

Criminals or Terrorists: Evaluating the Trump Administration's Designation of Cartels as Terrorists

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Abstract

This paper explores the complex definitions and applications of terrorism, particularly in the context of the Trump administration's designation of Mexican drug cartels as terrorist organizations. It begins by outlining the characteristics and definitions of terrorism from scholarly and legal perspectives, emphasizing the inherently political motives of terrorist acts. The paper then examines the nature of drug cartels, highlighting their primary focus on economic profit and organized crime. Through an evaluation of the dual designations of Foreign Terrorist Organizations (FTOs) and Specially Designated Global Terrorists (SDGTs), it assesses the implications of these labels on cartels. Finally, the paper critiques the potential use of military force against cartels, discussing the legal, diplomatic, and humanitarian consequences of such actions. By analyzing these issues, the paper argues that the designation of cartels as terrorist organizations risks diluting the definition of terrorism, creating a slippery slope with broad implications for US foreign and domestic policy.

Introduction

On January 20, 2025, the Trump Administration designated “cartels and other organizations as foreign terrorist organizations and specially designated global terrorists,” (The White House, 2025) sparking intense debates on whether or not it is the correct classification. With control over vast areas of territory and their use of extreme violence, cartels have increasingly been compared to terrorist groups like ISIS and al-Qaeda. This comparison raises an important question: Should criminal organizations driven by profits rather than ideology be treated as terrorist entities?

Proponents of the designations argue that it would provide powerful tools to combat cartel activities, including sanctions, asset freezes, and military intervention. However, critics warn of significant drawbacks, including strained diplomatic relations, the risk of mischaracterizing cartel violence, and potential harm to civilians and asylum seekers.

This paper argues that while labeling cartels as terrorist organizations may offer particular advantages, it ultimately does more harm than good. By examining the nature of terrorism versus criminal violence, the potential benefits, and the unintended consequences of such a policy, this paper will demonstrate why a more nuanced approach is needed to address the complex threat posed by cartels.

Terrorism

Terrorism Defined & Its Complexity

In the 21st century, the term terrorism seems to be used daily by the media. Whether characterizing protesters, criminals, or cartels, the term is seemingly used without knowing what defines a terrorist. As defined in chapter 4.4¹, “What is Terrorism?” of the textbook *International Politics: Enduring Concepts and Contemporary Issues*, Hoffman (2023) outlines the key characteristics of terrorism:

- It is inherently political, driven by specific aims and motives.

¹ Chapter 4.4, “What is Terrorism?” is used with permission of Columbia University Press. From *Inside Terrorism, Revised and Expanded Edition* by Bruce Hoffman, Copyright © 2020. Permission conveyed through Copyright Clearance Center.

- It involves violence or threats of violence.
- It is designed to create a widespread psychological impact, extending beyond the immediate target.
- It is typically carried out by organizations with a clear structure or by small groups of individuals inspired by an ideological movement.
- It is perpetrated by subnational groups or nonstate entities (pp. 234-235).

Furthermore, the FBI defines terrorism as "violent, criminal acts committed by individuals and/or groups who are inspired by, or associated with, designated foreign terrorist organizations or nations (state-sponsored)" for international terrorism, or "violent, criminal acts committed by individuals and/or groups to further ideological goals stemming from domestic influences, such as those of a political, religious, social, racial, or environmental nature" for domestic terrorism. While these definitions are more legalistic, they share key elements with Hoffman's. Both definitions emphasize the use of violence or the threat of violence to achieve objectives. The FBI highlights that terrorism is ideologically driven, which aligns with Hoffman's description of its political nature and the ideological motivations of terrorist groups. Additionally, both definitions suggest that terrorism is not random but instead part of a systematic effort to achieve broader goals, whether they are political, social, or religious.

However, it's important to note that Hoffman states that terrorism is a pejorative term, understandably, but the term is widely subjective. In other words, a specific terrorist or act of terrorism is only viewed as such depending on who you ask. This encapsulates the saying, "One person's terrorist is another person's freedom fighter."

