



STRATEGIC THINKING
INTELLIGENCE AND SECURITY CONSULTANTS

FOR THE U.S., TERRORISM; IN MEXICO ... EVERYTHING STAYS THE SAME

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The U.S. Department of State's designation of six Mexican criminal organizations as foreign terrorist organizations marks the end of a ten-year, effort to expand control mechanisms over the cartel's activities and the violence they generate not only in Mexico, but in the U.S., and the rest of the world. This controversial designation represents a change for the U.S. and its strategic partners, while for the Mexican government, everything indicates that it will not bring significant changes.

The inclusion in the list of foreign terrorist organizations causes confusion due to the complex legal and operational framework developed in the U.S. and its allies worldwide. The actors on this list are usually subjected to a special and extreme policy implemented by the armed forces, intelligence agencies, and national police, and, if necessary, with the support of the international community, particularly the U.S. and its strategic partners.

Although the U.S. has reduced its presence and operations aimed at what was once called the "global war on terrorism," the addition of six Mexican organizations to this list expands its portfolio of anti-terrorist tools and instruments for repression both within its own territory and globally.

Mexican organizations have characteristics that differ from others on the list. They have not carried out direct attacks in the U.S., like Al-Qaeda, nor have they been added to the list due to pressure from national governments, as was the case with the Spanish ETA. Therefore, it is difficult to predict how U.S. security institutions and their strategic partners will apply the extraordinary mechanisms granted by the counterterrorism framework.

Among the counterterrorism measures that tend to generate the most interest are the interception of communications from non-U.S. citizens through programs like PRISM; restrictions on rights such as freedom of movement and association; the use of indefinite pre-trial detention or intelligence in investigations; the targeted elimination of suspected individuals using drones; and the extensive involvement of the armed forces in anti-terrorism operations.



Given the international nature of foreign terrorist organizations, combating them requires a high degree of cooperation among nations, which are pressured to act within their respective territories and join the global fight against terrorism. In this context, the operational cells these organizations may have in different countries become a top priority for national and international security agencies, particularly for the U.S. and its allies in this fight.

The repercussions of this designation in Mexico remain unclear. To begin with, the Mexican government did not request this classification and apparently considers it irrelevant. But it has acknowledged the scope of global anti-terrorism powers and has therefore strengthened restrictions on the operations of foreign security agents within its territory and updated the list of offenses warranting mandatory pretrial detention, where terrorism had not been previously included.

The situation is complicated for the Mexican government, as the U.S.'s southern neighbor is expected to support the fight against terrorism. However, internally, Mexico has few additional tools or mechanisms to counter the activities and actors of the six designated organizations. For the past couple of decades, with weak institutions and the rule of law, Mexico has had a de facto extraordinary or special regime, similar to counterterrorism measures implemented in Western democracies.

In this regard, in Mexico, communication interception is an accepted practice among public and private institutions; the suspension of rights, such as freedom of movement and association, a common practice, even as a preventive strategy for individuals; due process is questionable and, for most, nonexistent; the targeted elimination of suspects is a practice—though not widespread and potentially punishable—that is nonetheless used; and the armed forces and intelligence institutions lead security efforts. This exceptional situation, long accepted by the Mexican population, has proven insufficient in tackling criminal activities and the now-designated terrorist

Strategic recommendation

Mexico must find a way to benefit from something it currently denies: terrorism and counterterrorism. The instruments, tools, and international interest that this phenomenon activates and attracts could be of great help in establishing a global framework for the pursuit of these six organizations, in which Mexico takes the lead and benefits from the capabilities developed by other nations to counter the activities that have caused so much harm to the country.



organizations. Therefore, aside from further restricting people's rights and freedoms, the Mexican government has few alternatives to combat terrorism within its territory.

What Mexico could take advantage of—by shifting its perspective on sovereignty and nationalism, which prevent it from accepting the designation—is access to instruments and tools in other territories where these six organizations operate. Additionally, it could encourage joint efforts and delegate activities in which the Mexican state has not developed capabilities but that the U.S. or other nations possess and could use to combat terrorism.

Last call

The link between tariffs and security is beginning to fade. The Mexican government's efforts were not enough to prevent the increase in tariffs. While it could be argued that the Trump administration's security expectations are much higher and that Mexico must intensify its efforts, there is also the possibility that tariffs are unrelated to security, meaning no effort will ever be enough.

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