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Mexican Cartel Tactical Note No. 3: Narco Armored Vehicle Threats and Countermeasures

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Mexican Cartel Tactical Note # 3

Narco Armored Vehicle Threats and Countermeasures

By [Robert Bunker](#)

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Who: Mexican Cartels (Lev III/IAFV; primarily Zetas & Gulf Cartel)

What: The deployment of narco armored cars and improvised armored fighting vehicles (IAFVs) in Mexico as a byproduct of the criminal insurgencies taking place.

When: I&W (indications & warnings) traced back to at least 1979 to the Dadeland Mall shooting in Florida tied to a Colombian cartel assassination team using improvised ballistic protection in a delivery truck (historical). Mexican cartel deployment of armored SUVs begins by the late 1990s and has greatly increased over time. A firebreak was crossed with the initial deployment of improvised armored fighting vehicles (IAFVs) in 2010.

Where: Threat Level I- sporadic at best in Mexico; Threat Level II- throughout cartel areas of operations in Mexico; Threat Level III- primarily in North-Eastern and Central Mexico, with vehicles recovered in the states of Chihuahua, Coahuila, Nayarit, Nuevo Leon and Tamaulipas.

Why: For well over a decade now, a deadly arms race has been taking place in Mexico between the various warring cartels and their gang and mercenary auxiliary forces. Weaponry has been shifting from civilian arms to law enforcement arms and then to infantry combat small arms. The introduction of cartel enforcers with former military and special forces backgrounds has resulted in the fielding of cartel units that have been increasingly professionalized. A component of this process is the deployment of armored SUVs and improvised armored fighting vehicles (IAFVs).

Synopsis of Narco Armored Vehicle Threats

Tactical Analysis

	Description	Encountered	Specifics
el)	<p>Narco armored vehicles come in defensive (Lev I-II) and offensive (Lev III) variants. While Lev II vehicles were superior in defensive armor to early Lev III vehicles (which did not have protected cabs/driver compartments), the early Lev III vehicles utilized gun ports as an offensive innovation. This allows for mounted infantry tactics to be conducted much like those undertaken by military units.</p> <p>Defensive Vehicles</p> <p>Threat Level I/Hasty/improvised ballistic protection utilized in otherwise soft vehicles. Countermeasures: Utilize shredder/hardened projectiles (via shotgun) and higher velocity AP rounds (via semi-auto rifles) for anti-personnel use and to target tires and engines (radiator) for mobility kills, establish perimeter to allow for more specialized SWAT response.</p>	<p>in defensive (Lev I-II) and offensive (Lev III) variants. While Lev II vehicles were superior in defensive armor to early Lev III vehicles (which did not have protected cabs/driver compartments), the early Lev III vehicles utilized gun ports as an offensive innovation. This allows for mounted infantry tactics to be conducted much like those undertaken by military units.</p> <p>in Mexico (current)</p>	<p>Specifics</p> <p>Ballistic vests hanging inside a protection to Colombian cartel assassination team (historical); vests, sand bags, and/or steel plates for basic ballistic protection</p>
	<p>Professionally Armored Slowly a dozens of vehicles in Mexico. firing ports are atypical, cartel</p>	<p>Through SUV Mexico (increasingly since the late 1990s) can be interspersed with soft (unarmored) vehicles. Since gunmen lose primary defensive advantage when dismounting to engage</p>	<p>Internal armor kits, ballistic glass of up to 10 mils</p>
	<p>Improvised Pill Box/Firing Countermeasures: Attempt mobility Position on Bed of Truck (see Gerardo for evolutionary of spike strips and/or commander choke points may be warranted.</p>	<p>doors/vehicle body can be used for mobility kills against tires and engines Central Mexico (~2009-2010): typically superseded by more mature variant</p>	<p>Work trucks with soft cabs; armored screens/box with firing ports for gunmen in bed</p>
)	<p>Offensive Vehicles</p> <p>Improvised Armored Fighting Vehicle (IAFV) aka "narco tanks" (a derivative of "Rhino" trucks and "monster trucks" position/Sully)</p> <p>Threat Level III- Mature: An improvised armored fighting vehicle (IAFV) with full body protection, gun ports, and an air conditioning</p>	<p>Primarily North-Eastern and Central Mexico (since 2010) for trucks/ heavy equipment. Exterior armor plating (1.5 to 2.5 cm), gun ports, and air conditioning for mounted troops; external gun mounts, turret firing ports, breaching rams</p>	<p>Platforms used are typically work trucks/ heavy equipment. Exterior armor plating (1.5 to 2.5 cm), gun ports, and air conditioning for mounted troops; external gun mounts, turret firing ports, breaching rams</p>
	<p>IAFV with work trucks through dump truck size vehicles. They are somewhat crude in appearance. Tires may be exposed and not protected by armor—no "run flat" tire usage evident to date.</p>	<p>Predicted Evolution— These vehicles have only been seen individually or in small numbers</p>	<p>Level III like the Mexican Federal police exposed and not protected by armor—no "run flat" tire usage evident to date.</p>

