Traficante de Drogas Vulnerable: Disrupt Market Motivations to Effectively Influence Drug Cartels

Implementing new controls over the cognitive conditions of illicit markets for weapons, drugs, contraband and people would address underlying enablers of a vexing border security challenge.

Since its inception, the Jalisco New Generation Cartel (CJNG) foreign terrorist organization has *deliberately used violence as a strategic means of influencing its targets*. The spectacle of its first attack – the 2009 mutilation and display of three rival cartel members' bodies, accompanied by a note reading, "we are the new group Mata Zetas [Zeta Killers] and we are against kidnapping and extortion, and we will fight them in all states for a cleaner Mexico"– was the first demonstration of CJNG's clever use of cognitive warfare as it rapidly ascended to a position of power. The note falsely justified the killings to the Mexican public while defiantly announcing more attacks in the future and hijacked the Mexican media – hallmarks of an influence campaign that would effectively circumnavigate state controls for years to come.

In February 2026, CJNG's leader Oseguera Cervantes ("El Mencho") was killed during an attempt by Mexican special forces to capture him in Jalisco state, according to Mexico's defense secretary. The CJNG influence tactics that followed were not the death throes of a defeated cartel; instead, they were a demonstration of well-delegated media responsibilities within the cartel. CJNG quickly staged actual retaliatory attacks, such as setting up roadblocks and setting fire to buses and stores, and these attacks were conflated on social media and in traditional media outlets by false depictions of broader violence, such as reports of the takeover of the Guadalajara airport by "assassins," a church set on fire in Puerto Vallarta, and other AI-generated images of destruction. The goal, according to cartel watchers, was to reinforce fear of CJNG and to depict a geographically unrestricted organization. Believable or not, CJNG's online content hijacked the media again, turning the death of its leader into a declaration of continued market control. That market control continued despite his death.
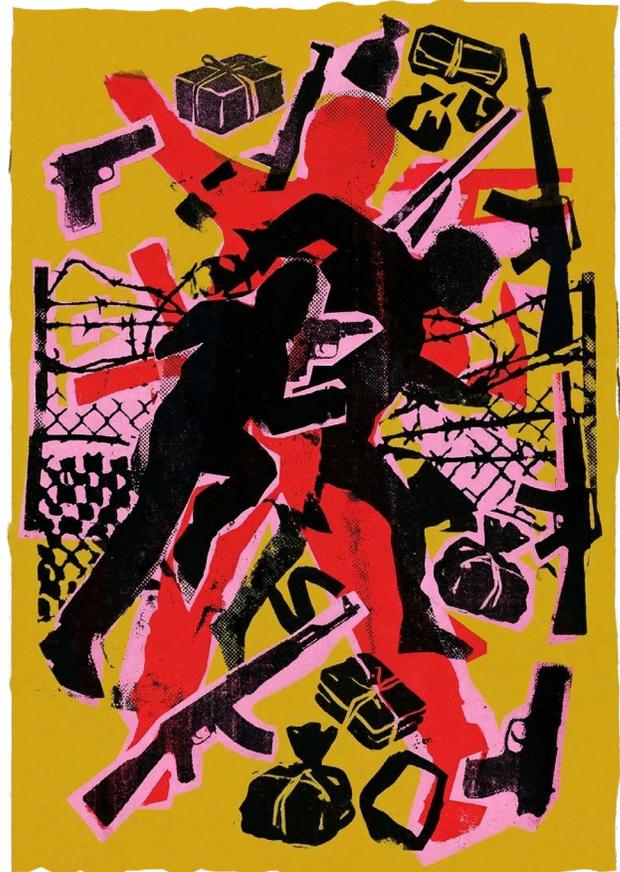
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IWC MISSION: The IWC prepares the warfighter to conduct irregular warfare across the spectrum of conflict by bridging instruction to operationalizing IW using next-generation techniques and concepts that enhance the lethality of the force and positions the United States and key Allies and partners to remain ahead of the threat.

Adapting Irregular Warfare Concepts to Emerging Conditions

The extreme importance of cognitive warfare for CJNG – one of nine major drug cartels operating in Mexico that employ similar principles – presents challenges to recent U.S. models of intervention. If military strategists equate these transnational criminal organizations with ideologically motivated terrorist organizations of the "GWOT era," for example, they will generate imperfect analogies and misdirected operations. In contrast to these recent adversaries, the cartels are "a network of subordinate gangs, tenuous alliances, and illicit collusion with politicians and police at all levels of government. All of these components are linked to global illicit economic flows […] that transcends territorial boundaries both within and across national frontiers," according to a recent study of the Mexican criminal landscape.

Putting those global illicit economic flows into perspective, the 2020 National Drug Threat Assessment estimated that the cartels generated $19-29 billion annually from drug sales to the U.S. alone. The cognitive warfare activities of the cartels are almost certainly intended to defend and expand those illicit market operations. It seems to be their core motivation… and their weakness. This core motivation should also be the focus of counteroperations. However, a review of cognitive warfare strategies for border security and counter-cartel operations reveals significant research gaps across multiple domains. These include limited empirical studies on the effectiveness of cognitive defense tactics, insufficient integration of psychological research with border security operations, inadequate legal frameworks for cognitive operations, and underdeveloped models for measuring cognitive impacts. Researchers should focus on developing comprehensive theoretical frameworks specifically tailored to border security contexts, conducting rigorous empirical studies on cognitive warfare effectiveness, exploring ethical implementation approaches, and creating standardized measurement methodologies.

