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Security Council Update III: The Sinaloa Cartel's Hold on Central America

Introduction

Transnational organized crime poses a significant threat to global peace and security, with criminal networks exploiting vulnerabilities of Member States and institutions to pursue illicit profits. In recent years, Central America has become a hotspot for these activities due to the influence of powerful drug cartels; chief among them being the Sinaloa Cartel. With deep roots in drug trafficking, the Sinaloa Cartel has been a dominant force in the illegal narcotics trade with operations spanning across Latin America and extending into the United States.¹ The cartel is known for trafficking cocaine, marijuana, heroin, and methamphetamines.² In recent years, the Cartel's involvement in the distribution of fentanyl has made it a significant contributor to the opioid crisis in the United States.³ Recent developments including the arrests of several key leaders, has destabilized the cartel, leading to concerns about a resurgence of violence and instability, not only in Mexico but across the Central American region.⁴ A crackdown on cartels and targeting leadership often causes the organization to splinter into many groups who are desperate to claim power.⁵

History of the Sinaloa Cartel

The Sinaloa Cartel was established in the late 1980s, following the breakup of the Guadalajara Cartel, with Ismael "El Mayo" Zambada and Joaquín "El Chapo" Guzmán emerging as its primary leaders.⁶ Throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, the cartel built a vast drug trafficking empire, leveraging alliances with other criminal organizations and gaining control of key smuggling routes into the United States. By the mid-2000s, the cartel was entrenched in a violent war for supremacy with rival groups such as the Gulf Cartel, Los Zetas, and the Tijuana Cartel, leading to widespread violence throughout Mexico.⁷

The Mexican government, under President Felipe Calderón (2006–2012), declared an all-out war on drug cartels, deploying military forces to combat organized crime.⁸ This marked the beginning of an era of extreme violence, with the government registering over 120,000 homicides.⁹ This figure is inclusive of all homicides during President Calderón's presidency which was approximately double that of the former president.¹⁰ Reports link approximately one-third to one-half of these homicides to the cartel which includes cartel violence against civilians, the government, and themselves.¹¹ The Sinaloa Cartel, however, proved resilient, maintaining its dominance even as other cartels splintered and weakened.¹² In particular, the cartel's ability to co-opt law enforcement and government officials allowed it to continue operating despite the government's efforts to dismantle its network.

El Chapo's capture in 2016 and subsequent extradition to the United States dealt a significant blow to the cartel's leadership.¹³ However, Ismael Zambada García and two of El Chapo's sons, Joaquín and Ovidio Guzmán, assumed

¹ Tikkanen, A. "Sinaloa cartel." Encyclopedia Britannica, October 9, 2024. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Sinaloa-cartel>.

² Office of Public Affairs. "Justice Department Announces Charges Against Sinaloa Cartel's Global Operation." United States Department of Justice. Accessed October 13, 2024. <https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/justice-department-announces-charges-against-sinaloa-cartel-s-global-operation>.

³ Office of Public Affairs. "Justice Department Announces Charges Against Sinaloa Cartel's Global Operation."

⁴ Tikkanen, A. "Sinaloa cartel"

⁵ Tikkanen, A. "Sinaloa cartel"

⁶ Tikkanen, A. "Sinaloa cartel"

⁷ Council on Foreign Relations. "Mexico's Long War: Drugs, Crime, and the Cartels." Council on Foreign Relations, October 10, 2023. <https://www.cfr.org/background/mexicos-long-war-drugs-crime-and-cartels>.

⁸ Council on Foreign Relations. "Mexico's Long War: Drugs, Crime, and the Cartels."

⁹ Council on Foreign Relations. "Mexico's Long War: Drugs, Crime, and the Cartels."

¹⁰ Council on Foreign Relations. "Mexico's Long War: Drugs, Crime, and the Cartels."

¹¹ Council on Foreign Relations. "Mexico's Long War: Drugs, Crime, and the Cartels."

¹² Council on Foreign Relations. "Mexico's Long War: Drugs, Crime, and the Cartels."

