

Threat Assessment; Cartel Jalisco Nueva Generación (CJNG)

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Cartel Jalisco Nueva Generación (CJNG) has grown from a regional criminal organization into one of the most violent, influential cartel networks in Mexico. Its expansion across trafficking corridors, control of logistical routes, use of extreme violence, and increasing reach into the United States make it more than a conventional drug-trafficking group. CJNG now operates as a hybrid threat that combines organized crime, territorial control, corruption, and intimidation in ways that challenge public safety, governance, and regional stability. By using violence to influence an audience wider than their primary victims and to effect political change, CJNG crosses from being simply a criminal organization into the arena of terrorism, specifically, narco-terrorism.

In this paper, the term “threat assessment” refers to a structured, evidence-based process that seeks to judge whether a specific actor – in this case, CJNG – has the capability and intent to cause targeted harm in a given context and the amount of harm that actor could cause. This threat analysis treats CJNG as a violent, transnational criminal-insurgent narco-terrorist actor whose behavior overlaps with what many scholars and practitioners describe as narco-terrorism. The paper focuses on CJNG’s development from the 2000s to the present, covering its activities in Mexico and its reach into U.S. and elsewhere. It assesses CJNG as a transnational threat by examining its origins, structure, methods, and risk profile, and by tracing how the organization builds power through violence, crime, financial networks, and relationships with local actors. The purpose of the assessment is to apply a structured, evidence-based methodology to evaluate CJNG’s capabilities, intent, and opportunities for continued growth and violence, and to identify practical implications for threat mitigation and future policy.

Conceptual and Threat Assessment Framework

Existing scholarship on Mexican cartels increasingly treats them as more than just profit-driven criminal enterprises; they are violent non-state actors whose behavior overlaps with insurgency and terrorism. Teiner (2020) reports on this literature, which is divided between modernist viewpoints that see cartels as organized crime gangs best addressed by law enforcement and post-modernist approaches that see cartels as criminal insurgents that infringe on sovereignty, exercise de facto territorial control and governance, and utilize symbolic violence for political purposes – a key element of many definitions of terrorism. Campbell and Hansen (2014) argue that cartel violence becomes narco-terrorism when cartels deliberately use theatrical brutality, such as public executions, car bombs, and highly mediatised attacks to intimidate state actors and civilians and to influence political outcomes; they describe it “...not...as an attempt at revolutionary takeover of the state, yet nonetheless a rhetorical form of political communication...and a vehicle for taking power in specific places” (p.161) and provide a compelling argument that Mexican cartel violence fits squarely into the category of “terrorism” (p.162).

Building on this, Sullivan and Jones (2022) describe an intelligence and analytical toolkit for addressing the crime-gang-terrorism nexus that aligns closely with this assessment’s approach. They highlight how multiagency fusion centers, terrorism early-warning groups, and analytical methods such as social network analysis, transaction analysis, and intelligence preparation for operations can support co-production of intelligence across law-enforcement, military, and public-safety agencies. These tools are designed to map networks, identify signatures of criminal or terrorist activity, generate indicators and early-warning hypotheses, and link transactions to judgments about actors’ capabilities and intentions. Framing CJNG as a hybrid criminal-insurgent organization within this crime-gang-terrorism nexus justifies the use of

a structured threat assessment model that looks at violence and profit as well as governance roles, networks, and escalation paths.

Sullivan and Jones (2024) propose a hybrid-threat paradigm, treating cartels and allied gangs as criminal-insurgent actors that blur boundaries between crime, insurgency, and statecraft. Their crime-gang-terrorism nexus framework emphasizes how violent non-state actors can simultaneously engage in drug trafficking, resource extraction, territorial governance, and political intimidation, often operating in partial collusion with government officials. Muñiz and Vilchis (2023) describe groups such as CJNG as eroding state sovereignty through “necropractices” (pp.777-780), a term that denotes spectacular acts of cruelty and the use of military-grade weaponry, which function as both coercion and propaganda.

CJNG is frequently highlighted as a hybrid actor. Pellegrini and Arocha (2023) document a robust history of CJNG’s political violence that transcends the realm of drug trafficking. Teiner (2020) notes that, with its strong military capacity, territorial expansion, and involvement in fuel theft and other activities, CJNG essentially embodies a criminal-insurgency or narco-terrorist profile (dependent on CJNG’s future trajectory). CJNG and its rivals contest illicit markets, influence local governance, displace or co-opt state authority, and use violence with political effects, reinforcing the view of cartels as violent non-state actors operating along a crime-terror continuum. This assessment accordingly treats CJNG as a hybrid transnational narco-terrorist organization and criminal-insurgent actor.

Threat assessment uses a fact-based investigative process to evaluate the risk of a specific actor engaging in a specific type of targeted harm. Work by Borum et al. (1999) on targeted violence emphasizes that threat assessment asks whether a subject poses a threat rather than merely makes a threat (pp.328, 332) and relies on observable behaviors, situational stressors, and

pathways to violence. Behavioral threat-assessment guidelines utilize this approach as a team process: identify and report a potential threat, gather multi-source information about the actor and context, analyze intent and capability, classify the level of concern, and implement mitigation strategies. These models were developed for school, workplace, or insider-threat contexts, but their core principles—a focus on behaviors, escalation, and context-specific evaluation—are applicable to organizational actors such as CJNG.

