

Declared War on the Cartels

Deterrence, Disruption, and Coercive Diplomacy as a U.S. Counter-Narcotics Strategy in Mexico

A strategic assessment, current as of 6 October 2026: whether a declared, Mexican-consented campaign against the fentanyl-producing cartels can deter them, cut U.S.-bound supply, and damage their business

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ABSTRACT

This paper assesses whether a formally authorized, Mexican-consented U.S. campaign against Mexico's fentanyl-producing cartels can deter those organizations, reduce U.S.-bound fentanyl supply, and damage their business. "Declared war" in the title means a public, statutory commitment to use force, an Authorization for Use of Military Force paired with a joint U.S.–Mexican ultimatum, not a declaration of war under Article I, Section 8. The paper specifies the campaign as four concurrent tracks: diplomacy and sanctions; restriction of precursors and equipment; intelligence and covert action; and strikes on the non-commercial industrial base and on the leadership of organizations that continue fentanyl production after the ultimatum, with an exit open to successors. Using a structured, focused comparison of Operation Tidal Wave II, Operation Iron Tempest, the 2025–2026 maritime strike campaign, and the 2025–2026 campaign against Iran, together with DEA laboratory data, CDC mortality data, U.S. court records, and Mexican constitutional texts, it finds that credible U.S. pressure from 2023 to 2026 changed cartel fentanyl behavior and moved Mexico toward cooperation; that strikes on transport alone displaced traffic without reducing supply; and that in Iran, strikes on fixed capital whose inputs were denied left enrichment plants assessed inoperable a year later, while decapitation produced a successor and a memorandum of understanding that broke down within ten days. The author projects a 25–45% reduction in U.S.-bound fentanyl supply in the first year. Against an intensified intelligence partnership without strikes, the marginal effect at peak is about 5,500–7,500 overdose deaths averted a year if a negotiated abandonment holds, and close to none if it does not. Mexican consent is the decisive constraint. The strategy reduces and disrupts the market; it does not eliminate it. An annex profiles the designated organizations from public records.

KEYWORDS

counter-narcotics; fentanyl; Mexico; drug cartels; coercive diplomacy; deterrence; Foreign Terrorist Organization designation; Authorization for Use of Military Force; law of armed conflict; U.S.–Mexico security cooperation

JEL CLASSIFICATION

F51 (International Conflicts; Negotiations; Sanctions); F52 (National Security; Economic Nationalism); H56 (National Security and War); K33 (International Law); K42 (Illegal Behavior and the Enforcement of Law)

REVIEW

The author is the principal of Sanctir LLC, an independent national security compliance consultancy. No external funding was received for this paper. The views expressed are the author's alone. Quantitative projections in Sections 5 and 8 are the author's analytic estimates and are labeled as such; they are not derived from a formal model. The multi-channel rules in Section 4.1 are the author's prior analytic framework, set out in the author's WP-2026 working papers cited as ⁸¹ and ⁸²; the Center for Competitive Statecraft and Strategic Policy named in those citations is the author's publishing imprint for that series. Those papers are unpublished working papers and have not been peer reviewed. The author used an AI system (Anthropic's Claude) for source retrieval, verification support, and drafting assistance; the author reviewed the text and is responsible for its content and any errors. License: CC BY-NC-ND 4.0.

IF YOU READ NOTHING ELSE

The claim

A declared, consent-based campaign against Mexico's fentanyl cartels can deter those organizations, cut U.S.-bound supply for one to three years, and damage their business. It runs four tracks at once — sanctions, resource denial, intelligence, and strikes on the industrial base and its leadership — with a stated exit, and in a fixed order: prepare every track, declare, execute simultaneously, then negotiate.

What the record shows

Strikes on transport alone do not work: the 2025–2026 maritime campaign displaced cocaine routes without moving supply or price. Iran is the most recent full application of the construct and its record is mixed — strikes on fixed capital held, while the memorandum that followed decapitation broke down within ten days of signature.

The limits

Mexican consent is the decisive constraint. The projected effect is a 25–45 percent cut in U.S.-bound fentanyl supply in year one; against an intensified intelligence partnership without strikes, the marginal effect at peak is about 5,500–7,500 overdose deaths averted a year if a negotiated abandonment holds, and close to none if it does not. The strategy reduces and disrupts the market; it does not eliminate it.

Bottom Line

A declared, consent-based U.S. campaign against Mexico's fentanyl cartels can deter those organizations, cut U.S.-bound fentanyl supply for one to three years, and damage their business. It runs four tracks at once, sanctions, resource denial, intelligence, and strikes on the industrial base and its leadership, with a stated exit. Iran in 2025–2026 is the most recent full application of that construct, and its costs are the reason this paper's consent, attribution, and civilian-harm rules exist. Its record is mixed: strikes on fixed capital held, but the memorandum that followed decapitation broke down within ten days of signature. It must follow a fixed order: preparation of every track, then declaration, then simultaneous execution, then coercive diplomacy. Strikes on transport alone do not work; the 2025–2026 maritime campaign displaced cocaine routes without moving supply or price. It will not end the drug trade. It should be judged against the goals it can meet.

The Data and Sources note at the end of the paper states which claims were checked against primary text and which are time-bound.

Summary

- **The strategy is feasible, and the record is consistent with it.** The cartels changed their fentanyl behavior when U.S. pressure became credible. DEA found that the share of fentanyl pills with a potentially lethal dose fell from 76% in FY2023 to 29% in FY2025, and that powder purity fell from 19.5% to 10.3% ¹. Mexico transferred 92 cartel figures to U.S. custody in three rounds ⁷⁸. The CDC's

provisional count is 67,798 overdose deaths for the 12 months ending March 2026, down 12.3% year on year ⁴.

- **The construct.** Four tracks in unison, on the Iran model: (1) diplomacy and sanctions; (2) resource restriction against the inputs of production; (3) intelligence and covert action; (4) kinetic strikes on the cartel industrial base—precursor supply, warehousing, industrial synthesis and pressing sites, equipment, and finance—and on the leadership of any organization that keeps producing after the ultimatum. Iran shows both sides: a year after the June 2025 strikes, analysts reading the IAEA’s June 2026 report assessed the enrichment cascades inoperable and the tunnel entrances backfilled, though the IAEA itself could no longer verify ⁷⁵; the February 2026 decapitation of the Supreme Leader produced a successor within two weeks and a ceasefire within six weeks, but the June 2026 memorandum that followed broke down within ten days of signature and fighting resumed ⁷⁸⁸⁶⁸⁹¹³¹. Decapitation produced succession and a temporary counterparty, not a settlement. Strikes on fixed capital stopped production where the inputs to rebuild were denied. The construct uses each for what it does.
- **Expected effect:** a 25–45% cut in U.S.-bound fentanyl supply in Year 1; a sustained 30–50% cut in the major organizations’ potency-adjusted supply by Year 3 if a negotiated abandonment holds; heavy damage to Sinaloa and CJNG revenue and cohesion. By Year 10 the effect is small unless demand reduction and precursor controls keep pace. Measured against an intensified intelligence partnership without strikes, the campaign’s marginal effect at peak is about 5,500–7,500 deaths averted a year if a negotiated abandonment holds, and close to none if it does not. These are the author’s analytic projections, not measured outcomes.
- **Scoping condition:** American users spent “on the order of \$150 billion” on cocaine, heroin, marijuana, and methamphetamine in 2016 ²⁹. Synthetic production needs no crop, and producers relocate. The strategy reduces and disrupts the market. It does not eliminate it. The decisive risk is Mexican consent: 78% of Mexicans opposed the use of U.S. military forces against criminal groups in Mexico in El Financiero’s January 2026 poll ³⁴; its May 2026 poll, as reported by Jorge Castañeda, put opposition at 61% ¹⁵⁰.

Key Judgments

The United States has designated the major Mexican cartels as Foreign Terrorist Organizations. This paper treats them as a national security threat and assesses a military option against them on the evidence.

From 2023 onward, U.S. pressure became credible. It came as indictments; the February 20, 2025 designation of the Sinaloa Cartel, CJNG, Cárteles Unidos, Cártel del Noreste, Cártel del Golfo, and La Nueva Familia Michoacana, with Tren de Aragua and MS-13, as Foreign Terrorist Organizations and Specially Designated Global Terrorists ⁶³; lethal maritime strikes; the January 3, 2026 capture of Nicolás Maduro ¹⁰; and explicit threats of land strikes ¹⁰. The cartels changed their fentanyl behavior. The Mexican government moved toward cooperation.

#	Judgment	Confidence
KJ1	The cartels respond to credible, personalized U.S. threats. Evidence: falling pill potency and purity FY2023–FY2025 ¹ ; Mexican transfers 2025–2026 ⁷ .	Moderate
KJ2	A formal declaration or AUMF makes the threat more credible than executive statements alone.	Moderate
KJ3	U.S. ISR, SIGINT, and precision strike deliver faster and less compromised strikes than Mexican forces can. Mexican institutions have suffered cabinet-level cartel corruption ²¹ .	High
KJ4	Lab strikes alone produce short-lived gains. Syria (Tidal Wave II) and Afghanistan (Iron Tempest) show that the revenue effect depends on target intelligence, re-striking, ground verification, and a political settlement ²⁴²⁶ .	High
KJ5	A negotiated abandonment of fentanyl is achievable within 18–36 months if the strike phase is credible and discriminate.	Low
KJ6	Additional overdose reduction over an intensified intelligence partnership without strikes: about 5,500–7,500 deaths per year at peak effect if a negotiated abandonment holds, and close to none if it does not (8,000–15,000 against a no-campaign baseline). Author’s estimate.	Low
KJ7	The strategy will not eliminate trafficking.	High
KJ8	Mexican consent is the decisive vulnerability.	High
KJ9	Iran 2025–2026 shows strikes on fixed capital whose inputs are denied can halt a program for about a year; decapitation produced succession and a negotiating counterparty, but not a durable settlement ⁷⁵⁷⁸¹³¹ .	Moderate (record: two secondary trackers of an unsettled conflict, time-bound); Low to moderate (transfer)
KJ10	The cartel industrial base is its inputs, warehousing, industrial sites, ports, equipment, and finance. Strikes on its non-commercial parts transfer the Iran effect only if precursor denial makes them slow to replace, which is unproven; strikes on cook houses do not ²⁶⁷⁵ .	Moderate

1 Question, Literature, and Method

1.1 Question and contribution

This paper asks whether a formally authorized, Mexican-consented U.S. campaign against Mexico’s fentanyl-producing cartels can deter those organizations, reduce U.S.-bound fentanyl supply, and damage their business, and on what conditions. It makes three contributions. First, it specifies the campaign as four concurrent tracks, defines the target class for each, and states the conditions under which each track fails. Second, it fits that design to the legal instruments that exist: a U.S. Authorization for Use of Military

Force, the War Powers Resolution, and the Mexican constitutional rules on foreign forces and foreign intervention. Third, it states quantitative expectations against an explicit comparison case, an intensified intelligence partnership without strikes, so that the campaign is judged on what it adds to the trend it inherits.

1.2 Literature

The design draws on four literatures. The first is coercion. Schelling distinguishes deterrence, which asks an adversary not to act, from compellence, which asks it to stop an action already under way, and argues that compellence is the harder task because compliance is visible and costly to the target ¹⁵². A demand that a cartel abandon fentanyl production is compellence. George's account of coercive diplomacy sets out the conditions under which threats and limited force produce compliance, among them a clear demand, a sense of urgency, an asymmetry of motivation favoring the coercer, and, in its strongest form, an offer that makes compliance acceptable to the target ¹⁵³. The stated exit in this design is that offer. Pape distinguishes coercion by denial, which persuades an adversary that it cannot reach its objective, from coercion by punishment, which raises its costs, and finds denial the more reliable of the two ¹⁵⁴. Track 4(a) is a denial instrument; Track 4(b) is closer to punishment, which is one reason the paper rates it below the industrial-base track.