¹³ Tikkanen, A. "Sinaloa cartel."

control and were able to maintain the Cartel's power.¹⁴ The organization continued to traffic drugs at an industrial scale, with fentanyl becoming an increasingly lucrative part of its portfolio.¹⁵ Fentanyl's potency and low production cost made it a key driver of the opioid crisis in the United States, prompting intensified efforts by U.S. and Mexican authorities to crack down on the cartel's operations.¹⁶

Actions Taken

The Mexican government, along with international partners, such as the United States, El Salvador, Guatemala, Belize, Honduras, and Colombia have launched major operations targeting the cartel operations and leadership that have resulted in the arrests of several key figures and the disruption of illicit trade. El Chapo was first captured in 1993 and, following an escape from prison in 2001, was subsequently recaptured in both 2014, 2016, and finally extradited to the United States in 2017.¹⁷ More recently, in July 2024, the current leaders of the Sinaloa Cartel, Ismael Zambada García and Joaquín Guzmán, were arrested on United States soil.¹⁸ However, these arrests have not been enough to dismantle the Cartel, which has long demonstrated history of being able to regenerate its leadership structure.¹⁹ Other operations such as the Central American Fingerprint Exploitation Initiative (CAFÉ) has worked to gather over 72,000 criminal records from El Salvador, Guatemala, Belize, Honduras, and Mexico for incorporation into a common database.²⁰

While the arrests of cartel leadership have not been enough to bring about the collapse of the Cartel, they have frequently led to periods of intense internal conflict as rival factions vie for control. The spillover of this violence has had a devastating impact on civilians, with many caught in the crossfire between warring cartel factions.²¹ One such example includes a cartel in the Guerrero state kidnapping and presumably murdering forty-three students which led to widespread protests from civilians.²² Efforts by the Mexican government to curb the violence, including deploying military forces to high-conflict regions, have had limited success.²³ The militarization of the drug war has, in some instances, led to further violence and human rights abuses, with security forces accused of extrajudicial killings and other violations.²⁴

At the international level, the United States and the international community has taken significant steps to cut off the cartel's financial resources through enhanced financial regulation, targeted sanctions, and asset freezes.²⁵ The United States Department of Treasury has targeted cartel associated business who serve as money laundering and drug distribution fronts.²⁶ While cartels continue to find new avenues to circumvent these sanctions, the sanctions do limit the cartel's ability to maneuver within the global financial system.²⁷ The international community accomplishes similar outcomes through Financial Action Task Force (FATF) initiatives which encourage widespread adoption of financial policy to combat criminal organizations.²⁸ The Latin and South American regions are a part of the Financial Action Task Force of Latin America (GAFILAT) and are subject to mutual evaluations of their adherence

¹⁴ Tikkanen, A. "Sinaloa cartel."

¹⁵ Tikkanen, A. "Sinaloa cartel."

¹⁶ Office of Public Affairs. "Justice Department Announces Charges Against Sinaloa Cartel's Global Operation."

¹⁷ Tikkanen, A. "Sinaloa cartel."

¹⁸ Tikkanen, A. "Sinaloa cartel."

¹⁹ Tikkanen, A. "Sinaloa cartel."

²⁰ Office of Public Affairs. "Fact Sheet: Department of Justice Efforts to Combat Mexican Drug Cartels." *United States Department of Justice*. Accessed January 14, 2025. <https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/fact-sheet-department-justice-efforts-combat-mexican-drug-cartels>.

²¹ Council on Foreign Relations. "Mexico's Long War: Drugs, Crime, and the Cartels."

²² Council on Foreign Relations. "Mexico's Long War: Drugs, Crime, and the Cartels."

²³ Council on Foreign Relations. "Mexico's Long War: Drugs, Crime, and the Cartels."

²⁴ Council on Foreign Relations. "Mexico's Long War: Drugs, Crime, and the Cartels."

²⁵ Hussein, F. "US Sanctions Mexican Businesses and Individuals Tied to Sinaloa Cartel's Fentanyl Trade." AP News, October 11, 2024. <https://apnews.com/article/treasury-sanctions-fentanyl-mexico-sinaloa-cartel-674d046c4c96a98d2227b123a4893a16>.

²⁶ Hussein, F. "US Sanctions Mexican Businesses and Individuals Tied to Sinaloa Cartel's Fentanyl Trade."

²⁷ Hussein, F. "US Sanctions Mexican Businesses and Individuals Tied to Sinaloa Cartel's Fentanyl Trade."