This brings us to our next point; Who falls under the category of terrorists and why is it so complex? As just stated, it's heavily dependent on the point of view. If one were to ask an individual, particularly someone exposed to media with a Western-centric perspective, to identify a terrorist or terrorist organization, they'd most likely say Osama Bin Laden, the Islamic State of Iraq and ash-Sham (ISIS), the Taliban, or al-Qaeda. The consensus would likely align with this categorization, because of the groups' actions and tactics, such as Bin Laden and al-Qaeda's involvement with the devastating 9/11 attacks which stemmed from political, ideological, and religious factors, or ISIS' Paris attack where 130 people were killed and over 400 injured. However, it's worth noting that there are differing viewpoints. My experience as an intern with an Afghan refugee resettlement organization and working very closely with Afghans, through our interactions, I learned that some view the Taliban differently. While none condoned the actions of the organization, you might hear something to the extent of, "They are doing a lot of good for Afghanistan in terms of implementing the Quran." It is also important to clarify that these individuals did not appear to me as sympathizers and that this view is not shared amongst all Afghans, and many of whom I spoke to absolutely despise the Taliban. Another example, that highlights the subjectivity of the designation of terrorism, is the US decision to place Nelson Mandela² on the terror watch list. This choice stems from Mandela's involvement and association with the African National Congress (ANC), which fought against the apartheid regime in South Africa throughout most of the 20th century. Although the ANC began with non-

² In January 1989, the Defense Department under President-elect George H.W. Bush designated the ANC among 52 of the "world's most notorious terrorist groups." The designation of the ANC and Mandela was ultimately dropped in 2008 (Windrem, 2013), nine years after Mandela served his five-year term as president, and 18 years after apartheid was abolished.

violent demonstrations, in the 60s because of the Sharpeville Massacre³ the organization ultimately turned to violent tactics against the South African government (Waxman, 2018). One could argue that if not for these organizations, like the ANC, the oppressive and racist apartheid system could well have lasted into the 21st century. This highlights how acts that are considered terrorism by some can simultaneously be viewed as necessity, resistance, or liberation struggle by others, further illustrating the inherent subjectivity and complexity in defining what constitutes terrorism.

Types of Terrorism Designations

There are two primary authorities used to designate groups and individuals associated with terrorism. The first is the designation of Foreign Terrorist Organizations (FTOs) under the Immigration and Nationality Act. The second is the designation of Specially Designated Global Terrorists (SDGTs) under Executive Order (E.O.) 13224. While both authorities enable the freezing of assets, they differ in scope and additional consequences.

FTO designations specifically target organizations and impose immigration restrictions on members solely based on their affiliation with the group. Additionally, this designation criminalizes the act of knowingly providing material support or resources to the organization. In contrast, E.O. 13224 applies to a broader range of entities, including individual terrorists, groups, financiers, and front companies. Travel restrictions under this order are based on meeting specific criteria outlined in the executive order. Furthermore, E.O. 13224 grants the Department

³ The Sharpeville Massacre occurred March 21, 1960, where "in the Black township of Sharpeville, near Vereeniging, South Africa, in which police fired on a crowd of Black people, killing or wounding some 250 of them. It was one of the first and most violent demonstrations against apartheid in South Africa" (Britannica, 2025).

of the Treasury the authority to designate other individuals or entities that support already designated parties (US Department of State, 2018).

Cartels

What are Cartels?

From the hit Netflix series *Narcos* to Hollywood films like *Sicario* and *Blow*, drug cartels have become a notorious fixture in mainstream media. These portrayals often emphasize their power, influence, and ruthlessness; characteristics rooted in reality. Drug cartels are highly organized and complex entities comprising various drug trafficking organizations (DTOs) and specialized cells responsible for tasks such as drug transportation, security enforcement, and money laundering. While the leadership and command structures of most cartels operate outside the United States, they rely on affiliated or allied DTOs to produce, transport, and distribute drugs within the country (US Department of Justice National Drug Intelligence Center, 2010).

Among the most potent cartels are the Sinaloa Cartel, the Jalisco New Generation Cartel (CJNG), the Gulf Cartel, and the Los Zetas Cartel (BBC News, 2019). The Sinaloa Cartel, once led by Joaquín "El Chapo" Guzmán, is known for its extensive trafficking network and influence on both sides of the US-Mexico border. Meanwhile, CJNG has risen to prominence due to its violent tactics and rapid expansion (Council on Foreign Relations, 2025). Collectively, the Mexican drug trade generates up to \$39 billion annually from drug trafficking alone, not accounting for the additional revenue from other criminal enterprises such as human trafficking, extortion, and arms smuggling (Rizzo, 2019).