The second is leadership targeting. Jordan finds decapitation generally ineffective against large, older organizations and sometimes counterproductive ¹⁴⁰. Johnston, comparing successful and failed attempts on insurgent leaders, finds that successful removals raise the likelihood of campaign termination and reduce violence ¹³⁹, and Price finds that decapitation raises the mortality rate of terrorist groups ¹⁵⁵. Work on Mexico is more negative. Calderón et al. find that captures and killings of kingpins and lieutenants were followed by more violence in the affected and neighboring municipalities ¹³⁶; Dell finds that crackdowns diverted trafficking and raised violence along the new routes ¹³⁷; Phillips finds leadership removal associated with higher homicide ¹³⁸; and Esberg finds kingpin removals correlated with the emergence of smaller groups ³². The paper treats the Mexican findings as the operative evidence and the cross-national findings as the reason the question remains open.

The third is conditional repression. Lessing argues that crackdowns reduce cartel–state violence when the state makes the severity of repression conditional on the cartel's use of violence, so that the cartel has a lower-cost option, and that unconditional crackdowns increase violence ¹⁵⁶. The exit in this design applies the same logic to different conduct: lethal targeting is conditioned on fentanyl production and U.S.-bound export, not on violence. Lessing also documents how difficult conditionality is to implement and to make credible ¹⁵⁶. That difficulty is the design's principal implementation risk.

The fourth is the economics of drug enforcement. Reuter and Kleiman argue that enforcement raises retail prices mainly by imposing risk costs on traffickers, and that source-country control and interdiction have limited effect on retail price because import-level costs are a small share of it ¹⁵⁷. That finding sets the ceiling on Tracks 2 and 4(a), and it is the reason the projections in Section 5 decay toward baseline by Year 10.

1.3 Method

The paper uses a structured, focused comparison ¹⁵¹ of four cases in which the United States used force against an adversary's revenue or production base: Operation Tidal Wave II against ISIS oil (2015–2017), Operation Iron Tempest against Taliban drug laboratories (2017–2019), the maritime strike campaign of 2025–2026, and the U.S.–Israeli campaign against Iran (2025–2026). The same questions are asked of each case: which of the four tracks ran, and whether together or in sequence; what target class was struck; whether results were verified by a party other than the striking force; what happened to revenue, supply, or program output, and for how long; and what political outcome followed. The answers are set out in Sections 2.2 and 3.2–3.4 and govern the design choices in Section 4. Within each case the method is process tracing: the paper asks whether the sequence of events is consistent with the mechanism the track is supposed to produce, not only whether the outcome occurred.

Evidence is ranked: statutes, court records, Federal Register notices, and agency releases first; official statements second; independent analysis and press reporting third. The Data and Sources note at the end of the paper states which claims were checked against primary text and which rest on secondary reporting or are time-bound. Key judgments carry confidence levels in the convention of U.S. intelligence analysis (ICD 203). The projections in Section 5 are the author's estimates, not the output of a model, and are labeled as such.

1.4 Case selection and its limits

The cases were selected because force was used, not on their outcomes. A set of cases selected on the use of force cannot establish how often force against a revenue base works: it contains no cases in which force was considered and withheld, and no comparison of like adversaries treated differently. The cases are therefore used to identify mechanisms and failure modes—displacement in the maritime campaign, unverified results and civilian harm in Iron Tempest, the dependence of revenue effects on territorial control in Tidal Wave II, and the gap between a signature and a settlement in Iran—not to estimate a rate of success. Two further limits follow. None of the four is a campaign against a criminal organization on the territory of a consenting ally, which is the case the paper prescribes for; the nearest consent case, Plan Colombia, is used only for cost and for the lesson of narrow goals (Section 8). And Iran is a state, with territory to defend and a government that must survive; a cartel has neither. Section 3.4 states the four respects in which the Iran case does not transfer.

2 Strategic Logic of Declaration

2.1 What a declaration changes

Terms. In this paper, “declared war” means a public, statutory commitment to use force, an Authorization for Use of Military Force, paired with a joint U.S.–Mexican public ultimatum. It does not mean a formal declaration of war under Article I, Section 8, which Section 7 explains is the wrong instrument.

“Declaration” in Phase 1 refers to the ultimatum.

A declaration or AUMF changes three things. It changes severity: the cartels move from prosecution to lethal targeting. It changes probability: U.S. ISR and SIGINT run persistently, and Mexican institutions cannot compromise them. It changes durability: a statute outlasts any one administration. The declaration must state the exit. Any organization that verifiably stops fentanyl production and U.S.-bound export avoids lethal targeting.

2.2 The evidence

The cartels changed their product. DEA laboratory testing found that 29% of fentanyl pills analyzed in FY2025 contained a potentially lethal dose, down from 76% in FY2023. Fentanyl powder purity fell to 10.3% from 19.5% over the same period ¹. DEA attributed the change to “unprecedented pressure on the global fentanyl supply chain, forcing narco-terrorists, like the Sinaloa Cartel and CJNG Cartel, to change their business practices” ¹. DEA said these reductions “correlate with a decline in synthetic opioid deaths to levels not seen since April 2020” ¹. NCHS final data record about 72,800 deaths involving synthetic opioids other than methadone in 2023 ⁷⁰. Two cautions on the DEA series. The 29% and 10.3% figures are fiscal-year laboratory data; DEA’s May 2025 National Drug Threat Assessment reports a separate calendar-year series (average purity 11.36%; five of ten pills at 2 mg or more), and this paper does not combine the two. DEA’s own baseline also varies between releases (19.5% in FY2023 in the December 2025 release; “20% in 2024” in some 2026 field releases). The paper cites the December 3, 2025 wording ¹.

On October 2, 2023, banners signed by Los Chapitos appeared in Sinaloa reading: “The sale, manufacture, transportation or any type of business involving the substance known as fentanyl is strictly prohibited in Sinaloa,” according to Reuters, which noted it was “unclear who put up the banners” ⁴⁹. Ríodoce had reported an earlier order to stop production in Culiacán ⁴⁹. Former DEA agent Leo Silva called the banners “a ploy to take the heat off of them... I don’t see them stopping production” ⁴⁹.

The Sinaloa Cartel split. On April 14, 2023, the Justice Department unsealed indictments against the four Guzmán brothers and other Chapitos leaders ⁶⁶. On July 25, 2024, Ismael Zambada García and Joaquín Guzmán López were arrested in El Paso, Texas ⁶⁵. The Chapitos–Mayos war that followed raised homicides in Sinaloa by more than 400% over the next year ⁶⁸. The April 2026 indictment of Sinaloa’s governor shows how deeply the Chapitos had captured the state ¹⁷.

The United States used force at sea. The first U.S. strike on an alleged trafficking vessel, announced September 2, 2025, killed 11 people ¹². Trackers disagree on totals because they count strikes or vessels differently and treat the missing differently, and the numbers change weekly. Just Security’s timeline, current to September 19, 2026, records 70 strikes and 234 killed, including 23 missing and presumed dead, with three known survivors ¹¹. The Intercept’s September 2, 2026 count was more than 65 attacks and over 225 killed ¹². CNN counted at least 234 killed across at least 80 vessels as of September 20, 2026 ¹³. This paper uses “about 234 killed in 70 strikes as of September 19, 2026” and treats the figure as time-bound. In an October 2, 2025 notice, the administration told Congress that the United States is in a “non-international armed conflict” with the cartels ¹³⁴; in November 2025 the Office of Legal Counsel told lawmakers that the strikes do not amount to “hostilities” under the War Powers Resolution ¹³⁵. The

administration has not provided public evidence of narcotics on the vessels it struck ¹³. CDC provisional data show overdose deaths declining from late 2023, before the strikes began ⁵.

Effect of the maritime strikes on supply. By mid-2026, evidence on supply effects was available. An internal DEA assessment reviewed by the Washington Post found that the strikes “failed to affect the supply or price of cocaine in the United States”; a price rise in the first two months “reverted to previous levels” ⁸³. Pentagon officials told the Senate Armed Services Committee that the strikes had not reduced cocaine purity ⁸³⁸⁴. The Department of Defense Inspector General reported in March 2026 that cartels had increased their reliance on air transport and shipping containers ⁸⁴. CBP projected FY2026 cocaine seizures down 5.4% ⁸⁴. Boat traffic fell 20% in the Caribbean and 25% in the Eastern Pacific, according to the acting Assistant Secretary of Defense, which is displacement, not reduction ⁸⁴. The strikes hit one conveyance on two cocaine routes; they did not reduce supply, and they did not touch the fentanyl route, which is overland through the ports of entry. This paper treats that result as the reason the construct in Section 4 targets inputs, production capital, and finance rather than transport, and as evidence that a single track run alone produces the substitution the multi-channel rule predicts ⁸¹.

On January 3, 2026, U.S. forces captured Nicolás Maduro and flew him to New York to face federal charges ¹⁰. President Trump told Fox News host Sean Hannity in an interview aired January 8, 2026: “We’ve knocked out 97% of the drugs coming in by water. And we are gonna start now hitting . . . land with regard to the cartels” ¹⁵⁸. That 97% figure is a presidential assertion. No agency data set confirms it.

Congress tied the Defense Secretary’s travel budget to oversight. The FY2026 NDAA, Public Law 119–60, was enacted December 18, 2025 ³⁹. It caps obligation of Office of the Secretary of Defense travel funds at 75% until the Pentagon gives the Armed Services Committees unedited video of strikes in the Southern Command area and delivers overdue quarterly reports, including reports on execute orders ³⁷³⁸. Politico first reported the provision ³⁷.

Mexico killed El Mencho with U.S. intelligence. On February 22, 2026, Mexican forces raided a site in Tapalpa, Jalisco. CJNG leader Nemesio “El Mencho” Oseguera Cervantes was wounded and died during the airlift ¹⁴¹⁵. The White House said the United States provided intelligence support ¹⁴. A U.S. defense official told Reuters that a U.S. military-led interagency intelligence task force focused on drug cartels, the Joint Interagency Task Force–Counter Cartel under U.S. Northern Command, supported the operation ¹⁵. President Sheinbaum said the United States shared intelligence but did not provide ground forces ¹⁴. The CJNG retaliated. Gunmen set 252 roadblocks in 20 states by 8 p.m. that day, by the federal Security Cabinet’s count ¹⁴⁹, and violence spread in the days that followed ¹⁵¹⁶. Security Minister Omar García Harfuch said 25 National Guard members died in the clashes that followed in Jalisco ¹⁴.

Mexico handed over cartel leaders. Mexico sent 29 cartel figures to the United States in February 2025, 26 in August 2025, and 37 on January 20, 2026. García Harfuch put the total at 92 ⁷⁸⁹. The January transfer used seven Mexican military aircraft ⁸. It included alleged Cartel del Noreste leader Ricardo González Saucedo, “El Ricky” ⁹. Mexico said the U.S. Justice Department committed not to seek the death penalty ⁹. García Harfuch said the action was carried out “with full respect for national sovereignty” ⁹.

Crisis Group analyst David Mora said: “As the pressure increases, as demands from the White House dial up, (Mexico’s government) needs to resort to extraordinary measures, such as these transfers” ⁷.

2.3 Mexico’s cooperation, and its limits

Mexico’s cooperation is real. The transfers ⁷, the El Mencho operation ¹⁴, and Mexico’s acceptance of U.S. intelligence support show it.

On April 29, 2026, the U.S. Attorney for the Southern District of New York unsealed an indictment. It charges Sinaloa Governor Rubén Rocha Moya and nine other current and former Sinaloa officials with drug-trafficking and weapons offenses ¹⁷. Prosecutors allege the defendants partnered with the Chapitos and “abused their positions of trust and authority to help facilitate the Chapitos’ operations” ¹⁷. It is the first publicly known U.S. charge against a sitting Mexican governor; earlier governors, including Tomás Yarrington and Eugenio Hernández Flores, were charged after leaving office ¹⁸. Rocha Moya filed a request for leave on May 1, 2026; the Sinaloa Congress approved a leave of more than 30 days on May 2 and swore in Yeraldine Bonilla Valverde as interim governor ⁵⁰. He returned on August 21, 2026, after 112 days, and within 34 hours submitted a second request, dated August 22, for indefinite leave, which the Congress’s Diputación Permanente approved unanimously on August 23 ⁵⁰. At her April 30, 2026 press conference, Sheinbaum said that if the Fiscalía General de la República received “pruebas contundentes e irrefutables, conforme a la legislación mexicana” (conclusive and irrefutable evidence, under Mexican law), it would proceed under Mexican jurisdiction. She also said, “Nosotros no vamos a cubrir a nadie que haya cometido un delito” (we will not cover for anyone who has committed a crime), and rejected any “intromisión o injerencia de un gobierno extranjero” (intrusion or interference by a foreign government) ⁵¹.