operating together though dozens of these vehicles (possibly more than 100) have now been built. The attachment of a few of these vehicles to provided security to a narco armored SUV convoy (Level II threat) must now be a consideration. Note— cartel gunmen riding in these vehicles may be carrying RPGs (Rocket Propelled Grenades) or tube launched anti-tank weapons that allow them to target and knock out opposing cartel IAFVs. This represents an additional concern in addition to military small arms (assault rifles, launchers, and grenades) being carried by these mobile infantry forces. This threat is beyond most Mexican state and federal law enforcement response capabilities. Countermeasures: Military medium and heavy tanks and other anti-armor systems; in dire situations can target tires for mobility kill, utilize spike strips, and/or commandeer trucks/big rigs to isolate avenues of approach/contain in urban choke points while awaiting military support.

Threat Level IV (Predicted Evolution) Linear projection of the Level III Threat into the future. Superior anti-vehicular offensive capabilities of such an organic (main) gun added to IAFVs would generate a threat way beyond Mexican state and federal law enforcement response capabilities. Probable 50 Cal. initial machine gun system usage with an eventual increase into smaller 20-40 mm cannon sizes derived

from AA (anti-aircraft) guns. Countermeasures Same as Level III- Mature; responding to this threat would basically turn this into a conventional military AFV engagement. Utilizing attack helicopters with anti-armor systems against these vehicles would be warranted.

No expectation exists for US law enforcement inside US territory to encounter a narco improvised armored fighting vehicle (IAFV) [Level III Threat]. While such a vehicle, in an overwatch position in Mexico, could conceivably cover a drug load going into the US, such a scenario presently appears unlikely—though co-opted personnel in Mexican military vehicles in years past have been involved in such incidents. Far more likely scenarios for US law enforcement on the US side of the border are sporadic/potential encounters with Mexican cartel operatives in defensive oriented Level I and Level II threat vehicles. [Note- some instances of cartel vehicles containing caltrop and oil slick dropping compartments have been reported. The effectiveness of such systems will vary].

*Countermeasures guidance underwent a basic tactical review by retired law enforcement and military personnel with extensive special operations field experience.

Significance: Cartel Tactics; Cartel Weaponry; Law Enforcement Countermeasures/Response; Officer Safety Issues

Sources

“[Mexican Cartels now using ‘tanks’](#)”- William Booth, Washington Post June 7, 2011.

“[Narco Motor Trend](#)”- Gerardo, Borderland Beat June 19, 2011. [See source for extensive collection of vehicular pictures].

“[Monster Trucks in Mexico: The Zetas Armor Up](#)”- STRATFOR July 4, 2011.

“[Narco-Armor in Mexico](#)”- John P. Sullivan and Adam Elkus, Small Wars Journal July 14, 2011.

“[‘Narco-Tanks’: Mexico’s Cartels Get Asymmetric Weapons](#)”- Gordon Housworth, In Sight July, 2011.

Also see the numerous English and Spanish <http://www.youtube.com> video clips of these vehicles.

About the Author

Robert Bunker

Dr. Robert J. Bunker holds degrees in political science, government, behavioral science, social science, anthropology-geography, and history. Training taken includes that provided by DHS, FLETC, DIA, Cal DOJ, Cal POST, LA JRIC, NTOA, and private security entities in counter-terrorism, counter-surveillance, incident-response, force protection, and intelligence. Dr. Bunker has been involved in red teaming and counter-terrorism exercises and has provided operations support within Los Angeles County.

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{3} <http://www.borderlandbeat.com/2011/06/narco-motor-trend.html>
{4} <http://www.stratfor.com/memberships/197885/analysis/20110623-monster-trucks-mexico-zetas-armor>
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