forces. The debacle of the Vietnam War cast a long shadow. American public opinion had turned not only against that war but against the military institution itself. U.S. experience in Lebanon and the grinding wars in Afghanistan and Iraq only intensified the military's aversion to irregular warfare.

In the eyes of many senior officials, the continuing war against terrorism also compromised the ability of the U.S. armed forces to perform other critical missions. It consumed limited resources and imposed heavy burdens on military personnel who faced repeated tours of duty at a time when a revanchist Russia and increasingly aggressive China posed growing threats. The 2018 National Defense Strategy represented a determined effort to pivot away from counterterrorism and counterinsurgency and focus on great power competition.⁹²

U.S. commanders had to accept that terrorists would continue to pose a threat. By 2018, the United States had already shifted to counterterrorism without counterinsurgency by employing proxies

“We cannot assume that because cartels compete with one another in various ways—sometimes in lethal and bloody ways—for turf, control, or influence, that they will remain divided in the face of broader and sustained offensives.”

and limiting U.S. participation to air support, drone strikes, special operations, and the deployment of small Special Forces contingents to provide training and limited support to various partners.

However, military planners also have to accept the fact that warfare itself is changing. Conventional wars increasingly involve elements of unconventional warfare, special operations, physical and remote sabotage, decapitation, cyber warfare, and terrorist attacks carried out by covert operators and irregular proxy forces. Recent U.S. military operations against Iran illustrate the point. U.S. military operations began with a striking demonstration of precision air attacks, but evolved into countering missile and drone strikes, and covert operations aimed at U.S. allies and civilian shipping.

Many will see U.S. military operations against the cartels as an inappropriate mission. As it was during the GWOT, it could increasingly be seen as a diversion of resources from the military threats we face from Russia or China. Military planners can be expected to limit U.S. involvement to single, precise military strikes, but these also can be politically perilous if there are significant casualties. They require detailed, accurate intelligence and certainty that U.S. operations are not being lured into attacks on civilian targets.

The United States can conduct these kinds of precision operations, but planners must also calculate that cartels can strike back in ways that could undermine local support for continuing anti-cartel efforts. The killing of a cartel leader by Mexican forces with U.S. intelligence support led to retaliatory attacks by cartel gunmen that left scores dead.⁹³ Such incidents may make it difficult for Latin American governments to support continuing U.S.-led counter cartel operations.

10. The GWOT left a trail of ruin and instability. The GWOT involved U.S. military operations in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, as well as Yemen, Somalia, the Sahel, and other countries. Afghanistan remains a conflict zone. Iraq is divided and dominated by Iranian proxies. Although not strictly part of the GWOT, the overthrow of Qaddafi left Libya in chaos, which had broader regional consequences in the surrounding countries of Africa. The Syrian civil war and U.S. military involvement, first to support the rebels against Assad and later to destroy ISIS, has left behind devastation, mass displacement of its population, and widespread ruin.

The United States, however, cannot be blamed entirely for the state of affairs. Afghanistan has been in continuous conflict since 1978. Saddam Hussein waged war on Iraq's Shi'a and Kurds, invaded Iran, and then Kuwait. The Assad regime in Syria brutally oppressed its own people.

The surrounding countries have also been conflict zones. Sudan has been engulfed in civil war for 39 of its first 50 years of independence. Lebanon never fully recovered from its civil war, which lasted from 1975 to 1991, and the continuing wars between Israel and the Palestinians in the 1970s and 1980s and between Israel and Hezbollah since the 1980s. Yemen has been a theater of separatists and civil wars since the 1960s. Somalia has been at war with itself since the 1970s.

Estimates of total casualties in these conflicts vary widely from hundreds of thousands to millions, depending on methodology. Brown University's Cost of War Project estimates 900,000-940,000 direct deaths (including 432,000 civilians).⁹⁴

Latin America has seen few wars in its modern history, although cartel and gang violence have killed hundreds of thousands. Experience suggests that attacks on cartels provoke violent responses against government and civilian targets. Mexico's war on drugs, which began in 2007 and was supported by the United States, led to levels of violence that were politically unsustainable. Direct military strikes and rapid kinetic operations by the United States may limit the exposure of U.S. forces, but leave local civilian populations (and American ex-pats) exposed to cartel violence.

The successful suppression of the cartels will create economic, social, and political upheavals. It will leave large sectors of the population in specific areas without employment. State economic collapse is not beyond imagination. In pursuing the GWOT, the United States ultimately concluded that nation-building was futile, but some nation *rebuilding* could become necessary to deal with displacement resulting from a more aggressive campaign to destroy drug trafficking organizations. What might Mexico look like as a result of a protracted effort to destroy its cartels? Is a failed state on our southern border tolerable? Will the United States provide security and precisely targeted economic assistance? As discussed above, taking more aggressive action against the cartels is, in general, broadly supported and seen as necessary. But considering these questions about long-term implications would be important if the United States desires to avoid the instability seen in the wake of the GWOT.

Part IV: Some Final Observations

Given the political rhetoric, the publication of the *2026 National Counterterrorism Strategy*, and highly publicized preparations, an increase in military operations against Latin America's cartels is a well telegraphed punch. Cartel leaders are likely to have thought about how this could affect them and what they might do to protect their operations and deter or respond to possible U.S. attacks. Our terrorist foes in the GWOT proved themselves to be resilient and adaptive. The same must be expected of our cartel opponents.

To say it again, drug traffickers are businessmen interested primarily in profit. Continuing, often violent competition among the traffickers, however, has given them considerable experience in the management of organized and often savage violence.

Gruesome murders and mass shootings are carried out by *sicarios*, recruited as young teenagers in impoverished areas and trained to be ruthless killers. Some cartels in Mexico reportedly have recruited regular soldiers, including non-citizen U.S. military veterans who have been deported after serving prison sentences.⁹⁵ Mexico's Los Zetas Cartel began as military deserters recruited by other cartels to enforce their rule. Former Colombian soldiers also have been hired as mercenaries.⁹⁶

These men bring combat experience and tactical skills. With abundant cash, the cartels can also recruit veterans with specialized skills such as drone operators, or more senior officers with intelligence and command experience. ISIS was effective because it combined dedicated jihadi fighters with experienced former officers in Saddam Hussein's army.

A sustained military campaign against the cartels will likely elevate the organizational role of the armed elements. Strategists will emerge, and their influence will increase. Sustained military campaigns against the cartels could also increase unemployment, generate refugees, and further destabilize local governments. Over time, it could transform criminal enterprises into insurgent armies that are even more willing and capable of challenging government authority.

Past wars against cartels in Colombia and Mexico show that a government assault on one cartel prompted its rivals to fight over its market share and territory, increasing the level of violence overall. But we cannot assume that because cartels compete with one another in various ways—sometimes in lethal and bloody ways—for turf, control, or influence, that they will remain divided in the face of broader and sustained offensives.

It is not hard to imagine a competing scenario that envisions cartel and gang leaders contemplating, perhaps even discussing informally how, while remaining business competitors, they might still cooperate against intensified pressure against all of them. Melees among competing gangs will raise the overall level of violence. Coordination will lead to more strategically targeted violence.

Local alliances within countries or even a broader regional alliance of cartels could emerge in response to a geographically broad anti-cartel campaign. The cartels lack a state sponsor such as, for example, Iran, and no state is likely to openly support drug traffickers. That does not preclude states like Russia or Iran itself, working through Hezbollah contacts in South America, from covertly assisting the cartels.⁹⁷ Distracting the United States with an escalating conflict in the Western Hemisphere would fit their strategic agendas. The cartels have their own financial resources—money is not the issue. However, outside actors could provide intelligence about U.S. moves.

The cartels have likely learned a lot by observing our patterns of behavior over the past quarter century. Some ways in which they are likely to adapt might seem easier to foresee, but what they have learned and how they may adapt may also include some surprises. To avoid the kind of miscalculations and unforeseen consequences Peter Bergen describes in his latest book, as mentioned in my earlier *CTC Sentinel* article on confronting the cartels in Mexico, continuous red teaming will be necessary.⁹⁸

U.S. allies in the Shield of the Americas are on the frontline. Insecurity caused by growing crime threatens their societies while state capture by the cartels directly threatens their authority. While this is a security-oriented pact, its members welcome U.S. leadership in the endeavor in order to guarantee broader U.S. political support and economic assistance, as they did when they were threatened by Marxist guerrillas during the Cold War.

Still, they are sovereign countries with their own interests, and they will behave as independent actors. If increased violence begins to threaten national well-being—or their own political survival—they will recalibrate. Or others may replace them. Coalition warfare is always challenging. Holding coalitions together is especially

difficult in long wars. Historically, Latin America does not have a great track record in maintaining political alliances over a long run,⁹⁹ which the war on the cartels promises to be. As in the GWOT, the United States could be dealing with problematic allies.

While some aspects of the forthcoming contest seem familiar, we are heading into uncharted waters. A continuing campaign

involving direct military action against the drug cartels is a worthwhile endeavor, but a significantly different and more complicated one than the GWOT. It is an endeavor that will require unblinking focus, leveraging all elements of national power, and strong, enduring partnerships to fully succeed. **CTC**

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A View from the CT Foxhole: Martha Crenshaw, Senior Fellow Emerita, Center for International Security and Cooperation at Stanford University

By Assaf Moghadam and Don Rassler

Dr. Martha Crenshaw is a senior fellow emerita at the Center for International Security and Cooperation (CISAC) at the Freeman Spogli Institute for International Studies (FSI) and a professor of political science by courtesy at Stanford. She was the Colin and Nancy Campbell Professor of Global Issues and Democratic Thought and professor of government at Wesleyan University in Middletown, Connecticut, where she taught from 1974 to 2007.