A considerable body of work exists on Structured Professional Judgment (SPJ) as an assessment tool (e.g., Borum et al., 2022; Guy et al., 2012; Storey et al., 2015). SPJ provides a bridge between behavioral threat assessment and security risk assessment. SPJ combines identifiable risk factors with expert judgment, usually after a multi-step process of defining the assessment and context, collecting relevant information, identifying the presence or absence of risk factors, formulating a judgment of risk, and developing risk management strategies. SPJ is considered the current “gold standard” (Schneider et al., 2022, p.1) in terms of violence risk assessment and threat assessment for individuals. Security and organizational risk-assessment tools use similar logic in a cyclical model: threat identification, assessment of likelihood and impact, selection of controls and mitigation, and finally ongoing monitoring. When synthesized, these approaches justify treating a cartel threat assessment as an evidence-driven process, and they provide a template that can be scaled from individuals to transnational criminal organizations.

Accordingly, this paper employs a four-step hybrid threat-assessment model tailored to CJNG as a violent non-state actor. First, the assessment identifies CJNG’s capabilities and intent across key domains, including violence, territorial governance, criminal economies, and transnational reach. Second, it uses insights from organized crime and security literature and

official drug threat information to assess the likelihood and impact of specific CJNG threat scenarios for Mexico and the United States. Third, it specifies risk indicators and escalation triggers, such as changes in alliances, expansion into new territories, changes in targeting, or changes in CJNG's tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTP). Finally, it develops mitigation and monitoring strategies for those risks, focusing on leadership and financial targeting, strengthening of governance and security, and enhanced U.S. responses. This paper applies this model to analysis of CJNG's risks and to determine policy recommendations.

The relationship between transnational organized crime (TOC) and state-building in Mexico is not simply a case of criminals attacking the state from the outside. Organized crime groups often grow by taking advantage of weak institutions, corruption, and gaps in state control, while also exacerbating those problems. Atuesta and Pérez-Dávila (2018) show that cartel fragmentation and new alliances after the start of Mexico's "war on drugs" helped create a more crowded and violent criminal landscape. As Atuesta and Pérez-Dávila note, between 2007 and 2011, "the structure of organized crime evolved from being comprised of five visible groups ... to nearly eighty identified cartels, gangs, and small organizations, participating in more than a thousand events in 2011" (Atuesta & Pérez-Dávila, 2018, p. 237).

As major groups broke apart and new groups formed, violence increased and the state faced a more complex security environment. In this setting, criminal organizations do more than traffic drugs; they influence local power, shape access to money and protection, and weaken the state's ability to govern effectively, all of which is consistent with a terrorist insurgency, rather than simply organized crime. Broader risk assessments of Mexico also describe major cartels such as CJNG and Sinaloa as powerful organizations that operate across borders, penetrate parts

of the legal economy, and deepen existing problems of violence, corruption, and weak governance (DEA, 2025 May 12; S&P Global Market Intelligence, 2025).

Case studies from Michoacán and other regions show even more clearly how organized crime can become tied to local governance. Aguirre-Ochoa (2025) and colleagues describe a condition of “blurred statehood”, wherein officials, cartels, and vigilante groups - such as Mexican autodefensas - become entangled in informal arrangements that govern territory and public order. Carbajal’s (2023) study of Apatzingán shows that criminal groups, including CJNG, have become linked to local political and economic struggles, especially over valuable industries such as avocados. Carbajal reports, “...criminal groups undoubtedly play a political role in Apatzingán because they seize, concentrate, and exert power. It is not only that; criminal groups play a political role because they help other actors - illegal and legal - to seize, concentrate and exert power” (Carbajal, 2023, p. 168). Sullivan and Jones (2024) make a similar point, arguing that modern criminal organizations often act as hybrid threats that combine trafficking, extortion, territorial control, and political influence. Taken together, these studies suggest that transnational organized crime does not only undermine the state; it can also assume governance, influence how authority works at the local level, and make long-term state-building more difficult.

CJNG’s power comes not only from firepower and drug revenues, but also from the way it builds and manages networks across Mexico and beyond. Social network analysis of Mexico’s criminal alliances shows that CJNG sits atop a structure that is “top-down and hierarchical” (Jones et al., 2022, p.2), wherein almost all affiliated groups connect directly to CJNG rather than to each other. The benefit of this is that it gives CJNG strong control over local affiliates and reduces the risk that allies will form independent coalitions; the drawback to this is that it

makes CJNG more vulnerable to leadership-targeting. Historical work on CJNG's rise shows that the cartel has repeatedly "...adopt(ed) orphan cells from fragmented cartels..." (Jones et al., 2022, p.88), absorbed their tactics and local knowledge, and then tied them into CJNG's centralized network. At the same time, CJNG draws on sophisticated financial operators such as Los Cuinis and other money-laundering networks, which use front companies and legitimate businesses in Mexico and the United States to move profits and pay off officials. As Jones reports,

