
Virtual Urban Siege: Modern Urban Siege and Swarming in Culiacán 2019 & 2023

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Virtual Urban Siege: Modern Urban Siege and Swarming in Culiacán 2019 & 2023

Abstract

Modern urban siege is a metaphor for evolved urban campaigns. The template for such attacks draws from the tactics seen in the 26/11 Mumbai attack in 2008, and continued with the 2013 Westgate Mall attack in Kenya, the January 2015 Charlie Hebdo and Hyper Cacher attacks in Paris and the November 2015 attacks against the Stade de France and Bataclan. These virtual sieges employ swarming tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTPs) to provide a template for urban strife and insecurity. This article provides an overview of terrorist swarming tactics, expanding the aperture to review the use of similar TTPs by criminal gangs in Brazil in the Novo Cagngaço style high intensity robberies and raids. The article will then review the October 2019 Battle of Culiacán or Culiacanazo, where elements of the Cártel de Sinaloa (CDS) employed urban siege TTPs to counter the arrest of cartel leaders by state security forces. The second incident occurred in January 2023 when the CDS again employed swarming TTPs in an unsuccessful attempt to thwart the arrest of Ovidio Guzmán.

Introduction

The two Battles of Culiacán between Mexican state forces and elements of the Cártel de Sinaloa in 2019 and 2023 provide examples of the challenges states face when criminal armed groups (CAGs) employ sophisticated urban battle techniques such as urban siege and swarming attacks. These challenges are a component of the operational complexity found in high-intensity criminal violence, such as that found in crime wars, criminal insurgencies, and the Novo Cangaço tactics employed by territorial gangs in Brazil.¹ Specifically, urban siege can be viewed as a metaphor for urban swarming as an evolved urban campaign.² John Arquilla and David Ronfeldt trace the history of swarming techniques from the animal kingdom all the way through decades of warfare.³ The authors trace the evolution of swarming techniques and predict that these tactics will increase in popularity because of the evolution of communication systems and their effectiveness in modern conflict.⁴ The concept of modern urban siege was first articulated in relation to the 26th of November Mumbai Attack.⁵ This style of attack was later employed in the Westgate Mall Attack (Kenya 2013), the Paris *Charlie Hebdo* and Hyper Cacher attacks (January 2015), and the (November 2015) Stade de France and Bataclan attacks.⁶ In addition to these classic events, the swarming tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTPs) applied in these innovative events continue to influence urban combat by criminals and terrorists alike. In addition to swarming, these influences include armed assaults, combined arms attacks, hostage-taking and, more recently, the use of weaponized aerial drones.⁷ This operational mix has been seen in criminal actions ranging from high-intensity robberies in Brazil's Novo Cangaço to terrorist acts such as the Siege of Marawi by ISIS affiliates in the Philippines (2017).⁸ This framework sets the stage for exploring the incidents in Culiacán.

The article compares the two arrests of Ovidio Guzmán and their implications for urban warfare by criminal networks in response to state high-value targeting (HVT). In October 2019, the Mexican military captured Ovidio Guzmán, one of the leaders of the Chapitos faction of the Sinaloa Cartel. The Sinaloa Cartel response was a comprehensive siege of the city of Culiacán, which involved heavy weaponry, street blockades, threats delivered electronically, a prison break, and sufficient violence that the Mexican government at the Presidential level chose to release Ovidio

Guzmán to prevent further bloodshed. This incident became known as the *Culiacanazo*. While these tactics were not new, the scale was unprecedented, and the intervening years saw other Mexican cartels mimic this response. Later, in early 2023, the Mexican government recaptured Ovidio Guzmán and was better prepared to withstand the coming onslaught. The authors call this incident *Culiacanazo 2.0* in their comparison in this article. This article uses the two events as case studies to compare criminal network urban warfare in response to state high-value targeting. It supplies tactical and operational comparisons of the events and their strategic implications. It also concludes with policy recommendations for how states can address criminal network urban warfare in response to high-value targeting by states. Ultimately, the Mexican government successfully applied many lessons from the 2019 Siege of Culiacán to the January 2023 capture of Ovidio Guzmán. Still, future Mexican administrations must answer what strategic framework successful HVT operations will serve.

Our assessment will proceed by (1) contextualizing the two attempts to capture Ovidio Guzmán and the urban environment of the city of Culiacán, (2) briefly discussing the recent scholarship on urban security of relevance, (3) elucidating the case study and data gathering methods; (4) presenting the cases in chronological order; (5) analyzing and comparing the cases in their geopolitical context; and (6) providing conclusions and policy recommendations.

