

Use of Unmanned Aircraft Systems by FTO-Designated Mexico-Based Cartels a Danger to US Security Officials and Public Safety

SCOPE: This product is intended to inform federal, state, local, tribal, and territorial government, law enforcement, public safety officials, and private-sector security partners of the threat of unmanned aircraft systems (UAS) used by select Mexico-based foreign terrorist organization (FTO)–designated transnational criminal organizations (FDTCOs).

The increasing use of weaponized UAS by Mexico-based FDTCOs within Mexico’s northern border states is of concern, as is the widespread availability of low-cost, constantly improving, commercially available UAS with navigation systems, range, speed, and video that increase their lethality. The use of weaponized UAS can significantly affect civilian populations, such as forcing relocations, or have other impacts to public safety, as well as challenge the detection and response capabilities of US authorities.

Several FDTCOs are regularly operating UAS carrying drugs as far as 30 miles inside US airspace. As of early 2025, several FDTCOs were conducting hundreds of UAS flights a day, mostly for intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) activities on border authorities to aid in human and drug smuggling from Mexico into the United States.

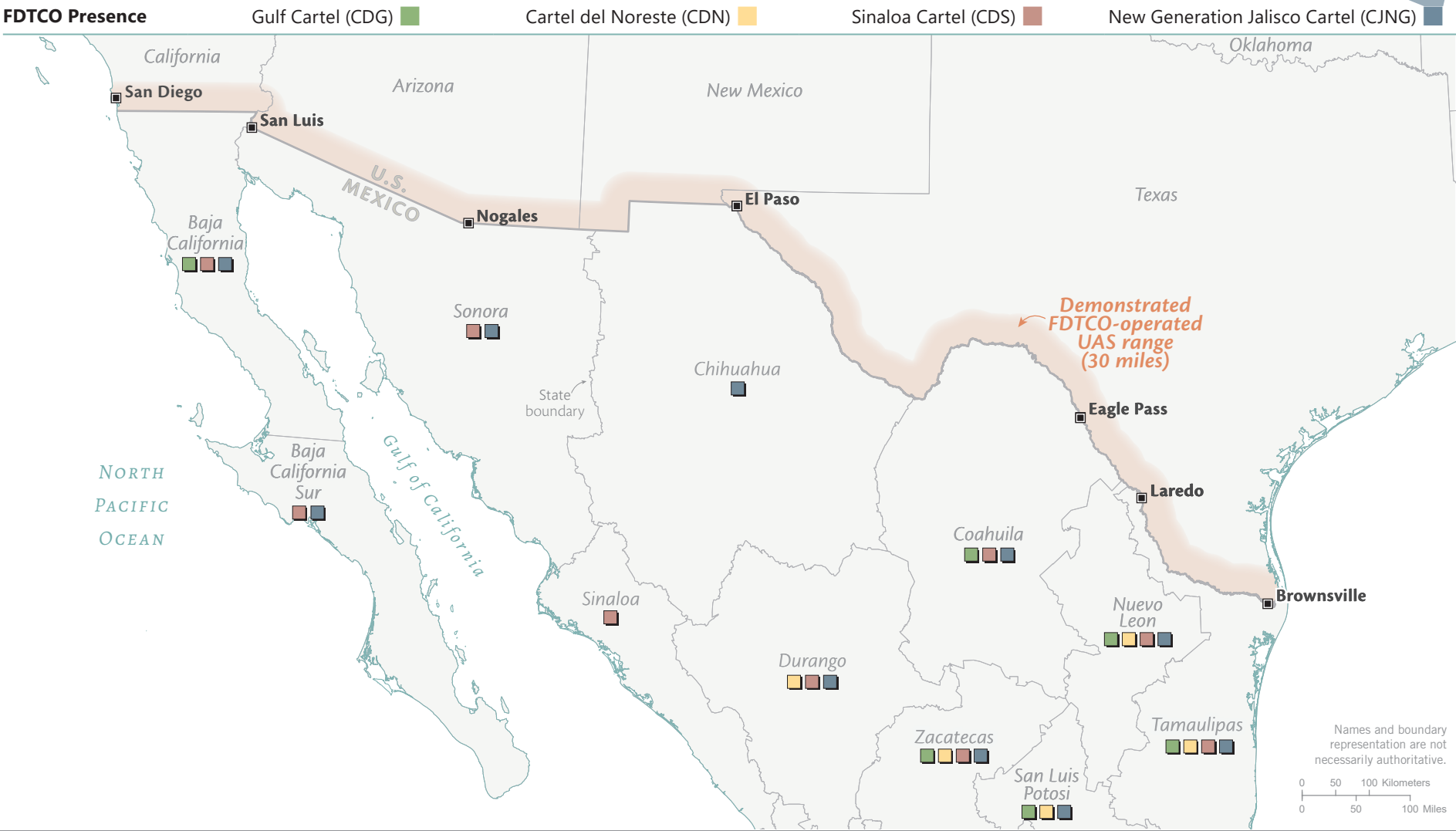
- **Attacks against personnel:** An uncorroborated report suggested that unidentified Mexican cartel leaders had authorized attacks using UAS carrying explosives against US law enforcement and US military personnel along the US-Mexico border. This type of attack against US personnel or interests inside the United States would be unprecedented but exemplifies a plausible scenario, although FDTCOs typically avoid actions that would result in unwanted attention or responses from US authorities.
- **Attacks against aircraft:** A Mexican Army helicopter was attacked by an unidentified group using small arms and a UAS loaded with an improvised explosive device (IED).
- **Attacks against government property:** Mexican State police officers were ambushed by several UAS that shot and launched explosive devices at their vehicles by almost certainly the New Generation Jalisco Cartel (CJNG).
- **Attacks against civilian communities:** The CJNG and Sinaloa Cartel have used weaponized UAS to attack residential communities in Mexico, causing casualties, fear, and panic and displacing residents.
- **Surveillance:** Mexico-based FDTCOs frequently use UAS as lookouts and for ISR of US authorities during cross-border drug and human smuggling operations.

