

The Mexican Cartels' employment of Inform and Influence Activities (IIA) as tools of Asymmetrical Warfare

Adversarial Information Operations in the Mexican Drug War

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The Mexican Drug War is one of the most violent asymmetrical conflicts currently experienced in the Western Hemisphere. Several drug Cartels, fuelled by the multi-million dollar drug trade, have battled among themselves and against the state generating thousands of casualties across the country. It is estimated that between 2006 and 2013, there have been approximately 120,000 casualties including both combatants and civilians caught in the crossfire as well as victims from other types of Cartel organized violence. Indeed, the conflict itself has been able to reach all operating environments across the country including large demographic centres, rural regions and littoral areas. However, this conflict is also being aggressively fought in the information and cognitive domains, where the Cartels as asymmetrical entities, have sought to shape the attitudes, perceptions and behaviour of target populations. Undeniably, these violent non-state actors have developed comprehensive Inform and Influence Activities (IIA) strategies that seek to gather support from civilians and coerce vulnerable government institutions while at the same time weakening the resolve of their opponents. The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate how the Mexican Cartels have developed and employed IIA as a tool to achieve political and military objectives. In order to achieve this, the paper will examine the different approaches used by the Cartels which include the use of "off the shelf" software applications, multi-media, traditional messaging techniques as well as information denial tactics. Ultimately, it will be recommended that the Government of Mexico, its security forces and other international stakeholders start developing their own IIA campaign in order to counteract the ongoing Cartels' activities.

Information Operations, Psychological Operations, Violent Non-State Actors, Inform and Influence Activities, Mexican Cartels

I. INTRODUCTION

The Mexican Drug Cartels have emerged as one of the most bellicose Violent Non-State Actors (VNSAs) of the 21st century. As Mexican historian Enrique Krauze notes, the hinterlands of Mexico have experienced a historical continuity of criminal activity that dates back to the 19th century due to the permissiveness or lack of state institutions [1]. Nevertheless, the successful dismantling of the major Colombian drug Cartels in the late 90s left a power vacuum in the profitable transnational drug trade industry. Even though

the organizational structure of the main Colombian drug syndicates was eliminated, it did not stop various marginal groups from taking over the high-density cocaine production in the South American country. Consequently, the lack of vertical management plus the constant outward flow of drugs from the Andean region to North America allowed the formerly subordinate Mexican criminal organizations to quickly assume control of the cocaine trafficking and pricing [2]. According to the 2008 *International Narcotics Control Strategy Report*, 90 percent of the cocaine that enters the United States is trafficked through Mexico's borders and territorial waters [3]. Hence, local criminal organizations spread across key terrain in the Mexican borders and coasts to acquire full control of the cocaine trade industry. This situation has created an environment of violent competition among these VNSAs as each single one of them has sought to control the drug trade monopoly across the country. Also, the Mexican government has found itself in direct conflict with these organizations as they coercively try to usurp power from the state in their areas of operations through both violent and non-kinetic means [4].

By the late 1990s the Gulf Cartel was able to recruit 30 officers from the Mexican military's Special Air Mobile Force Group in order to create its own paramilitary force known as Los Zetas. Initially, this group was being used to carry out complex assassination missions (using sophisticated military hardware) against the leadership elements of rival Cartels. However, in the last decade, Los Zetas have aggressively attacked government installations killing members of the Mexican security forces and government officials alike [5]. Moreover, this group underwent significant changes as their numbers multiplied and their military capabilities increased with time. Ultimately, the Zetas became a Cartel organization in their own right, taking control over the Atlantic coast of Mexico while competing against its old parent organization, the Gulf Cartel. Other Cartels followed similar footsteps creating their own paramilitary organizations recruiting from populations under social and economic stress; former Mexican and Central American security forces

members; and finally from Central American criminal gangs such as MS-13, whose members received military training and equipment through the Cartels [6].