Crenshaw has written extensively on the issue of political terrorism; her first article, "The Concept of Revolutionary Terrorism," was published in the Journal of Conflict Resolution in 1972. In 2011, Routledge published Explaining Terrorism, a collection of her previously published work. With Gary LaFree, she is the author of Countering Terrorism (Brookings Institution Press, 2017). Crenshaw received her PhD from the University of Virginia in 1973.

CTC: Twenty-five years after 9/11, what do you think are the most significant accomplishments in the terrorism studies field, and what are the areas where you think terrorism research still has some advances to make?

Crenshaw: It's an enormous enterprise now, so summarizing everything about it is a difficult thing to do. At the time of 9/11, the amount of research on terrorism was much smaller, and now it's grown fast and gone in many different directions with many disciplines.

The study of terrorism was always interdisciplinary. It's become even more so. In terms of accomplishments, there are many; I'm not a pessimist about the state of studying terrorism. I think one of the accomplishments that's often overlooked is data collection, which sounds sort of boring and mundane. But years ago, when you began to study terrorism, it was really quite a struggle to get information about what you might want to know, whether it was a particular case or aggregate statistical information. Now we have so many databases that we can barely list them. Prominent among them, of course, would be the Global Terrorism Database,^a which came about because of government funding. It's an important incident database that's used by many researchers, and its creation was an asset to terrorism research. There are many other databases that go beyond terrorism, such as ACLED,^b the Armed Conflict Location &

Event Data resource.

In addition to these large-scale databases, we also have many more case studies. If you wanted to know, for example, about al-Shabaab in Somalia years ago, you would have been hard-pressed to find information; you would perhaps go through *The New York Times* and find some references. Now, there are many detailed case studies, often based on primary research. There are complaints that there's not enough primary research within the terrorism studies field. It is not easy, but there is some primary research, although it is not as extensive [as it would be] if you were working in a field that did not involve violence.

However, I can't say that we have a big overarching theory of terrorism, unlike the subject of deterrence; I don't think that one big theory is really possible or even desirable. Analysis of terrorism has gone in many, many more directions than the study of other subjects, such as deterrence. Yet, a mark of the growing maturity of the field is that we now have critical terrorism studies.¹ You have to reach a certain level of accomplishment in terms of theorization and explanation for people to start developing a 'critical studies' aspect of what you've been studying. I regard that critical approach as an accomplishment as well—we're looking back reflectively on what we've done and [asking], 'Were we too influenced by government? Are we creating terrorism by seeing terrorism, by propagating the image?'

CTC: Are there major questions you think that scholars have been unable to address?

Crenshaw: There are still lots of questions, and generating questions is an important contribution in any field of study. One thing that constantly strikes me is that we are still arguing over definitions of the concept of terrorism. I thought after 9/11 that what terrorism is would no longer be contested. The 9/11 attacks presented a clear example that we could all agree on. It was a horrifying model case. Yet, we're still arguing about meaning. Prominent voices still equate terrorism with particular ideologies as opposed to seeing it as a method or a strategy. We still are fuzzy about what is terrorism, and what is not, such as criminality. Are drug cartels terrorists? This is still a live question. Furthermore, particularly after the attack on the U.S. Capitol, when is mob violence terrorism—or violent riots, violent protests? Is Antifa terrorism? We're still arguing over the same things all these years later. We've made some progress, but it's still a conundrum.

Beyond that, several questions still puzzle me. One is, when do terrorists change strategies? What leads to the different methods that they use? One answer, of course, is that the availability of technology determines tactics. Because methods of violence are available—because there are drones, AI [artificial intelligence], or weapons of mass destruction—they are inevitably going to be used; terrorists will take advantage of technological opportunity. Another

a Editor's Note: The Global Terrorism Database (GTD) "is an open-source database including information on terrorist events around the world from 1970 through 2020." It is maintained by the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START) at the University of Maryland. See "About GTD," START, n.d.

b Editor's Note: Based in the United States, ACLED is "an independent, impartial global monitor that collects, analyses, and maps data on conflict and protest." See "About ACLED," ACLED, n.d.



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argument would be to point to the substitution effect: Governments block what terrorists can do, so they find alternatives. Hijackings and smuggling explosives onto aircraft began to fail because governments were forewarned. Terrorists then switched to other methods.

But there are other arguments, such as that methods are determined by ideology. The 'New Terrorism' school² gained popularity for a while, presenting the idea that religious motivations lead to highly indiscriminate and destructive terrorism, and that groups with more secular ideologies are likely to be more discriminating. We're still arguing about this point, and it would be important to know the answer if we're concerned about terrorists adopting AI, or if we're concerned about their getting ever more destructive weaponry. For example, we're currently asking how and why drones are feasible for terrorism. That's still a big open question that could use more research.

CTC: Do you think terrorism scholars should continue to focus on terrorism as an isolated phenomenon, or should terrorism increasingly be studied alongside other related forms of political violence?

Crenshaw: I would lean certainly toward the latter approach. Terrorism is one form of political violence, and obviously, the problem is distinguishing it from other forms of political violence, not from other forms of action whether political or military. I've argued for a long time that we were neglectful in ignoring the role of terrorism in civil wars,³ instead seeing it as a standalone phenomenon used by militant groups in stable, peaceful situations and disrupting an established order. Terrorism is commonplace in civil wars, which makes it, of course, hard to distinguish from the other myriad forms of violence present in civil wars. It's extremely important to understand the relationship, not seeing civil war and terrorism as the same thing, but understanding the connection between them.

Clarifying the relationship between terrorism and other forms of what we regard as standard military combat is also important—for example, as I mentioned earlier, the use of drones. Drones are a method of warfare, but militant non-state actors use them as well. When is this terrorism? When is it simply warfare? How do we deal with groups that use terrorism but are militarily powerful?

Hezbollah, at one point Hamas, and some of the pro-Iranian Iraqi militias such as Kata'ib Hezbollah present military threats,

and yet these groups also use terrorism. How do you make that distinction? It's not enough to say, 'Because this is a military conflict, whatever goes on in it is not terrorism. Terrorism is something else.' Or 'because this is a civil war, whatever goes on in that context is not terrorism.' At the same time, I don't hold to the notion that if the non-state actor in question actually holds territory, their violence cannot be terrorism.⁴ I don't agree that, 'If violence is in a civil war and the violent group is holding territory, whatever they do is not terrorism.' It's terrorism regardless of whether or not the actor holds territory. Non-state actors in civil war situations—take the Algerian revolution^c as a case in point—often hold territory. These are still active disputes and subjects for further research.

CTC: We want to talk about your own work. You mentioned the Algerian Revolution, which of course was the subject of your PhD research. It's really hard to overstate the overall impact of your influence and impact on the field. Are there any particular contributions that you've made that you're especially proud of and that you think have withstood the test of time particularly well?

Crenshaw: I'm very pleased that the work on the use of terrorism by the FLN [Front de Libération Nationale] during the Algerian War, a book that was originally published in 1978,⁵ has only this year been translated into French and published in France. It was interesting to see that study resurrected, and now published in France, where it had not gotten much attention at the time of its original publication.

I've also been pleased that the 1981 article on the causes of terrorism has stood the test of time.⁶ It's been republished often and is frequently cited. It was one of my early works. You're eager at that point in your career to contribute something that will make an impact. I worked hard on that study to boil it down into one short article, and I recall that the first time I presented the argument was at a seminar at the University of Cardiff where Paul Wilkinson was then teaching.

I would also note my work in the 1980s on organizations, which argued that an organization using terrorism shares many characteristics of any other political organization.⁷ Instead of viewing terrorists as a group of madmen who are beyond reason and beyond even trying to understand what they're trying to do, I found it helpful to view them through a political organization lens, since they face many of the same problems as other organizations. At the time, I did not have detailed research to back up that claim, but since then other scholars have built on the idea and added a lot of data. Another point that I made then and did not develop thoroughly is that there are rivalries among these organizations—even though they might share the same ideology, they don't always get along. Competition can be an important determinant of behavior and of the effectiveness of counterterrorism policy.

Looking back, I've had a good career. It's given me a lot of pleasure, despite the tragic nature of the subject.

CTC: If you were to complete your PhD again today, what would you be drawn to in terms of a topic or methodological approach?

^c Editor's Note: The Algerian Revolution was a war fought by the Algerians for independence from France from 1954 to 1962.

Crenshaw: Well, a scholar today looking for a PhD topic would find much more data. They would also have a much wider choice of what they might study. At the time that I began to work on my PhD, a case study was pretty much what was available to you. Today, scholars have access to a range of datasets, and probably would not go for a single case study. They would likely adopt a comparative case study approach. Case selection would be enormously important. In a modern American graduate school, students would likely be expected to do some quantitative or statistical research at a fairly sophisticated level, and preferably collect and code their own data, which can be extremely laborious, time consuming, and expensive. They might need to construct a mathematical model. So, it would probably be more daunting for them than it was for me when I completed my PhD, since I could write something through my own historical research using what I could find in libraries, information that was much less comprehensive than it is today.

There are still so many questions to look at, regardless of method. Why do groups that are operating in a local conflict expand outside the borders of the country? Why did al-Shabaab act against Somalia's neighbors? There are some immediate answers, but when you look at the question closely, it's actually very complicated as well as important to the security of outside actors who need to know when a local group is going to turn on them. Is the reason ideology? Is it that a local group is blocked at home [by counterterrorism forces or other forms of pressure]?

CTC: How serious of a threat does terrorism pose to the United States today when compared to 25 years ago? In your view, how does that threat compare to other types of threats, including strategic competition?