The limits are also real. On April 19, 2026, two U.S. embassy personnel, widely reported to be CIA officers, died in a vehicle crash in Chihuahua connected to an anti-drug raid; two Chihuahua officials, including Pedro Ramón Oseguera, director of the State Investigation Agency (AEI), died with them ²⁰. Mexico’s security cabinet said they were not authorized to operate on Mexican territory: “Neither had formal accreditation to participate in operational activities within national territory” (English rendering of the Spanish statement) ²⁰. Sheinbaum said: “This is something that Mexicans shouldn’t take lightly” ²⁰. The U.S. government has not confirmed that the two were CIA officers ²⁰. Chihuahua’s attorney general, César Jáuregui Moreno, resigned on April 27, 2026 ⁵².

The lesson is plain. Mexico accepts intelligence partnership. It rejects unilateral U.S. operations on its soil. The campaign must be designed around that fact.

A second point follows, and the paper has to choose its causal story. The cooperation of 2025–2026 came under pressure: tariff threats, the Maduro operation, and public talk of land strikes. Coercion is what the evidence in Section 2.2 shows working. Coerced consent is also what the polling shows to be fragile: with a majority of Mexicans opposed to U.S. forces (78% in El Financiero’s January 2026 poll ³⁴; 61% in its May poll, as reported by Jorge Castañeda ¹⁵⁰), authorization extracted by threat can be withdrawn after a mass-casualty event, and the Mexican reader will know it was extracted. This paper’s position is that coercion can produce transfers and intelligence access, and has, but cannot carry a 12-month strike

campaign. Phase 2 therefore requires bargained consent, and the paper states the cost: bargaining is slower, it may fail, and if it fails the United States keeps the coercive tools but should not run Phase 2 on them.

A bargain needs a U.S. concession with a price. The items usually offered (arms-trafficking cooperation, extradition of U.S.-based financiers, no U.S. ground combat role) are things Mexico already has or things the design already requires, so they signal nothing. The concessions that would signal are these: a treaty-level status agreement, approved by the Mexican Senate under Article 76(I) and given advice and consent by the U.S. Senate, giving Mexico criminal jurisdiction over U.S. personnel for off-duty conduct and shared jurisdiction for operational conduct; a statutory cap on U.S. personnel on Mexican soil written into the AUMF and published; an enforceable southbound firearms commitment with outbound inspection targets at U.S. ports of entry, a dedicated appropriation, and public quarterly metrics; and a guarantee that no security-linked tariff action will be taken against Mexico for the duration of the authorization, including through the USMCA review. Each of these costs the United States something a Morena Senate majority can see. Without at least two of them, that majority has no reason to vote yes against majority opposition.

The fallback if bargaining fails is the intelligence partnership that already exists. That partnership produced the potency decline and the El Mencho raid, so the question a reviewer will ask is what Phase 2 adds over an intensified version of it. Section 5 answers with a comparison case.

3 Capability

3.1 Why U.S. assets, and why now

The United States brings persistent ISR, SIGINT, fast strike timelines, and freedom from compromise. Mexico's record of compromise at the top is documented in U.S. courts.

Genaro García Luna, Mexico's Secretary of Public Security from 2006 to 2012, was convicted in February 2023 of engaging in a continuing criminal enterprise, international cocaine distribution conspiracy, and related counts. On October 16, 2024, he was sentenced to 460 months in prison and a \$2 million fine for "his decade-long assistance to the Sinaloa Cartel in exchange for millions of dollars in bribes" ²¹.

Former Defense Secretary Salvador Cienfuegos Zepeda was arrested at Los Angeles International Airport on October 15, 2020 ²². On November 17, 2020, the Justice Department moved to dismiss, stating in its motion that "sensitive and important foreign policy considerations outweigh the government's interest in pursuing the prosecution of the defendant" ²². The Barr–Gertz joint statement of the same day said the dismissal was sought "so that he may be investigated and, if appropriate, charged, under Mexican law" ²³. Judge Carol Bagley Amon dismissed the case on November 18, 2020 ²³. On January 14, 2021, Mexico's Fiscalía General de la República announced it would bring no charges ⁵³.

The Rocha Moya indictment names a sitting senator and a Culiacán mayor among the defendants ¹⁷¹⁹. Corruption in Mexico reaches cabinet and gubernatorial levels, and the record is at the tier a campaign would have to trust. In September 2025, Mexico's security secretary announced 14 arrests in a fuel-

smuggling investigation run through the customs system, among them six Navy personnel including Vice Admiral Manuel Roberto Farías Laguna ⁷⁴. García Luna sat in the security cabinet. Cienfuegos ran the Army. A Rocha Moya co-defendant sits in the Senate. Nothing distinguishes the 2026 cabinet from its predecessors except that it has not been indicted. The Tapalpa raid was carried out by Army Special Forces, with support from the National Guard's immediate-reaction force and the Air Force ¹⁴: the same institution whose former secretary is this paper's evidence of compromise. Leahy vetting is by unit, its results are not public, and it cannot be audited by the reader. This paper therefore does not rest the design on a trusted Mexican tier or on vetting. It rests on four rules, set out in Section 4: fleeting targets are pre-cleared by category, with no per-strike disclosure and post-strike notification; per-strike Mexican concurrence applies only to fixed targets, where hours of notice cost nothing; battle-damage assessment is done by U.S. full-motion video and a Mexican element from a different service than the one that executed the strike, with third-party access for a designated monitor; and a leak narrows the concurrence list and moves the affected target class to the pre-cleared category, but does not end the channel, because ending the channel is what an adversary would engineer. Compartmenting protects a strike. It does not protect a campaign: after the first strikes the cartels will infer the target classes, the geography, and the ISR pattern whatever the Mexican side sees. The paper accepts that, because Sections 3.2 and 3.3 show that persistence, not surprise, produces the revenue effect.

3.2 Operation Tidal Wave II (Syria/Iraq)

Oil provided about half of ISIS revenue ²⁴. Tidal Wave II opened on October 21, 2015 with strikes on the Omar oil field, and in November the coalition began systematically striking tanker trucks, collection points, pump stations, and wellheads ²⁵⁵⁴. On January 6, 2016, coalition spokesman Col. Steve Warren stated: "We assess this operation has reduced their revenue by about 30 percent," with production down from about 45,000 to about 34,000 barrels a day ⁵⁴. The State Department estimated in early 2016 that ISIS oil revenue had dropped to about \$1 million a day from a peak of \$1.3 million ²⁵. By October 2017 the coalition put revenue below \$4 million a month ²⁴⁵⁵. Sources differ on the peak: a coalition spokesman gave \$40 million a month ⁵⁵, and USA Today, citing coalition statistics, gave \$50 million ²⁴. The State Department's \$1.3 million-a-day figure implies about \$40 million. More than 2,500 tanker trucks were destroyed ²⁴. The collapse of ISIS revenue came with the loss of its territory, not from air strikes alone.

The lesson: strikes cut revenue when they hit the distribution system repeatedly, and when ground forces take back the territory.

3.3 Operation Iron Tempest (Afghanistan)

Beginning in November 2017, U.S. aircraft struck Taliban drug labs in Afghanistan. General John Nicholson said the aim was to hit "the Taliban where it hurts, which is their finances" ⁵⁶. SIGAR's January 2019 quarterly report relayed the Defense Department's estimate that the strikes had denied about \$200 million to "those involved in the illegal drug trade in Afghanistan," and more than \$42 million to the Taliban specifically ¹⁵⁹. The Department used estimates because, as its officials had stated, "no ground verification takes place to weigh and assess the amounts of the precursors or products actually destroyed by an air strike"; SIGAR had raised concerns about that methodology in earlier reports ¹⁵⁹. Afghan opium

production reached a record in 2017, most of it harvested before the campaign began, and remained high in 2018 ²⁶. The military ended the program in early 2019 ²⁶.

On May 5, 2019, U.S. strikes hit more than 60 sites identified as drug-production facilities in Bakwa district, Farah, and neighboring Delaram district, Nimroz ²⁷²⁸. UNAMA verified 39 civilian casualties: 30 deaths, five injured, and four undetermined, including 14 children and one woman ²⁷. It concluded that “the civilian structures that were allegedly used as drug labs and were hit during the airstrikes did not have a sufficient nexus to the Taliban’s war-fighting operations to warrant their classification as military objectives” ²⁷. USFOR-A “assessed that there were no civilian casualties resulting from the airstrikes” ²⁷²⁸.

The lesson: strikes without ground verification produce inflated claims and civilian deaths. Both destroy the political basis for the campaign. The Mexico campaign must require ground battle-damage assessment and must never target lab workers as combatants.

3.4 Iran, 2025–2026: the integrated precedent

Iran is the one recent case in which all four tracks of the construct in Section 4 ran together against a single adversary, and it is the precedent this paper draws on for sequencing and for the choice of target class. It is not a template: the four respects in which it does not transfer are stated at the end of this section.

Sanctions and resource denial first. U.S. sanctions ran continuously from 2018. UN sanctions were restored under the JCPOA snapback procedure after the E3 trigger of August 28, 2025, taking effect September 28, 2025, and reimposed by the EU Council on September 29, 2025: asset freezes on the Central Bank and major commercial banks, arms and energy embargoes, and transport restrictions ⁷⁷⁸⁵. Export controls on centrifuge components and dual-use inputs had run for two decades before any strike. The target set that made the strikes possible was built over years of intelligence preparation; the details are outside the public record this paper uses.

Kinetic against the industrial base. Israel struck Iran’s nuclear sites and senior military leadership beginning June 13, 2025; the United States struck Fordow, Natanz, and Isfahan on the night of June 21–22, 2025 ⁸⁰. Assessments diverged at once. The Defense Intelligence Agency’s leaked preliminary assessment, made with low confidence, was that the program had been set back by only a few months ⁷⁶; IAEA Director General Grossi said on June 26, 2025 that the Fordow centrifuges were “no longer operational” ¹⁴², and assessed it “extremely unlikely” that centrifuges at the three struck sites had survived ⁷⁶. Later evidence favors the more severe assessment but does not settle it. The IAEA’s report of June 4, 2026 (GOV/2026/33) states that the agency “is unable to verify the suspension of Iran’s uranium enrichment,” that it stopped verification activities in Iran on February 28, 2026, and that it cannot verify the 440.9 kg of 60% enriched uranium it last verified before the June 2025 strikes; Grossi has said most of that stock is believed to be at Isfahan ⁷⁵. The Institute for Science and International Security, analyzing that report and commercial imagery, assesses that the Fordow cascades are “inoperable,” that Fordow and Natanz “likely remained inoperable since the June 2025 conflict” with “tunnel entrances [that] remain backfilled,” and that centrifuge manufacturing capacity was “severely degraded” ⁷⁵. Those are the

Institute's assessments, not IAEA findings. Strikes in February and March 2026 hit nuclear sites again, including Natanz and Isfahan, so the June 2025 strikes cannot be credited alone ⁷⁵. A year after the June 2025 strikes, no public evidence showed that enrichment had resumed; the IAEA could not confirm that it had not.