The current situation has seen the emergence of several well-established organizations with paramilitary capabilities including Los Zetas, Sinaloa Cartel, Juárez Cartel, Tijuana Cartel, Beltran Leyva Cartel, and the Knights Templar Cartel, all of which violently compete against each other and the state in order to achieve their overall economic and political objectives [7]. Bunker and Sullivan have described these VNSAs as “new war making entities” since they have acquired significant military grade expertise, personnel and hardware from both domestic and international sources [8]. Although it is difficult to obtain an exact figure, it is estimated that the Cartels’ use of violence has generated over 120,000 casualties within the last six years with numbers increasing everyday [9]. Nevertheless, the Mexican Drug War is also being fought in the information and cognitive domains, as the Cartels are seeking to influence target populations, weaken support for government institutions and limit the operational freedom of their opponents.

In this light, the purpose of this paper is to discuss the development and employment of Inform and Influence Activities (IIA) by the Mexican Cartels as strategies in their irregular warfare operations against the state and among themselves. To accomplish this the paper will examine the concept of IIA in asymmetrical warfare, which will highlight the intimate and necessary relationship between the two. The second section will explore how this relationship is present in Mexico where the Cartels, as current practitioners of asymmetrical warfare, have developed information operations strategies in order to achieve their organizational goals.

II. DEFINING INFORM AND INFLUENCE ACTIVITIES IN ASYMMETRICAL WARFARE

Throughout history, information and the use of organized violence have been intimately linked to each other. The fact that primitive armies, as constructed human systems, required a relatively high degree of organization it meant that there was a needed to develop command and communication nodes from where operational and strategic direction originated as well as nodes that facilitated the dissemination of such information. However, as soon as the first military organizations came to be, information itself transformed into an offensive tool, which could be used to achieve objectives in the battlefield and beyond. Strategists such as Sun Tzu, Alexander of Macedonia, Julius Caesar, and Genghis Khan incorporated information/psychological warfare as part of their overall campaign efforts, making their forces more effective and helping them consolidate political power in conquered lands [10]. Indeed, information since earlier times had the ability to help commanders shape the battlespace and disrupt their opponents’ decision-making processes. The exponential growth of communications technology from the 19th century to the present day, has dramatically improved how information is created, managed and used as a military instrument [11]. Everything from computer network systems, wireless communications, mass broadcasting hardware, printing assets

and even culture itself have become in pervasive tools in the battlefield.

In this context, Inform and Influence Activities are defined as the integration of messages and messaging mechanisms in order to influence selected audiences and affect the decision-making processes of opposing forces [12]. From a military perspective, what constitutes IIA may be dictated by both the objectives and capabilities of the military actor employing them. For example, contemporary conventional forces may include a variety of competencies such as psychological operations (PSYOPS); civil affairs or civil-military cooperation (CA/CIMIC); computer network operations (CNO); electronic warfare (EW); information and operational security (INFOSEC/OPSEC); public affairs (PA); and military deception [13]. All of the above are not exclusive and it is imperative they are synchronized in order to maximize their effects and assist the achievement of specific strategic, operational or tactical goals. C. Lamb argues that military IIA assets have become in the modern battlefield as equally important as land, air or maritime (kinetic) assets since they are necessary to achieve victory in cotemporary operating environments [14]. Furthermore, as warfare itself has evolved with the integration of information technology, authors such as John Arquila and David Rontfeld note that the main effort behind future conflicts will lie in IIA as threats become asymmetrical networked and information based [15]. Nonetheless, since the emergence of the first modern armed non-state actors in the 20th century the relationship between IIA and the practice of asymmetrical warfare is rather one of necessity in which the latter is an essential requirement of the first.

Classic theorists of asymmetrical warfare have always pointed out the fact that in order for a VNSA to carry a successful campaign, it is necessary that it develops an information and influence strategy that will target both civilian and government actors. For instance, Mao Tse-Tung understood that, unlike a conventional army, a VNSA required logistical and political support from the local civilian population in order to strategically thrive. In his theory of Protracted Warfare, Mao highlights that the first step is to “persuade” civilians residing in areas with weak government presence to commit to the VNSA’s political cause. According to him, this is accomplished by deploying political cadres, whose purpose is to inform and influence the perception of local communities [16]. This clearly referred to IIA competencies such as PSYOPS and CA, which exploited vulnerabilities and conditions affecting targeted civilian populations. Moreover, during this phase, the PSYOPS efforts also sought to obtain recruits, logistical support (funds, food and other supplies) [17]. Furthermore, as the asymmetrical campaign against the state gains momentum, the VNSA is able to further employ IIA tactics such as developing clandestine press and broadcasting stations [18]. Similarly to Mao’s views, Ernesto “Che” Guevara, noted that a VNSA obtains its upper hand from popular support, in which the struggle of the armed group must be linked to the grievances of the local civilian population [19]. For Guevara, the success for popular support lies in the ability that the VNSA has in creating and disseminating information, which contains a narrative of

violent struggle as a solution to present political, social and economic conditions.