Crenshaw: On the eve of 9/11, during that summer, which I remember quite vividly, the sense of threat in the United States was acute, as high as I had ever known it, and I think as high as ever since. Everybody in the intelligence agencies, in the academic world, those who followed the subject, everybody was absolutely on high alert, apprehensive that something was going to happen. Entire conferences combining expertise from government and academia focused on: What is going to happen? What is al-Qa`ida going to do? The level of threat had been building from about 1998 onward. But everybody was completely taken by surprise on September the 11th.

That level of apprehension doesn't exist now, largely because over the intervening years, we have, if not eliminated, at least severely diminished, the particular threats from al-Qa`ida and ISIS.

At the same time, we can always be taken by surprise, as Israel was on October 7, 2023. It's critical to avoid complacency: Avoid thinking, 'We've dealt with the threat and no need to worry.' The threat may not be eliminated even if it might be contained. Surprise isn't always due to complacency. On the eve of 9/11, warning signs weren't dismissed but some important pieces of information were overlooked. Some crucial bits of the puzzle weren't put into place in time. In the end, the danger of surprise is still there.

It is also important that the United States not interpret the threat of terrorism as being exclusively against us, against our territory, our forces, our citizens. We neglect at our peril civil wars and instability elsewhere because we're focused on other issues. Local problems can quickly become global problems.

CTC: When you think about how terrorism has evolved in

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terms of the behavior of terrorist groups and their tactics over the past 25 years, what stands out to you about the threat?

Crenshaw: I would point to the impact of the internet. Digital communication has made an enormous difference to all forms of interactions, including terrorism, of course. Terrorists can communicate via social media, raise money, recruit followers, publicize their message, and even livestream an attack in order to mobilize supporters. All these means are new, as methods of communication for violent groups have expanded enormously.

If you think back to the 19th century, anarchists and revolutionaries could write pamphlets explaining what they were doing and try to get people to join them. Nowadays, they have greater access and can also go undetected. As far as I can see, attempts to restrict illicit access to media have not been particularly successful. Authorities can block one channel, but then another channel pops up.

These developments have also made a difference to those of us trying to study terrorism. What can we say about an organization whose members are simply online followers? Is this an organization like other organizations? It's harder and harder to know who might be making decisions [for the organization]. It's hard to know how much of their activity is strategic and how much is not.

As I see it, many groups—even well-established groups that existed before the social media revolution—were willing to sacrifice control over the use of violence for the ability simply to act, and to do so unpredictably. Calling on followers, wherever they might be, to use any means available to them—such as driving a vehicle into a crowd—is inherently unpredictable because the actor who is instigating violence doesn't know when and where and who and how. Many groups that hope to succeed do wish, I think, to control the use of violence. I myself puzzle over how to treat this type of violence—particularly whether it should be seen as an organized strategy. It can be part of an organized strategy, but it's also dependent on the individual volunteer to do it. This is a very important shift that we need to understand. Fortunately, a lot of researchers are working on this, on terrorist use of social media, tracking it as well as gathering information on the use of encrypted devices and other means of concealment.

CTC: When you think about the terrorist threat of tomorrow or in the future, what worries you the most?

Crenshaw: Well, I don't really know, and I guess that's the worry.

It's hard to see what direction terrorism might take. I've talked about surprise, and I think that's always the risk—that there is something we simply haven't foreseen. I also think, as a caution, that we are always interested in terrorist use of new methodologies, new techniques, new forms of communication and organization, and new forms of using violence, for example their use of WMD or whatever sort of methods they can acquire. But if we look back at some of the most disastrous attacks in recent years, they have not involved extremely exotic methods. Attackers have often very cleverly used a combination of old methods. In the case of 9/11, we did not expect training a pilot to fly the aircraft so that the aircraft is the explosive. We thought hijackings were a thing of the past, but they were adapted to a new form. These tactics depended as well on a willingness and capacity to organize a large plot that required multiple operatives to exist underground in a strange country for a year without revealing the conspiracy. It didn't require high tech at all to do that.

The Hamas attack on October 7th didn't involve extremely sophisticated methods, but astute exploitation of vulnerabilities on the Israeli side and a willingness to commit atrocities and accept the opprobrium and outrage that would follow. Both cases involved the willingness to kill massive numbers of civilians and not care about the consequences. I don't know what specifically we should be afraid of, except to keep all these factors in mind. I also hope that our counterterrorist forces, such as we still have them, are thinking hard about not resting on old assumptions, but realizing what we do not know. There are certain definitive threats that we fear, such as that terrorists might use weapons of mass destruction. We've been afraid of such a development for quite a long time, but I think the greater worry is surprise.

CTC: Looking back at the last 25 years of counterterrorism, what did the United States get right, and what did we get wrong in terms of our counterterrorism policy?

Crenshaw: In the aftermath of 9/11, the persistence and scope of the counterterrorism effort was impressive. The mobilization of resources had begun before 9/11 because the threat had been growing and expanding. The CIA had created a team to deal with al-Qa`ida.^d That team was extremely interested in AQ, but struggled in terms of resources to gather and interpret intelligence—for example, to have enough people with foreign languages who could read the intelligence and who had the sufficient level of security clearance to access it.

Then, after 9/11 enormous resources began to pile in. People were moved from the Russia desk to work on terrorism, for example. It was sometimes difficult to absorb the overload of talent coming into the counterterrorism fight. The end results were extremely impressive. Cooperation with our allies around the world also increased enormously. I think that in some cases we did not always take their warnings seriously, but we flung ourselves wholeheartedly into close cooperation. The support from allies was enormously important in all areas.

At the same time, we failed to see that some of the things we were

“It's hard to see what direction terrorism might take. I've talked about surprise, and I think that's always the risk—that there is something we simply haven't foreseen.”

doing helped to create the problem and maybe made the problem worse.⁸ The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and our support for the *mujahideen*, understandable at the time, of course, in light of Cold War dynamics, created opportunities for bin Ladin to create al-Qa`ida. Furthermore, prior to 9/11 we moved into the Middle East in response to Iraq's invading Kuwait, which was widely appreciated and admired in the region and around the world. It seemed appropriate to stop Saddam Hussein from invading a smaller neighbor because he wanted their resources. But at the same time, we created more fuel for the fire that bin Ladin was setting in Saudi Arabia and for the rise of militant Islamism. I think we were not fully aware that Islamists had been on the move for 10 years, at least. When we moved against the Taliban in Afghanistan, we made inroads against al-Qa`ida. We drove bin Ladin into hiding in Pakistan. But by invading Iraq, we created another set of circumstances that were propitious for the reincarnation of first al-Qa`ida and then ISIS in the Iraq-Syria theater. Of course, I don't think we could have predicted the Arab Spring and the civil war in Syria, which further increased opportunities for ISIS.

I don't know whether it was possible to foresee the consequences of these actions. They seemed wise and appropriate to many at the time, but thought needs to be given to questioning decisions: 'If we do this, here's the upside. But what about weighing the benefits against the downsides? What might be the negative consequences of what we do?' It is well not to proceed too quickly, particularly without asking experts on the region and on a range of threats.

It concerns me that the U.S. seems to have a constant wish to return to the threat of great power competition. We're more comfortable dealing with that kind of threat, it seems. We find it easier to understand, easier to predict. Not that there are not terrible surprises [in great power competition], but perhaps we'd rather be in the familiar domain of warfare with one army pitted against another army, or air force against air force, where superior military capabilities can be brought to bear, where information on the adversary is more available because you have tracked them for years. Our temptation to return to that threat may not be misplaced, since there's a real threat [in the great power competition realm], but it doesn't mean that we should ignore the threat from non-state actors.

CTC: Counterterrorism is oftentimes described as a toolbox. There are a lot of different tools in this toolbox: military responses, intelligence, public diplomacy, countering terrorist financing, et cetera. Given the nature of how terrorism has evolved—you mentioned social media, for example, and its influence after 9/11—are we using the right tools in response? Do we need to consider using more of certain tools and less of others?

^d Editor's Note: This is a reference to the unit known as Alec Station. For background, see Mark Mazzetti, "C.I.A. Closes Unit Focused on Capture of bin Laden," *New York Times*, July 4, 2006.

Crenshaw: I would always put a priority on intelligence. There's no substitute for gathering intelligence, even in very difficult circumstances. I don't want to underestimate the difficulty of sorting out signals from noise in any field, especially now that we have means of collecting information that often overwhelms us with quantity. We need the ability to sort all that data. This task has become more and more of a challenge for the intelligence agencies. The extent to which sorting signals from noise could be given over to automated methods is unclear. I don't know how well that can be done; a human contribution will always be needed to understand and interpret results. For good intelligence, we also need to continue cooperating with other governments. Often a local government is going to have the kind of sources and assets that will give you critical information. Then you've got to have analysts who are knowledgeable enough to say, for example, 'This looks to be a local group, but we think it has potential to expand its operations and ambitions.'

Military responses are important, sometimes necessary. There's been a debate in academia as to whether a decapitation strategy—removing the leadership of a group—works in terms of defeating the organization. Good intelligence is essential to know who the real leader is, where leaders are at practically every moment of the day, especially because they're trying to elude surveillance. The United States did this very, very well in the fight against al-Qa`ida and ISIS. We began to perfect intelligence collection, even under battlefield conditions, and get it analyzed quickly, understanding that information is only valuable for a short period of time. All this effort requires extensive resources. Military force works when you have good intelligence behind it. It doesn't work—it's just blunt military force—if you can't identify your real target, if you end up making mistakes that then create more support for the adversary.

Cutting off terrorist financing has also been important, although it is hard to do. There are so many ways for terrorists and criminals—because this is an aspect that they share—to gather funds, move money around, and invest in all kinds of licit and illicit enterprises. Although cutting off financing has proved difficult, that's not to say that it's not worth doing, even if it's an uphill battle.