The economic and social impact of cartel operations is vast. In Mexico, cartels fuel violence, with homicide rates in some regions among the highest in the world (alHarbi, 2025). Corruption often permeates local governments and law enforcement, undermining governance and public trust (Truqui, 2021). In the United States, cartels are a primary source of illicit drugs, contributing to the ongoing opioid crisis and other substance abuse epidemics (Ferragamo & Klobucista, 2025). These impacts underscore why cartels, particularly those like Sinaloa and CJNG, are targeted by US law enforcement and international anti-narcotics efforts.

Which are Being Designated as Terrorists & What Does it Mean?

From a press statement by Secretary of State, Marco Rubio (2025), “The State Department announces the designation of Tren de Aragua, Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13), Cártel de Sinaloa, Cártel de Jalisco Nueva Generación (CJNG), Cártel del Noreste (formerly Los Zetas), La Nueva Familia Michoacana, Cártel de Golfo (Gulf Cartel), and Cárteles Unidos as FTOs and SDGTs.” Rubio goes on to state that the designation is meant to protect the US and its citizens, by putting an end to their violence. Because of these designations, it provides law enforcement, which Rubio states, as “additional tools to stop these groups.” Furthermore, a memorandum directed to all department employees from the Attorney General (2025), states that the priority of this designation is, “Achieving total elimination of Cartels...” But what are these tools and means of elimination being used? The US government can deploy a dual approach to counteract these organizations because the aforementioned cartels are designated as both FTOs and SDGTs (The White House, 2025). The FTO designation criminalizes material support and restricts immigration for members, while the SDGT designation enables asset freezes and financial

disruptions. Together, these designations aim to dismantle the cartels' operations and reduce their national security threat.

However, despite the significant powers granted through these designations, there is a lack of a clear legal framework for military action against cartels. While the terrorist designation enables asset freezes and financial restrictions, the use of military force remains a murky issue (Ferreira, 2024). The US government has not provided explicit authorization for military action against foreign criminal organizations like cartels. The 2001 Authorization for Use of Military Force (AUMF) was passed in the aftermath of the September 11 attacks and grants the president the authority to use force against those responsible for the attacks or associated forces (Congress.gov, n.d.). However, the cartels' activities, while violent and disruptive, are not directly tied to al-Qaeda or other terrorist organizations covered by the AUMF. Nevertheless, in 2024, the chair of the Task Force to Combat Mexican Drug Cartels, Representative Dan Crenshaw, and then-Representative Mike Waltz announced a bill seeking authorization for the use of military force with the use of the AUMF (Crenshaw.house.gov, n.d.), which raises concerns for some. This ambiguity highlights the challenges of addressing cartels within a counterterrorism framework. While the intent behind these designations is to bolster national security, the lack of a clear legal structure for military action raises questions about their practical implementation. Resolving these issues requires a careful balance between addressing the threat and navigating the legal and diplomatic complexities involved.

Evaluating the Designation of Cartels

Why it Doesn't Make Sense

The easiest argument as to why the designation of these cartels as terrorists doesn't make sense is simply due to their definitions. As mentioned earlier, terrorism is inherently political in motives. Whether it's religious, ideological, or nationalist, terrorism seeks to achieve a broader agenda that transcends criminal profit. In contrast, cartels are primarily driven by economic gain, operating as organized criminal enterprises focused on drug trafficking, extortion, and other illicit activities. Misclassifying these organizations risks blurring the critical distinctions between criminal activity and terrorism. If the US government's own definition of terrorism is shifted, where is the line drawn? Is terrorism now defined by the number of lives an organization takes; whether directly or indirectly? Would the Ku Klux Klan then be designated as a domestic terrorist organization due to a history of racially motivated violence?⁴ Or would cigarette corporations fall under this category because their products contribute to hundreds of thousands of deaths annually for profit? This opens the door to a slippery slope. Broadening the definition of terrorism risks diluting the term's pejorative nature, potentially undermining its effectiveness as a tool for addressing genuine terrorist threats.

⁴ "By 1868, the Klan had evolved into a hooded terrorist organization responsible for murdering thousands of free blacks..." (Silverbrook, n.d.) and "In Arkansas, over 2,000 murders were committed in connection with the election." (PBS, n.d.)

