



Written by [Luis Miguel](#) on March 10, 2023

What Americans Should Understand About the Cartels

In an era of fourth-generation warfare, is it any surprise that even criminal organizations are displaying a new level of sophistication?

Combating the drug crisis and the Mexican cartels responsible for it is a worthy goal, but doing so calls for a recognition of the actual situation confronting us — not a reliance on outdated concepts.

To that end, recent actions by Mexico’s Gulf Cartel are very informative of the nature and power of organized crime in Mexico; knowledge of this should influence any policy decisions made with the aim of curtailing the drug trade.



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On Thursday, the Gulf Cartel — Mexico’s oldest cartel — apologized for the recent kidnapping of four U.S. citizens in Matamoros, Tamaulipas, and the killing of two of them.

According to a letter allegedly authored by the cartel that was obtained by the [Associated Press](#), the cartel members who were involved in the kidnapping and related murders and shootout with Mexican police acted without the authorization of the cartel’s higher-ups and were handed over to authorities.

“We have decided to turn over those who were directly involved and responsible in the events, who at all times acted under their own decision-making and lack of discipline,” the letter reads, further adding that the individuals involved acted contrary to the cartel’s rules, which include “respecting the life and well-being of the innocent.”

The grizzly abduction and murder of Americans prompted several well-known U.S. lawmakers to [call for the designation](#) of Mexican cartels as terrorist organizations, which would allow for U.S. military action to be taken against them in the same way as Iraq and Afghanistan.

Among them is Senator Lindsey Graham (R-S.C.).

“We are going to unleash the fury and might of the United States against these cartels,” said Graham, the ranking member of the Senate Judiciary Committee. “We’re going to destroy their business model and their lifestyle because our national security and the security of the United States as a whole depends on us taking decisive action.”

These threats are likely what provoked the Gulf Cartel to deal with the alleged culprits and make a public apology. AP notes that the cartel’s Thursday move is not an unheard-of tactic for Mexico’s criminal groups:

Cartels’ community relations efforts are well-known within Mexico. In contested territory, one cartel might hang banners around a city blaming a rival for recent violence and distinguishing themselves as the gang that does not mess with civilians.

Last November, such banners appeared around Guanajuato state, purportedly written by



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the Jalisco New Generation cartel, that blamed a rival for a spate of killings in bars and other businesses.

... More subtly, cartels use their power to plant stories in the local press or keep stories from appearing. Their members are active on social media.

This behavior runs contrary to the conventional perception of the cartels as nothing more than savage, bloody murderers. While they are, they also possess an increasing degree of sophistication that must be taken into consideration to combat them successfully.

A few important takeaways from the Gulf Cartel's public apology and their decision to turnover the perpetrators of the kidnapping:

First, the cartels understand the importance of good PR, of keeping on "good" terms with a more powerful political force (in this case, the United States), and of cooperating with the government when it suits them.

Furthermore, the cartels of today cannot be understood as mere criminal organizations. They have essentially become small states existing within the framework of Mexico's overall political dynamic. They virtually *are* the government in many areas of Mexico, while in the nation at-large they wield tremendous influence due to the exorbitant amount of money they generate — with which they bribe Mexican politicians.

An apt comparison would be to the Communist Party, which is its own independent entity with its own power structure, but which, in a country such as China, also has formal power, having taken control of the government.

The cartels can also be compared to warring tribes in places with weak states or no states at all — the inevitable situation that arises in the vacuum when the formal institutions of society fail at effectively addressing the people's needs and thus lose their legitimacy.

In a twisted way, the cartels are also like transnational corporations and churches, which may be based in one country but operate extensively in a myriad of countries. The cartels bear semblance to historical religious organizations in the sense that they both can wield formal political power at home while exercising soft power abroad (as the Catholic Church in the Middle Ages, which had real political control over the papal states while simultaneously exercising influence over Europe's monarchies).

All of this is important because, by analyzing the phenomenon of the cartels through these different concepts, rather than simply through the limited lens of organized crime, policymakers can have a better understanding of how to combat them. They can't be eliminated by traditional methods or simply outgunning them.

Just as the cartels now operate along an unprecedented degree of sophistication, it will take sophisticated and innovative solutions to crush them.



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