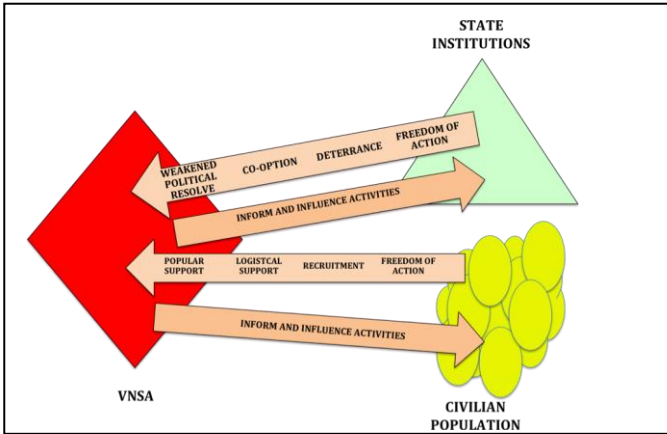


Figure 1. IIA flows between a VNSA; the civilian population; and state institutions.

Similar to the VNSAs presented by the revolutionary models of Mao and Guevara, modern violent actors seek to generate strategic political effects by targeting the perceptions and attitudes of key target audiences. For instance, David Kilcullen argues that the immediate availability of information communications technology and hardware has facilitated the accessibility to target audiences, the crafting of influence messages and streamlined logistical processes such as funding [20]. This in combination of traditional methodologies including face to face communications or employment of traditional messaging systems have expanded the toolkit as well as the strategies employed by non-state actors [21]. Ultimately, technology has maximized the range and performance of IIA, allowing VNSAs to overpass geospatial limitations and target audiences that might be within adversary controlled areas. Furthermore, technology has facilitated the coordination of kinetic and non-kinetic activities within their areas of operations through the creation of communication nodes that allow the synchronization among diverse VNSA cells or sub-units [22]. Stephen Metz also agrees with this perspective by noting that cheap and accessible technology such as the internet has been employed as a tool in asymmetrical warfare in order to mobilize both individual targets or target populations into their cause using websites, social media, chat rooms and other types of social and mass communication means [23]. This same principle has also allowed non-state actors to create messaging products in the form of videos, online application, electronic newsletters and other types of documents using of the shelf computer hardware and software. This competency has also worked as a force multiplier in the sense that a single inform and influence cell can recruit, train and obtain support from a wider target audience through computer based means [24]. Moreover, as a conflict between a VNSA and its adversary carries on, the access to the Internet, social media and globalized communication networks will also help the actor shape its public image as a wider audience becomes exposed to its psychological and political warfare products, which can either provide unintended supporters or opposition [25].

In the end, larger connectivity and technological tools have significantly expanded the ability that VNSAs have to reach key information targets and multiply the effects generated by their kinetic activities towards adversaries and other audiences. In the context of traditional and contemporary technological capabilities acquired by VNSAs these can develop core IIA competencies that may consist of the following:

- PSYOPS: Which includes persuasive and coercive messaging conducted through print, audiovisual, cultural and electronic media as well as face-to-face interactions.
- CA: Which includes the distribution of public goods such as education, infrastructure and healthcare. This may also include the co-opting of government and other public institutions.
- CNO: Mainly by employing hackers seeking to obtain tactical or strategic information as well as information infrastructure attacks against adversaries.
- PA: Employing local and global civilian media organizations and their communication assets in order to deliver messages to wider audiences.
- Deception: Through the competencies above, the VNSA can feed or make available information that may disrupt or compromise the planning and activities of an adversary.

The use of these different tools will help the VNSA shape the conditions in the battlespace by obtaining vital logistical goods, combatants and overall support for its *raison-d'être* [26]. In addition, for a VNSA to be successful it is necessary that it synchronizes all of its competencies under one strategic direction seeking to accomplish a defined end-state.

