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Robert J. Bunker
Claremont Graduate University

John P. Sullivan

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VBIEDS IN THE MEXICAN CRIMINAL INSURGENCY

At least 130,000 people have been killed in the ongoing Mexican “crime war,” and many more have been kidnapped or simply gone missing.¹ Yet despite the significance of these numbers, official reports and news accounts frequently underreport the toll of this war.

Iraqi Security Police investigate a destroyed car used as a Vehicle Borne Improvised Explosive Device (VBIED) in which both occupants died. Photo by: Tsgt Roy Santana



By Robert J. Bunker and John Sullivan

Mexican cartels and gangsters clearly use violence to further their business interests. Threats and violence ward off competition and discourage interference with illegal drug transshipment points (*plazas*) and distribution nodes. The cartels have also directly confronted Mexico's government, leading to a

crisis of state solvency (the net result of capacity and legitimacy) that can be characterized as “criminal insurgency.”²

So far, the majority of cartel actions have involved small arms—such as the classic *cuerno de chivo* (AK-47). Mass shootings, grenade attacks, dismemberments, beheadings, and blockades (*narcobloqueos*) are also

common tactics. Additional weapons employed by cartels include both improvised armored fighting vehicles known as *narcotanques* and car bombings (*coches bomba*). In fact, use of car bombs or VBIEDs (vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices) is a tactic that has been employed with varying frequency throughout the conflict.



Sinaloa Cartel officer Javier Torres Felix is deported to Mexico after completing his sentence in the U.S. He was immediately arrested in Mexico for pending charges in his homeland. Photo by: U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement

CARTEL VBIED USE IN MEXICO

VBIEDs have been employed in several attacks by cartels in Mexico, with the majority of these incidents occurring between July 2010 and July 2012. The first widely reported contemporary Mexican car bombing occurred in embattled Ciudad Juárez on Thursday, 15 July 2010, with four people killed in

an ambush on the Federal Police.³ The last major VBIED attack of this period occurred on 31 July 2012 in Culiacán, Sinaloa. Other isolated VBIED-related incidents have taken place outside of this period, however. For example, on 14 July 2008 in Culiacán, Sinaloa, two explosive devices integrated with gas cylinders (in an attempt to enhance lethality) were discovered in a vehicle at a cartel safe house.

In our monograph *Cartel Car Bombings in Mexico*, we tracked 20 VBIED incidents between 2010 and 2012. Two of these incidents involved multiple devices (one in 2011 with two car bombs, and one in 2012 with two vehicle-borne incendiary devices).⁴ The Mexican attorney general or PGR (Procuraduría General de la República) reported 16 car bomb incidents for the 2010-2012 timeframe.⁵ Use of VBIEDs has virtually stopped since that sequence. The only reported incident since our analysis of the 2010-2012 incidents was an alleged CNG (El Cártel Nueva Generación) car bomb—actually an improvised incendiary device accompanied by a *narcomanta* (narco-banner)—detonated outside the Reclusorio Oriente correctional facility in Distrito Federal, Mexico City.⁶

VBIED DESIGN AND CONSTRUCTION

The VBIEDs employed by Mexican cartels have generally been low-yield devices—more “bombs in cars” than higher-yield devices that take advantage of the volume of explosives that a vehicle (especially a van or larger truck) can accommodate. Accurate information on the design and construction of these devices is limited. Payload sizes encountered have been in the 10- and 16-kilogram range. Types of explosives utilized include Tovex (a mining explosive), dynamite, and C-4. Electric detonation systems are typically triggered via cell phone activation; however, a Futaba radio controller has also been recovered. The cartels are also known to possess detonation cord.

A glimpse into the construction of one of these devices is available in a Mexican Cartel Tactical Note focusing on a VBIED recovered in January 2012. This particular VBIED was meant for detonation next to a police station in Ciudad Victoria, Tamaulipas, but was seized before it could be employed. Photos of the device, hidden in the trunk of a vehicle, were utilized for forensic purposes; however, due to poor photo quality, only a limited analysis was conducted.⁷

A limited number of 60mm mortar rounds, claymore mines, and numerous RPG rounds have been recovered in Mexico. To date, none of these munitions have been reported incorporated into VBIEDs. Conceivably, hand and rifle grenades—both older muzzle-launched forms and modern launched variants—could be bundled together for boosting purposes, along with gasoline and other highly flammable fuels (such as that found in the July 2008 VBIED incident), to augment these improvised explosive systems.