"The CJNG maintains an alliance - solidified through marriage ties - with the financially powerful Los Cuinis (organized crime group) OCG, which the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) in 2015 identified as the wealthiest in Mexico and possessing the best Mexican drug distribution in Canada, Europe, and Asia... (i)n this sense the CJNG is the ultimate amalgam of various Mexican OCGs bringing with it TTPs from, among others, the sophisticated financial networks of Los Cuinis and relationships with Guadalajara money launderers such as the recently (the U.S. Treasury Department's Office of Foreign Asset Control) OFAC sanctioned Flores (drug trafficking organization) DTO that laundered money for both the CJNG and the Sinaloa Cartel" (Jones, 2018, p.22).

These networks allow CJNG to exercise a form of criminal governance that uses corruption and deals with political and economic elites. Studies of Michoacán and similar states describe hybrid governance in which criminal organizations infiltrate municipal governments, regulate legal markets such as avocados and mining, and establish parallel security and tax systems in collusion with local authorities (Aguirre Ochoa et al., 2025). In places like Apatzingán, criminal groups linked to CJNG engage in local power struggles over land,

economic hegemony, and political control, helping some actors “seize, concentrate, and exert power” (Carbajal, 2023, p.168) while using violence to discipline rivals. Corruption and money-laundering cases also show how cartel leaders and their partners use corrupt politicians, businesspeople, and financial institutions to protect operations and launder money. Taken together, CJNG’s alliance structure, territorial governance, and corruption networks form an operational model that reaches from local neighborhoods and municipal councils to international financial systems.

Overview of CJNG: Origin, Structure, and Evolution

CJNG is a relatively young cartel, but it has quickly become one of the most powerful and violent cartels in Mexico. Jones notes that “(m)ost security analysts now view the *Cártel de Jalisco Nueva Generación* (CJNG) as the most powerful organized crime group in Mexico” (2018, p.19), highlighting the speed and scale of its rise since 2010. Official U.S. assessments reach similar conclusions. The National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC) describes CJNG as “one of the most powerful and violent cartels in Mexico” (2026) and identifies it as responsible for a significant share of fentanyl and other illicit drug flows into the United States and worldwide. Together, these sources frame CJNG as a central actor in Mexico’s criminal and security landscape.

CJNG’s roots lie in the Milenio Cartel and the Sinaloa Federation. During the 2000s, Ignacio “Nacho” Coronel, a senior Sinaloa Cartel leader who specialized in methamphetamine production in the Jalisco region, absorbed the Milenio Cartel into the Sinaloa umbrella (Jones, 2018). When Mexican authorities killed Coronel in 2010, his operations fragmented into several successor groups. Jones (2018) writes that “the CJNG’s genesis was the 2010 death of Sinaloa Cartel leader Ignacio ‘Nacho’ Coronel... [whose] operations fragmented into multiple OCGs

(p.21),” from which the CJNG, led by Nemesio “El Mencho” Oseguera, eventually emerged as a new and powerful organization. In this early stage, CJNG still operated in alliance with the Sinaloa Cartel and drew heavily on the experience and contacts of former Milenio and Sinaloa operatives.

CJNG first gained national and international attention under the name *Mata Zetas* (“Zeta killers”) in Veracruz in 2011. Jones notes that “most analysts first learned of the CJNG as the Mata Zetas... when their forces orchestrated a massacre of 35 supposed-Zeta rivals” in the state of Veracruz (Jones, 2018, p. 21). At that time, CJNG operated as an armed wing fighting against the then-dominant Los Zetas on behalf of the Sinaloa alliance. This violent debut, marked by mass killings and public displays of bodies, foreshadowed CJNG’s later use of spectacular violence and media messaging to shape perceptions and intimidate both rivals and state authorities, a clear use of violence aimed at a larger audience to effect political outcome. According to U.S. officials, CJNG then passed through three phases: its emergence after Coronel’s death, support to self-defense forces in Tierra Caliente around 2012, and a public split from Sinaloa by 2013 (Jones 2018).

By the mid-2010s, CJNG had shifted from a regional offshoot to national expansion. Jones reports that U.S. and Mexican analysts and law enforcement “identified [CJNG] as the only cartel in Mexico on an ‘expansionary track’ since 2015,” noting that it was “present to varying degrees in all 32 Mexican states” and capable of confronting and corrupting the Mexican government at federal, state, and local levels (Jones, 2018, pp. 20–21). NCTC (2026) similarly assesses that CJNG split from Sinaloa in 2010 and “has expanded across Mexico since 2018,” with a hierarchical command structure and strongholds in Jalisco, Nayarit, and Colima. Actor-profile work by Armed Conflict Location and Event Data (ACLED) and others further

emphasizes CJNG's combination of drug trafficking and violent territorial control, underlining that despite its relatively recent formation, the group has become a central pole of power in a now bipolar Mexican criminal system, alongside the Sinaloa Cartel (Pellegrini and Arocha, 2023).