Contextualizing the Urban Siege of Culiacán

Ovidio Guzmán López (*El Ratón*) is the son of Joaquin (*El Chapo*) Guzmán and is accused of having a significant role in the Sinaloa Cartel, according to the Treasury Department of the United States.⁹ In April 2018, the United States Department of Justice accused Ovidio and his brother Joaquín Guzmán López of trafficking large shipments of cocaine, methamphetamines, and marijuana to the United States.¹⁰ In 2021, the U.S. State Department offered a 5-million-dollar reward for information leading to the arrest of four of El Chapo's sons, including Ovidio.¹¹ The other three sons that comprise the Chapitos are Iván Archivaldo Guzmán Salazar, Jesús Alfredo Guzmán Salazar and Joaquín Guzmán López.

Two operations by the Mexican government have attempted to capture Ovidio Guzmán. The first attempt in 2019 failed, resulting in his capture and subsequent release. The second attempt in 2023 would result in his capture and transfer to the Altiplano maximum security federal prison (the same prison his father escaped from in 2015). Security expert Alejandro Hope explains that Mexico opened no judicial investigation against Ovidio and that most of the judicial case to arrest Ovidio emerges from the United States.¹² He believes that the Mexican judicial system will only be able to legally detain him for a few months, which means the government will likely seek to extradite him to the United States.¹³ The Mexican judicial system gave the United States until March 5, 2023, to formally request his extradition and present evidence against Ovidio.¹⁴ On February 27, 2023, the United States government officially requested the extradition of Ovidio. Both operations to capture Ovidio serve as valuable case studies to explore modern urban sieges that employ swarming tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTPs).

Culiacán is the Capital City of Sinaloa. Historically and presently, Sinaloa is known as the heart of Mexican drug trafficking, with many of the original cartel-leading families hailing from the state where poppy and marijuana grew the first significant traffickers. The Sinaloa Cartel also dominates it. The sons of Chapo Guzman now essentially lead the cartel. Culiacán is a city of one million people. It has dense urban zones in addition to bridges and high toll booths that can serve as chokepoints, allowing a powerful non-state actor with command control over its forces to shut down the possibility of Mexican government reinforcements.

Recent Scholarship

There has been significant recent scholarship on urban security, and the role cities will play in the future of conflict, of which this current special issue on urban security, the authors hope, will become a core component.¹⁵ In his seminal 2015 book *Out of the Mountains*, David Kilcullen argues that militaries' fixation on rural warfare is ill-considered given the megatrends he identifies, such as coastal city growth, climate change, and increased urbanization, all of which lead us to forecast increased urban conflict. Given that likelihood, understanding the role of violent non-state actors (VNSAs)—specifically CAGs—in using urban siege tactics to prevent high-value targeting (HVT) of their leadership is critical to global,

regional, and local security and an understanding of illicit network resilience.¹⁶

Urban Operations Planning

Military and police urban operations are challenging due to the intricate interplay between the competing forces—state services against arms bearers: Criminals, terrorists, insurgents, or military forces—population density, and the complexity of the terrain and the built environment. When these factors converge, operations become difficult, the distinction between combatants (or arms bearers) blurred, and the population is at risk.¹⁷ Planning is the key to effective procedures that protect the populace and minimize risk to security forces and their adversaries. This planning must be based on effective intelligence to understand the potential threats and risks faced during a specific operation, the nature of the threat group, and the terrain where the operation(s) will occur.¹⁸

The relative success of urban operations depends upon detailed intelligence, planning, and execution. This preparation must be sufficient to overcome the natural defensive advantage of local criminal groups on their turf, where they have an advantage on terrain knowledge, can prepare defenses and strongholds, and rely on local support.

Police-Military Interaction in the Urban Environment

Crime, including violent gang crime, is a feature of many cities. Urban crime is often a significant policy concern. When territorial and third-generation gangs dominate the local space criminal enclaves, characterized by criminal governance, may exist.¹⁹ When CAGs confront the state, well-honed interaction between civil police agencies and state military forces is necessary. This interaction, however, is often problematic due to bureaucratic competition, perceptions of corruption, and lack of capacity. Mexico has profoundly experienced these challenges over the years.²⁰ These challenges are exacerbated by the organizational complexity of both the military and the police, with the military divided among the army under the *Secretaría de la Defensa Nacional* (SEDENA or Secretariat of National Defense) and naval forces under the *Secretaría de la Marina* (SEMAR or Naval Secretariat). On the police side, the First Battle of Culiacán occurred just weeks after the *Policía Federal* (Federal