²⁸ Financial Action Task Force, *FATF Recommendations: International Standards on Combating Money Laundering and the Financing of Terrorism & Proliferation*, accessed January 14, 2025, <https://www.fatf-gafi.org/en/topics/fatf-recommendations.html>.

to FATF recommendations and assessment those recommendations' subsequent effectiveness.²⁹ The U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) has worked closely with Mexican law enforcement to intercept drug shipments and dismantle trafficking networks, particularly those linked to fentanyl production.³⁰ This includes programs such as Operation Last Mile which targets the Sinaloa's operations globally and has resulted in 3,337 arrests and a seizure of approximately 44 million fentanyl pills and more than 6,500 pounds of fentanyl powder.³¹ However, the Cartel's adaptability and the persistence of demand for narcotics have complicated efforts to end its influence.³²

Recent Developments

The recent arrests have left the Sinaloa Cartel on the brink of a major power struggle.³³ Violence is already escalating in parts of northern Mexico, particularly in the states of Sinaloa, Chihuahua, and Sonora, as rival factions vie to fill the leadership vacuum.³⁴ Clashes between the Joaquín "El Chapo" Guzmán and Ismael "El Mayo" Zambada loyal factions or the "Chapos" and the "Mayos" ensued in the months following their leaders' arrests.³⁵ In Culiacán, the capital of the state of Sinaloa, violence included skirmishes between military and armed gunmen, highway executions, and confrontations between groups armed civilians suspected to have cartel affiliation.³⁶ According to the office of the State Attorney General there were a total of 36 murders and 32 forced disappearances in the first week of September.³⁷ The fighting spread across the state of Sinaloa leading to the disruption of transportation, shutdown of schools, and even the excavation of towns such as El Palmito to preserve the safety of its citizens.³⁸ On October 1st President Claudia Sheinbaum succeeded former president Lopez Obrador and was tasked with responding to the escalating conflict in which 58 clashes between the Mayos and Chapos had claimed 132 lives.³⁹ Conflicts escalated resulting in an October 21st shootout between the military and suspected cartel forces that killed 19 of the gunmen outside of Culiacán.⁴⁰ The end of the month also saw the conflict spread to the neighboring state of Durango when residents reported seeing a small plane drop bombs on the town of Vascogil, the origin of group allied to the Mayos.⁴¹

As the conflict continues into January 2025 the Sinaloa civil war continues progress and become more costly.⁴² On January 7th a commander of the Municipal Police of Culiacán was shot while driving his car.⁴³ The commander was

²⁹ Financial Action Task Force. "Financial Action Task Force of Latin America (GAFILAT)." Accessed January 14, 2025. <https://www.fatf-gafi.org/en/countries/global-network/financial-action-task-force-of-latin-america--gafilat-.html>.

³⁰ U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration. "DEA Releases 2024 National Drug Threat Assessment." DEA, May 9, 2024. <https://www.dea.gov/press-releases/2024/05/09/dea-releases-2024-national-drug-threat-assessment>.

³¹ U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration. "DEA Operation Last Mile Tracks Down Sinaloa and Jalisco Cartel Associates." Last modified May 5, 2023. <https://www.dea.gov/press-releases/2023/05/05/dea-operation-last-mile-tracks-down-sinaloa-and-jalisco-cartel-associates>.

³² U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration. "DEA Releases 2024 National Drug Threat Assessment."

³³ U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration. "DEA Releases 2024 National Drug Threat Assessment."

³⁴ De Cordoba, J. "Inside Mexico's New Plan to Take On Cartel Violence." *Wall Street Journal*, October 13, 2024. https://www.wsj.com/world/americas/inside-mexicos-new-plan-to-take-on-cartel-violence-fcff2a54?mod=Searchresults_pos2&page=1.

³⁵ Aristegui Noticias. "Lunes de enfrentamientos en Sinaloa dejó cinco muertos." *Aristegui Noticias*, September 10, 2023. <https://aristeginoticias.com/1009/mexico/lunes-de-enfrentamientos-en-sinaloa-dejo-cinco-muertos/>.

³⁶ Aristegui Noticias. "Lunes de enfrentamientos en Sinaloa dejó cinco muertos."

³⁷ Proceso. "Gatilleros atacan a militares en Sinaloa; se registra una semana de enfrentamientos." *Proceso*, September 16, 2024. <https://www.proceso.com.mx/nacional/2024/9/16/gatilleros-atacan-militares-en-sinaloa-se-registra-una-semana-de-enfrentamientos-336810.html>.