Kinetic against leadership. On February 28, 2026, the United States and Israel began a second campaign against Iran's leadership, air defenses, missile forces, and navy. Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei was killed in a U.S.–Israeli strike on Tehran that day; the Assembly of Experts announced a consensus on a successor on March 8, and his son, Mojtaba Khamenei, issued his first statement as supreme leader on March 12 ⁷⁸⁸⁶⁸⁷. Iran retaliated with missile and drone strikes on U.S. facilities in Bahrain, Jordan, Kuwait, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates, on Israel, and on Gulf energy and civilian infrastructure, and closed the Strait of Hormuz; the United States imposed a counter-blockade on April 13 ⁷⁸⁷⁹. A ceasefire began April 7–8, 2026 (U.S. and regional time) ⁷⁸⁸⁹. The Islamabad Memorandum of Understanding between the United States and Iran, negotiated under Pakistani mediation, was signed June 17, 2026; the signing date rests on ⁸⁹ and on the White House release of the text that day ⁸⁸. Its operative term is an “immediate and permanent termination of military operations on all fronts, including in Lebanon”; Iran undertakes to arrange safe commercial passage through the Strait of Hormuz for 60 days and to address enrichment and the disposition of its stockpile under IAEA supervision; the United States undertakes to “terminate all types of sanctions,” including UN Security Council resolutions, IAEA Board of Governors resolutions, and all unilateral U.S. sanctions; and the parties set a 60-day window, extendable, to negotiate a final agreement ⁸⁸. The 60 days governs the negotiation and the Hormuz arrangement, not the cessation, which the text calls permanent ⁸⁸. As of CFR's September 2026 update, thirteen U.S. service members had died; the Human Rights Activists News Agency documented 1,701 civilian deaths in Iran and up to 3.2 million displaced; a U.S. strike on a school killed at least 175 ⁷⁸. The memorandum did not hold. A Singapore-flagged vessel was struck off Oman on June 25; on June 27 U.S. Central Command struck missile, drone, and radar sites on Iran's southern coast, and Iran struck U.S. installations the same day ¹³¹. After a further round of U.S. strikes on July 7–8 (U.S. and Iran time), the President said the memorandum was “over” ¹³¹¹³². The 60-day window lapsed on August 17, 2026 without a final agreement ¹³¹; a new round of U.S. strikes on IRGC targets began September 1 ¹⁴⁸; and as of late September, Qatar-mediated talks had not produced a ceasefire ⁷⁸¹³³.

What transfers. Four things.

- *Sequencing.* Sanctions and resource denial ran for years and built the target picture before any strike. The Preparation Paradox in Section 4 is the same rule: every track execution-ready before the first one fires.
- *The industrial base as the target.* Iran's industrial base was fixed capital: enrichment halls, centrifuge manufacturing, missile plants. Strikes on that capital left the activity stopped, as far as outside observers can tell, a year later, because the inputs to rebuild it were already denied; the 2026 re-strikes mean the effect cannot be credited to the June 2025 strikes alone. The cartel industrial base, defined the same way, is the precursor supply from China, domestic chemical supplies, warehousing, industrial synthesis and pressing sites, production equipment, and the financial nodes that pay for all

of it. Ports and commercial logistics are addressed through interdiction under Mexican authority in Track 2, not by strikes. That is the target set in Section 4, Track 4(a). It is not the cook house, which is the Iron Tempest target and produces the Iron Tempest result.

- *Decapitation as coercion.* Killing the Supreme Leader produced a successor within two weeks and a regime that fought on for six weeks. It did not collapse the state. What it produced was a counterparty that accepted a ceasefire within six weeks and signed a memorandum of understanding within four months, and that memorandum broke down within ten days of signature ¹³¹¹³². Decapitation bought a negotiation, not a settlement. That is the limit of the Phase 3 mechanism, and the reason Phase 3 rests on verification rather than on the counterparty's signature. Leadership targeting in Section 4, Track 4(b), is designed for that effect: it removes the decision-maker who refused the exit and presents the same choice to the successor.
- *The cost side.* Hormuz, thirteen U.S. dead, 1,701 civilians, 3.2 million displaced, and a war that resumed after the memorandum and remained active seven months on. Iran's costs were borne by a hostile state and its neighbors. In Mexico the same costs fall on an allied democracy and the top U.S. trading partner; the paper's consent, attribution, and civilian-harm rules exist for that reason. Those rules constrain U.S. conduct. They do not constrain cartel retaliation, which the El Mencho aftermath shows reaching 20 states in a day ¹⁴⁹. The Iran outcome is therefore the case for the consent rules and the case against the analogy at the same time, and the paper uses it for the first purpose only.

What does not transfer, stated as design adjustments. Production is mobile, so the kinetic track targets fixed inputs, logistics, and finance rather than synthesis sites that cost nothing to relocate. There is no single decision-maker, so the exit is offered and verified per organization. Demand regenerates supply, so the supply effect is measured against the comparison case in Section 5, not against zero. The territory is allied, so the campaign runs under Mexican authorization and attribution or not at all.

4 The Construct: Four Tracks in Unison

4.1 The rule

The strategy runs four tracks simultaneously against the same organizations, on the Iran model. The reason is the multi-channel framework the author developed in the WP-2026 series (see Disclosure). The framework holds, as a hypothesis not yet tested outside the author's working papers, that sequential enforcement fails against adaptive networks because administrative timelines of 30–180 days exceed channel-migration timelines of 30–60 days, so each action lands on a target that has already moved; only pressure across the operative channels at once removes the low-cost substitution route ⁸¹. Three rules from that framework govern this design. At least four financial channels are under concurrent pressure, including formal banking or cryptocurrency conversion points. No track is interrupted for more than 60 days. Fragmentation without parallel organizational disruption is a null outcome, not a success, and triggers reassessment ⁸¹. The maritime campaign of 2025–2026 is the counter-example: one track, one conveyance, and the cargo moved to aircraft and containers while price and purity held ⁸³⁸⁴.

4.2 The four tracks

Track 1 — Diplomacy and sanctions. *Targets:* the organizations' financial access and their counterparties. *Actions:* FTO and SDGT designations, in force since February 20, 2025 ⁶³; Section 311 primary-money-laundering-concern findings (31 U.S.C. §5318A) and the FEND Off Fentanyl Act orders under 21 U.S.C. §2313a, of which the first three issued June 25, 2025 ⁶⁴; secondary sanctions on Chinese and Hong Kong banks that clear cartel proceeds; documented notice to PRC precursor suppliers that their customers are designated FTOs, establishing the knowledge element for 18 U.S.C. §2339B, subject to the extraterritorial-jurisdiction limits of §2339B(d) ⁸²; forfeiture of funds in U.S. interbank (correspondent) accounts under 18 U.S.C. §981(k) ⁸²; and the coercive diplomacy of Phase 3, with the exit stated. *Measure:* correspondent-account terminations, laundering commission rates, SAR patterns, and the fentanyl signature and purity series.

Track 2 — Resource restriction: the input side of the industrial base. *Targets:* precursors, pre-precursors, equipment, and the logistics that deliver them. *Actions:* control of precursors and pre-precursors as List I chemicals under the Controlled Substances Act (21 U.S.C. §802(34); 21 C.F.R. §1310.02); direct pressure on China, whose chemical companies DEA identifies as the cartels' partners ⁴¹; Entity List and export-control action against equipment suppliers (tableting and pill-press machinery, reagents); interdiction at Manzanillo and Lázaro Cárdenas; and forfeiture of stockpiles. *Measure:* precursor seizure weight and price, pill-potency and purity series ¹, and the Section 5 supply indicators. This is the track with a visible signature in the fentanyl data: China's May 2019 class-wide control of fentanyl-related substances and its September 2024 control of the precursors 4-AP, 1-boc-4-AP, and norfentanyl precede or coincide with the potency decline ¹⁴⁵¹⁴⁶. Before 2025, export controls slowed Iranian enrichment alongside the JCPOA's verified limits; they were not the only measure.

Track 3 — Intelligence and covert action. *Targets:* the target picture itself, and the organizations' ability to protect it. *Actions:* the 90-day ISR and SIGINT baseline; the Joint Interagency Task Force–Counter Cartel under U.S. Northern Command, which supported the El Mencho operation ¹⁵; HUMINT; a Title 50 finding under 50 U.S.C. §3093 for actions short of force against laundering infrastructure, cryptocurrency settlement, and communications, conducted outside Mexican territory or with Mexico's express authorization, since unilateral covert action in Mexico would breach the Article 40 rule that governs the whole design (Section 7.2) and repeat the April 2026 Chihuahua incident; and counterintelligence against the compromise documented in Section 3.1. *Measure:* positive-identification rate, target-deck age, and independent battle-damage assessment.

Track 4 — Kinetic. Two target classes, with different logic.

- *4(a) The industrial base.* Bulk precursor stockpiles and warehousing at non-commercial sites; industrial-scale synthesis and pressing sites; production equipment; and financial nodes, pursued through Treasury and DOJ, or physically where they are physical. Ports and commercial logistics are not in this class: interdiction there is a law-enforcement function under Mexican authority in Track 2, because a strike on Manzanillo or Lázaro Cárdenas is a strike on the trade Section 6 prices at \$872.8 billion and cannot be attributed under Section 7.2. Struck only when unoccupied, under the fixed-

target concurrence rules below. Whether these sites are lawful military objectives is the hardest legal question in the design. UNAMA found that Afghan drug labs lacked “a sufficient nexus” to war-fighting²⁷; the United States has taken the position that objects contributing to an adversary’s “war-sustaining” capability may be targeted¹⁴¹, a position the ICRC and most U.S. allies reject. Section 7.1 treats a published legal determination for each target class as a precondition. This is the Fordow class of target if, and only if, Track 2 makes it slow to replace. That condition is the construct’s central unproven premise. Centrifuge components have a handful of suppliers and two decades of export control; fentanyl precursors are commodity chemicals from thousands of firms, and Section 6 documents production relocating to British Columbia and back into the United States. If precursor denial cannot produce a multi-month gap, Track 4(a) buys weeks, and the construct reduces to Tracks 1–2 plus the deterrent in Track 4(b). The paper states that as the risk and treats the first year of Phase 2 as the test. It is not the cook house, whose destruction produces weeks of effect and the Bakwa result²⁶²⁷.

- *4(b) Leadership.* The class is defined by role and legal status, not by name: persons who direct fentanyl production or U.S.-bound export for an organization designated as a Foreign Terrorist Organization, whose organization continues that conduct after the Phase 1 ultimatum, and who meet the legal standard stated below. This paper places no individual in the class. The purpose is deterrence of conduct, not attrition. Legally, targeting cannot rest on conduct after the ultimatum: under the law of armed conflict a person is targetable by status (membership with a continuous combat function in an organized armed group party to the conflict) or for direct participation in hostilities, and outside armed conflict only under human-rights law’s imminent-threat standard. The exit is therefore a policy decision to withhold force from those who take it, not the legal basis for using force against those who do not. Where a member of the class is a U.S. national, the Section 7.1 U.S.-persons review applies before any action. If an organization refuses the exit, members of the class may be targeted under the Phase 2 standards; a successor faces the same choice with the same exit open. The record on decapitation is that it produces succession, not collapse—Escobar, the Cali leadership, Arellano Félix, Guzmán, Zambada, Oseguera, and in February 2026 the Supreme Leader of Iran³¹³²⁷⁸—so the strike is not expected to reduce supply by itself. It is expected to produce a counterparty willing to take the exit. The record on that expectation is thin: one adversary, a state under total war, negotiated after decapitation, and its agreement broke down within ten days¹³¹; no Mexican organization ever has. Oseguera’s death was answered with 252 roadblocks in 20 states¹⁴⁹. A state must survive; a cartel successor faces no equivalent pressure. The exit open to successors is the design’s answer, and it is untested. The fragmentation stop condition applies: if leadership strikes produce new entrants and maintained output without reduced throughput, Track 4(b) pauses until the parallel organizational disruption of Track 1 (indictment, forfeiture, designation) is in place⁸¹.

4.3 How it works

Track 2 raises the cost of inputs and cuts throughput. Track 4(a) destroys the capital that Track 2 makes hard to replace. Track 1 raises the cost of moving money and cuts the revenue that would rebuild the capital. Track 3 makes all of it targetable and verifies what happened. Track 4(b) puts the decision-maker

at personal risk, and the exit converts that risk into a decision. Simultaneity is the mechanism: each track closes the substitution route the others open. Run alone, each has a documented failure mode—sanctions leak, precursors substitute, intelligence without action is a report, strikes on transport displace, and decapitation fragments. Run together, the record from Iran is a year with no observed enrichment and a memorandum of understanding that did not hold ⁷⁵⁸⁸¹³¹.

4.4 Phases

Phase 0 — Preconditions.

- Mexican Senate authorization under Article 76(III) and treaty ratification under Article 76(I) of the Mexican Constitution ⁴⁴.
- A bilateral operations agreement.
- A U.S. AUMF.
- A 90-day ISR and SIGINT baseline.
- The Preparation Paradox satisfied: administrative records for every Track 1 and Track 2 action at the standard that survives review, and execution-ready, before any Track 4 action; the slowest record governs the start date ⁸¹. Coalition status documented for the finance corridor (Mexico; and for Chinese and Hong Kong clearing, at least documented non-objection from one primary partner). Resources and authorization confirmed for the full 12–18 month window with no track interrupted more than 60 days.

