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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 Narco armored vehicles come in	Encountered defensive (Lev I-II) and offensive (Lev III)	Specifics While Lev II
I Vehicles with improved hasty ballistic protection	cab/driver compartments, the early Lev II vehicles utilized gun ports to be conducted much like those undertaken by military units in Mexico (current) Defensive Vehicles <i>Threat Level I:</i> Hasty/improvised Utilize shredder/hardened projectiles (via shotgun) and higher velocity for anti-personnel use and to target tires and engines (radiator) for mobility kills, allow for more specialized SWAT response.	defensive armor to early Lev III vehicles (which did not have protected gun ports as an offensive innovation. This ballistic vests hanging inside a delivery truck to provide protection to Colombian cartel assassination team (historical); vests, and bags, and/or steel plates for basic ballistic protection.	While Lev II variants. This ballistic vests hanging inside a delivery truck to provide protection to Colombian cartel assassination team (historical); vests, and bags, and/or steel plates for basic ballistic protection.
II Professionally Armored SUVs	Professionally armored dozens of vehicles in Mexico. These firing ports are atypical, cartel gunmen lose primary defensive advantage	Threat to Mexico (increasingly since the late 1990s) be interspersed with flat	Internal armor kits ballistic glass (flat tires)
III Improvised Pill Box/Firing Position on Bed of Truck [see Gerardo for evolutionary examples]	other forces, still, the armored doors/vehicle body can be used for ballistic shielding purposes. Countermeasures: Attempt mobility kills against tires and engines (radiator) with small arms fire, establish perimeter of spike strips and/or commandeer choke points may be warranted.	Primarily North-Eastern and Central Mexico (~2009-2010): typically, superceded by more mature variant	Work trucks with soft cabs; armored screens/box with firing ports for gunmen in bed of approach/contain in urban
IV Improvised Armored Fighting Vehicle (IAFV) aka "rhino tanks" (see driver views) "Rhino trucks" and "rhino trucks"	Primarily North-Eastern and Central Mexico (since 2010) fighting position pill box placed on the engine (radiator), and/or tires for a mobility kills to allow for more specialized SWAT/military	Primarily North-Eastern and Central Mexico (since 2010) fighting position pill box placed on the engine (radiator), and/or tires for a mobility kills to allow for more specialized SWAT/military	Platforms used are typically work trucks heavy equipment. Exterior armor plating (5 or 2.5 cm), gun ports and air conditioning for mounted troops; external gun mounts, turret firing ports, breaching rams
V IAFV with gun turret and high dump truck size vehicles. They are somewhat like the Mexican Federal Police vehicle El "rinoceronte" but cruder in appearance. Tires may be exposed	IAFV with gun turret and high dump truck size vehicles. They are somewhat like the Mexican Federal Police vehicle El "rinoceronte" but cruder in appearance. Tires may be exposed	IAFV with gun turret and high dump truck size vehicles. They are somewhat like the Mexican Federal Police vehicle El "rinoceronte" but cruder in appearance. Tires may be exposed	Like the Mexican Federal Police vehicle El "rinoceronte" but cruder in appearance. Tires may be exposed

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>
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