CAVEAT: While there are no known cases of cartels using UAS to conduct attacks inside the United States, FDTCOs will probably avoid actions that would result in US law enforcement scrutiny or jeopardize their cross-border activities; however, a change in circumstances might alter their willingness to conduct acts of violence against US authorities or persons along the border.

Examples of Weaponized UAS in Mexico



The CJNG has a trained group of UAS operators and probably began weaponizing UAS in about 2021.



NOTICE: This is a Joint Counterterrorism Assessment Team (JCAT) product. JCAT is a collaboration by NCTC, DHS, the FBI, and state, local, tribal, and territorial government personnel to improve information sharing and enhance public safety. The product promotes coordination among intergovernmental authorities and the private sector in identifying, preventing, and responding to terrorist activities. Consider the enclosed information within the context of existing laws, regulations, authorities, agreements, policies or procedures. For additional information contact us at JCAT@ODNI.GOV. This document is best printed on 11"x17" paper.

This is an NCTC-approved sanitized or downgraded version of the original product NCTC-JFRT-2025-17180 published on 03 September 2025.

Use of Unmanned Aircraft Systems by Designated Mexico-based Cartels a Potential Danger to US Security Officials and Public Safety *(continued)*

THREAT AWARENESS:

- Consider expanding law enforcement and security professionals use of remote ID data to identify, locate, and approach UAS operators because remote ID signals have been determined to be the digital equivalent of a license plate.
- Consider frequently updating prevention frameworks, policies, and regulations and collaborate with federal government departments and agencies to better understand changes, implemented and planned, to legal authorities to keep pace with UAS advancements.
- Consider frequent collaboration with and coordination among federal, state, local, tribal, and territorial authorities and military organizations. For example, conducting UAS table top and scenario exercises such as those conducted by DHS's Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency and FBI's Critical Incident Response Group to address the legal authorities and processes of working with other organizations with authorities on UAS.
- When needed, consider requesting expanded airspace restrictions, such as temporary flight restrictions, over critical areas or sensitive locations. This may be relevant during special events or large gatherings.
- Consider potential implications of UAS attacks using IEDs, including evacuation and safe haven protocols.
- Consider the psychological aspects of UAS attacks such as how quiet and discreet UAS can be, the disruption to daily life under a general threat of attack, and the effects on schools, hospitals, open areas, and mass gathering venues.
- Maintain awareness of events occurring within your area of responsibility that may require an elevated security posture to improve public safety.
- Establish a UAS working group or formal mechanism comprising federal, state, local, tribal, and territorial agencies and private-sector partners to analyze UAS trends, anomalies, and activity along the border to inform the threat of UAS.
- Inform the public to call authorities and to avoid handling suspicious UAS.
- If safe to do so, take photos or videos of UAS and describe it; its actions, such as flying near people, aircraft, or critical infrastructure; and any modifications and share them with authorities through methods such as DHS's Nationwide Suspicious Activity Reporting (SAR) Initiative.