Phase 1 — Declaration and 30-day ultimatum. The declaration names the organizations. It names the prohibited conduct: fentanyl production and U.S.-bound export. It names the consequence: lethal targeting of the industrial base and the leadership. It names the exit: verified abandonment, open to any successor.

Phase 2 — Simultaneous execution (months 4–15). All four tracks fire in the same window.

- Targeting standards for Track 4: positive identification from two sources, one non-Mexican; the near-certainty standard for civilian presence set in the 2013 Presidential Policy Guidance, adopted here as a benchmark rather than as current policy, since the PPG was replaced in 2017 and again by a classified 2022 Presidential Policy Memorandum and the standard now in force is not public ⁴⁷; for fleeting targets (leadership), category pre-clearance in the bilateral annex and the Senate authorization, no per-strike disclosure, and Mexican notification within hours after the strike; for fixed targets (industrial sites, precursor stockpiles, warehousing), per-strike Mexican concurrence by a named official, given expressly within a 12-hour clock, with silence treated as refusal, because Article 40 requires express authorization (Section 7.2); battle-damage assessment by U.S. full-motion video plus a Mexican element from a service other than the executing one, with access for a designated third-party monitor. Independent assessment is the direct correction for the Iron Tempest failure, in which the striking force graded its own results ²⁶¹⁵⁹.

- Track 1 and Track 2 actions publish in the same 30-day window as the first Track 4 strike, so that the migration window opened by any one action is closed by the others ⁸¹.
- DEA's release accompanying its 2024 National Drug Threat Assessment states that the cartels "have built mutually profitable partnerships with China-based precursor chemical companies to obtain the necessary ingredients to manufacture[r] [sic] synthetic drugs," and that they "work in partnership with Chinese money laundering organizations to launder drug proceeds" ⁴¹. The campaign names China and pressures it directly on both.

Phase 3 — Coercive diplomacy (months 9–36).

- Precedent: the Chapitos' 2023 ban shows a major organization will publicly change its product under pressure, even though enforcement was partial and former DEA officials called it a ploy ⁴⁹. Iran's Islamabad Memorandum of June 2026 shows a decapitated adversary will negotiate under sustained pressure, and its breakdown within ten days shows that the signature is not the settlement ⁸⁸¹³¹. A settlement must therefore rest on verification, not on declarations.
- Deal terms: verified abandonment of fentanyl production and U.S.-bound export, in exchange for removal from lethal targeting. The offer stands for successors.
- Verification: ISR, port monitoring, DEA fentanyl signature profiling, and market indicators, with strikes resuming within 72 hours of any violation.

Why the United States should accept a deal. In 2023, about 69% of U.S. overdose deaths involved synthetic opioids, mainly illegally made fentanyl ⁶. About 105,000 Americans died of overdoses that year ⁶, so roughly 72,000 deaths involved synthetic opioids. Removing the lethal product saves the most lives.

5 Expected Effects

Baseline.

- The CDC's predicted provisional count, as of its August 31, 2026 release, is 67,798 overdose deaths for the 12 months ending March 2026, down 12.3% from the prior year ⁴. The count is model-adjusted and revised monthly.
- CDC's February 25, 2025 release put deaths at about 87,000 for the 12 months ending September 2024, down from about 114,000 the year before, a decline of nearly 24%, with 45 states showing declines ⁵.
- In 2025, DEA reports seizing 47 million fentanyl pills and 9,938 pounds of fentanyl powder, which DEA describes as "equivalent to 369 million potential lives saved" ².
- CBP fentanyl seizures at the southwest border rose from about 14,100 pounds in FY2022 to about 26,700 pounds in FY2023; the nationwide FY2023 total was about 27,000 pounds ⁴⁸⁵⁷.

Attribution. The administration attributes the overdose decline to enforcement pressure. DEA’s own language is that purity reductions “correlate with” the decline ¹. Independent analysis has not yet apportioned the contributions of enforcement, Chinese precursor controls, the potency shift, expanded naloxone access, and the Sinaloa conflict, which overlap in the same period. This paper claims what the data show: pressure changed cartel behavior, potency fell, and deaths fell in step. It also records what the maritime strikes show: transport interdiction alone left cocaine supply, price, and purity unchanged ⁸³, which is why the projections below are attributed to Tracks 1, 2, and 4(a), not to interdiction.

Projections. These are the author’s estimates, not sourced measurements. All figures are measured against a no-campaign baseline in which the 2024–2026 decline continues at a decaying rate (about 12% in the first year, halving each year after). “Additional deaths averted” means deaths below that baseline, not below the current level. The first row gives the comparison case the strategy must beat: an intensified intelligence partnership without strikes, extrapolating the FY2023–FY2025 potency trend under current pressure. The campaign’s claimed marginal effect is the difference between that row and the rows below it, and the confidence in that difference is low. The second deaths-averted row states that marginal claim. It applies the relationship between supply reduction and deaths averted implied by the campaign rows in each year (about 160–180 deaths per percentage point of supply in Year 1, 270–300 in Year 3, and 330–400 in Year 10, the rise reflecting lagged effects) to the gap between the campaign and the comparison case, pairing low with low and high with high because both depend on the same cartel response. Against the comparison case, rounded to the nearest 500, the campaign averts about 2,500–4,500 deaths in Year 1, 5,500–7,500 in Year 3 if a negotiated abandonment holds, and 0–1,500 in Year 10. Without a settlement, the campaign’s Year 3 supply range (–10% to –20%) is no better than the comparison case (–10% to –25%), and the marginal effect is close to zero. The campaign’s case for its costs therefore rests on Phase 3.

Indicator	Year 1	Year 3	Year 10
Comparison case: intensified intelligence partnership, no strikes (supply)	–10% to –20%	–10% to –25%	–5% to –10%
U.S.-bound fentanyl supply (major organizations)	–25% to –45%	–30% to –50% with settlement; –10% to –20% without	–5% to –15%
Share of pills with a lethal dose	Below 20%	Below 20% if settlement holds	Returns toward baseline
Retail fentanyl price	+30% to +80%	+20% to +50%	Baseline
Deaths averted per year, against the no-campaign baseline	4,000–8,000	8,000–15,000	2,000–5,000
Deaths averted per year, against the comparison case (derived)	2,500–4,500	5,500–7,500 with settlement; about 0 without	0–1,500

Indicator	Year 1	Year 3	Year 10
Cartel fentanyl revenue	–40% to –60%	–50% to –70%	Recovered, unless precursor and demand controls hold
Organizational cohesion	Leadership losses; factional conflict	Fragmentation risk peaks	New equilibrium

6 Limits and Second-Order Effects

This section states the limits once. The campaign plan treats them as design constraints.

Demand. Americans spent on the order of \$150 billion on cocaine, heroin, marijuana, and methamphetamine in 2016 ²⁹³⁰. That estimate covers four drugs only. It does not measure fentanyl. Demand of this size will find new supply.

No crop, and relocation. Synthetic drugs need no farmland. Production moves. In October 2024, the RCMP dismantled what Assistant Commissioner David Teboul called “the largest, and most sophisticated drug superlab in Canadian history” in Falkland, British Columbia. Investigators seized 54 kg of fentanyl and 390 kg of methamphetamine ⁴⁰. In 2023, DEA documented 60 domestic methamphetamine clandestine lab seizures, compared with 23,700 labs seized in 2004 ⁴¹. Domestic production collapsed after the Combat Methamphetamine Epidemic Act of 2005 restricted retail pseudoephedrine, and Mexican supply replaced it ⁶⁹. Production will leave Mexico under pressure too.

Fragmentation. Crisis Group found that the number of criminal groups in Mexico more than doubled, from 76 in 2010 to 205 in late 2020, and that at least 543 armed groups operated between mid-2009 and late 2020 ³¹. Crisis Group states that “as leaders have been removed, the number of armed groups in Mexico has grown” ³¹. Esberg’s peer-reviewed analysis found that kingpin removals were correlated with the emergence of smaller groups ³². Earlier work points the same way: Calderón et al. find that captures of kingpins and lieutenants were followed by more violence in the affected and neighboring municipalities ¹³⁶; Dell finds that crackdowns diverted trafficking routes and raised violence along them ¹³⁷; Phillips finds leadership removal associated with increased homicides ¹³⁸. The cross-national literature is divided: Jordan finds decapitation generally ineffective against established organizations ¹⁴⁰, Johnston that it weakens insurgencies ¹³⁹. The El Mencho aftermath confirmed the risk: roadblocks and attacks spread across 20 states within a day ¹⁴⁹. INEGI’s preliminary 2025 figures record 27,989 presumed homicides, a rate of 21.4 per 100,000, down from 25.8 in 2024 ⁵⁸; a lethal campaign would probably reverse that decline in the areas struck. Iran adds the state-level case: the Supreme Leader’s death produced a successor within two weeks, no collapse, and no durable settlement ⁸⁶⁸⁷¹³¹. The campaign therefore does not count on leadership strikes to reduce supply; it counts on them to produce a counterparty, and it pairs every leadership strike with the parallel organizational disruption of Track 1 and a plan to hold the territory.

Americans in the trafficking chain. From 2018 to 2024, U.S. citizens made up 3,058 of the 3,874 convicted fentanyl traffickers in southwest border districts, or 78.9%, according to Cato’s analysis of U.S. Sentencing Commission data ³³. Strikes in Mexico do not reach these couriers. CBP reports that more than 90% of interdicted fentanyl is stopped at ports of entry ¹³⁰. Domestic enforcement at the ports of entry must continue.

Trade. Mexico was the top U.S. trading partner in goods in 2025, with \$872.8 billion in goods trade per CRS; Census data put the figure at about \$871.6 billion ⁴²⁵⁹. A campaign that ruptures the relationship puts that trade at risk.

Consent. El Financiero’s national poll of January 14–21, 2026 found that 78% of Mexicans disagreed with the use of U.S. military forces against criminal groups in Mexico, and 21% agreed ³⁴. El Financiero reported that rejection was at its highest since January 2025 ³⁴. El Financiero’s May 2026 poll, as reported by Jorge Castañeda, put opposition at 61% and support at 37% ¹⁵⁰. Opposition has fallen since January. It remains a clear majority. Consent is the decisive constraint. The campaign runs only with Mexico’s authorization, or not at all.

7 Legal Authorities

7.1 United States

- **AUMF preferred.** An AUMF is preferred over a formal declaration of war. It gives specific authority, names the organizations, and sets limits.
- **War Powers Resolution.** It requires a report to Congress within 48 hours and ends unauthorized hostilities after 60 days, plus 30 days for withdrawal ⁴⁵. The administration’s November 2025 position that the maritime strikes are not “hostilities” under the Resolution ¹³⁵ is the reason the AUMF must state that it is specific statutory authorization within the meaning of 50 U.S.C. §1547(a)(1).
- **FTO designation.** Designation under INA §219 (8 U.S.C. §1189) triggers sanctions and criminal liability. It does not authorize force. The 2001 AUMF does not cover the cartels. The first prosecutorial use of the terrorism framework against the Sinaloa Cartel was the May 13, 2025 Southern District of California indictment of Pedro Inzunza Noriega and others for narco-terrorism and material support ⁶⁷.
- **Title 10 and Title 50.** Covert action under Title 50 requires a presidential finding under 50 U.S.C. §3093. Traditional military activities are excluded from the covert-action definition (§3093(e)(2)), so Track 4 strikes run under Title 10 and the AUMF, not under a finding.
- **Leahy laws.** 22 U.S.C. §2378d and 10 U.S.C. §362 bar assistance to a foreign security unit where the Secretary has credible information that the unit has committed a gross violation of human rights.
- **Law of armed conflict.** Whether the cartels meet the threshold for a non-international armed conflict is disputed. On October 31, 2025, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Volker Türk said the U.S. boat strikes violate international human rights law and stated: “The US must halt such attacks and take all measures necessary to prevent the extrajudicial killing of people aboard these boats, whatever the

criminal conduct alleged against them” ³⁵³⁶. A domestic AUMF does not answer that charge. Whether a non-international armed conflict exists turns on the intensity of the violence and the organization of the armed group (Prosecutor v. Tadić, ICTY Appeals Chamber, Oct. 2, 1995, ¶70), not on domestic authorization, and outside armed conflict lethal force is governed by human-rights law. An AUMF with clear targeting rules settles the domestic-law question and narrows the civilian-harm question; the international-law question turns on facts in Mexico and on Mexico’s own characterization of its conflict with these groups.