PATTERNS OF EMPLOYMENT

Threats and Warnings: Cartel VBIEDs have been primarily utilized against Mexican military and police personnel, the media, and businesses to encourage or discourage certain behavior. The intent is to both threaten and warn against taking particular actions, in order to motivate a shift to activities more favorable to cartel policies and desires. Examples include warning military personnel away from cracking down on a specific cartel or threatening a newspaper from reporting on a cartel leader’s activities. In numerous incidents in which VBIEDs were left outside facilities, the detonations resulted

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in no causalities; however, the implicit threat of what would happen if unwanted behaviors continued was made clear.

Psychological Warfare/Terrorism: Implicit in the above *threats and warnings* dynamic is the use of psychological warfare (and terrorism) principles to generate fear, terror, and the ambiguity of not knowing when or if an attack might come. The creation of an ever-present feeling of imperilment induces high levels of stress. VBIED employment patterns represent another cartel capability in addition to the use of direct assaults, snipers, kidnapping, and torture to terrorize and resocialize populations. VBIED employment against a police headquarters building in April 2012, a city hall in June 2012, and the private residence of a chief security officer in July 2012—all in the state of Tamaulipas—represents an ongoing campaign to terrorize public officials so they become compliant with cartel control.

Diversion: Here, a VBIED or incendiary device is detonated to draw a police or security response and thus distract responders from another attack. This creation of a diversion is similar to the use of narcobloqueos (*narco-blockades*) to channelize maneuver options and is essentially an anti-maneuver tactic. *Narcobloqueos* typically involve large trucks or buses and frequently include tanker trucks that are set ablaze to complicate response.⁸

Anti-Personnel Targeting: This targeting theme can be seen in both the initial July 2010 Ciudad Juárez bombing, which drew in unsuspecting police and responder personnel, and later in the much more sophisticated attack in Nuevo Laredo, Tamaulipas, on 24 May 2012. In that incident, police personnel at a



A simulated VBIED at the National Training Center (NTC).

Photo by: Master Sgt. Johancharles Van Boers

makeshift barracks at the Hotel Santa Cecilia—a small L-shaped motel—were targeted. Gunfire directed at the motel drew them out of their rooms into the parking lot. A small device was then detonated in the back of a pickup truck next to the motel. Eight officers and two civilians were wounded as a result.

Anti-Vehicular/Anti-Materiel Targeting:

In an incident in Monterrey, Nuevo Leon, on 20 October 2011, a Mexican military convoy was drawn into an ambush in which a parked car on the side of a road was detonated. Because none of the vehicles in the passing convoy were damaged, it is not known

whether the low-yield VBIED detonated prematurely and/or did not function properly or whether this attack was meant as only a threats and warnings incident.² In another incident, albeit a quasi-VBIED one, in Ciudad Victoria, Tamaulipas, on 6 June 2012, two vehicles at a car dealership were targeted. In what appeared to be an extortion plot, the gas tanks of the vehicles were ignited either by grenades or Molotov cocktails.

PATTERNS OF EMPLOYMENT NOT DEMONSTRATED

VBIEDS can be used in more destructive employment profiles than those described above. To date, Mexican cartel use of VBIEDs has been far more constrained than use of these devices by contemporary al-Qaeda-linked groups, as well as the bombings carried out by both Hezbollah and Colombian cartels during the late 1980s and early 1990s. VBIED patterns not demonstrated in Mexico include the following:

Mass/Indiscriminate Killing: VBIED casualty figures in Mexico have been low, with one incident resulting in four

deaths, another in two deaths, and a further incident in one death. Upper totals for injuries have been seven in two incidents and three in three others. Numerous incidents have yielded no deaths or injuries. By comparison, the highest fatality- and injury-producing cartel incident utilizing an explosive device was a September 2008 grenade attack in the main square of Morelia, Michoacán, during a festival. In that incident, detonation of multiple fragmentation grenades resulted in eight deaths and over 100 injuries.