Police) dissolved and merged into the new *Guardia Nacional* (National Guard).²¹

The Guardia Nacional (National Guard) and the Military

The establishment of the Guardia Nacional was controversial and remains so. Some view The National Guard as a step toward militarizing Mexican law enforcement, and its critics prefer establishing civil policing institutions.²² Essentially, the issue is one of military versus civilian control. To contain corruption and enhance citizen perceptions of legitimacy, Mexican president Andres Manuel Lopes Obrador (AMLO) sought to place the National Guard under military leadership (SEDENA); the Mexican Supreme Court has rejected military control as being unconstitutional.²³ Nevertheless, there is a role for both police and army operations (supported by intelligence) to contain the threat of CAGs and the extreme violence they present. Both civil police and military-type capabilities are necessary at various parts of the violent contest between the state and CAGs. That is one reason the government constructed the Guardia Nacional as a paramilitary or gendarmerie-type force. Further police reform and discussion about the framework for policing in Mexico are needed. Notwithstanding that necessary policy debate, the operational effectiveness of security forces needs to be calibrated by the government to address the threat of CAGs in a range of missions, including urban operations.

Presentation of the Case Studies

This comparative case study analysis relies on open-source materials describing the two events. These include opensource media reports, court documents, videos of the incident where available, and documents made public by the *Guacamaya* hackers, including a trove of Mexican Military (*Secretaria de Defensa Nacional* (SEDENA)) documents related to the incident. Additionally, this operational and tactical analysis utilized timelines presented by the Mexican government and the New York Times, which painstakingly pieced together relevant social media videos, posts, and other data to create a timeline replete with maps. The cases are compared utilizing chronological analysis and the method of structured, focused comparison wherein the same questions were asked of all cases to ensure their comparability.²⁴

Culiacanazo (The Siege of Culiacán 2019)

The first and failed attempt to capture Ovidio happened on October 17, 2019, in Culiacán, the capital of the state of Sinaloa. Mexicans refer to this attempt popularly as the *Culiacanazo* or *Jueves negro* (the black Thursday). The Mexican government gave several official versions of what happened. Alfonso Durazo, head of the secretary of security and citizen protection, would report that 30 elements of the National Guard and the army were conducting a routine patrol when they were attacked from a home.²⁵ The security forces proceeded to repel the attack and surround the house, where four people, including Ovidio Guzmán, were detained.²⁶

The video recorded by authorities in 2019 showed Ovidio coming out of a residence with his hands in the air. Once arrested, Ovidio Guzmán received a cell phone from security forces so that he could order the Sinaloa Cartel to stop the violence. He did so but to no avail as his Sinaloa Cartel compatriots fought.²⁷ The cartel would proceed to begin an operation to release Ovidio, and only an hour after his reported detention, the authorities released him back to the cartel.²⁸ President Andrés Manuel López Obrador contradicted Durazo and declared this had been a purposeful operation to capture Ovidio due to an extradition order for his apprehension.²⁹ After significant pressure due to contradicting reports on the arrest, the government would provide a minute-by-minute operation breakdown that justified Ovidio's release as a decision to "protect the lives of citizens" in Sinaloa.³⁰

Chronology of Events

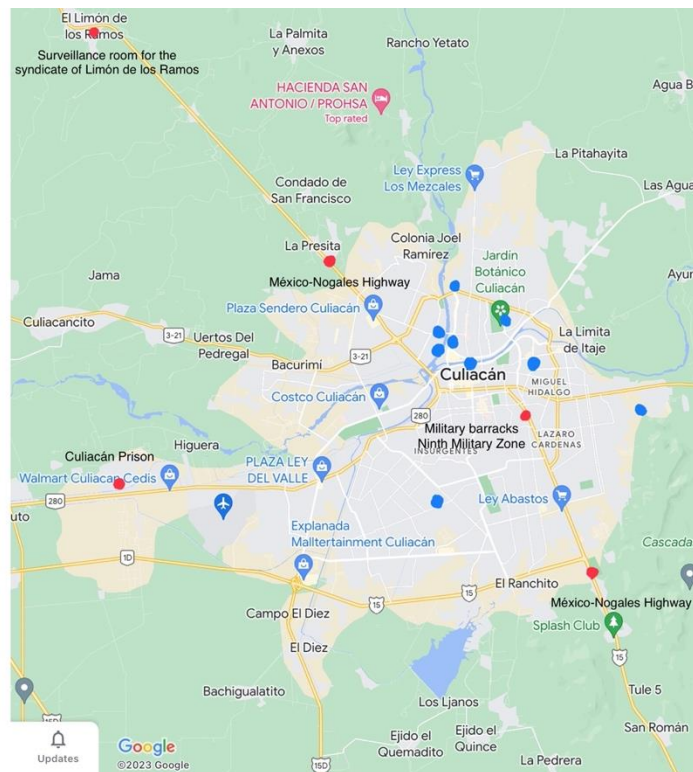
The operation began at 1 pm Pacific time in Mexico City, where members of the National Guard presented a report to the prosecutor's office to justify a search warrant and alerted the armed forces to prepare for the operation.³¹ Around an hour later, at 2 p.m., Ovidio arrived at a house in Culiacán, and 30 minutes later, the operation began by surrounding the place where Ovidio and his family were located.³²