As U.S. defense strategy radically turns away from its post-9/11 focus, fresh research into U.S. operations in Afghanistan highlights the effectiveness and limits of counterterrorism operations as a model and requires analysts to question the replicability of these operations against emerging adversaries. The strategy used against the terrorist group al-Qaida was not directly transferrable to the Taliban, for example, and was susceptible to drift from the original intent of operations in Afghanistan. It is also unlikely to serve as the useful basis of a current counter-cartel strategy, requiring new and creative thinking. A useful new strategy against the cartels would publicly define and quantify objectives to avoid mission creep, perhaps beginning with the stated principle of "preventing the illicit movement of weapons, drugs, contraband and people"– a principle that intentionally or unintentionally implies the underlying market causes of the problem. Supportive influence initiatives would reflect those objectives.

What's certain is that it's been extraordinarily difficult to beat the cartels at their own psychological games, and to address the underlying causes of the problem. Successful historical influence operations against the cartels have mostly been reactive, such as anti-gang campaigns in Central America, publicization of prosecutions of corrupt officials in Mexico, or publicization of economic alternatives of drug production and trafficking. These tactics often are intended to reduce the obvious symptoms of the illicit drug trade, while falling short of addressing underlying motivations. Perhaps the least effective influence campaigns are online only, often contributing to colorful and escalatory discussion, but lacking a clear behavior change objective – such as recent online state condemnation of narcocorrido drug ballads, which may unintentionally reinforce cartel status.

Reducing Illicit Market Participation with Cognitive Tools

Under the assumption that market opportunity compels participation in illicit drug production, and trafficking, the main focus of effective counter-cartel influence operations would go much deeper than simply addressing the symptoms of the market. *Controlling the cognitive conditions of market participation may offer new opportunities for influence over the cartels.* Examples of influence options against these foreign organizations may include the following:

- **Anti-Money Laundering Exemplars:** Publicize the use of strong financial regulations identifying and freezing cartel assets. Information that accurately illustrates the extreme difficulty of effectively moving illicit funds under current conditions may be used to dissuade new market participants, and to create market inefficiencies for existing participants. Effective anti-money laundering influence activities would invoke a sense of omnipotence of anti-cartel interveners, leaving market participants with a feeling of "nowhere to hide" and no alternative laundering options.

- **Cryptocurrency Exposure:** Collaborate with tech

companies to track and disrupt cartel transactions using cryptocurrencies, and openly publish the results. This necessary cat-and-mouse game would help to neutralize a new preferred alternative mechanism for discretely moving illicit funds, sending a clear message that options for obfuscating funds are diminishing and costly.

- **Open Exploration of Drug Decriminalization and Regulation:** Initiate academic studies into the legalization and regulation of illicit drugs, whether or not there is any actual intention to do so. These studies would be used to signal to illegal drug producers and traffickers that the illicit market may be disrupted imminently. Through key leader statements, the implication of market disruption may trigger useful market instability, and revelatory communications, offering opportunities for targeted influence operations and interdictions.

- **Expansion and Advertisement of Rewards Programs:** Current cartel bounty programs offer substantial rewards for tips that lead to interdiction of key cartel leaders, and these programs could be enhanced to offer bounties for broader information, such as tips regarding major market exchanges and logistical facilities – with the use of messaging into known areas of cartel operations. The goal of program enhancement would be to reduce trust in the markets themselves, encouraging avoidance.

- **Expansion and Advertisement of Employment Alternatives:** Mexico has funded job training programs since 2019, with the goal of creating sustained employment for participants. The program has an unstated dual effect of removing vulnerable youth from illicit job markets. Almost 3.5 million participants have gone through its flagship program, offering a quantifiable opportunity to defend against cartel recruitment into illicit market activities. Messaging could improve upon the system by broadly recruiting participants, creating a positive narrative about program graduates, and creating a deeper narrative about defiance of illicit market forces.

Acknowledging the Risk of Meddling with Illicit Markets

All of these options, and the greater concept of a cognitive warfare approach to countering illicit markets, come with a frustrating caveat: that if the goal is the elimination of trafficking into the U.S., there has never been an effective national counter-cartel policy. Tampering with illicit drug markets in Mexico has historically created significant and unintended risks, sometimes leading to heightened vio-

lence, the diversification and militarization of criminal organizations, the displacement of cartel activity to other areas (the "balloon effect"), and the development of more potent adulterated drugs. Preparing for these risks is essential to new policy development.

- Efforts to disrupt markets (supply and demand) can lead to instability within the criminal landscape, sparking violent turf wars as different groups fight for control over territories, and smuggling routes.

- Disruption in traditional crop-based drugs (like marijuana) has accelerated the shift toward synthetic drugs, such as fentanyl and methamphetamine, which are easier to produce and transport in more potent quantities.

- Increased enforcement in one area sometimes pushes criminal activities into other, more vulnerable regions, which then face their own surges in crime and violence.

- The extraordinary profits from illicit markets enable criminal organizations to corrupt state officials, judges, and police through a mix of threats and payoffs, undermining the rule of law and hindering effective governance.

Ultimately, these interventions have often aggravated rather than solved the underlying drug problem, leading to profound socioeconomic and political costs. Cognitive approaches to the problem must be integrated into a well-constructed strategy that accounts for supply-side and demand-side factors, as well as both causes and symptoms of the problem.

This Insights article follows up on concepts discussed during a February 2026 Pinnacle conference panel moderated by the Irregular Warfare Center's Operations in the Information Environment expert J.D. Maddox (CTR), and featuring Dr. Guadalupe Correa-Cabrera (George Mason University), Dr. Jonathan Schroden (Center for Naval Analysis), COL Xavier Colon (Joint Staff J37), and Mr. Doug Turner (Agenda LLC).