Public diplomacy and political and economic assistance attempt to win hearts and minds, to undermine the appeal of violent extremist groups by improving conditions [and] by creating more stable regimes in countries that are at risk, aiming to prevent failed and failing states. The policy is difficult to sell to taxpayers who have to support it, in part because the results are likely to be slow. It's still important to invest in diplomacy and assistance. It would improve counterterrorism if we could do more to prevent state breakdown in areas of the world where it's now become all too common, Africa being a prime example. It's hard for governments to build support for policies that aren't immediately visible, where the payoff is in a very uncertain future, but it's important to do those things.

A last policy or counterterrorism practice area has been rehabilitation of individual 'formers,' as they are called. Nobody's quite sure how well rehabilitation programs have worked. Different governments have tried different approaches to reintegration of former terrorists. It's obviously important to try, but these efforts can result in people who have been released from prisons who might still be committed to the cause that put them in prison in the first place. Rehabilitation and reintegration are still big problems that we haven't figured out. I am not sure that there have been good case studies of what actually works, of what kind of intervention is

likely to work.

There's still a lot of other problems for counterterrorism that haven't been solved, such as the issue of the role of foreign fighters. In the United States currently, the intelligence agencies are being reduced in capabilities, with a number of people fired from the agencies, and a lack of resources. This situation is not going to bode well for effective counterterrorism.

CTC: Do you think that analytical frameworks to think about terrorism or counterterrorism have evolved in line with the threat?

Crenshaw: In terms of the analytical frameworks being used by the intelligence agencies, I really don't know. There's still as 'overclassification' of information, for example. There's an opacity that blocks critical appraisal of the analytical frameworks being used. Scholars outside government knew more in earlier decades, when there was more collaboration between academic and government communities and more sharing of information that didn't involve access to really sensitive material. We don't have that now. So, we academic analysts, as outsiders, know little except what we read in the press or other public documents. We try to ascertain the accuracy of open-source information as best as possible, but our knowledge is imperfect.

Academic researchers make an effort to keep up with the changes that are affecting terrorism, for example, to what extent are they likely to rely on AI? How could AI help terrorists? Is there already evidence that it's of use to select targets, conduct surveillance, or gather background information? Just as the rest of us are using various search mechanisms in our research, terrorists have become more sophisticated. We have to assume that they are exploiting these opportunities, even if we lack direct knowledge of what the adversary is doing. Academic researchers have an incentive to look for new topics for research, to find ways to say something original and new, so they are attuned to changes in the object of study. This is not to say that researchers are not historically minded, but we look for what might be new and different in a threat. I don't know whether today's government analysts are looking through old lenses or whether they are looking for innovative ways to approach terrorism. For instance, do government analysts assume that all terrorism comes from the same ideological direction? The information available to the public does not necessarily reflect what's really going on in the intelligence community.

A last point in terms of the value of academic research is that there is more open-source information out there than government analysts have time to keep up with. Most of us try to manage as best we can, but it is daunting. A contribution of academic research is having a grip on what's available in the public domain. Researchers survey the field to identify important and reliable findings and sum up what's known. There's even inside knowledge about different conflict situations in the open-source literature. As for myself, as I have admitted, I can't keep up with everything published. All the same, an academic researcher has more time to summarize and interpret relevant information that would be useful for counterterrorism agencies that do not have the time. Government analysts are already overwhelmed with classified information, I assume, which presents a daunting task in itself. Academic research can fill a significant gap. **CTC**

Citations

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Terrorists and Weapons of Mass Destruction: A History of Hype and the Possibility of a Dystopian Future

By Peter Bergen

After 9/11, the Bush administration was preoccupied by the possibility of terrorists armed with weapons of mass destruction (WMD), so much so that the United States went to war in Iraq. In fact, in the post-9/11 era, terrorists only experimented with crude WMD of low lethality. However, now that we are in the age of AI and synthetic biology, terrorists—who are often well educated—will likely be able to create pathogens in a manner that was not available to militants of an earlier era. This feels like a dystopian reality rather than politicized hype, because it is AI industry leaders, not politicians, who are sounding the alarm about the issue.

The United States went to war against Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq in March 2003 based on the false assertions of dodgy defectors and the faulty assumptions of U.S. policymakers that the Iraqi dictator had weapons of mass destruction that he might give to his allies in al-Qa`ida. None of this was true, but the subsequent invasion of Iraq and Iraqi civil war claimed the lives of some 200,000 Iraqi civilians¹ and those of 4,418 American service members,² and in the process greatly damaged global perceptions of American power and undermined faith in the U.S. government at home.

This article will not rehash any of this well-documented history but instead will attempt to explain why senior Bush administration officials became preoccupied with the idea of terrorists deploying weapons of mass destruction (WMD) following the 9/11 attacks. The article will then examine the history of how terrorists experimented with WMD, producing only relatively crude weapons in the two decades that followed the 2003 invasion of Iraq despite much of the hyperbole surrounding the issue. It will then try to answer two pressing questions: Do advances in the fields of genetic editing and artificial intelligence change the game, so that what was once a fanciful notion—that terrorists might kill very large numbers of people with WMD—could become a bleak future reality? Does the history of hype about terrorists deploying WMD hold lessons that might be applicable today?

The 9/11 attacks came as a complete surprise to senior Bush administration officials, even though they had received a stream of highly classified warnings from the CIA during the spring and summer of 2001 that al-Qa`ida was planning a large-scale attack, including possibly in the United States.<sup>3</sup> At the time, key Bush officials were so preoccupied by the purported threats posed by states such as Iraq that they discounted the notion that a non-state actor such as al-Qa`ida was a real threat. Underlining their preoccupation with state sponsors of terrorism, immediately after 9/11 senior Bush officials such as Secretary of Defense Donald

Rumsfeld pushed for attacks against countries such as Iraq, which had concealed its active weapons of mass destruction WMD program during the 1980s.⁴

After 9/11, the thinking of President Bush and his war cabinet was greatly influenced by the anthrax attacks in the United States that took just place just weeks after al-Qa`ida had attacked the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. During October 2001, letters containing anthrax were sent to American journalists and members of Congress, killing five people and shaping President Bush's understanding of the post-9/11 threat landscape, as they seemed to show that terrorists were now deploying WMD in the United States. The letters themselves contained the phrases "Death to America," "Death to Israel," and "Allah is great."⁵ In fact, the FBI would eventually determine that Bruce E. Ivins, a biological weapons researcher working for the U.S. government who had access to highly secure biolabs, was solely responsible for the attacks.⁶

At the Bush White House, worries about terrorist access to WMD intensified when the CIA discovered that before 9/11, Usama bin Ladin had met in Afghanistan with Dr. Sultan Bashiruddin Mahmood, a Pakistani nuclear scientist who had been fired from his country's nuclear program in 1999 because of his militant jihadi views. Bin Ladin had claimed to Mahmood that he possessed fissile materials suitable for a nuclear weapon, while Mahmood had shown bin Ladin a sketch about how to build a nuclear bomb.⁷ Sketching a nuclear bomb design is a very long way from actually building one, and bin Ladin's boast about fissile materials was almost certainly false; instead, al-Qa`ida had very likely purchased quantities of radioactive waste. Still, Mahmood's meeting with bin Ladin indicated that al-Qa`ida's leaders were interested in learning about the most lethal forms of WMD and had connections to scientists who appeared to share their worldview.

After 9/11, al-Qa`ida's leaders stepped up their public rhetoric about their purported access to WMD. On November 8, 2001, bin Ladin told Pakistani journalist Hamid Mir, "I wish to declare that if America used chemical or nuclear weapons against us, then we may reply with chemical and nuclear weapons. We have the weapons as deterrent." This statement was followed in May 2003 by a *fatwa* from a militant Saudi cleric, Nasir bin Hamd al-Fahd, that gave religious sanction to those who wanted to use WMD on large numbers of American civilians.⁸

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Vice President Dick Cheney became so concerned about the possibility of some kind of chemical or biological weapons terrorist attack that after 9/11, he kept a full biohazard suit on hand when he traveled.⁹ Yet, if Bush administration officials had had more familiarity with the history of non-state actors using WMD, perhaps they would have been more skeptical that al-Qa`ida could pull off a large-scale attack with weapons of mass destruction.

The case of Aum Shinrikyo is instructive. A Japanese cult with tens of thousands of followers who subscribed to obscure, apocalyptic beliefs, Aum actively recruited from among the best and brightest in Japan and had access to hundreds of millions of dollars donated by its followers.¹⁰ Despite recruiting scientists and possessing large-scale resources, when they manufactured sarin gas, a highly toxic nerve agent, they were able to kill only the relatively small number of 13 people in the crowded, enclosed environment of the Tokyo subway on March 20, 1995.

The Aum attack underlined that even terrorists with real scientific knowledge and considerable financial resources did not successfully build true weapons of *mass destruction*, although they could deploy weapons of *mass disruption* that could sow panic with relatively small-bore chemical or biological weapons attacks.

In one of the grimmer ironies of the war on terror, the Iraq War helped to create an alliance between some of Saddam's Ba'athist officials and members of al-Qa`ida, which resulted in the creation of al-Qa`ida in Iraq (AQI) that deployed crude WMD weapons. In other words, the Iraq War produced the al-Qa`ida-Ba'athist-WMD nexus it was supposed to prevent.

