



Should Mexican cartels be labeled as terrorist organizations?

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The destructive influence of Mexican cartels and the drugs they traffic, particularly fentanyl, is well known on both sides of the border, and some Republican lawmakers say it's time for the U.S. government to respond.

News broke over the weekend that armed men stormed a resort in the central Mexican state of Guanajuato on Saturday, killing six adults and a child. Although it was not immediately clear who was responsible for the violence, Reuters reported rival drug cartels have been doing battle in the region.

On the American side of the border, cities and towns are struggling with an increase in violence and drug addiction, and many local leaders, including Jonathan Lines, a supervisor in Yuma County, Arizona, say that a more aggressive approach from the federal government is necessary. Yuma County shares almost 150 miles of border with Mexico.

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"I don't know anybody in Yuma whose lives have not been touched by fentanyl over the last few years," Lines said in a phone interview with the Deseret News.

For Lines, anecdotes that illustrate the cartels' presence in Yuma come easily. His housekeeper's son, he said, was killed by a fatal dose of fentanyl.

"The pressure that the people feel when it's applied from the cartel is pretty significant," Lines added. "So, I think that a more collective approach with law enforcement and military is needed to combat these challenges."

Lines, who is also a former chairman of the Arizona Republican Party, isn't alone in his position. A growing chorus of Republican lawmakers, including Utah Republican Sen. Mike Lee, are calling for more aggressive action against Mexican cartels.

This year, multiple bills have been introduced in the U.S. House and Senate that would designate Mexican cartels as “foreign terrorist organizations” in order to broaden the actions that can be used against them.

In an interview with the Deseret News, Lee said he made it clear to Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador during a visit in March that the GOP is not trying to start a war within Mexico.

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“I think there’s some misunderstanding about exactly what designating them as terror organizations would do,” Lee said. “The purpose of doing that is primarily to give U.S. law enforcement officials at the U.S. Treasury additional tools to be able to seize assets... tools we wouldn’t otherwise have. And I actually think that’s important.”

Another bill, introduced by Texas Republican Rep. Dan Crenshaw, would give authorization for the use of military force against Mexican cartels, similar to those approved for Iraq and Afghanistan.

“My legislation will put us at war with the cartels,” Crenshaw said in a January press release. Crenshaw later said in a Wall Street Journal op-ed that “No one is talking about an invasion or a war with Mexico.” Instead, the authorization for the use of military force would provide “the minimum authority needed to operate with the Mexican military, as we’ve done with other allies battling internal insurgencies.”

Once considered a fringe idea, these aggressive tactics have now become a common refrain among Republicans, with former president Donald Trump, and other 2024 hopefuls Nikki Haley and Vivek Ramaswamy, promising to take military action against the cartels if elected commander in chief.

This stance comes as the number of undocumented immigrants and illicit drugs trafficked across the border by Mexican cartels reaches unprecedented levels. According to data released by U.S. Customs and Border Protection, in 2022, there were a record 2.5 million border encounters, compared to 550,000 in 2020. That same year, 13,400 pounds of fentanyl were seized by border patrol officers, compared to 7,300 pounds seized in 2020, according to the Drug Enforcement Agency.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reports that Fentanyl is 50 times stronger than heroin and has become the leading cause of death among adults ages 18 to 45, with more than 70,000 people dying from a fentanyl overdose in 2021 and again in 2022.

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But opponents of the idea say that designating Mexican cartels as terrorist organizations or authorizing military force would risk shattering America's relationship with the Mexican government, escalating violence along the southern border and embroiling the country in another war on terror, all without addressing the true underlying causes, including America's demand for illicit drugs.

"Knocking out some drug labs in Mexico will not solve the basic problem. And designating the cartels as terrorist groups is hardly a solution," said Brian Jenkins, a senior adviser at the RAND Corporation, in a piece for The Hill. Jenkins suggests that the moves by Republican lawmakers are meant to send a loud message and don't address the deeper problem. But Lines and others believe inaction will cost more American lives.

A threat to national security

Mexican cartels became the dominant supplier of drugs to the U.S. after Colombian narco-traffickers were toppled by U.S. intervention in the late 1980s and early 1990s. In the decades since, cartels like the influential Sinaloa Cartel, and its offshoots, have engaged in internecine warfare, government intimidation and indiscriminate killings, and now control vast swaths of Mexican territory.

Jeffrey Addicott, a retired Lt. Col. and professor of national security and terrorism law at St. Mary's University in San Antonio, Texas, said that due to the cartel's entrenchment in Mexican society, it might be better to view them as "virtual states" rather than criminal drug organizations.

"The cartels have all the attributes of a nation state," Addicott said in a phone interview with the Deseret News. "They have an armed force, they have a taxing system, they have geographic areas where they operate."

And alongside this growing perception of sovereignty, cartels have grown increasingly bold in their violence against officials and citizens.

- In March, four U.S. citizens were kidnapped by cartel members just across the border from Brownsville, Texas. Two were killed and the other two were returned to Mexican authorities.
- In August of last year, cities across northern and central Mexico burst into flames in an unprecedented show of violence as cartel members reacted to the attempted arrest of one of their leaders
- In November 2019, three women and six children were murdered in an ambush by cartel members.