³⁸ Revista Espejo. "El Palmito sigue sin agua, sin transporte y sin la llegada de productos, señalan desplazados." Last modified September 24, 2024. https://revistaespejo.com/2024/09/24/el-palmito-sigue-sin-agua-sin-transporte-y-sin-la-llegada-de-productos-senalan-desplazados/#google_vignette.

³⁹ Latin Times. "Mexico's Sheinbaum to Launch Special Task Force to Address Sinaloa Turf Wars in First Days of Her Presidency." *Latin Times*, December 2024. <https://www.latintimes.com/mexicos-sheinbaum-launch-special-task-force-address-sinaloa-turf-wars-first-days-her-presidency-560906>.

⁴⁰ Associated Press. "Mexican Army Targets Sinaloa Cartel in Major Operation." *AP News*. Last modified January 14, 2025. <https://apnews.com/article/mexico-army-drug-cartel-sinaloa-9789a8286055ec01d13497b2a8e3f995>.

⁴¹ SDP Noticias. 2025. "¿Qué pasó en Durango? Avión lanzó artefactos explosivos cerca de Vascogil, que fue escondite del Mayo Zambada." *SDP Noticias*. Accessed January 14, 2025. <https://www.sdpnoticias.com/estados/que-paso-en-durango-avion-lanizo-artefactos-explosivos-cerca-de-vascogil-que-fue-escondite-del-mayo-zambada/>.

⁴² El País. "Asesinado a Balazos un Comandante de la Policía de Culiacán." *El País*, January 8, 2025. <https://elpais.com/mexico/2025-01-08/asesinado-a-balazos-un-comandante-de-la-policia-de-culiacan.html>.

⁴³ El País. "Asesinado a Balazos un Comandante de la Policía de Culiacán."

one of an estimated dozen or more officers killed in the cartel war including a federal agent from President Sheinbaum's force dispatched to the state of Sinaloa.⁴⁴ This war will be sure to have regional impacts in Latin America with Sinaloa allies such as the Choneros gang in Ecuador who rely on cartel drugs and weapons.⁴⁵ The Sinaloa Cartel's involvement in Ecuador has led increased gang violence as rival cartels such as the Jalisco New Generation Cartel (CJNG) make their own alliances with local gangs.⁴⁶ The cartels have also expanded to other Member States such as Australia and New Zealand who have reported spikes in violent activity and drug use associated with cartel arrival.⁴⁷ Spain has also noted growing Sinaloa influence as the national police raided two drug production laboratories and arrested 16 people with ties to the Chapos in November 2024 after arresting 14 for a gang related killing in August.^{48,49} This power struggle has the potential to spiral into full-scale warfare, as remaining leaders seek to assert their dominance. The infighting may also open the door for external actors, including other cartels and armed groups, to take advantage of the instability. The Sinaloa and its rivals, chief among them the CJNG, have operations and interests on all continents making escalation a global issue.

⁴⁴ El País. "Asesinado a Balazos un Comandante de la Policía de Culiacán."

⁴⁵ The Associated Press. "In Ecuador, the Global Reach of Mexico's Warring Drug Cartels Fuels a National Crisis." *U.S. News & World Report*. January 13, 2024. https://www.usnews.com/news/world/articles/2024-01-13/in-ecuador-the-global-reach-of-mexicos-warring-drug-cartels-fuels-a-national-crisis?utm_source=chatgpt.com.

⁴⁶ The Associated Press. "In Ecuador, the Global Reach of Mexico's Warring Drug Cartels Fuels a National Crisis."

⁴⁷ The Associated Press. "In Ecuador, the Global Reach of Mexico's Warring Drug Cartels Fuels a National Crisis."

⁴⁸ T Cadena SER. "Desmantelados Dos Laboratorios de Cocaína y Metanfetamina en la Provincia de Toledo con Conexiones con el Cártel de Sinaloa." *Cadena SER*, November 9, 2024. https://cadenaser.com/castillalamancha/2024/11/09/desmantelados-dos-laboratorios-de-cocaina-y-metanfetamina-en-la-provincia-de-toledo-con-conexiones-con-el-cartel-de-sinaloa-ser-toledo/?utm_source=chatgpt.com.

⁴⁹ HuffPost. "Detenidas 14 Personas del Cártel de Sinaloa que Asesinaron a un Hombre en Cataluña." *Huffington Post España*. Accessed January 14, 2025. <https://www.huffingtonpost.es/sociedad/detenidas-14-personas-cartel-sinaloa-asesinaron-hombre-catalunabr.html>.