From late 2006 through mid-2007, AQI detonated a series of crude chemical bombs in Iraq that were designed to spread what they hoped would be lethal quantities of chlorine, widely available in the Middle East for treating water. The U.S. military killed or captured many of the insurgents who were deploying these bombs. Charles Faddis, who headed the CIA's operations against AQI's chlorine bomb network, explained, "There was a lot of effort to secure the chlorine, to get a hold of the tanks, to track these guys down (who were responsible for building the chlorine bombs) to kill them or capture them. Meanwhile the attacks are not being particularly successful. The people are dying in the blast, but fortunately nobody is dying from chlorine."¹¹

Over time, AQI would morph into the Islamic State, which in 2014 seized much of Syria and Iraq. The Islamic State also experimented with WMD weapons, but again these were relatively crude chlorine-based devices. The group used these bombs dozens of times against the Iraqi military and Syrian Kurdish forces.¹²

The Islamic State mounted a more ambitious chemical weapons effort between 2015 and 2017, producing mustard gas and adding the agent to bombs and rockets. Yet, they only produced mustard gas at relatively low concentrations, unlike the mustard gas that was used by the armies that fought during World War I.¹³

Overall, the Islamic State's chemical weapons efforts were not much more sophisticated than AQI's, although the Islamic State, a terrorist army of some 30,000 fighters, at one point controlled a population greater than that of New York City that it was able to tax and extort from at will.¹⁴ At its height, the group's claims to be the "Islamic State" had some basis in truth, and yet even with its substantial resources and its large-scale recruitment of militants, including 40,000 jihadis from around the Muslim world, the Islamic State still could not create an effective WMD program.

During the post-9/11 period, several would-be terrorists hoped to create effective chemical weapons by manufacturing ricin. Ricin,

"All this history suggests that terrorists could not deploy true weapons of mass destruction because the barriers to entry were so high. But will those barriers be lowered now that we are in the age of AI and synthetic biology?"

which can be extracted from widely available castor beans, can kill, but only if it is deployed by those with real chemical weapons expertise, as it does not aerosolize well and must typically be injected directly for lethal effects. The most infamous case of ricin poisoning was that of the Bulgarian defector Georgi Markov, who was stabbed by a ricin-tipped umbrella in London in 1978 as he was waiting for a bus near Waterloo Bridge. Markov subsequently died, a death that was almost certainly the work of the KGB or an allied Eastern Bloc intelligence service.¹⁵

But in the hands of terrorists, ricin weapons were almost invariably duds. In 2003, an al-Qa`ida-linked militant based in the United Kingdom, Kamel Bourgass, attempted to produce ricin. So too did a Tunisian man living in Cologne in 2018, who was identified by German authorities as Sief Alla H., an Islamic State supporter.¹⁶ In 2025, Indian authorities in Gujarat arrested a doctor linked to Islamic State Khorasan, the group's affiliate headquartered in Afghanistan, who was carrying castor bean mash suitable for making ricin.¹⁷ In none of these cases did the militants deploy a ricin weapon.

All this history suggests that terrorists could not deploy true weapons of mass destruction because the barriers to entry were so high. But will those barriers be lowered now that we are in the age of AI and synthetic biology?

Militant groups often recruit educated young men, a demographic that is likely to understand aspects of these emerging technologies. In 2006, New America researcher Swati Pandey and I examined the educational background of 79 jihadi terrorists responsible for five major anti-Western terrorist attacks—the World Trade Center bombing in 1993, the bombings of two U.S. embassies in Africa in 1998, the September 11 attacks, the Bali nightclub bombings in 2002, and the London bombings on July 7, 2005. All those who had masterminded the attacks had university degrees. More than half the terrorists involved in them had attended university. Of those who attended a university, more than half had scientific or technical degrees, with engineering being the most popular subject studied.¹⁸

A dozen years after our study was published, sociologist Diego Gambetta and political scientist Steffen Hertog co-authored *Engineers of Jihad: The Curious Connection between Violent Extremism and Education*, which examined the educational background of 335¹⁹ terrorists across the ideological spectrum, from jihadis to right-wing extremists to leftist terrorists. Gambetta and Hertog found that engineering was by far the most popular subject studied by the militants who had attended university, underlining that terrorists are often well educated with a scientific bent.²⁰

Which brings us to recent developments in the field of AI: In August 2026, Stanford University scientists announced that they had developed an AI program that had designed and made 16 new

viruses. These viruses were not pathogens, but the study showed that entirely *de novo* viruses could now be made by AI. While there are plenty of reasons to celebrate that discovery—the viruses made by the Stanford scientists could be used to kill bacteria that cause disease—it also raises significant questions around biosecurity since *de novo* viruses are now an alternative path to making biological agents.²¹

Similarly, when it comes to chemical weapons, in 2022 North Carolina-based Collaborations Pharmaceuticals was contracted by the Swiss Federal Institute for Nuclear, Biologic and Chemical Protection to investigate whether AI systems involved in drug discoveries could generate thousands of novel chemical agents. Using the MegaSyn AI model, which was used to generate safe drugs, a scientist rewarded the model for finding toxic chemicals instead of safe drugs. Within hours, the model generated thousands of highly toxic potential new compounds.²² That said, it is important to emphasize the word “potential.” As Audrey Kurth Cronin pointed out in these pages four years ago, “generating a list of chemicals did not mean the results could be synthesized or would prove stable and effective. Pharmaceutical companies use the same method to create drugs; yet out of millions of compounds, they find few viable enough to enter into production.”²³

While much of the focus on the promise and perils of AI is on large language models (LLMs) such as Claude and ChatGPT that can provide detailed answers to a wide range of questions, additional AI tools known as biological design tools (BDTs) can be used to design novel organisms far quicker than any laboratory can.²⁴ Some BDTs are open source, such as AlphaFold, while others require expensive hardware such as Graphics Processing Units (GPUs) that can cost tens of thousands of dollars.

Could terrorist groups exploit these tools in coming years? As scholars Daniel Byman and V.S. Subrahmanian noted in July 2026, terrorists “are not technological pioneers in the conventional sense, but they are often capable adopters.”²⁵ A similar skeptical note had been struck two months earlier in these pages by Andrew Glazzard, David McIlhatton, and Paul Martin, who pointed out that terrorists typically favor technologies that are both accessible and reliable.²⁶

Indeed, the history of terrorism is rife with example of terrorists sticking with tried-and-true methods to murder large numbers of civilians, such as mass shootings, because they are relatively easy to do, especially in the United States where semi-automatic weapons are readily accessible. The most lethal terrorist attack in the United States since 9/11 was carried out by Omar Mateen, an American citizen inspired by the Islamic State, who killed 49 patrons at the Pulse nightclub in Orlando in 2016 using semi-automatic weapons. Mateen managed to kill around 10 times more people in his attack than Ivins had with his anthrax attacks, even though Ivins was one of the leading biological weapons researchers in the United States, while Mateen had no training from a terrorist group.

Vehicle ramming requires little skill and preparation. We have seen several of those in the United States since 9/11: an Islamic State-inspired terrorist killed eight in Manhattan using his vehicle as a weapon in 2017,²⁷ for instance, the same year a right-wing extremist rammed a protestor in Charlottesville, Virginia, killing her.²⁸ Early on New Year’s Day 2025, an Islamic State supporter killed 14 people with a truck in New Orleans.²⁹

By contrast, the science around creating *de novo* viruses is presently highly complex and requires special labs. That said, it is worth noting that, like the much of rest of the world, terrorists are increasingly using AI in their work. In a study of the Nigerian Boko

Haram militant group published in July 2026, Antonia Juelich of Cambridge University interviewed 27 former members of the group and found that they had used AI to plan attacks and design explosives. Islamic State members had also provided in-person AI training to the Boko Haram militants. None of this involved WMD research or planning, but it demonstrates that terrorists have moved beyond using AI to create propaganda and have now used these tools for operational planning.³⁰

There is an as-yet unsettled debate about the origins of the COVID-19 virus: Was it inadvertently leaked from a biolab in Wuhan, China, or did the virus cross over into humans from a nearby “wet market” selling exotic animals? This article does not take a position on that important debate, but if the Wuhan lab leak theory is in fact correct, it underlines the very real dangers of “gain of function” research that uses genetic editing to tinker with the traits of viruses, experimentation that was going on at the Wuhan biolab in question.³¹ This points to how such gain of function research could be used for nefarious purposes; the massive global death toll and the calamitous economic and social consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic speak for themselves.

Among AI thought leaders, the possibility that AI tools could be used for gain of function research with nefarious intent is now a very real concern. Efforts to preclude that kind of research are built into closed American AI models such as ChatGPT, which are programmed with ethically based considerations that will, at least in theory, not allow the models to perform substantive research on how to manufacture WMDs.³² In July 2025, OpenAI announced that it was introducing a new framework that explicitly guarded against any queries that were aimed at “bioweaponization.”³³ The effectiveness of these guardrails is open to debate since there are ways to circumvent them if inquiries are posed in a deceptive manner, known as jailbreaks.

In July 2026, this journal published research from the non-profit Tech Against Terrorism that queried 27 AI models about WMDs and found that 15 came up with information that exceeded what was publicly available, while a third gave “real assistance” to either make or plan a WMD mass casualty attack, a sobering finding.³⁴

So where does that leave us? Senior Bush administration officials, caught completely by surprise by the 9/11 attacks, went into overdrive in the other direction and adopted a sky-is-falling approach to WMD that embroiled the United States in a disastrous war of choice in Iraq. During the quarter century since 9/11, terrorists have created and used chemical weapons, but with a scant record of success in terms of their lethality, despite all the hype around the topic of terrorists armed with WMD.