CJNG combines centralized leadership with a network of subordinate groups, contractors, and regional entities. Social network analysis of Mexico's criminal alliances shows that the organization is built around a highly hierarchical model in which "almost none of its affiliates" ally with one another and "nearly all connections route directly through the CJNG (Jones et al., 2022, p. 76)," giving the cartel control over its alliance system. The same study concludes that CJNG has "a hierarchical, centralized, internal alliance structure" (Jones et al., 2022, p. 76)", in contrast to the denser and more interconnected network of the Sinaloa Cartel. This suggests that CJNG is a hierarchical enterprise that keeps local entities dependent on the center for resources, direction, and protection (Jones et al., 2022).

Operationally, this hierarchy appears to function through a combination of top leadership, regional commanders, and subordinate local cells. The NCTC (2026) describes CJNG as having "a hierarchical command structure in which regional leaders manage day-to-day operations, such as drug trafficking, under the command of top cartel leaders." Jones (2018) reports that CJNG's rise was fueled by its ability to absorb fragmented groups and "adopt (and control) orphan criminal cells" (p.19) left behind by the kingpin strategy. Jones et al. (2022) reinforce this, reporting that CJNG's network contains very few ties among subordinate entities, which "suggests a hierarchical model wherein the CJNG has significant control of all subgroups" (Jones et al., 2022, p. 88). This allows CJNG to project power across many territories while limiting independence of lower-level affiliates.

CJNG's command structure is strengthened by its financial structure, notably its relationship with Los Cuinis and other money laundering networks. Jones (2018) further asserts that CJNG inherited "the sophisticated financial networks of Los Cuinis" (p.22) and ties to Guadalajara-based money launderers, which helped give CJNG a major advantage in expansion and resilience. This financial base supports the cartel's control of *plazas*, defined as key territorial corridors and markets, and helps explain how CJNG can sustain operations across a wide area while continuing to recruit, arm, and corrupt local entities (Jones, 2018, pp. 20, 27–29).

CJNG also relies on the use of apparently legitimate businesses and front entities to move money, obscure ownership, and protect CJNG leadership from direct exposure. Correa-Cabrera, Lewis, and Yaworsky (2024) state that their research "demonstrates the pervasive use of legitimate businesses and fronts in the United States as a disguise for criminal activity (p.64)," while also showing how organized crime actors and corrupt officials launder "hundreds of millions of dollars (p.65)" through the U.S. financial system. Jones et al. add that the CJNG's profits from Los Cuinis and control of Pacific ports helped CJNG profit from precursor imports and broaden its reach into global drug markets (Jones et al., 2022). Thus, CJNG's power does not rest on violence alone; it also depends on a governance model that links territorial control, trafficking routes, port access, financial intermediaries, and front-company systems into an integrated criminal structure.

CJNG's development is closely tied to and shaped by the background and leadership of Nemesio Oseguera Cervantes, better known as *El Mencho*. Jones (2018) argues that El Mencho's biography influences "...where the CJNG acquired its TTPs and expansion strategies (p.23)," because his path exposed him to agricultural labor, drug cultivation, the U.S. criminal justice

system, Mexican policing, and eventually the Milenio and Sinaloa trafficking worlds (Jones, 2018). After having worked in and being imprisoned in the United States, Cervantes was deported to Mexico in 1997, became a Jalisco state police officer, and later joined the Milenio Cartel, where he ran a team of assassins for Nacho Coronel (Jones, 2018). Cervantes's unusual career path allowed him to learn from different environments and served to combine criminal experience with knowledge of state practices, policing, counterintelligence, and coercive control.

Jones also portrays El Mencho as operating in a mix of personal secrecy and organizational aggression. Jones (2018) reports that one DEA agent described this as, "in Mexico you would run into guys who had met Chapo... But not Mencho. He is kind of a ghost" (p. 24). Jones describes Cervantes as being notorious for threats and intimidation against both his own personnel and police, including a "...recording (that surfaced) of El Mencho threatening to kill a state police commander and ordering him to get his men to stop targeting the CJNG" (Jones, 2018, p. 24). This low public visibility combined with high coercive pressure is a likely contributor to CJNG's resilience, aiding CJNG in expanding and confronting rival cartels and the government.

CJNG's tactical profile sets it apart from many earlier Mexican trafficking groups because it has repeatedly shown a willingness to confront the state in open combat. Jones writes that the organization "has proven itself ready to challenge the government directly (Jones, 2018, p. 24)", citing ambushes on police in 2015 and the downing of a Mexican military helicopter in May of that year. He also notes that many observers initially viewed CJNG as an armed wing or paramilitary force for Sinaloa during the struggle against the Zetas, and that CJNG later evolved into its own organization, with increasingly independent combat capacity (Jones, 2018). These

patterns support the view that CJNG is not only a trafficking enterprise but also a violent actor capable of quasi-military operations.