The cartels' power is also shown by their control of the drug trade, Lines said. The number of both immigrants and drugs crossing the border have skyrocketed in recent years.

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Yuma County has been especially hard hit, Lines said, with fentanyl-related deaths significantly higher than the national average. In testimony to Congress, Yuma County Sheriff Leon N. Wilmot said his county had 50 overdose deaths in 2022.

But while border communities like Yuma may be on the frontlines, the impacts of the cartels' power can be felt across the county, according to Joshua Treviño, the chief of intelligence and research at the Texas Public Policy Foundation.

“It’s important to move away from a framework where these are really just border issues,” Treviño said in a phone interview with the Deseret News. “All of the above is really a 50 state problem at this point.”

Policy proposals and problems

Talk of addressing cartel violence through military action was renewed when Crenshaw and Florida Republican Rep. Mike Waltz introduced a bill to authorize military force against cartels in January, shortly after an explosion of cartel violence in northern Mexico that left over 30 dead.

The bill authorizes the president to use military force “against those responsible for trafficking fentanyl ... or carrying out other related activities that cause regional destabilization in the Western Hemisphere.” The authorization would apply only to individuals and organizations outside of U.S. territory and would sunset after five years.

It’s difficult to know what an authorization of military force against Mexican cartels would do, Treviño said, but Crenshaw and Waltz have clarified that it would not mean an invasion. Rather, the authorization could be used to conduct intelligence operations, special forces missions, and cyber and drone attacks.

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Among the bills in the House and Senate that would designate specific Mexican cartels as terrorist organizations, a version put forward by Republican Sens. Lindsey Graham of South Carolina, John Kennedy of Louisiana, Mike Lee of Utah, and three others, would formally designate nine Mexican cartels as terrorist organizations, making it easier to prosecute and use military force against them and granting the Secretary of Treasury authority to freeze the cartels' assets.

Such measures were considered during the Trump administration but failed to materialize.

Critics of these measures say the terrorist designation could hurt migrants by making them subject to prosecution based on their reliance on cartels for entering the U.S. There is also fear that such action would escalate cartel violence and harm an already strained relationship between the U.S. and Mexico.

“The history of the United States declaring war or authorizing the use of the military against non-state actors is not a happy one,” said Justin Logan, director of defense and foreign policy studies at the Cato Institute, in an email to the Deseret News. “There has been little examination of what a military campaign would look like. ... At this point it is just flailing, and that’s dangerous.”

What’s more, Logan said, these efforts are unlikely to have any effect on the amount of drugs crossing the border. When the U.S. defeated drug trafficking operations in Peru and Colombia, they moved to Mexico. If the U.S. were to eradicate Mexican cartels, the drug trade would just crop up somewhere else, Logan said. There’s just too much money to be made.

“As long as Americans are willing to engage in risky behavior like taking drugs, and as long as there are astronomical profits in supplying them, there will be little way to break out of this morbid cycle,” Logan said.

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Though the U.S. has a history of launching operations to topple drug trafficking cartels, the actions currently being considered by Congress would be unprecedented, Addicott said. For one, the U.S. has never designated a drug cartel as a terrorist organization, and past anti-cartel campaigns have always involved close coordination with the governments of other countries.

“The difference here is that they’re looking at doing it with or without the cooperation of the Mexican government because the Mexican government has shown that they’re either unwilling or not able to take action against the cartels,” Addicott said.

Fighting cartel corruption

Despite decades of attempted cooperation between the U.S. and Mexican governments to address cartel violence, including billions of dollars to modernize Mexico’s security and judicial systems, there appears to be very little to show for it. Cartel homicides hover near an all-time high, according to the UN Office on Drugs and Crime’s International Homicide Statistics database.

Frustrated by the lack of success, some U.S. lawmakers now talk openly about acting without Mexico's consent. Mexican authorities have responded with outrage.

"We are not going to permit any foreign government to intervene in our territory, much less that a government's armed forces intervene," Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador said last month in response to a tweet from Crenshaw.

But Treviño said he considers unilateral action by the U.S. the only viable option.

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"The bottom line is that the efforts have failed because the Mexican state values cooperation with the cartels more than it does doing right by its own citizens," Treviño said.

Recent government policies in Mexico have deemphasized arresting cartel members. And Treviño says if cartels don't face tougher pushback their corrupting influence will continue to spread across the boarder, referring to several incidents in which Texas sheriff departments were found to be engaged in drug trafficking.

"Democratic civics is a very fragile thing and cartels are a direct threat to that," Treviño said. "You can either have cartels flourishing as they are ... in which case Democratic civics in America is over, or we can fight them."

Lines agrees that the coercive pressure of the cartels is a daily reality for many on the frontlines. His brother, a border patrol officer, was recently forced to arrest one of his own agents who was caught trafficking drugs for the cartel in his border patrol vehicle.

"It broke morale just to see one of your own being coerced into doing something from the cartel," Lines said.

Lines says that many border patrol officers are overwhelmed and discouraged by these pressures and that the time for the U.S. to act with decisive force against the cartels is now.

"If there was any other possibility, I would like to know what it is," Lines said. "I know that as a local community, we have done everything that we can do."