III. VNSAs' USE OF INFORM AND INFLUENCE ACTIVITIES IN THE MEXICAN DRUG WAR

The Mexican Cartels pose an interesting ontological question when it comes to defining them as politically or economically motivated VNSAs. Unlike traditional organized crime, which relies on developing a parasitic relationship within the state based on clandestine networks and flows, the Mexican Cartels seek to shape the political and human environment within their areas of operations in order to achieve strategic goals [27]. For instance, by co-opting, supplanting or weakening the state or adversarial non-state actors, a Cartel organization will be able to control the drug trade and other economic activities within its area of responsibility. Therefore, for the Mexican Cartels information transforms into to an operational tool that is necessary for the achievement of their overall strategic goals. Moreover, due to the clandestine nature of their activities, typical criminal organizations normally require several command and communication nodes in order to coordinate activities, provide strategic direction and avoid detection by state security forces; however with the case of the Mexican Cartels, operational information assets are in place to influence a variety of targets, which also multiplies effects of their kinetic and economic operations. Ultimately, these

VNSAs have more in common with the insurgency models proposed by both classic and contemporary theorists of asymmetrical warfare than any type of criminal actor. This also elucidates on the fact that these groups have allocated time and resources into developing diverse competencies that seek to exploit the information and cognitive domain of the various state, civilian and adversary non-state actors present in contested areas of operations. As of 2014, the following competencies have been employed by the Cartels throughout the Mexican Drug War:

A. PSYOPS

PSYOPS are probably the most widespread IIA competency currently employed across Mexico by the various Cartels seeking to influence the attitudes, perception and behaviours of a variety of audiences in order to achieve strategic, operational or tactical objectives [28]. The messaging strategies employed can be of either coercive or persuasive nature depending on the effect they seek to generate and the audience being targeted. The Cartels also have taken advantage of their ability to access the Internet and off the shelf software applications; local production assets; and media capabilities to develop a diversified set of products tailored for the information and influence requirements of these VNSAs, which include recruitment, overall popular support and dissuasive messaging against adversaries. Probably the most high profile PSYOPS campaigns being carried out by the Cartels are dissemination of pro-Cartel propaganda through web-based social media applications including popular websites such as Facebook, YouTube, and MySpace. A simple online social media search using the names of Cartel organizations or themes associated with these VNSAs will reveal numerous videos, group pages and personal profiles of entities and individuals associated with them [29]. Certainly, the Internet itself has become the main avenue through which the drug-lord “lifestyle of big money, big guns and big thrills” is proactively promoted by the Cartels and their civilian supporters [30]. In particular, media such as online videos playing homage to the Cartels’ activities, wealth, weapons and known members can be found in the thousands by browsing throughout the Internet. Most of these were done with commercial software available in the hardware used such as mobile phones or personal computers. Similarly, there are numerous Facebook and other social networking individual profiles and groups claiming to be members of Cartel organizations. In the majority of these pages, the alleged Cartel members appear posing with military grade weapons, combat hardware, drugs, and tattoos linked to these VNSAs [31]. However, the Mexican Cartels have also found the Internet to be an extremely flexible tool that can be used for coercive effects. For instance, it is well known that these VNSAs have also used public video hosting websites to upload footage of decapitations, torture, interrogations and summary executions perpetrated against adversaries. To a great extent, the Cartels have replicated the video montages that were used by insurgents in Iraq as a way to spread fear among their adversaries and contested civilian communities that otherwise would be resistant to their presence [32].

The Cartels’ have also taken advantage of more traditional methodologies to distribute propaganda across different areas of operations, which to a great degree are parallel to practices employed by modern conventional forces including face to face communication; the use of print and visual, media; and the distribution of goods with the purpose of shaping the cognitive dimension of the human battlespace. For instance, throughout the country media sources have reported the frequent use of *narco-mantas*, which are propaganda



Figure 2. Screenshot of the Knights Templars’s Facebook profile. Photo by Vice Magazine (2013).