CJNG's methods have also evolved through innovation, recruitment, and diversification. Jones (2018) reports that authorities discovered a clandestine AR-15 manufacturing facility supplying the cartel in Guadalajara in 2014, and that later reporting linked CJNG to drones fitted with explosives and improvised explosive devices, indicating "a new warfare capacity" (pp. 25–26) beyond traditional cartel gunfights. CJNG has also used deceptive recruitment, including fake job offers for "bodyguards, security guards, pollsters and even local police" (Jones, 2018, p. 26), only to force recruits into CJNG training camps after they arrived. At the same time, CJNG brands itself as a "protector of the people" in some regions, echoing La Familia Michoacana's earlier messaging, and has embraced a heavy social-media footprint, with recent analyses finding that CJNG-linked accounts dominate cartel-related content on platforms like TikTok and devote a large share of material to recruitment and propaganda rather than overt threats (Jones, 2018; Guerrero and Quiroz, 2023). Meanwhile CJNG has expanded its operations from drug trafficking into extortion, kidnapping, petroleum theft, and human trafficking, while spreading across most or all of Mexico's states through alliances, annexations, and the absorption of fragmented cells (Jones, 2018). Combined, these features show how CJNG is a criminal organization that learns quickly, adapts its tactics, and combines leadership discipline with expanding territorial and operational reach.

CJNG's power is also reflected in how quickly it has spread across Mexico and diversified its activities. Jones notes that "in a relatively short rise from 2010 to early 2018, the CJNG developed a documented presence in 24 of 32 Mexican states; when including alliances and small cells the count includes all 32 Mexican states" (Jones, 2018, p. 27), arguing that this

rapid spread is strong evidence of the group's resilience. He explains that CJNG exploited kingpin strikes against rivals to "adopt and ally with independent local cells" (Jones, 2018, pp. 27), while also taking advantage of its central location in Jalisco and control of major Pacific ports such as Manzanillo and Lázaro Cárdenas to move methamphetamine and import precursor chemicals. According to Jones, the cartel's expansion into states like Michoacán, Veracruz, and Guanajuato has been violent, but the profits from control of the corresponding ports, diversified activities such as extortion and fuel theft, and its broad geographic footprint have helped CJNG finance further territorial expansion and corruption of local officials (Jones, 2018).

Operational and tactical profile

CJNG is one of the most powerful and profitable drug trafficking organizations in Mexico. CJNG uses its national footprint and control of infrastructure to project economic power into the United States and global markets. Drawing on the experience and ability it inherited from Milenio and Sinaloa networks, CJNG combines experienced logistics, access to ports like Manzanillo and Lázaro Cárdenas, and diversified business enterprise to maximize revenue from methamphetamine, cocaine, and more recently, fentanyl destined for U.S. cities. Jones (2018) notes that control of Pacific and Gulf ports has allowed CJNG to import precursor chemicals and export synthetic drugs - like methamphetamine - to Europe and Asia, while U.S. officials now describe CJNG as among the most prolific methamphetamine producers in the world and a major supplier to distribution hubs such as Los Angeles, Chicago, Houston, Atlanta, and New York. CJNG also leverages fuel theft and other illicit markets to generate cash flow, with researchers documenting how cartels - including CJNG - use huachicol (stolen fuel) and related resource-extraction economies in states like Guanajuato and Veracruz to fund their

operations and launder proceeds through ostensibly legal transport and energy supply chain (Jones, 2018; Jones and Sullivan, 2019).

CJNG's drug networks and supply chains are built around a flexible hub-and-spoke model, linking Mexican production and transit hubs to U.S. and overseas markets through ports, border plazas, and alliances with local bad actors. Jones (2018) describes how the cartel used the Milenio and Sinaloa inheritance to rapidly expand its presence into all 32 Mexican states, combining control of Pacific and Gulf ports with alliances to "orphan" local groups and legacy organizations like the Arellano Félix Organization in Tijuana to secure trafficking corridors. DEA reporting cited by Davis (2020) indicates that CJNG now maintains control or influence over major Mexican ports, allowing CJNG to import precursor chemicals from Asia and Latin America and move cocaine, methamphetamine, and fentanyl along a 10,000-kilometer Pacific route from South America to the U.S.-Canada border. Those CJNG supply chains feed distribution in cities such as Los Angeles, Chicago, Houston, Atlanta, and New York, where CJNG leverages gang and trafficking networks, deepening its integration into the North American drug market.

CJNG's money laundering and corruption networks rely on the relationship between its financial arm, Los Cuinis, and a web of front businesses and operatives that move and disguise profits across Mexico, the United States, and beyond. Jones (2018) argues that CJNG brings with it the powerful financial networks of Los Cuinis and maintains relationships with Guadalajara money launderers, including the OFAC-sanctioned Flores DTO that has laundered money for both CJNG and the Sinaloa Cartel. Zagaris reports U.S. enforcement actions that show how these networks operate, from gold-trading schemes that laundered over 100 million on CJNG's behalf to the use of hotels, restaurants, tequila brands, and advertising firms as fronts tied to El

Mencho's relatives (Zagaris, 2018; Zagaris, 2021). At the same time, CJNG relies on a systematic *plata o plomo* approach - which demands that government officials cooperate or face assassination - to corrupt or coerce officials, with Jalisco's attorney general estimating that criminal groups have corrupted about 20 percent of Guadalajara's police and intimidated most of the rest, allowing the cartel to purchase protection and political influence rather than simply evade enforcement (Jones 2018).