- **U.S. persons.** The Office of Legal Counsel’s July 16, 2010 memorandum on Anwar al-Aulaqi sets out the analysis for lethal force against a U.S. citizen abroad ⁴⁶. Treasury describes both the head of Los Mayos and the U.S.-named CJNG leader as dual Mexican-U.S. nationals ⁹³⁹⁵, so the review is a present requirement for Track 4(b), not a contingency.

7.2 Mexico

- Article 76(III) gives the Senate exclusive authority to authorize the President to permit the passage of foreign troops through national territory and the stationing of foreign naval forces in Mexican waters for more than a month ⁴⁴. The Senate has used it in 2026 to admit small armed U.S. training contingents ⁷¹⁷². It authorizes passage, not a campaign. A 12-month operation with thousands of U.S. personnel is stationing, and Mexican constitutional lawyers will say the instrument does not exist for it.
- Article 89(X) binds the President to non-intervention, self-determination, and the proscription of the threat or use of force in international relations as principles of foreign policy ⁴⁴. The reform of Article 40 published in the Diario Oficial on April 1, 2025 added: “El pueblo de México, bajo ninguna circunstancia, aceptará intervenciones, intromisiones o cualquier otro acto desde el extranjero, que sea lesivo de la integridad, independencia y soberanía de la Nación . . . ,” and “Tampoco consentirá intervención en investigación y persecución alguna sin la autorización y colaboración expresa del Estado Mexicano, en el marco de las leyes aplicables” ⁷³. The word “expresa” matters: express authorization is what the treaty route below supplies. These are the governing texts, and they are Mexican, not American.
- The design therefore has to fit the instruments Mexico has. First, U.S. personnel on Mexican soil are held to liaison, advisers, and the assessment element, inside the numbers the Senate has already authorized for training; strike aircraft operate from U.S. territory, and ISR is collected from U.S. or international airspace, which requires no Mexican authorization. Any overflight of Mexican territory by armed or ISR aircraft is a separate question: it is not obviously “paso de tropas” under Article 76(III), and it is the case Mexican lawyers will contest. The design therefore requires that overflight be authorized expressly in the ratified treaty under Article 76(I), with strike overflight limited to the pre-cleared target categories. Second, the operations agreement is concluded as a treaty and ratified under Article 76(I), so that jurisdiction over U.S. personnel and Mexican concurrence are matters of Mexican law. Third, every strike is framed and publicly attributed as a Mexican operation with U.S. support, which is the only framing Articles 40 and 89(X) permit. The framing does not transfer legal

responsibility: the United States remains responsible for its own forces' conduct. If Mexico's Senate will not ratify on those terms, the campaign has no Mexican legal basis and does not run.

- Mexico's security cabinet has stated that foreign agents need federal authorization to operate in Mexico ²⁰.

7.3 Bilateral

Congress appropriated about \$1.5 billion for the Mérida Initiative in FY2008–FY2010 and some \$3.6 billion in total from FY2008 to FY2023, including the Bicentennial Framework that replaced it in 2021 ⁶⁰. On September 3, 2025, Secretary Rubio and Foreign Secretary de la Fuente established a high-level security implementation group; its first meeting, on September 26, 2025, launched “Mission Firewall” against arms trafficking ⁶¹⁶². None of these frameworks contemplates U.S. combat operations in Mexico.

8 Force Requirements and Cost

These are the author's planning estimates, sized to the footprint Section 7.2 permits.

In Mexico. Liaison, adviser, and assessment personnel only, on the order of 100–200, inside the scale the Senate has already authorized for training contingents ⁷¹⁷²: a combined targeting and concurrence cell at the security-cabinet level; advisers to the executing Mexican unit; the cross-service assessment element and monitor support; and embassy-based DEA, FBI, and Treasury liaison. No U.S. ground combat element.

Outside Mexico. 8–12 MQ-9 or equivalent orbits and 1–2 wide-area surveillance platforms flown from U.S. bases; 2–3 airborne SIGINT orbits; strike aircraft on call from U.S. territory; JIATF–Counter Cartel staff under U.S. Northern Command; a special operations element held in the United States for hostage recovery or personnel recovery only, not for direct action in Mexico; intelligence, analysis, and financial-targeting staff at DEA, Treasury, and the combatant command. Total on the order of 2,500–4,000 personnel, almost all in the United States.

Cost. \$2–4 billion in Year 1 and \$1.5–3 billion a year thereafter, driven by ISR flying hours, munitions, and the financial and precursor programs. That is roughly three to six times Plan Colombia's average annual U.S. funding of about \$700 million over FY2000–FY2008, and one and a half to three times the FY2000 emergency supplemental of about \$1.3 billion, of which about \$860 million went to Colombia ⁴³¹⁴³; it is below the author's estimate of \$4–7 billion for a ground special-operations task force. The figures exclude the cost of the U.S. concessions in Section 2.3 (firearms outbound inspection and its appropriation), which should be budgeted separately and are part of the price of consent.

Precedent. GAO found that the United States provided over \$6 billion for Plan Colombia from FY2000 to FY2008. Over 2000–2006, opium poppy cultivation and heroin production declined about 50%, while coca cultivation rose about 15% and cocaine production about 4% ⁴³. Money and force reduced one drug and failed against the other. The lesson is to set narrow goals.

9 Recommendations

1. **Seek Mexican Senate authorization first.** No operation begins without it ⁴⁴.
1. **Pass an AUMF.** Name the organizations, the prohibited conduct, the targeting standards, a sunset, and reporting requirements. State that it is specific statutory authorization under 50 U.S.C. §1547(a)(1), define target classes by status, and require the U.S.-persons review for any U.S. national. Include the NDAA's video and execute-order disclosure requirements ³⁷.
2. **Build the ISR and SIGINT baseline for 90 days** before the ultimatum.
3. **Issue the declaration and the 30-day ultimatum.** State the exit.
4. **Fire all four tracks in the same window.** No Track 4 action until Track 1 and Track 2 records are execution-ready; no track interrupted more than 60 days ⁸¹.
5. **Define the industrial base and strike it, not the cook house.** Precursor stockpiles, warehousing, industrial synthesis and pressing sites, equipment, and finance, struck when unoccupied, after a published determination that each target class is a lawful military objective, with independent battle-damage assessment ²⁶²⁷⁷⁵. Target leadership only as the conduct-tied deterrent, with the exit open to successors. Pressure China on precursors and money laundering through Treasury designations, §2339B notice, and diplomatic action ⁴¹⁸².
6. **Open coercive diplomacy by month 9.** Offer removal from targeting in exchange for verified abandonment of fentanyl.

Measures of effectiveness: DEA pill-potency and purity data ¹; CDC provisional overdose deaths ⁴; seizure data ²³; retail price; civilian-harm counts.

Exit conditions: Success — verified abandonment holds for 12 months. Consent — Mexico withdraws authorization. Civilian harm — any verified civilian-casualty event triggers a pause and independent review; a mass-casualty event or a verified strike on a non-military objective ends Phase 2 pending renewed Senate authorization. Section 2.3 predicts that the second kind of event would end Mexican consent; the exit condition is written to act before that happens. Futility — supply indicators do not move within 12 months.

10 Conclusion

The United States has designated the cartels as terrorist organizations, and the fentanyl they supply has been involved in tens of thousands of American deaths a year. When U.S. pressure became credible, they changed their product, and Mexico sent 92 of their members to U.S. courts. A declared, consent-based campaign that runs sanctions, resource denial, intelligence, and strikes on the industrial base and its leadership in unison—the construct under which Iran's enrichment plants were assessed inoperable a year on, though it did not produce a durable settlement—can cut the fentanyl supply and save American lives. Its gain over the intelligence partnership Mexico already accepts depends on a negotiated abandonment that no Mexican organization has yet made. Strikes on transport alone did not; the 2025–2026 maritime campaign showed that. It will not end the drug trade. Mexico's sovereignty is real, and so is Mexico's responsibility. The campaign succeeds only as a partnership.

ANNEX A

Organizational Profiles

This annex profiles the organizations the strategy names. It covers every group the State Department designated a Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO) and Specially Designated Global Terrorist on February 20, 2025, the two Mexican groups designated on July 16, 2026, and the later Latin American designations in summary. It is current to October 6, 2026.

This annex is a reference profile compiled from public designations, indictments, sanctions actions, and reward notices. It is not a target list. It does not identify any person as a lawful military objective, and the Track 4(b) class in Section 4.2 is defined by role and legal status without reference to it. Legal status is reported as the public record states it; an indictment is an accusation, not a finding of guilt.

A.0 Method

- **Sources.** U.S. primary sources first: State Department designations and reward notices, Federal Register, Treasury and OFAC releases, FinCEN, DOJ and DEA releases, the DEA National Drug Threat Assessments (NDTA) ⁹⁰⁹¹, and CRS. Mexican government statements are cited through Mexican press. InSight Crime is the principal analytic secondary. No encyclopedia or partisan outlet is cited; where a government text is cited through a mirror (GlobalSecurity.org, Justia, syndicated wire copies), the mirror is identified.
- **Legal status.** Every named person is given a status: indicted (with district), OFAC-sanctioned, subject to a State Narcotics Rewards Program (NRP) offer, in custody, transferred, killed, or reported only. Indicted means charged, not convicted. A person named as a leader on press reporting alone is labeled reported.
- **Revenue.** No current, method-transparent revenue estimate exists for any organization profiled here. Where a figure circulates, the annex gives its origin and date and says what it is not.
- **Limits.** No 2026 NDTA had been released; the May 2025 NDTA is the latest DEA characterization. Several 2026 arrests in Mexico rest on Mexican press and are marked for confirmation against SSPC or FGR statements. Analysts disagree on succession in CJNG and La Línea; the annex gives both positions.

A.1 Summary

Organization	Designation	Top leadership and legal status	Primary drugs	Base / key countries	Revenue and financial exposure
Sinaloa Cartel: Los Mayos	FTO Feb. 20, 2025 (as Sinaloa Cartel)	Ismael Zambada Sicairos (“Mayito Flaco”): OFAC Sept. 29, 2026, fugitive ⁹³ . Founder El Mayo in U.S. custody since July 2024; sentenced to life, July 2026 ¹⁴⁴	Fentanyl, meth, cocaine, heroin, marijuana	Culiacán, Golden Triangle, Baja California; Sinaloa Cartel active in 40+ countries ⁹⁰	No estimate. Tijuana exchange houses, 25 OFAC-designated entities ⁹³ ; CMLNs