banners placed by the Cartel organizations in high vehicle and pedestrian traffic points such as highway underpasses [33]. The messaging disseminated by this medium varies from recruitment and support narratives to coercive messages carrying threats against the Cartels’ adversaries and their supporters in the local community [34]. In the most extreme cases the *narco-mantas* are accompanied with bodies of the latest victims of the drug-fuelled violence, as a technique to strengthen the threats written through this medium. Print media has also been extremely prevalent in Mexico with the extensive use of handbills, flyers and other products that are disseminated across key population centres either eliciting popular support or discouraging local adversaries [35]. Furthermore, there have been even reports of the cartels dropping airborne leaflets over target areas, showcasing the freedom of action that these VNSAs have when it comes to conducting IIA where the state would normally exercise control [36]. In some instances type of PSYOPS products contain a recalcitrant narrative that encourages members of local security forces to join the Cartels’ rank and file, which in many occasions they have done so as discussed in the introduction. Other defiant PSYOPS tactics by these VNSAs include the distribution of public goods and face-to-face communication with the local civilian population. For example, after Hurricane Ingrid struck the Mexican state of Tamaulipas, the Gulf Cartel brought humanitarian aid in the form of food and other basic supplies to communities that were heavily affected [37]. Apart from influencing local civilians, the Cartel posted videos of the operation on YouTube, accessing a wider audience and strengthening the notion that this VNSA can take care of the people while the Mexican authorities failed to do so. Similar operations have been carried out including the distribution of gifts to children from poor communities and Cartel-sponsored traditional celebrations such

as *El Día del Niño* (Children’s Day), where the VNSA brings “music, fireworks, free toys and sweets, clowns, wrestling” and even “notes of good wishes” from the organizations’ leaders [38]. In these instances the Cartel exploits the hyper-exposure that it is offered by web applications in order to maximize the range and effects of PSYOPS being conducted.



Figure 3. Example of a narco-manta placed in Tabasco, Mexico in 2008. Photo by Román Jiménez García (2008).

The degree to which Cartel kinetic and influence activities have managed to shape the cognitive and information domain of local communities is extensive. This is clearly reflected with the emergence of sub-cultural practices and symbols that are closely associated with the Cartels. Examples of these include the *narco-corridos*, a genre of folk ballads that glamorize the lives of drug-traffickers and their life-style. Indeed, this musical genre has become mainstream in many areas across Mexico and the southwest United States to the point that these songs are played in commercial music stations [39]. Even more concerning, is the fact that the narrative exposed by the *narco-corridos* strengthens the perception that members of these organizations are rather heroic figures battling evil or oppressive adversaries present in the government or other Cartels [40]. Another pervasive cultural feature is the emergence of *narco-cultos*, which are practices of a religious nature in which individuals and communities affiliated with the Cartels worship pseudo-deities such as *Santa Muerte* (Holy Death), and *Jesus Malverde* which are symbols that have affiliated to the underworld since the mid-20th century and have million of followers among disenfranchised members of society [41]. These folkloric worship systems have been co-opted by individuals affiliated to Cartel organizations who could not obtain spiritual support for their criminal activities through the Roman Catholic Church, Mexico’s mainstream religion. Hence, *narco-cultura* becomes in an additional instrument that can be used by the Cartels to influence civilian populations that are vulnerable to their advances. The Cartels are known to have used these cultural devices in propaganda such as videos, where *narco-corridos* are used as background music or symbols such as *Santa Muerte* are placed in pro-Cartel graphics distributed through social media. Certainly, the incorporation of *narco-cultura* in Cartel PSYOPS efforts facilitates the acceptance of these organizations by target

civilian populations as a legitimate presence within Mexico due to their close attachment to widespread folk practices and beliefs.

TABLE I. PSYOPS TACTICS EMPLOYED BY THE MEXICAN CARTELS

Cartels’ PSYOPS Matrix		
PSYOPS Messages	Delivery Methods	Target Audiences
Persuasion (Local support, recruitment and descreditation of adversaries)	Online and multimedia (social media, online videos and graphics)	Local civilians.
	Print (<i>narco-mantas</i> , handbills and leaflets)	Susceptible members of Mexican security Forces.
	Face-to-face (distribution of goods and organization of social events)	Local politicians and civil servants.
Coercion (Forced support, threats, dissuasion)	Online (social media applications)	Adversary Cartels.
	Print (<i>narco-mantas</i> , handbills and leaflets)	Mexican security forces. Local politicians and civil servants.