CJNG possesses militarized capabilities and engages in direct conflict with state forces. Jones (2018) notes that the group emerged as the *Mata Zetas* in Veracruz in 2011, orchestrating the killing and public dumping of 35 alleged Zetas, and that it has since utilized ambushes on police, including attacks that killed more than 15 officers in a single day and even the shoot-down of a Mexican military helicopter in 2015. Jones (2018) also cites leaked Mexican intelligence indicating that CJNG has experimented with clandestine weapons production, armed drones carrying explosives, and improvised explosive devices modeled on FARC "papa" bombs, thus incorporating insurgent and terrorist TTPs. Davis (2020) reports on U.S. and Mexican assessments that further underscore how CJNG is now regarded as one of the most heavily armed and "remorseless" cartels, whose members are willing to directly confront competitors and federal forces alike, leaving what DOJ officials describe as a "catastrophic trail of human and physical destruction (p.3)" across multiple Mexican states.

CJNG uses a spectrum of targeted and symbolic violence that runs from assassinations of rival operatives and officials to narco-terror-style attacks on infrastructure and public spaces. Those capabilities support operations such as urban *narcobloqueos* (roadblocks erected by narcotic traffickers), arson attacks, and public displays of mutilated bodies or mass graves, all of which serve to intimidate rivals, terrorize local communities, and signal a willingness to strike

government targets and critical infrastructure in ways that blur the line between cartel crime and narco-terrorism.

CJNG has increasingly complemented its street-level intelligence and counterintelligence with cyber-enabled and information operations that enhance its reach and resilience. Jones (2018) notes that El Mencho's background as a former Jalisco state police officer and his experience in U.S. prisons helped CJNG absorb state counterintelligence TTPs and build dense human-intelligence networks, while later leaked Mexican military reporting shows the group experimenting with encrypted communications and internal arms production to reduce its susceptibility to state monitoring. Additionally, studies of social media in Mexico and TikTok recruitment campaigns reveal that CJNG is at the forefront of cartel use of platforms such as TikTok and others, running hundreds of linked profiles that glamorize cartel life, disseminate disinformation during crises, and openly recruit young people into roles ranging from drivers and guards to cooks in clandestine labs, effectively using to its advantage the digital battlespace (Business & Human Rights Resource Centre, 2025).

Threat Assessment: CJNG's Current and Emerging risks

CJNG presents a high-likelihood, high-impact threat; it combines durable financial and logistics networks, demonstrated willingness to use militarized violence, continuing access to U.S. drug markets, and an operating environment shaped by corruption and uneven state capacity. From a U.S. perspective, CJNG is a compound threat to public health, critical infrastructure, and safety of American personnel. DEA threat assessments and DOJ statements describe CJNG as one of the most prolific producers and traffickers of methamphetamine and a major supplier of fentanyl and heroin into U.S. markets (Davis, 2020), with distribution hubs in cities such as Los Angeles, Chicago, Houston, Atlanta, and New York, directly feeding surging

overdose deaths and associated health-system burdens (DEA, 2025b; U.S. Attorney’s Office for the District of Columbia, 2026). CJNG’s efforts to control key Mexican ports and border corridors, including Manzanillo, Lázaro Cárdenas, and major border crossings raise concerns about security of U.S. transportation and trade infrastructure. CJNG’s willingness to confront security forces and engage in kidnappings and other violence creates elevated risks for U.S. law-enforcement, consular, and intelligence personnel operating along the border and in Mexico.

CJNG’s expansion generates regional and systemic risks that extend beyond drug markets, touching networked crime, licit trade, and critical resource flows with direct implications for U.S. security. Analyses of cartel dark networks and hybrid threats argue that Mexican groups like CJNG increasingly plug into global illicit infrastructures, such as money-launderers, drug precursor supply chains, fuel-theft rings, and human-smuggling corridors, so that disruption in one node (for example, ports on Mexico’s Pacific coast) can cascade across multiple regions and commodities threatening U.S. energy security, border infrastructure, and financial systems (DEA, 2025a; Jones, 2018; Jones et al., 2021; Sullivan & Jones, 2024; Zagaris, 2018). By controlling logistics assets such as ports, highways, and pipelines, CJNG can tax or infiltrate legitimate trade routes and fuel theft from Pemex infrastructure. As a major supplier of fentanyl and methamphetamines to U.S. distribution hubs, CJNG directly influences U.S. drug markets and public-health and indirectly puts stress on critical services, our nation’s health system, emergency medicine, law enforcement and corrections.