Anti-Infrastructure Targeting: There is currently no evidence that purposeful anti-infrastructure attacks utilizing VBIEDs—with the intent of destroying buildings or other forms of infrastructure—have taken place in Mexico. The most similar style incident would be the use of arson by a gang of gunmen against the Casino Royale in Monterrey, Nuevo Leon, resulting in 52 deaths and over a dozen injuries. To place this in context regarding upper casualty thresholds, the most devastating cartel VBIED attack of all time was an incident involving a security building in Medellin,

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A Blackwater MD-530 responds to a VBIED in Baghdad, Iraq.
Photo by Master Sgt. Michael E. Best

Colombia, in December 1989. In that attack, a 500-kilogram VBIED was detonated, killing 59 people and injuring 1,000. This was one of the largest VBIEDs to be employed in the Western Hemisphere.

Suicide/Martyrdom Operations: As of September 2013, no evidence has been reported of a car or truck driver engaging, or even attempting to engage, in a suicide or martyrdom-style operation using a VBIED in Mexico. The most similar incident may be that of the July 2010 Ciudad Juárez bombing, in which a bound and wounded man was dressed as a police officer and used as an unwilling decoy in a “bait and wait” trap to kill Mexican police and first responders.⁹

PRESENT AND FUTURE USE

VBIED use by Mexican organized crime cartels has been dormant since August 2012, after sustained multiyear employment beginning in July 2010. The reasons for this “strategic pause” in VBIED use are unknown. Strangely, the pause correlates with the Mexican presidential elections at the end of July 2012 and the subsequent victory of Enrique Peña Nieto, the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) candidate. Also interesting, an earlier period of limited cartel VBIED employment existed in the early 1990s. During that period, VBIEDs



Truck bomb in Cali, Colombia, August 2006. Photo by: Segan

That is, VBIEDs become more valuable when seeking to manipulate mass opinion during a campaign to secure control of turf or a contested plaza. Other tools (such as grenades or individual armed assaults) are better suited to tactical engagements or retaliation for individual transgressions against the cartel.

Although the religious fervor of the Knights Templar (*Cabelleros Templarios*) cartel in Michoacán may at first glance raise the possibility of potential martyrdom operations (involving vehicle- or person-borne devices), such attacks may not be likely. The instrumental violence of the drug wars originates in local contexts, not in the context of global jihad. Furthermore, *narcocultura* exploits religious imagery to sustain images of social bandits, not religious martyrs. San Nazario is a venerated icon of innate rebellion, but the local context does not mirror the Middle East. Beheadings are used to dehumanize adversaries, not mimic jihadis. Likewise, VBIEDs in Mexico must be viewed in the context of the Mexican criminal insurgency and not forced to mirror global jihad imagery that does not fit.

were used by the cartels against one another, rather than against governmental security personnel, the press, and businesses.

A cartel's selection of tactics is driven by the environment. Although Mexico's cartels have the capability (both knowledge and materials) to conduct

VBIED attacks, they apparently do not have need for such attacks at the present time. They are able to achieve desired results by use of other tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTPs). Both sophisticated and simple variants of VBIEDs—i.e., both car bombs and “bombs in cars”—are better used when seeking to shape strategic space.



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VBIED spillover from the Mexican conflict into the United States is a possibility. Current probabilities are low—especially since VBIED use has presently ramped down in Mexico. However, gangsters in the U.S. have already employed bombings, and the future may make key U.S. cities or neighborhoods within those cities into contested plazas, transportation corridors, and distribution nodes. An awareness of VBIED potentials, TTPs, and response considerations is therefore prudent, in the border zone and enclaves upstream where cartel-gang interpenetration drives gang warfare. ●

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Mr. Bunker is distinguished visiting professor and Minerva Chair of the Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College. He is coauthor of Cartel Car Bombings in Mexico (Strategic Studies Institute, 2013), Studies in Gangs in Cartels (Routledge, 2013), and Mexico's Criminal Insurgency (iUniverse, 2012). He is also a senior fellow of Small Wars Journal—El

Centro. The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not represent the position of any U.S. government agency.

Mr. Sullivan is a lieutenant with the Los Angeles Sheriff's Department. He is coauthor of Cartel Car Bombings in Mexico (Strategic Studies Institute, 2013), Studies in Gangs in Cartels (Routledge, 2013), and Mexico's Criminal Insurgency (iUniverse, 2012). He is also a senior fellow of Small Wars Journal—El Centro. The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not represent the position of the Los Angeles Sheriff's Department.

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