We now stand on the brink of a new era, and the capabilities of AI and synthetic biology do present terrorist groups or individuals with idiosyncratic motives new tools to potentially create mass mayhem and murder. This feels like a dystopian reality rather than politicized hype, because it is AI industry leaders, not politicians, who are sounding the alarm about the issue. Demis Cambiss, who founded Google’s DeepMind and won the Nobel Prize for Chemistry in 2024, as well as Sam Altman, CEO of OpenAI, warned publicly in June 2026 that some AI systems “now outperform PhD-level virologists on questions about highly technical laboratory procedures.”³⁵

Thomas Schelling succinctly observed in his preface to Roberta Wohlstetter’s 1962 book, *Pearl Harbor: Warning and Decision*: “There is a tendency in our planning to confuse the unfamiliar with the improbable.”³⁶ The United States discovered that to its cost on

9/11. Policymakers around the world must ensure that the fruits of the dual revolutions in AI and gene editing do not end up in the

wrong hands, creating a weapon that might rival, or even eclipse, 9/11 in its impact on the world. **CTC**

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Pressure and Adaptation: Mexico's Changing Criminal Landscape under Sheinbaum

By Sandra Pellegrini

On February 22, 2026, the leader of the *Cártel de Jalisco Nueva Generación*—one of Mexico's most powerful criminal organizations—died in an operation launched by Mexican federal security forces. The killing of “El Mencho” took place amid a broader shift in Mexico's security approach under President Claudia Sheinbaum. Her administration has stepped up targeted operations against mid- and top-level criminal leaders, a trend widely interpreted as a return to the “kingpin strategy” implemented during President Felipe Calderón's mandate two decades ago. This article examines whether after nearly two years in office, Sheinbaum's security operations have coincided with shifts in violence, based on an analysis of political violence data from ACLED for Mexico. This article argues that security operations have corresponded with uneven shifts in patterns of violence. In some states, they have likely contributed to violence spreading or even intensified criminal competition. Elsewhere, reduction in violence likely reflects criminal adaptation rather than the dismantling of criminal organizations and networks. Heightened pressure exerted by security forces has pushed criminal groups into less overt use of violence and remote violence, further fueling rising levels of forced disappearances in Mexico, or the use of drones and improvised landmines.

On February 22, 2026, Mexican federal security forces launched a raid at a ranch in Tapalpa, Jalisco that led to the killing of “El Mencho”—Nemesio Oseguera Cervantes, the leader of the *Cártel de Jalisco Nueva Generación* (CJNG), one of the most powerful criminal organizations in the country.

The operation took place amid a broader reshuffling of Mexico's criminal landscape following the arrest of a founder of the Sinaloa Cartel, Ismael “El Mayo” Zambada, in July 2024, which led to the outbreak of an internecine war between the cartel's rival factions. Against this backdrop, the death of El Mencho raised questions about the likelihood of internal fragmentation within the CJNG and the wider consequences for territorial disputes between criminal organizations across Mexico.

When discussing violence and conflict in Mexico, emphasis is often placed on criminal groups and how they relate with one another. Discussions around security forces and their operations tend to revolve around their ability, or inability, to reduce or prevent violence, which often overlooks the role that they play in shaping criminal dynamics in the first place. This article focuses on this

premise and examines how security policy under the presidency of Claudia Sheinbaum may be shaping criminal dynamics, and whether, after nearly two years in office, Sheinbaum's security operations have coincided with shifts in violence.

The article first provides a brief overview of the previous government's security policy in Mexico and how those policies have impacted criminal dynamics. Using conflict event data produced by the Armed Conflict and Location Event Data (ACLED), it highlights how criminal dynamics have already experienced significant shifts in recent years following the Sinaloa Cartel's rift, and it proceeds to identify states recording the most significant shifts in violence trends in 2025 and 2026.

While it is still early to conduct a full assessment of Sheinbaum's policy, the article contends that security operations have led to uneven shifts in violence trends within the country. In the state of Morelos, for example, violence levels increased between January and August 2026 compared to the same period in 2025, likely as a result of intensified criminal competition prompted by efforts to dismantle criminal extortion networks. Meanwhile, in hotspots of violence, Sinaloa and Michoacán, and in Jalisco, violence levels during the same period declined, although in the former two, violence has spread to new municipalities, while in the latter, it likely reflects a tactical retreat, enabled by the CJNG's hegemony in that state. Overall, heightened security pressure by Mexican authorities has further contributed to the acceleration of an emerging trend, whereby criminal groups have been turning to remote and less overt forms of violence likely to avoid exposure, while still reaching new territories and rivals over that same span of time.

Leveraging Conflict and Event Data to Understand Shifts in Criminal Dynamics

This article examines the security approach adopted under Mexican

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A burned truck is seen on February 24, 2026, near where CJNG leader “El Mencho” was killed two days earlier in Tapalpa, Jalisco state, Mexico. (Ulises Ruiz/AFP via Getty Images)

President Claudia Sheinbaum’s government, and whether it has contributed to shifts in violence trends involving non-state armed groups. The analysis uses conflict event data from ACLED covering the period January 1, 2018, to August 28, 2026.¹

ACLED collects political violence and demonstration events and reports information on the event type, date, actors involved, type of interaction, and georeferenced locations. The information is collected from a combination of open sources, including traditional and new media, reports from international institutions and non-governmental organizations, and local partner data. The analysis relies on political violence events, defined by ACLED as “the use of force by a group with a political purpose or motivation, or with distinct political effects,”² which, in the case of Mexico, encompasses the violent activities of non-state armed groups such as criminal organizations, categorized in ACLED dataset under the political militia actor type.

ACLED’s dataset classifies conflict events into three disorder categories: political violence, demonstrations, and strategic developments. This article focuses on political violence, which includes the use of physical force by or against a specific individual or group. It therefore excludes threats, or the destruction of properties, including damages associated with the setting of roadblocks by criminal organizations, which ACLED tracks less systematically under strategic developments. The political violence disorder category encompasses the following event types and sub-event types: battles: armed clash and non-state actor overtakes territory or government regains territory; explosions/remote violence: air/drone strike, grenade, chemical weapon, suicide bomb, shelling/artillery/missile attack, and remote explosives/landmine/IED; protests: excessive force against protesters; riots: mob violence; violence against civilians: abduction/forced disappearance, attack, and sexual violence.

To assess changes in violence patterns involving criminal organizations in Mexico, this article examines the number of events, a variable that measures the frequency of violence rather than its intensity. It is important to note that ACLED relies on information reported by open sources. As a result, the number of events and reported fatalities are likely underestimates and might be subjected to biases in reporting, but ACLED data can still be used to identify broader trends and conflict patterns.

The article explores temporal and geographic overlaps between clashes between non-state armed groups and state forces, and clashes between non-state armed groups and their targeting of civilians. However, it does not test for statistical correlation or causal relationship between these trends. Consequently, while the article explores several hypotheses that may explain shifts in the observed violence trends, they should be considered alongside other contextual dynamics that are also likely influencing patterns of violence.

To ensure clarity and consistency throughout the article, this study defines its principal terms and distinguishes violence involving non-state armed groups’ from armed interactions involving state forces. “Non-state armed group violence” includes political violence events and all interactions involving political militia and identity militia actors.³ It includes symmetrical interaction between non-state armed groups and asymmetrical actions involving non-state armed groups, including non-state armed groups targeting

civilians.^a The symmetrical interaction with state forces is analyzed separately to understand patterns in the state's security response to violence.

Changes in geographical patterns of violence in Mexico were identified through the disaggregation of events along Mexico's administrative divisions as well as identification and analysis of trends at the state and municipal levels in the country.

The analysis of non-state armed groups' mode of violence relies on two ACLED variables: the sub-event type and the notes, which can provide useful additional details, such as the use of specific weapons.

Before examining recent shifts in violence patterns, Table 1 presents the baseline number of political violence events involving non-state armed groups recorded in Mexico between January 1, 2024, and August 28, 2026. The data is disaggregated by violence involving non-state armed groups and violent interaction between non-state armed groups and state forces. It provides yearly political violence figures, as well as violence levels between January, 1 and August, 28 to allow comparison with 2026 and data available at the time of publication.

Table 1: Political Violence Events Involving Non-State Armed Groups in Mexico (January 1, 2024 - August 28, 2026)

Period	Number of political violence events between state forces and non-state armed groups	Number of political violence events - other violence involving non-state armed groups	Total
Jan. - Aug. 28, 2024	503	4,100	4,603
Jan. - Dec. 2024	851	6,407	7,258
Jan. - Aug. 28, 2025	780	4,545	5,325
Jan. - Dec. 2025	1,075	6,579	7,654
Jan. - Aug. 28, 2026	621	3,693	4,314

Beyond the Kingpin Strategy

The removal of El Mencho and eight other CJNG members in February 2026 rekindled debate over President Sheinbaum's security approach and whether her administration is reenacting the "kingpin" strategy that defined Felipe Calderón's war on drugs, launched in 2006.⁴

The "kingpin" strategy, as implemented throughout Calderón's mandate, consisted of decapitating criminal organizations by targeting high-ranking members. Between 2006 and 2012, security operations led to the killing and arrest of some of the most-wanted

organized crime group leaders in Mexico, including Beltrán Leyva, Arellano Félix, and Sinaloa Cartel and Gulf Cartel leaders.⁵ These operations contributed or led to the fragmentation of Mexico's main criminal organizations into smaller factions, reshuffling the country's criminal landscape. Pre-established alliances and territorial arrangements broke down and shifts in the balance of power among warring criminal groups intensified competition, which led to skyrocketing levels of violence in Mexico. After spiking in the early 2010s and surging again in the second half of the decade, homicides declined between 2020 and 2023, but have remained high until today.⁶

While the strategic targeting of criminal leaders continued under Calderón's successor, Peña Nieto,⁷ the election of Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO) of the National Regeneration Movement (Morena) in 2018 marked a significant shift in Mexico's approach to organized criminal organizations. AMLO campaigned on the "Hugs not Bullets" approach, emphasizing the need to tackle organized crime through social spending to tackle economic incentives that had drawn Mexico's population to join criminal ranks.⁸ Although the militarization of security continued under his presidency—with the creation of the National Guard and its later incorporation into the military⁹—his mandate was resolutely less confrontational to Mexico's criminal organizations. As early as 2020, a little over a year after AMLO took office, ACLED recorded a 15 percent decrease in clashes between security forces and non-state armed groups compared to the previous year.