Historical and Ongoing Counter-Threat Efforts

U.S. responses to CJNG have centered on coordinated law-enforcement operations and the use of legal and financial tools to disrupt CJNG’s leadership, logistics, and revenue. Davis

(2020) describes Project Python, a six-month DEA-led interagency operation that culminated in more than 600 arrests, 350 indictments, and substantial drug and cash seizures; DOJ framed Python as its most comprehensive action to date against CJNG and part of a broader campaign to “disrupt, dismantle, and destroy (p.19)” the organization. These efforts combine with targeted prosecutions of key figures—such as superseding indictments against El Mencho, the extradition of his son Rubén Oseguera González, and the Kingpin Act case against his daughter Jessica Johanna Oseguera González—as well as an extensive sanctions program under the Foreign Narcotics Kingpin Designation Act, which Zagaris notes has led OFAC to designate dozens of CJNG and Los Cuinis leaders, front companies, and business assets and to support State Department rewards of up to 10 million dollars for information leading to El Mencho’s capture (Zagaris, 2018; Zagaris 2021).

CJNG’s rise exposes the limits of Mexico’s kingpin-centered security strategy and the inadequacy of subsequent reforms, with significant implications for Mexican security and governance. Jones (2018) reports that, while high-value targeting fragmented older cartels, it also allowed CJNG to “adopt orphan” criminal cells and consolidate power at a national scale, enabling it to confront and corrupt state institutions even as episodic military crackdowns intensified. As CJNG escalated confrontations—including ambushes on security forces and the 2015 downing of the Mexican military helicopter in Jalisco—the Mexican federal government responded with large-scale joint operations involving the army, federal police, and state forces, and later with an Internal Security Law that effectively formalized the military’s domestic role, reinforcing a long-term reliance on armed forces rather than fully professionalized civilian policing (Jones, 2018). Under President Andrés Manuel López Obrador, the official discourse shifted to *abrazos, no balazos* (*hugs, not bullets*), emphasizing social programs and the creation

of a National Guard that merges military and police personnel. But assessments by Mexican and international analysts suggest that militarized deployments against groups like CJNG have continued, while intelligence coordination, judicial reform, and local strengthening of local forces—essential to tackling CJNG’s corruption, firepower, and territorial control—have lagged behind.

From the U.S., responses to CJNG layer traditional law-enforcement tools with sanctions, terrorism designations, and enhanced cross-border intelligence arrangements. DEA, FBI, and DHS have led multiyear investigations and task forces targeting CJNG cells and logistics in the United States. Project Python and subsequent enforcement surges produced hundreds of arrests, major seizures of methamphetamine and fentanyl, and indictments against El Mencho and regional lieutenants (Davis, 2020), while DOJ and the U.S. Attorney’s Office in Washington, D.C., have moved to indict CJNG leadership under continuing-criminal-enterprise, terrorism-related, and drug-trafficking charges to increase legal leverage (DEA, 2025b). These efforts are reinforced by the Foreign Narcotics Kingpin Designation Act and related sanctions programs: as Zagaris notes, OFAC has executed multiple Kingpin-Act actions since 2015 designating scores of CJNG and Los Cuinis leaders, front companies, and business assets, including hotels, restaurants, tequila brands, and real-estate firms, while State Department narcotics rewards of up to 10 million dollars for information on El Mencho and other senior figures are intended to support law-enforcement targeting and encourage cooperation from regional partners (Zagaris, 2018; Zagaris, 2021).

At the regional and bilateral level, CJNG has become a test of U.S.–Mexico cooperation and international efforts to curb drug-related violence and illicit flows. Analyses of U.S.–Mexico cooperation since the Merida era highlight deepening but sometimes fragile mechanisms for

cross-border intelligence-sharing, joint task forces, prisoner transfers, and coordinated operations—arrangements that have enabled joint targeting of CJNG leadership and facilitators (U.S. Embassy and Consulates in Mexico, 2021), but that remain vulnerable to disputes over sovereignty, corruption, and domestic politics on both sides of the border (Felbab-Brown, 2019; Felbab-Brown, 2021). Studies from organizations such as International Crisis Group (2025) argue that tackling organizations like CJNG requires continued bilateral enforcement and port-security initiatives, along with multilateral efforts to regulate precursor-chemical and financial flows, address Chinese-linked money-laundering networks, and support institutional reforms in Mexico and neighboring states, since CJNG’s transnational alliances and hybrid threat profile mean that enforcement actions in one jurisdiction can easily be offset by adaptation elsewhere in the regional illicit economy.

Applying the Threat Assessment Model to Mitigation

This paper applies a structured threat-assessment model that combines a capability–intent–opportunity framework with a likelihood-versus-impact matrix to evaluate CJNG’s threat. This model treats the group’s operational resources, geographic reach, and external alliances as measures of capability; its demonstrated use of militarized and terroristic tactics, coercion, and messaging against state and foreign targets as indicators of intent; and the surrounding institutional, political, and regulatory environment—corruption, law-enforcement capacity, cross-border logistics, and gaps in precursor-chemical and financial controls—as dimensions of opportunity. The threat assessment then examines how shifts in each of these dimensions affect both the likelihood that CJNG will employ particular actions (for example, high-profile violence, retaliatory attacks on U.S. interests, or diversification into new markets) and the likely impact of those behaviors on public safety, governance, and regional stability.