Implications with the AUMF

The decision to implement the AUMF against these cartels is not out of the realm of possibility. As stated, there have been discussions regarding the matter, with the Task Force to Combat Mexican Drug Cartels and Rep. Dan Crenshaw. Additionally, the Trump administration is exploring the use of drone strikes against drug cartels in Mexico as part of a bold strategy to target criminal organizations responsible for trafficking narcotics across the southern border, according to six current and former officials from US military, law enforcement, and intelligence agencies familiar with the discussions (De Luce et al., 2025). If military force was to be authorized, there would be immense implications.

Diplomatic relations with Mexico could be massively hindered. Mexico has consistently opposed foreign military intervention within its border with the Mexican president, Claudia Sheinbaum recently refusing any unilateral US military action (Bradley, 2025). Furthermore, deploying troops or the use of drone strikes in Mexico, the US's ally and neighbor could be seen as undermining its sovereignty, an act that could face criticism on the global stage. A recent example of the backlash to foreign military involvement is the US bombing in Iraq in February 2024⁵, which faced widespread condemnation from Iraqi officials and led to mass protests denouncing the violation of their territorial sovereignty⁶ (Al Jazeera, 2024). This highlights the

⁵ Joseph Clark, writer at the US Department of Defense News states, "The strikes, which were carried out by U.S. Central Command forces, included more than 85 targets across seven facilities used by groups affiliated with Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps' Quds Force. "

⁶ The Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesperson, Nasser Kanaani stated, "The attacks are a violation of the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Iraq and Syria, international law, and a clear violation of the United Nations Charter."

potential for similar unrest and deterioration of US-Mexico relations if such actions were pursued against the cartels.

Like the bombing in Iraq, there are concerns that military action could add fuel to the fire. US military involvement in Mexico could escalate violence by provoking cartels to retaliate with increased violence, not only within Mexico but also against US citizens, government facilities, and interests abroad. A similar occurrence happened when Felipe Calderón was elected Mexican president in 2006. President Calderón declared a war on drugs using military tactics to mitigate the cartel's activity. This only backfired when cartels started targeting law enforcement, military personnel, and government officials (Livermore, 2025). Doug Livermore (2025), a writer at the Atlantic Council states, "Entire police forces resigned in fear, and public officials were assassinated in broad daylight. Beyond physical violence, cartels also employed psychological tactics, using brutal killings and public displays of bodies to instill terror among the population." This would only decrease tourism within Mexico, a significant industry for the country, further straining Mexico's economy⁷ and worsening socio-economic conditions, coupling the recent Mexican tariffs.

Moreover, drone strikes or other military operations could result in significant casualties, displacing communities and exacerbating the already critical humanitarian situation in areas affected by cartel violence. The US has notoriously found itself in controversy over civilian casualties from drone strikes. For example, the US military admitted that a drone strike in Afghanistan in August 2021 killed ten civilians, seven of which were children, without killing a

⁷ "The tourism industry provides more than 4.5 million jobs across Mexico and makes up more than 8% of the country's GDP." (Ecology Project International, n.d.)

designated terrorist. There are countless other instances, such as bombings in Pakistan, Yemen, Somalia, Iraq, Libya, and Syria, however, the number of non-combatant civilians is not officially counted (Yager, 2022). This would attract condemnation from international human rights organizations and the US would find itself scrutinized globally.

Given these factors, using military force against cartels could have far-reaching consequences that outweigh any potential benefits. It risks undermining US-Mexico relations, escalating violence, destabilizing communities, and drawing global criticism toward the US. Such an approach would only complicate an already complex issue, highlighting the need for a strategy that prioritizes diplomacy and collaboration over unilateral military action.

Conclusion

The designation of Mexican drug cartels as terrorist organizations presents significant challenges and potential consequences. While the intent behind these labels is to curb the violence and disruption caused by cartels, the application of terrorism designations to criminal enterprises risks conflating distinct concepts with vastly different motivations. The political and ideological nature of terrorism contrasts starkly with the profit-driven objectives of cartels, making such designations legally and practically problematic. Additionally, the prospect of employing military force against cartels under the framework of the AUMF could jeopardize US-Mexico relations, exacerbate violence, and attract global condemnation. These issues underscore the importance of developing nuanced strategies that address the threats posed by cartels without undermining the integrity of terrorism definitions or international diplomacy. Effective solutions must prioritize collaboration with Mexico, enhance law enforcement efforts,

and address the underlying socio-economic factors that sustain cartel operations, rather than resorting to military intervention.

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