B. CA and PA

The Cartels activities within the civil and public affairs competencies are limited and rather play rather a supportive role in regards to the PSYOPS efforts undertaken by these organizations. For example, by conducting activities such as the distribution of aid, rather than having a strong interest in the wellbeing in the community, Cartel organizations seek to be seen as a legitimate political-economic actor among various target audiences. Other influence strategy used by the Cartels is to employ their vast economic power in order to co-opt government institutions, validating their narrative as a legitimate force within their areas of operations. For instance, the municipal police department of Nuevo Laredo had been in the past under the direct control of Los Zetas Cartels as its officers have been used as combatants against other cartels and even the Mexican Federal Police [42]. The Cartels have also infiltrated or weaken components of the Mexican political infrastructure like in the case of judiciary institutions and public administration bodies [43]. On the other hand, when it comes to the use of established media outlets, the Cartels have sought to re-state general narratives that have been applied across their overall PSYOPS campaigns. An example of this is the leader of the Knights Templar Cartel, Servando Gomez Martinez “La Tuta,” who has given interviews to Spanish-language media outlets where he reinstates that his organization is in place to generate economic activity in poor areas, and protect communities from other cartel organizations [44]. In the past Cartels have also used well-established newspapers as an IIA instrument; however these are used to place deceptive ads seeking to recruit unemployed people that

respond to the postings thinking that they are approaching a legitimate employer [45]. All these efforts that are made directly with the community or the press by the Cartels seek to strengthen the overall IIA, conducted these VNSAs, which are spearheaded by PSYOPS campaigns.

C. CNO and Information Denial Operations

The Cartels' use of readily available Internet and software applications for IIA in support of drug-fuelled violence has generated the response of online activists who protests against the operations of these organizations and at the same time try to warn communities of drug related fire-fights happening in real time. Nevertheless, the Cartels value the protection of information at every level and do not tolerate resistance towards them, which has led to an aggressive response towards anyone that discloses information in regards to their activities, membership and networks. Several bloggers and social media users that have ran webpages concerning Cartel activity have been targeted in lethal operations and used the executions as deterrents against further online activism [46]. According to U.S. security consulting firm Stratfor, the Cartels are believed to have hired their own hacker teams with the purpose of targeting online activists' that would normally use the cloak of anonymity offered by the Internet to speak against the actions of these VNSAs [47]. Other authors, such as Minette Drumwright also believe that the Cartels have set up teams of hackers to counteract any type of online activism, which can in the future limit their freedom of action when it comes to conducting kinetic and criminal activities across their areas of operations [48]. In 2011, the cyber-conflict escalated further after the transnational hacktivist group Anonymous became involved after it claimed that Los Zetas Cartel had kidnapped one of its members [49]. Subsequently, Anonymous threatened to disclose information that would identify members and collaborators of the Cartel at every level. The hacktivist group later claimed that Los Zetas had complied to their demands and that they would cease operations against them; however many commentators have noted that this whole ordeal might have been a hoax organized by Anonymous to gather further attention since there was no information corroborating the disappearance of the alleged hacker [50]. Regardless, for the Cartels the use of hackers and violence has turn in a deadly yet efficient formula through which they seek to maintain absolute control of the information domain.

This formula has also been applied to more overt information disclosure sources that may compromise the integrity sought by the Cartels. Since, the start of the Mexican Drug War in 2006 the Mexican press has been coerced into silence when it comes to reporting on the Cartels and the activities they conduct across the country. Several reporters have been threatened, killed or simply disappeared, which has led to a culture of self-censorship across the Mexican press when it comes to reporting on the Cartels [51]. In addition, according to a Reporters Without Borders report, Mexico is among the top ten worst countries providing protection to journalists, which creates a permissive environment for Cartel generated-violence against the press [52]. In addition, the narrative highlighting that the Cartels have an absolute domination of their areas of operation has been strengthened

due to the fact that these VNSAs have been able to target and censor key communicators such as professional and amateur journalists. This also makes the Government of Mexico and its security forces look weak at their inability to protect journalists who are individuals with a high degree of media exposure across the country. In other cases, the Cartels have ensured to not only deploy information denial operations against the press but also use it in favour of their overall PSYOPS campaigns. For instance, it was reported that in northern Mexico the Sinaloa Cartel kidnapped news programs editors and journalists threatening to kill them if they did not play a video in which they justified a violent confrontation against their adversaries Los Zetas Cartel [53]. Ultimately, the Cartels have adopted an information dominance strategy where they can deny the acquisition of information, while at the same time having the operational freedom to disseminate their information products across multiple means.