After coming to power in October 2024, AMLO's political heir, President Claudia Sheinbaum, did not formally rebuke AMLO's approach and reinforced her administration's commitment to addressing the social causes of crime.¹⁰ Yet, during her first year in office, the government under took more direct action operations against criminal organization than under her predecessor's mandate, with clashes between security forces and non-state armed groups increasing by 26 percent in 2025 compared to the previous year.

Several factors have contributed to the surge in direct confrontations. First, the government inherited the severe deterioration in security in the state of Sinaloa. The arrest of Ismael Zambada "El Mayo" in the United States in July 2024 led to the outbreak of the Sinaloa Cartel's war that pitted the Los Mayos and Los Chapitos factions against each other. The intensification of criminal competition in Sinaloa prompted heightened security operations prior to Sheinbaum's arrival in power¹¹ and mobilized much of the federal security capabilities early in her mandate. Second, since taking office in January 2025, the administration of U.S. President Donald Trump has issued threats of tariffs and foreign military intervention to pressure the Mexican government into curbing drug trafficking and migrants flows.¹² The moves effectively prompted Sheinbaum's government to demonstrate steadfast efforts to curb organized crime. As a result, clashes between Mexican security forces and criminal groups intensified in the first quarter of 2025. Security operations concentrated in Mexico's violence hotspots, such as in the states of Sinaloa and Michoacán, and in states bordering the United States, with the deployment of 10,000 Mexican security personnel in February 2025.¹³ In addition, U.S. authorities have played a crucial role in Mexican security operations by providing intelligence. Although conducted by Mexican forces, the operation that led to the killing of El Mencho relied on U.S.-provided intelligence to identify CJNG's hideout.¹⁴

a Symmetrical actions generally refers to confrontation between two armed actors with the capacity to retaliate, such as clashes between two criminal organizations or clashes between a criminal group and security forces. Asymmetrical actions refers to interactions where only one of the parties can participate in an armed engagement, typically when one armed group targets civilians, which are by definition unarmed, or when an armed group uses remote-warfare tactics such as a drone strike or IED explosions without an identifiable target or victim.

While heightened confrontations between security forces and high-value targeting of criminal organizations under Sheinbaum share similarities with Calderón's kingpin approach, the government's strategy differs from the earlier model in several respects. Sheinbaum's approach has notably prioritized greater use of intelligence to dismantle criminal groups' financial operations and targeted middlemen and regional leaders,¹⁵ which, in the medium term, could disrupt supply and operational networks and harm criminal organizations' operational base, rather than removing a leader, who is more easily replaced. In addition, Sheinbaum's government has further rolled out law enforcement operations along with several social programs, including the Plan Michoacán for Peace and Justice in November 2025,¹⁶ which, if successful, might weaken the conditions that enable criminal groups to draw or coerce individuals into their activities.

Overall, Sheinbaum's security approach took a more confrontational turn than her predecessor's but differs from the traditional kingpin strategy applied under Calderón. Still, irrespective of the government in power or the approach adopted, security forces have historically played a significant role in shaping criminal dynamics in the country. The remaining sections of this article seek to assess the footprint that Sheinbaum's security approach is leaving on conflict trends in Mexico and the country's criminal landscape.

An Already Shifting Criminal Landscape

When assessing the effects of President Sheinbaum's security operations on the reshuffling of criminal dynamics in 2025 and 2026, it is important to account for preexisting instability. Sheinbaum took office in October 2024 amid significant shifts in Mexico's criminal landscape. Her administration began a little over a month after the outburst of the Sinaloa Cartel's factional war between Los Chapitos and Los Mayos, one of the most kinetic criminal disputes in the country in recent years. As noted earlier, the conflict was triggered by the arrest of Sinaloa Cartel's founder Ismael Zambada "El Mayo" in the United States in July 2024, after his nephew Joaquín Guzmán Loera, one of Los Chapitos' leaders and son of El Chapo, betrayed him.¹⁷

The dispute translated into a severe increase in non-state armed groups' violence in the state of Sinaloa, with at least 116 events in the third quarter of 2024, double the level recorded during the previous quarter, and doubling again to 330 events in the fourth quarter. The Los Chapitos and Los Mayos turf war and competition for control of criminal economies had already concentrated in the state of Sinaloa. But in 2025, it spilled over into nearby northern states, including the state of Durango, one of the Sinaloa Cartel's strongholds, and Baja California Sur, where factional wars spread. Violence also rose from 2024 to 2025 by 21 percent and 50 percent in the Baja California and Sonora states, where disputes between factions allied with Los Chapitos and Los Mayos surged to secure strategic control over smuggling and trafficking routes along the U.S. border.¹⁸

Yet, the surge in violence in northern states cannot solely be attributed to infighting between Los Chapitos and Los Mayos, or to proxy wars through their allies. The Sinaloa Cartel's weakening has also led to opportunistic incursions from rival criminal groups and the formation of new alliances. For instance, the Nayarit state saw several violent incidents in 2025 linked to the CJNG and the Sinaloa Cartel's movement to secure access to trafficking corridors.¹⁹

“Between January and August 2026, non-state armed group violence decreased by 19 percent nationwide compared to the same period in 2025 ... however, the downward trend is not a uniform pattern across Mexico's states.”

Meanwhile, the perceived weakening of the Sinaloa Cartel likely led to increased competition at border crossing points in Tijuana, which is home to a fragmented criminal landscape.²⁰

Shifts in violence patterns in those states in 2025 provide evidence of the ongoing reshuffling of criminal disputes and territorial control that the Sheinbaum administration faced shortly after coming into office. The killing of CJNG leader El Mencho and the subsequent arrest of the cartel's senior figures in 2026 further produced an aftershock in Mexico's criminal landscape. While the targeting of the CJNG leadership structure has thus far not resulted in significant factional war along the lines of the Sinaloa Cartel's conflict, the following section examines where overlapping restructuring processes are producing changes in 2026, and how heightened security operations might be feeding into those patterns.

Uneven Patterns of Violence Reduction in 2026

Between January and August 2026, non-state armed group violence decreased by 19 percent nationwide compared to the same period in 2025.^b (See definition of non-state armed group violence provided earlier.) However, the downward trend is not a uniform pattern across Mexico's states. In the Sinaloa and Michoacán states, where security efforts have been most significantly concentrated, violence levels decreased by 29 percent and 15 percent respectively, although violence appears to be relocating across new municipalities as turf wars persist. Meanwhile, in Morelos state, non-state armed groups' violence increased by nearly 78 percent in 2026, despite ongoing raids to dismantle extortion networks, suggesting that security operations might have indirectly contributed to heightened competition between criminal groups. In contrast, the state of Jalisco is experiencing a 41 percent drop in violence in 2026, though this drop may be the result of criminal adaptation rather than increased security pressure in the state.

Modest security gains in Sinaloa and Michoacán as criminal disputes persist and spread

As two of Mexico's most violent and criminally competitive hotspots, the states of Sinaloa and Michoacán have been home to some of the largest deployments of security forces in the country in the last two years. Despite a 29 percent and 15 percent respective decrease in violence in each state in the first eight months of 2026 compared to the same period in 2025, disputes have spread to new areas,

^b Between 1 January and August 28, 2025, ACLED records 4,906 political violence events involving non-state armed groups, aside from violent interactions with state forces, against 3,807 events over the same period in 2026.

highlighting the limitations of security efforts in high-intensity and significantly fragmented conflict theaters and how security pressure applied in one area can have a spillover impact on criminal activity and violence in other areas.

As of May 2026, over 13,000 federal personnel were reportedly deployed in Sinaloa, and over 12,500 in Michoacán as part of the Michoacán Plan for Peace and Security launched in November 2025.²¹ Reinforced security operations have further led to some of the highest levels of clashes between security forces and non-state armed groups in those states in 2025. For example, in 2025, ACLED records at least 179 clashes between non-state armed groups and security forces in Michoacán and 240 clashes in Sinaloa, representing an 86 percent and 176 percent increase, respectively, compared to the previous year.

In Sinaloa State, non-state armed groups' violence dropped by 33 percent between January and July 2026 compared to the same period in 2025. The decrease in violent incidents is particularly pronounced in the municipality of Culiacán, the epicenter of the disputes between Los Chapitos and Los Mayos, a gain attributed to the "deterrent effect" of security forces' presence, but also to the tactical victory of El Mayo's faction over Los Chapitos territories in the city.²² The further decrease in violence in Culiacán in July and August 2026 has been attributed to the killing of Los Chapitos local commander Cristhian Guadalupe Pérez Pérez, also known as "El Texas" or "El 01," during a federal operation on July 8, 2026.²³ However, the concentration of security operations in and around Culiacán has likely shifted the conflict's epicenter to Sinaloa's southern municipalities, with violence levels doubling in Mazatlán and experiencing a five-fold increase in Escuinapa in 2026 compared to the previous year.

The displacement of violence away from areas experiencing heightened security pressure is not isolated to Sinaloa. A similar trend can be observed in the state of Michoacán. Security efforts throughout 2025 and the launch of the Plan Michoacán for Peace and Justice in November 2025 coincided with a 31 percent decrease in violence in the municipality of Apatzingán in 2026 and a 55 percent decrease in violence in the municipality of Buenavista in 2026. Nevertheless, between January and July 2026, violence progressively increased elsewhere in Michoacán, including avocado-producing municipalities in the central-western municipalities and in the Purépecha plateau.²⁴

Arrests, Operation Enjambre, and the intensification of disputes over extortion markets in Morelos

Unlike in other states, where security operations coincided with a decrease, or at least stagnation, in violence, in Morelos, efforts to dismantle extortion networks did not yield significant security improvements in the first eight months of 2026 and instead contributed to heightened competition between criminal groups.