Thus, the analysis uses a set of key risk indicators as signals of change in CJNG's threat profile. Indicators include the operational tempo and geographic dispersion of CJNG-linked violence; the incidence of militarized and terroristic tactics such as public mass killings, explosives, and drone-borne IEDs; and the degree of control in strategic corridors, such as Pacific ports, border crossings, and major highways. Additional indicators track CJNG's share of U.S. methamphetamine and fentanyl markets, CJNG's penetration of local and state institutions through corruption or coercive "criminal governance", and the breadth and sophistication of CJNG's money-laundering infrastructure, including Chinese-linked illicit banking and front companies, such as those mentioned above. The model also considers alliances and relationships with local gangs and foreign actors, the group's retaliatory posture toward U.S. and other foreign interests, CJNG's resilience after leadership targeting, and bilateral and multilateral enforcement cooperation. Together, these indicators provide a structure for judging how changes in CJNG's capability, intent, and opportunity alter both the likelihood and potential impact of future threat scenarios.

In terms of intelligence- and data-driven targeting of CJNG leadership and financial nodes, mitigation should prioritize network-focused targeting that utilizes intelligence on CJNG leadership, mid-to-high-level operators, and money-laundering networks rather than relying solely on high-value decapitation strikes. This necessitates use of multi-agency task forces and their shared analytical platforms to map CJNG's logistics, precursor-chemical sourcing, and finances, including Chinese-linked underground banking and trade-based laundering operations. Successful operations could then synchronize law-enforcement, sanctions, and asset-forfeiture actions. It also means exploiting data, such as suspicious transaction reports, customs records, telecommunications data, and social-media, to identify vulnerabilities and adjust enforcement.

Because CJNG's threat rests on its ability to penetrate and co-opt local institutions, mitigation must use coercive tools and institution-building to counter CJNG. This includes investments in professionalizing local police and prosecutors, tightening internal affairs and expanding court and corrections capacity so that arrests and seizures translate into credible prosecutions. It also requires supporting municipal and state governments in reclaiming basic government functions, such as transparent budgeting, service delivery, and community engagement, in CJNG-contested areas so that "criminal governance" loses its appeal and space for cartel-brokered order becomes reduced. This supports an overall U.S. strategy in Mexico that integrates security, rule-of-law, governance, and economic-development objectives while still striving to protect U.S. citizens' safety in Mexico (U.S. Department of State, 2021).

On the U.S. side, mitigation should focus on hardening domestic systems that CJNG exploits, while reducing the demand for drugs like fentanyl and methamphetamine and enabling conditions that sustain CJNG's business model. Elements of this include upgrading border and postal system screening with inspection technology, better targeting of commercial cargo, and expanded use of canines and data-driven targeting to intercept fentanyl, methamphetamine, precursors, and pill presses before they reach distribution networks. U.S. agencies and state and local partners should intensify efforts against domestic distribution and cartel-affiliated gangs, while scaling treatment and public health interventions so that shrinking demand and improved prevention reduce CJNG revenue and reduce the security impacts that make CJNG a strategic concern in the first place.

Limitations of current analysis, Directions for future research, and policy implications

This assessment is constrained by reliance on open-source reporting and secondary analyses, by gaps in data on CJNG's activities, and by the difficulty of separating CJNG

behavior from that of other groups. This circumstance limits the precision of any claims about causal effects or future scenarios. Future research should further work on CJNG's local governance practices, its use of militarized and terroristic tactics, and its transnational financial and precursor-chemical networks, including Chinese-linked money-laundering channels and partnerships in other geographies. Building datasets on CJNG's operations, alliances, and government penetration, and integrating them with public health and socio-economic indicators, would also improve future research. The analysis underscores the need to pair sustained enforcement and financial disruption with investments in Mexican justice and security institutions, local governance, and U.S. public health responses to fentanyl and methamphetamine use and overdose, as well as to maintain bilateral and multilateral cooperation frameworks that can respond to CJNG.

Conclusion

CJNG has developed into a sophisticated threat that cannot be understood only as a drug cartel or criminal enterprise. CJNG's combination of territorial expansion, militarized violence, corruption, financial flexibility, and transnational reach gives it the characteristics of a hybrid criminal-insurgent actor with the ability to destabilize communities and strain government institutions in both Mexico and the United States. CJNG's resilience also shows that enforcement alone is not enough when underlying conditions such as weak governance, corruption, and strong drug demand continue to support its growth.

This assessment finds that CJNG's long-term danger lies in its current capabilities and also in its ability to adapt faster than the institutions trying to contain it. Effective mitigation thus requires a strategy that combines targeted enforcement with effective local governance, more capable justice and security institutions, and better domestic responses to the public health and

criminal impacts of CJNG activity. Viewed in this way, CJNG is not just a law-enforcement problem; it is a security challenge with implications for government authority, bilateral cooperation, and North American regional stability.

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