Organization	Designation	Top leadership and legal status	Primary drugs	Base / key countries	Revenue and financial exposure
Sinaloa Cartel: Los Chapitos	Same	Iván Archivaldo and Jesús Alfredo Guzmán Salazar: indicted N.D. Ill. and S.D.N.Y., fugitives. Ovidio and Joaquín Guzmán López: pleaded guilty, U.S. custody ⁹⁹	Fentanyl, meth, cocaine	Culiacán, Sonora, Baja California	No estimate; DEA: “billions of dollars in profits” ⁹¹
CJNG	FTO Feb. 20, 2025	Juan Carlos Valencia González (“El 03”/“Pelón”): charged D.D.C., \$25M reward, fugitive ⁹⁴ ; succession contested ⁹⁶	Fentanyl, meth, cocaine	Jalisco; franchises across Mexico; 40+ countries ⁹⁰	No estimate. Los Cuinis; fuel theft; timeshare fraud; FinCEN §2313a orders ⁶⁴
Cárteles Unidos	FTO Feb. 20, 2025	Juan José Farías Álvarez (“El Abuelo”): charged and OFAC Aug. 14, 2025, \$10M, fugitive ¹⁰⁶¹⁰⁷	Meth, cocaine	Tepalcatepec, Michoacán	No estimate; agricultural extortion
Los Viagras	FTO July 16, 2026 ¹²²	Nicolás Sierra Santana (“El Gordo”): charged and OFAC Aug. 14, 2025, \$5M, fugitive ¹⁰⁶¹⁰⁷	Meth	Apatzingán, Michoacán	No estimate; lime and avocado extortion
La Nueva Familia Michoacana	FTO Feb. 20, 2025	Johnny (\$5M) and José Alfredo (\$3M) Hurtado Olascoaga: indicted N.D. Ga., OFAC Apr. 15, 2025, fugitives ¹¹⁰¹¹¹	Meth, heroin, cocaine, fentanyl	Guerrero, State of Mexico, Michoacán; Dallas hub	No estimate; used-clothing fronts; peso exchange
Cártel del Noreste	FTO Feb. 20, 2025	Juan Cisneros Treviño (“Juanito Treviño”): reported leader, no U.S. action found ¹¹² . Abdón Federico Rodríguez García (“Cucho”): OFAC, “second-in-command” ¹¹³¹²⁸	Fentanyl, meth, cocaine	Nuevo Laredo, Tamaulipas; Texas, Oklahoma, Georgia	No estimate; casinos (OFAC Apr. 2026) ¹¹³
Cártel del Golfo	FTO Feb. 20, 2025	No unified leader; DEA: “no longer a unified cartel” ⁹⁰ . 2026 faction arrests reported in Mexico	Fentanyl, meth, cocaine, heroin	Reynosa, Matamoros, Altamira; about 16 U.S. states ⁹⁰	No estimate; bulk cash; fuel smuggling; §2313a orders ⁶⁴

Organization	Designation	Top leadership and legal status	Primary drugs	Base / key countries	Revenue and financial exposure
Juárez Cartel / La Línea	FTO July 16, 2026 ¹²²	Current leader not established	Cocaine, meth, fentanyl	Ciudad Juárez; El Paso corridor	No estimate
Tren de Aragua	FTO Feb. 20, 2025	Héctor Guerrero Flores (“Niño Guerrero”) killed June 2026 ⁹² ; no public successor	Retail drugs, including tusi	Venezuela; Colombia, Peru, Chile, U.S. ⁹⁰	No estimate; migrant extortion
MS-13	FTO Feb. 20, 2025	No single public leader confirmed by U.S. sources	Retail drugs	El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras; U.S. ⁹⁰	No estimate; extortion

A.2 Sinaloa Cartel

Designation. FTO and SDGT, February 20, 2025, as a single entity; its factions are not designated separately ⁶³.

History. Built by Ismael “El Mayo” Zambada García and Joaquín “El Chapo” Guzmán Loera. After El Chapo’s extradition and conviction, his four sons took over his share of the organization. On July 25, 2024, El Mayo and Joaquín Guzmán López were arrested in El Paso ⁶⁵. Joaquín Guzmán López later admitted in his plea that he kidnapped El Mayo to bring him to the United States ¹⁰¹. DEA states the arrests “escalated tensions and infighting between the main two factions” ⁹⁰. Open war between Los Chapitos and Los Mayos has run since September 2024, centered on Culiacán ⁶⁸.

DEA characterization. “One of the world’s most powerful drug cartels and one of the largest producers and traffickers of fentanyl and other illicit drugs to the United States,” present “in at least 40 countries,” with members “working in decentralized networks” ⁹⁰. Drugs cross mainly through ports of entry in California and Arizona to wholesale hubs in Los Angeles, Phoenix, Houston, Chicago, Atlanta, and Miami. Precursors come from China and India through Pacific ports. DEA reports methamphetamine purity near 97% and sales into Asia, Australia, and New Zealand at prices far above U.S. levels ⁹⁰. Non-drug lines include extortion, fuel theft, arms trafficking, and human smuggling ⁹⁰.

Revenue. No current estimate. The most cited figure, about \$3 billion a year, is Patrick Radden Keefe’s 2012 back-of-envelope calculation from a 40–60% share of Mexico’s drug trade, published without a method ¹²⁷. It is a dated approximation and should not be used as a current figure.

A.2.1 Los Chapitos

- **Iván Archivaldo Guzmán Salazar (“El Chapito”)**, co-leader. Indicted N.D. Ill. (April 2023) and S.D.N.Y. ⁶⁶; NRP reward up to \$10 million; fugitive ¹⁰².
- **Jesús Alfredo Guzmán Salazar (“Alfredillo”)**, co-leader. Same indictments and reward; fugitive ¹⁰².
- **Ovidio Guzmán López (“El Ratón”)**. Arrested January 2023, extradited; pleaded guilty July 11, 2025 (N.D. Ill.); in U.S. custody ⁹⁹.
- **Joaquín Guzmán López (“El Güero”)**. Arrested July 25, 2024 ⁶⁵; pleaded guilty December 1, 2025 (N.D. Ill.) to drug trafficking and continuing criminal enterprise, with an \$80 million forfeiture; in U.S. custody ⁹⁹¹⁰⁰.

Business. DEA: “Los Chapitos and the Sinaloa Cartel reap billions of dollars in profits from the fentanyl trade, and pioneered the deadliest drug threat the United States has ever confronted” ⁹¹. The faction is family-led with armed wings in Sonora and Baja California ¹⁰³. Joaquín Guzmán López admitted moving cocaine, heroin, methamphetamine, marijuana, and fentanyl, largely through cross-border tunnels ¹⁰⁹. The \$80 million forfeiture is a negotiated figure, not a revenue measure. Territory: Culiacán, the Sinaloa coast, Sonora, Baja California, with reported losses in Culiacán since 2024 ¹⁰³.

A.2.2 Los Mayos (La Mayiza)

On September 29, 2026, OFAC designated 21 individuals and 25 entities as Sinaloa Cartel leaders or facilitators under E.O. 14059 and E.O. 13224 ⁹³.

- **Ismael Zambada Sicaños (“Mayito Flaco”)**, head. Treasury: a “dual Mexican-U.S. national” who “has risen to fill the leadership void left by his father’s arrest and is now the undisputed head of Los Mayos.” OFAC September 29, 2026; fugitive ⁹³¹⁰⁵. The public record cited here does not state a charging district.
- **Ismael Zambada García (“El Mayo”)**, founder. In U.S. custody since July 25, 2024 ⁶⁵; pleaded guilty in August 2025 (E.D.N.Y.); sentenced to life imprisonment on July 20, 2026 ¹⁴⁴.
- **Carlos Alberto Torres Torres**, ex-husband of the Governor of Baja California. OFAC September 29, 2026. Treasury alleges he uses “his political influence to facilitate cartel activities and protect the Sinaloa Cartel from government and law enforcement intervention in Baja California” ⁹³. No criminal charge confirmed.
- **Juan José Ponce (“El Ruso”)**, Mexicali plaza boss, and other plaza operators in Tijuana: OFAC September 29, 2026 ⁹³¹⁰⁵.

Financial structure. The 25 entities designated September 29 are the clearest public picture of the faction’s finances ⁹³. They include two currency exchange houses, Galerías Centro Cambiario/Magic Casa de Cambio and Mia Centro Cambiario, described as laundering narcotics proceeds; a hotel business, Servicios Hoteleros Gastelum; a transport firm, Rivos Servicios; and front companies spanning real estate, entertainment and concert promotion, advertising, fuel retail (Xolo Gas; Grupo Gasolinero Nueva Esperanza), restaurants and bars, video surveillance, and wellness businesses in Tijuana and Baja California. DEA reports Los Mayos supply the Cártel del Noreste with fentanyl, methamphetamine, and cocaine ⁹⁰. Territory: southern and eastern Culiacán, the Golden Triangle, Durango, Baja California ¹⁰⁴. Assessment, moderate confidence: Los Mayos hold the advantage over Los Chapitos; Washington’s September 2026 targeting of the faction’s protection network in Baja California is consistent with that.

A.3 Cártel de Jalisco Nueva Generación (CJNG)

Designation. FTO and SDGT, February 20, 2025 ⁶³. OFAC’s July 23, 2026 action was its largest against CJNG ⁹⁵¹²⁶.

History and leadership. Founded around 2009–2010 by Nemessio “El Mencho” Oseguera Cervantes, financed by the González Valencia family (“Los Cuinis”). El Mencho was killed in a Mexican Army operation in Tapalpa, Jalisco, on February 22, 2026 ¹⁴¹⁵. The U.S. government names his stepson as successor. InSight Crime cautions that he is “one of several senior CJNG figures with a claim to power, and the group may avoid naming a single visible boss at all” ⁹⁶. Both positions are stated here; the annex does not resolve them.

- **Juan Carlos Valencia González (“El 03,” “Pelón”)**, U.S.-named leader. Born in Santa Ana, California, in 1984 ⁹⁷¹²¹. Charged earlier in D.D.C.; reward raised to \$25 million on August 5, 2026; fugitive ⁹⁴. OFAC July 23, 2026 ⁹⁵ (Treasury’s rendering of his name differs from DOJ’s; same person). Treasury describes him as a dual Mexican-U.S. national ⁹⁵.
- **Charged in D.D.C., unsealed August 5, 2026 ⁹⁴:** Julio Alberto Castillo Rodríguez (“Chorro”), operations in Colima, \$15 million; Hugo Gonzalo Mendoza Gaytán (“Sapo”), weapons procurement and training of gunmen, \$15 million; Ricardo Ruiz Velasco (“RR”), regional operations, \$10 million; Julio César Montero Pinzón (“Tarjetas”) and Carlos Andrés Rivera Varela (“La Firma”), founders of the “Grupo Elite” armed wing, \$10 million each; and Griselda Margarita Arredondo

Pinzón, timeshare fraud, \$2 million. DEA puts total rewards across eight CJNG fugitives at over \$100 million ⁹⁴. Valencia González was previously charged and is not among the five newly indicted leaders ⁹⁴.

- **Abigael González Valencia** (Los Cuinis): arrested in Mexico in 2015; transferred to the United States in August 2025 ¹¹⁶.

Structure and business. DEA describes a “unique franchise-based command structure” and states CJNG “does not rely on illicit fentanyl or even methamphetamine as its only sources of drug profits” ⁹⁰⁹¹. It traffics fentanyl, methamphetamine, and cocaine, and has associates in “almost all 50 U.S. states” and in over 40 countries ⁹⁰. Non-drug lines: fuel theft, extortion, taxing human smuggling, infiltration of legitimate industries, and timeshare fraud aimed at U.S. retirees ⁹⁰⁹⁴. The franchise model makes survival as a coalition more likely than collapse after El Mencho’s death ⁹⁶⁹⁸.

Financial structure. DEA: Los Cuinis use “CMLNs, cryptocurrency exchanges, bulk cash smuggling, trade-based money laundering” ⁹⁰. CJNG transactions are among those cited in FinCEN’s June 25, 2025 orders against CIBanco, InterCam, and Vector ⁶⁴. OFAC’s July 2026 action reached family-controlled front companies in agriculture, beverages, and logistics ⁹⁵¹²⁶. No credible revenue estimate exists; an unsourced “\$50 billion in assets” figure circulates and is not used.

A.4 Cáteles Unidos and Los Viagras (Michoacán)

Designation. Cáteles Unidos: FTO and SDGT February 20, 2025 ⁶³. Los Viagras: designated by OFAC under E.O. 14059 and E.O. 13224 on August 14, 2025, with Cáteles Unidos leaders ¹⁰⁶; FTO July 16, 2026 ¹²².

- **Juan José Farías Álvarez (“El Abuelo”)**, Cáteles Unidos leader. Charged and OFAC August 14, 2025; reward up to \$10 million; fugitive ¹⁰⁶¹⁰⁷¹⁰⁸.
- **Nicolás Sierra Santana (“El Gordo”)**, Los Viagras founder and leader. Charged and OFAC August 14, 2025; reward up to \$5 million; fugitive ¹⁰⁶¹⁰⁷¹⁰⁸.
- **Juan José Farías Mendoza and Israel Vega Farías** (son and nephew of El Abuelo): indicted D.D.C. July 1, 2026, on methamphetamine conspiracy, material support to an FTO, and firearms charges ¹⁰⁹.
- **Other leaders charged August 2025** (Alfonso Fernández Magallón, Luis Enrique Barragán Chávez, Edgar Orozco Cabadas): Mexican press reports one detained, one killed, and one arrested in September 2026, leaving El Abuelo and El Gordo as the remaining fugitives ¹⁰⁸. Mexican press only; confirm against SSPC or FGR.