Throughout 2025, state and federal authorities conducted a series of operations targeting local criminal leaders involved in extortion schemes. For instance, raids in Yautepec in July 2025 led to the arrest of members of La Nueva Empresa, and in October 2025, the arrest of the leader of Los Acapulcos in Cuautla, a local faction tied to the criminal organization Guerreros Unidos.²⁵ In both municipalities, the operations were followed by an uptick in violence in 2026: Between January and August 2026 alone, recorded violence was nearly double the total reported in Yautepec throughout the whole of 2025, and five times the corresponding

annual total in Cuautla. Against the backdrop of Morelos' increasingly fragmented criminal landscape,²⁶ the targeting of regional leaders and the disruption of extortion networks have likely created opportunities for rival groups to compete for control of local extortion markets.

Additional security efforts in the Morelos in 2026—part of Operation Enjambre, a cross-state federal initiative launched in 2024 to investigate and dismantle networks of corruption and suspected collusion between local authorities and criminal groups—may help weaken criminal organizations but have thus far not translated into a reduction in violence. By mid-June 2026, federal authorities had arrested 85 former and current public officials throughout the country as part of the operation, including at least six in Morelos for alleged ties with organized crime groups and participation in extortion schemes. For example, this included officials in Amacuzac, the municipal president of Cuautla, the mayor of Atlatláhuacan, and the former mayor of Yecapixtla in Morelos.²⁷ Still, violence levels after the arrests in June and July 2026 have remained at high levels in those municipalities.

Reduced violence in Jalisco as the CJNG reorganizes and adapts

Throughout 2025 and the first half of 2026, state and federal authorities have also intensified law enforcement operations in Jalisco state, the stronghold of the CJNG. Those operations have coincided with a 41 percent drop in violence throughout the first eight months of 2026 compared to the same period in 2025, which, in light of the CJNG's hegemony in the state, likely reflect criminal adaptation rather than the effectiveness of the measures. The CJNG has faced limited competition from rival groups over the control of its turf in Jalisco, giving it greater latitude to lower its operations and limit the needs to resort to public displays of violence during heightened security pressure.

In 2025, authorities multiplied raids and criminal assets seizures, including the destruction of drug-production laboratories.²⁸ The intensification of security efforts throughout 2025 and 2026 culminated in an operation in Tapalpa and the killing of the CJNG's leader on February 22, 2026, and the subsequent deployment of 2,000 military personnel throughout the state. It also featured the arrests in April 2026 of additional CJNG leaders César Alejandro "El Güero Conta" in Zapopan and Audias Flores Silva "El Jardinero" in neighboring Nayarit state.²⁹

Unlike in other states, where the results of law enforcement operations appear more limited, in Jalisco violence levels declined significantly: Gang violence decreased by 21 percent between 2024 and 2025 and by another 42 percent between January and July 2026 compared to the same period in 2025. The contrast with violence trends in other states should not, however, be interpreted as evidence that security efforts have successfully dismantled the CJNG. The criminal organization has remained active in other states. It notably continues to engage in turf wars with rivals in Baja California and Michoacán and, throughout 2026, has deployed several large-scale coordinated roadblocks in the country, particularly in Michoacán, as a show of force against security operations targeting its members.³⁰ The security operations and removal of CJNG leaders have also thus far not led to a visible fragmentation of the group, nor the internecine conflict observed in Sinaloa.

Instead, in the author's view, the drop in violence in Jalisco more likely reflects CJNG's tactical retreat, at least in its home

territory, and a temporary reduction in visible violence in the face of heightened security pressure. Unlike in other settings in Mexico where severe criminal fragmentation has been reported and observed, the reduction in the intensity of CJNG's operations is enabled by the hegemony the criminal group has exerted over the state and the organization's coherence and ability to withstand the loss of its leader. These dynamics have arguably shielded the group thus far from opportunistic incursions in its stronghold by rival criminal organizations or factions.

Criminal Groups' Adaptation in Response to Security Pressure

Security operations during the Sheinbaum administration have targeted important linkages between criminal organizations and colluding political actors, disrupting leadership structures and criminal groups' sources of revenue and material. These interventions are reshaping Mexico's criminal landscape, altering violence levels, and realigning the balance of power between criminal groups as well as the geography of conflict among criminal actors. By increasing the risks associated with territorial presence and open confrontation, security pressure appears to be changing how criminal organizations execute violence. For example, since 2024, criminal organizations in Mexico have increasingly resorted to less overt forms of violence and warfare techniques that limit their exposure, including forced disappearances, and more remote forms of violence such as drone strikes.

In 2026, the Sheinbaum government highlighted a drop in homicides across the country, which officials have widely attributed to the implementation of reinforced security measures and operations.³¹ The discovery of mass graves and cremation ovens in Jalisco in March 2025 has, however, highlighted the severe forced disappearances crisis Mexico faces.³² With about 128,000 people considered missing as of June 2025,³³ the discovery brought the government's homicide figures under renewed scrutiny. Jalisco' capital of Guadalajara had the highest number of forced disappearances, a trend largely attributed to the CJNG as a means for the organization to exert control while staying off the authorities' radar. The targeting of *madres buscadoras*, human rights activists searching for missing relatives, has also been on the rise in recent years,³⁴ suggesting that organized crime groups have deliberately sought to avoid drawing attention to their methods.

At the same time, criminal groups have increasingly resorted to the use of remote violence to reach their enemies through limited exposure. Criminal groups in Mexico previously relied on commercial drones for surveillance or to ship drugs. However, in more recent years, criminal groups in the country have been using armed drones with improvised explosives as an attack vector. While this tactic has remained confined to Mexico's most severe conflict theaters, such as in Sinaloa and Michoacán, their use has grown significantly since 2024. In 2026, ACLED records at least 54 drone strikes launched by non-state armed groups, and is on track to reach similar levels recorded last year.^c Explosive-laden drones are

also currently being used by Mexican cartels to repel security forces, target rivals, and establish territorial control by terrorizing the local population.³⁵

Criminal groups' heightened sophistication and use of remote violence is further evidenced in the Michoacán state, where, in addition to drone strikes, the use of improvised landmines has followed a similar upward pattern. Between January and August 2026, ACLED records at least 33 events involving the use of remote explosives, landmine or IED, reaching similar levels recorded for the whole of 2025. The tactic has allowed groups to achieve control over agricultural exploitation remotely, on crops such as avocado and lime, coveted for extortion revenues and the prevention of advances from rivals, while raising the risks for farm workers who remain on the frontline of such a tactical shift.³⁶

Against a backdrop of reinforced security forces deployment and presence on the ground, criminal groups' concealed and remote forms of violence may expand further, which in the long run risks further complicating security and investigative efforts.

Conclusion

Like those of previous administrations, President Sheinbaum's security approach is contributing to the ongoing reshaping of Mexico's criminal underworld, which finds itself at a critical juncture amid internal challenges for two of its main criminal organizations.

Despite certain similarities, interpreting Sheinbaum's security policy as a mere revival of the kingpin strategy would be reductive, given efforts to bring longer-term measures to address the structural drivers of criminal activity through, for instance, increased social spendings and the development of infrastructure. While operations during Sheinbaum's tenure have indeed targeted high-ranking criminal figures, they have also aimed at middle-ranking figures and key operational actors, including financial specialists. Similarly, the militarization and additional deployments have come alongside efforts to disrupt corruption networks between criminal organizations and political and institutional actors. Still, considerable challenges remain, as illustrated by the collusion allegation surrounding Morena Sinaloa governor Rubén Rocha Moya.³⁷

Security operations have coincided with uneven shifts in violence across states. In some areas, violence has declined, although the case of Jalisco illustrates that such a decrease should not necessarily be interpreted as a security gain and could, in fact, reflect criminal groups' deliberate shift in tactics. Heightened security pressure on criminal groups can also lead to some adverse secondary effects, driving the spread of violence to new areas, as seen in Sinaloa, or contributing to intensifying criminal competition in Morelos' fragmented settings.

Despite some preliminary results, it is still early to fully assess the successes and shortcomings of President Sheinbaum's security policy to combat criminal organizations in the country. Each state is shaped by its own local criminal dynamics or institutional capacities, which can affect the outcome of security operations. Still, the uneven shifts in violence levels can offer some valuable lessons. The displacement of violence at municipal levels, for instance, is a pattern that could also be replicated at a wider scale. As such, concentrating operations in a specific state is likely to create new hotspots of criminal competition in the future, which highlights the need for a comprehensive approach to security in the country. In addition, to better understand the conditions under which

c Last downloaded on September 2, 2026. These figures were established relying mostly on open news coverage. Those reports rely principally on criminal groups', security forces', and the affected population's own reporting and therefore the number of strikes are likely underreported, especially in remote areas. The continuous risks of reporting on criminal groups' activities often lead to self-censoring of journalists, which further complicates obtaining access to comprehensive and reliable figures.

violence is most likely to decrease, future research should consider how the local level of criminal fragmentation—in other words, how many criminal groups are competing for territorial control and the criminal market in a given area—affects the outcome of security operations and the likelihood of triggering violent competition among rival groups.

Finally, considering the emergence of criminal groups' growing reliance on covert violence, future assessments of security gains and their impact on criminal activities can rely on violence patterns

and levels, but should also account for criminal activity that is less visible. Information on criminal economies, particularly extortion, may offer a better indication of the extent to which criminal groups exercise control over a certain territory or population than just the number of violent incidents. Trends identified through event-data analysis should therefore be interpreted alongside other factors that such data cannot fully capture, including the longer-term effects of social policies and the broader approach to crime prevention that the Sheinbaum administration seeks to establish. **CTC**

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