PLANS AND PREPARATIONS:

- Establish emergency plans that designate evacuation routes, meeting points, and communication procedures.

- Establish plans, policies, and procedures for responding to UAS incidents and conduct regular exercises to test and improve them.
- Establish plans, policies, and procedures to deconflict between federal, state, local, tribal, and territorial authorities and military organizations.
- Collaborate with federal partners to acquire and deploy UAS detection devices.
- Collaborate with federal partners to acquire and deploy monitoring and surveillance capabilities such as CCTV systems and remote sensors.
- Clearly mark designated "no drone zone" areas to indicate UAS use is against federal, state or local laws.
- Establish effective and efficient mechanisms to share information among federal, state, local, tribal, and territorial authorities and first responders.
- Offer training to public safety officials and private-sector security personnel to identify and report potential suspicious UAS activity.

ACTIONS IF A SUSPECTED WEAPONIZED UAS HAS BEEN TAKEN DOWN OR CRASHED:

- Secure a perimeter around the suspected weaponized UAS in accordance with recommended standoff distances for explosives. https://tripwire.dhs.gov/system/files/bomb_threat_standoff_card_digital_final_v2.0.pdf
- Contact the local bomb squad or explosives ordnance disposal professionals to ensure that any explosives on a UAS are rendered safe.

REPORTING:

Document and provide as much of the following information as possible to the FAA and other federal government departments and agencies when encountering suspicious UAS. Share information through effective and efficient mechanisms among federal, state, and local authorities and first responders, aiming to cover as much of the items listed below:

- The identity of operators and witnesses (name and contact information).
- The type of operation (recreational, commercial, public/governmental).
- The type of device(s) and registration information (request to see "The Recreational UAS Safety Test" (TRUST) certificate if flown recreationally, UAS FAA Remote Pilot Certificate, the airspace authorization for drone operations within controlled airspace, the FAA Certificate of Waiver or Authorization (COA) for drone operations being conducted contrary to federal law).
- The location and details of the incident (date, time, and place).
- Any other evidence (photos, videos, or confiscated devices).

RESOURCES:

FAA

Report the incident to the FAA using their online reporting tool or by calling their hotline (1-866-TELL-FAA)

No Drone Zone: https://www.faa.gov/uas/resources/community_engagement/no_drone_zone

FBI

The **FBI UAS Response Playbook** for Responding to UAS Incidents in the Homeland is available on LEEP JusticeConnect.

To find your local FBI field office, visit: <https://www.fbi.gov/contact-us/field>

Report information about unknown UAS to the FBI: 1-800-CALL-FBI (1-800-225-5324) or submit a tip online at tips.fbi.gov

The **Terrorist Screening Center (TSC)** is a federal multi-agency center administered by the FBI, which maintains the Terrorist Screening Dataset and provides screening info to USG screening and vetting agencies for appropriate and lawful use. <https://www.fbi.gov/investigate/terrorism/tsc>

eGUARDIAN is an online repository of terrorism-related activities shared among federal, state, local, tribal, and territorial law enforcement agencies. <https://fbi.gov/resources/law-enforcement/eguardian>

DHS

The **Nationwide SAR Initiative** helps to establish a national capacity for gathering, documenting, processing, analyzing, and sharing SAR information. <https://www.dhs.gov/nationwide-sar-initiative-nsi>

Technical Resource for Incident Prevention (TRIPwire): <https://tripwire.dhs.gov>

Suspicious UAS Identification Poster and Postcard: <https://www.cisa.gov/resources-tools/resources/suspicious-uas-identification-poster-and-postcard>

Advisory on the Application of Federal Laws to the Acquisition and Use of Technology to Detect and Mitigate Unmanned Aircraft Systems: <https://www.dhs.gov/publication/interagency-legal-advisory-uas-detection-and-mitigation-technologies>

Office for Bombing Prevention Training Program: <https://www.cisa.gov/resources-tools/programs/office-bombing-prevention-obp-training-program>



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<https://www.JCAT-url.com>

For further information, please email JCAT
jcat@odni.gov



(U) The Joint Counterterrorism Assessment Team (JCAT) is a collaboration by NCTC, DHS, FBI, state, local, tribal, and territorial government personnel to improve information sharing and enhance public safety. The First Responder's Toolbox is an ad hoc, unclassified reference aid intended to promote counterterrorism coordination among federal, state, local, tribal, and territorial government authorities and partnerships with private sector officials in deterring, preventing, disrupting, and responding to terrorist attacks.