Business. DOJ describes Cáteles Unidos as “among the most prolific methamphetamine producers capable of manufacturing multiple tons every month” ¹⁰⁷. Both groups extort lime and avocado producers in Tierra Caliente; DEA reports extortion of “thousands of dollars per acre” ⁹⁰. They are at war with CJNG in Michoacán. No revenue estimate. Base: Tepalcatepec and Apatzingán, Michoacán.

A.5 La Nueva Familia Michoacana (LNFM)

Designation. FTO and SDGT February 20, 2025 ⁶³; OFAC sanctions on four Hurtado Olascoaga siblings April 15, 2025 ¹¹⁰.

- **Johnny Hurtado Olascoaga (“El Pez”)**: indicted N.D. Ga.; OFAC April 15, 2025; reward up to \$5 million; fugitive ¹¹⁰.
- **José Alfredo Hurtado Olascoaga (“El Fresa”)**: same indictment and OFAC date; reward up to \$3 million; described by State as second in command; fugitive ¹¹⁰¹¹¹.
- **Ubaldo and Adita Hurtado Olascoaga**: OFAC April 15, 2025. Treasury states Adita laundered proceeds “including through used clothing stores along the Rio Grande Valley” ¹¹⁰.

Business. Fentanyl, methamphetamine, cocaine, and heroin; Guerrero laboratories produce “ton-quantities” monthly, and methamphetamine moves in produce shipments to Dallas, its primary U.S. market ⁹⁰. The State reward notice attributes to LNFM more than 36 metric tons of methamphetamine, 12 of heroin, and 12 of cocaine a year ¹¹¹; that is a volume

attribution, not a revenue figure. Non-drug lines: mining extortion, arms smuggling from Guatemala, migrant smuggling, kidnapping ⁹⁰¹¹⁰. Finance: black-market peso exchange, bulk cash, wire transfers through affiliated money services businesses ⁹⁰. Base: Guerrero, southern State of Mexico, Michoacán, Morelos; with its sister groups, present in about a third of U.S. states ⁹⁰.

A.6 Cártel del Noreste (CDN)

Designation. FTO and SDGT February 20, 2025 ⁶³; the former Los Zetas.

- **Juan Cisneros Treviño (“Juanito Treviño”):** InSight Crime’s “most identifiable leader” as of 2025 ¹¹². No U.S. indictment, OFAC designation, or reward found. Reported only.
- **Abdón Federico Rodríguez García (“Cucho”):** OFAC August 6, 2025 ¹²⁸; still described as “second-in-command” in April 2026 ¹¹³.
- **Ricardo González Saucedo (“El Ricky”):** arrested February 3, 2025 ¹¹⁴; transferred to the United States January 20, 2026 ⁹¹¹⁵.

Business. DEA describes “a large network of compartmentalized cells” moving fentanyl, methamphetamine, cocaine, heroin, and marijuana into South Texas toward San Antonio, Austin, and Dallas–Fort Worth, supplied in part by Los Mayos ⁹⁰. Non-drug lines: human smuggling and migrant extortion, kidnapping, vehicle theft ⁹⁰. Finance: cash-intensive fronts; on April 14, 2026, OFAC designated two Nuevo Laredo-area casinos and associated individuals ¹¹³¹²⁹. No revenue estimate. Base: Nuevo Laredo, Tamaulipas; Coahuila; Nuevo León. U.S. presence: Texas, Oklahoma, Georgia, upper Midwest ⁹⁰.

A.7 Cártel del Golfo (CDG)

Designation. FTO and SDGT February 20, 2025 ⁶³. DEA: “As of 2025, CDG is no longer a unified cartel” ⁹⁰. Factions: Los Metros, Los Escorpiones, Los Ciclones. DEA states Los Metros “has effectively become an enforcement arm of CJNG in northeastern Mexico” ⁹⁰.

- **2026 arrests in Mexico (Mexican press; confirm against SSPC or FGR):** Los Metros leader “Metro 9,” Reynosa, April 27 ¹¹⁷; Los Metros financial operator “Bebo,” linked to fuel smuggling, September 2026 ¹¹⁸; Los Escorpiones leader “Lexus,” Matamoros, February 26 ¹¹⁹; “El Cherrys,” Reynosa, March ¹²⁰. No current NRP offer for a CDG faction leader was found.

Business. Fentanyl, methamphetamine, cocaine, and heroin into the Rio Grande Valley; precursors through the Port of Altamira; migrant smuggling generates “significant revenue” ⁹⁰. Finance: bulk cash and Brownsville exchange businesses ⁹⁰; CDG transactions cited in the FinCEN §2313a orders ⁶⁴. Base: Reynosa, Matamoros, Altamira; associates in about 16 U.S. states ⁹⁰. No revenue estimate.

A.8 Juárez Cartel / La Línea

Designation. FTO and SDGT July 16, 2026, with aliases including La Línea and Barrio Azteca ¹²². The State Department’s statement cites the 2019 killing of nine U.S. citizens in Sonora by La Línea gunmen. Its historic leader Vicente Carrillo Fuentes was sent to the United States in February 2025 ⁷. Current leadership is not established to this annex’s standard; one Mexican outlet names a leader, others say no one clearly heads the group. Business: drug and human smuggling through the Ciudad Juárez–El Paso corridor, with Barrio Azteca as its U.S. street arm. No revenue estimate. Confidence: low.

A.9 Tren de Aragua and MS-13

Tren de Aragua. FTO and SDGT February 20, 2025 ⁶³. Founded in Venezuela’s Tocarón prison. Its leader, Héctor “Niño” Guerrero Flores, was killed in a U.S. airstrike in Venezuela, conducted in coordination with Venezuelan authorities and

announced June 12, 2026; no successor is publicly established ⁹²¹⁴⁷. DEA describes retail sales of tusi, courier and enforcement work for larger groups, migrant smuggling and extortion, and forced prostitution ⁹⁰. Present in Venezuela, Colombia, Peru, Chile, and the United States ⁹⁰. Low relevance to the fentanyl supply this paper addresses.

MS-13. FTO and SDGT February 20, 2025 ⁶³. Founded in Los Angeles; present in El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and “almost all 50 U.S. states” ⁹⁰. Retail drugs and extortion. No single leader is confirmed by U.S. sources. Low relevance to U.S.-bound fentanyl supply.

A.10 Latin American designations after February 20, 2025

Designated	Organization	Country	Relevance to this paper
May 5, 2025	Viv Ansanm; Gran Grif	Haiti	None
Sept. 5, 2025	Los Choneros; Los Lobos	Ecuador	Cocaine transit
Sept. 24, 2025	Barrio 18	Central America, U.S.	Low
Nov. 24, 2025	Cartel de los Soles	Venezuela	Low; experts dispute it is a structured organization
Dec. 17, 2025	Clan del Golfo	Colombia	Cocaine supply to Mexican groups
June 5, 2026	Comando Vermelho; Primeiro Comando da Capital	Brazil	Low
July 2, 2026	Chone Killers	Ecuador	Low
July 16, 2026	Juárez Cartel (La Línea); Los Viagras	Mexico	Profiled (A.4, A.8)
Sept. 2026	Los Tiguerones	Ecuador	Low

Dates per AS/COA (updated July 27, 2026) ⁹², the Federal Register for the July 16, 2026 designations ¹²², and State’s September 9, 2026 statement for Los Tiguerones ¹²³. AS/COA counted 20 Latin American groups through July 2026; Los Tiguerones makes 21.

A.11 Cross-cutting financial infrastructure

Chinese money-laundering networks (CMLNs). FinCEN’s August 2025 Financial Trend Analysis reviewed 137,153 Bank Secrecy Act reports describing approximately \$312 billion in suspicious activity linked to CMLNs from January 2020 through December 2024 ¹²⁴. Those are suspicious-activity reports, not confirmed laundering, and not cartel revenue. The mechanism, described by FinCEN and CRS ¹²⁴¹²⁵: cartels sell U.S. dollars from street sales to Chinese brokers, who sell them to Chinese nationals evading capital controls; the cartels are paid in pesos in Mexico. Settlement runs through mirror transactions, trade-based laundering, money mules, and real estate. DEA states the cartels rely on CMLNs “to move drug money quickly and consistently from the United States to Mexico” ⁹⁰.

FinCEN §2313a orders. The June 25, 2025 orders against CIBanco, Intercam, and Vector bar covered U.S. institutions from transmittals to or from them, effective October 20, 2025, and cite transactions for CJNG, the Gulf Cartel, the Sinaloa Cartel, and the Beltrán-Leyva Organization ⁶⁴.

OFAC network designations. OFAC now designates in batches that reach the family-held and commercial layer: CJNG in July 2026 ⁹⁵, Los Mayos in September 2026 (25 entities, including two exchange houses and fuel retailers) ⁹³, and CDN casinos in April 2026 ¹¹³.

Mapping to the four tracks. These are Track 1 and Track 2 instruments in Section 4. The record in this annex supports the judgment in Section 4 that the settlement layer (CMLNs, Mexican nonbank financial firms, exchange houses, and fuel and casino fronts) is a more durable target than leaders: CJNG lost its founder and the United States had to name a successor and raise rewards within six months ⁹⁴⁹⁶.

A.12 Alliances and rivalries

- **Los Mayos against Los Chapitos:** open war since September 2024 ⁶⁸¹⁰⁴.
- **Los Chapitos and CJNG:** DEA reported press accounts that CJNG could side with Los Chapitos against Los Mayos ⁹⁰; durability after El Mencho's death is uncertain.
- **CJNG and Los Metros (CDG):** Los Metros act as CJNG's enforcement arm in the northeast ⁹⁰.
- **CJNG against Cáteles Unidos and Los Viagras:** long-running war in Michoacán.
- **CDN against CDG factions:** contest for Reynosa and the Tamaulipas border.
- **Los Mayos and CDN:** supplier relationship ⁹⁰.

METHOD

Data and Sources

This note states what the paper's factual claims rest on. A row-level verification log, recording the status of each claim and each correction made across drafts, is published with the paper's materials at <https://github.com/collingeorge/WP-2026>.

Checked against primary text. U.S. court records and Justice Department releases (the García Luna sentence, the Cienfuegos dismissal motion, the Rocha Moya and Chapitos indictments and pleas, and the Zambada García sentence); State Department designations and Federal Register notices; Treasury, OFAC, and FinCEN actions and analyses; DEA laboratory, seizure, and threat-assessment releases; CDC and NCHS mortality releases; GAO, SIGAR, UNAMA, and CRS reports, with SIGAR's January 30, 2019 quarterly report read through the GlobalSecurity.org copy ¹⁵⁹; the U.S. Code provisions cited in Sections 4 and 7; and Articles 40, 76, and 89 of the Mexican Constitution, with Article 40 read against the Diario Oficial text of April 1, 2025. The January 8, 2026 presidential quotation was checked against the interview transcript ¹⁵⁸.

Resting on secondary reporting. Findings of the IAEA's June 4, 2026 report are cited through the Institute for Science and International Security's analysis of it, and the paper separates the Institute's assessments from IAEA findings ⁷⁵. The internal DEA assessment of the maritime strikes is known through Washington Post reporting ⁸³. Mexican government statements are cited through Mexican press where the original communiqué was not retrieved, including the Security Cabinet's roadblock count ¹⁴⁹. The May 2026 El Financiero poll is known through a column reporting it ¹⁵⁰. Several 2026 arrests in Annex A rest on Mexican press alone and are marked there.

Time-bound. Boat-strike counts are current to September 19–20, 2026, and the trackers disagree. CDC overdose counts are provisional, model-adjusted, and revised monthly; the paper uses the August 31, 2026 release. The Iran conflict and the status of its nuclear program are stated as of late September 2026. Leadership and legal status in Annex A are current to October 6, 2026. The Law of War Manual is cited to its July 2023 update; section numbering differs in earlier editions ¹⁴¹.

Translations and estimates. Spanish quotations are given in the original with the author’s English rendering, except where the text identifies an English rendering by the source. Projections in Sections 5 and 8 are the author’s estimates; Section 5 states how the deaths-averted figures against the comparison case were derived.

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