IV. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In the last decade, the Mexican Cartels have transformed themselves into non-state war-fighting entities that, as rational actors, seek to generate effects through various kinetic and non-kinetic means in order to achieve specific political objectives. Unlike traditional criminal organizations, these VNSAs have acquired military-like capabilities as well as the political will to shape the environment in which they operate creating a synergetic approach through which they can achieve their perceived organizational survival. Some of these desired outcomes include: weakening the state to its bare minimum, defeat adversary cartels; dominate the human battlespace; and subsequently control the drug trade monopoly. All of these are vital for these actors' existence. As part of these efforts, the Cartels have developed a framework of IIA as an enabling tool that will assist them in achieving these goals. By looking at the variety of information and influence type of operations undertaken by these actors, it is clear that they have placed significant effort in developing comprehensive PSYOPS campaigns that target a variety of actors residing within the Cartels' areas of operations. Depending on the desired effect and how the target audience facilitates it, these VNSAs may employ coercive or persuasive approaches that may elicit popular support, recruitment of new members and freedom of action for illegal activities. Similarly this PSYOPS messaging may also discourage adversaries, threaten possible opposition within the civil sector and enable non-interference from the state. The Cartels have taken advantage of the accessibility of modern information and communications technology in order to over-expose and expand the range of their PSYOPS. Furthermore, some of the Cartels have also employed tactics in line with the civil and public affairs competencies within IIA; however, these are rather supporting operations towards the overall PSYOPS efforts discussed above. With the emergence of operational environments where interconnectivity is a salient feature due to the wide access to information and communications technology, the Cartels have proactively employed information denial operations. These include kinetic operations against journalists, bloggers and online activists facilitated by the Cartels' own hacker cells employed as targeting teams against anyone willing to disclose information on these organizations. Moreover, this has created an

information environment where there is pervasive culture of self-censorship among journalists and activists alike.

In this context, it is important to understand that the Mexican drug conflict is a complex problem that will likely require a comprehensive and multidimensional solution involving social development; addressing existing socio-economic inequalities; and providing public goods such as security to communities vulnerable to criminal activity. At this point the Government of Mexico has placed a strong emphasis on kinetic operations that include the capture of key Cartel leaders and heavy military responses against operations carried out by these VNSAs. However, this has not been sufficient to stop the Cartels from conducting their criminal operations, recruiting new members and ultimately using extreme violence to devastating effects. Therefore, as part of any solution it is imperative for the Government of Mexico to develop an information operations strategy that should fall into the implementation of a comprehensive plan to quell the drug-fuelled conflict. Currently, the Cartels have generated a permissive information environment from where they can disseminate various PSYOPS products with no or little opposition, especially through the Internet. Hence, it is key that strategic, operational and tactical anti-Cartel narratives are developed and synchronized in order to address the messaging that is being conducted by these groups and strengthen any comprehensive programs set in place by the government. This should include training specialist units of the Mexican security forces in IIA competencies such as PSYOPS, CA, PA, and CNO so they can actively counteract the campaigns being carried out by these armed actors. Currently none of the Mexican armed forces branches or federal law enforcement agencies has adopted IIA as a permanent military instrument that can be employed in ongoing operations. In addition, the Government of Mexico should liaise with the private sector; especially social media providers in order to limit the permissiveness through which these groups operate across the web. Government-private sector cooperation can either limit the dissemination of Cartel PSYOPS or facilitate the acquisition of intelligence that can be used against these VNSAs. In the end, any major strategy taken by the Mexican authorities needs to have an IIA component that will counteract the Cartels propaganda as well as gain terrain in the information and cognitive domains that preside over contested areas of operations. Within the context of Mexico any government and security forces IIA assets will require flexibility, creativity and proper backing in order to address a foe that is versatile when it comes to employing information as an offensive weapon.

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https://www.facebook.com/search/results.php?q=Cartel%20los%20zetas&init=mag_glass&tas=0.8535993299447&search_first_focus=1398632157181
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