The house is in the neighborhood of *Tres Rios* within Culiacán.³³ This neighborhood has a high urban density and is close to the city's most famous park, Las Riberas, shopping center, *Plaza Fórum*, and several

education and government buildings.³⁴ Mexican security forces reported getting fired upon at 2:50 p.m. As a result, the search warrant under process in Mexico City was deemed no longer needed, and the operation to capture Ovidio began.³⁵

In 2022, reporter Carlos Loret de Mola reported on documents his news agency (*Latinus*) had received from a hacker group called *Guacamaya* that uncovered previously unknown information about this military operation.³⁶ The army reported that Ovidio's capture occurred at 3:15 p.m. Still, the hacked documents report that the army arrived at 3 p.m. At 3:17 pm, state security forces captured Ovidio to persuade his older brother Iván Archivaldo Guzmán Salazar to stop hostilities.³⁷ As soldiers attempted to surround Ovidio's home, news around Sinaloa spread, and by 3:30 p.m., the first reports of injured soldiers began to come in. Culiacán was under siege, with all highways in and out blocked.³⁸ Figure 1 represents all blockades conducted during this operation by criminals with blue points and any violent confrontations with red points.

Figure 1.



Map of blockades and violent confrontations in Culiacán during Ovidio's first arrest.³⁹

The cartel members surrounded the house where the operation occurred by 3:47 p.m.⁴⁰ The group of criminals surrounding the house consisted of 40 armed men in eight vehicles, two of which had bulletproof windows and armor.⁴¹ On a larger scale, the criminals also blocked strategic points around the city with burning vehicles. They successfully secured a perimeter in which soldiers, federal agents, and the population of Culiacán could not escape.⁴² Overall, the cartel placed barricades and burning vehicles at 19 different points across Culiacán, and the violence took the lives of nine people.⁴³

There are reports that as the cartel set up blockades, a military helicopter trying to support the armed forces on the ground received several bullet impacts.⁴⁴ At 3:50 pm, armed cartel members aboard vehicles surrounded the military bases in Culiacán and kidnapped several military personnel.⁴⁵ Cartel members blocked the highways North and South of Culiacán to prevent land reinforcements from reaching Mexican armed forces.⁴⁶ The federal forces could only recapture and hold one of the access points by *Avenida Universitarios* of the nine available in the area of the operation.⁴⁷

To create more chaos and replenish their numbers, cartel members targeted the Aguaruto prison at 5:04 p.m. and successfully orchestrated a massive prison break.⁴⁸ The cartel members liberated around fifty convicts, of which several belonged to the cartel, and joined in the fight against the armed forces.⁴⁹ The cartel members successfully kidnapped soldiers protecting a highway towards Mazatlán and targeted the barracks where soldiers' families live.⁵⁰ The criminals threatened to execute the families of the soldiers, and twenty cartel members with automatic weapons in four vehicles were able to repel the troops sent to support the barracks.⁵¹

The criminals penetrated four apartments to kidnap their inhabitants as part of a broader strategy to exchange soldiers for Ovidio.⁵² The cartel targeted the military and kidnapped nine soldiers and two officers, two of whom were taken by 15 armed men in the Crucero de Jesús María about 30 km from Ovidio's house.⁵³ The cartel members also created blockades from vehicles taken from the armed forces. They surrounded the military bases in Cosalá, El Fuerte, and Cosa Rica, where 150 cartel members kidnapped 24 soldiers and two officers.⁵⁴

At 6:49 pm, the cabinet of security of México, supported by AMLO, ordered the armed forces to fall back and liberate Ovidio.⁵⁵ The violence would begin to diminish after security forces released Ovidio. By 7:17 pm, an officer and four soldiers kidnapped at a highway toll booth in Costa Rica, located South of Culiacán, were released.⁵⁶

Overall, around 700-800 armed cartel members successfully defeated 350 members of security forces around the city.⁵⁷ The army also reported the criminal use of eight vehicles, of which at least two were armored, and the use of Barrett sniper rifles and machine guns, some of which were vehicle mounted.⁵⁸ Secretary of Defense Crescencio Sandoval explained how the criminals had overtaken the four strategic points close to the home of Ovidio that the army had tried to secure.⁵⁹ Juan Carlos Montero, a security expert, believes that either someone prewarned the criminals or the army didn't have enough manpower.⁶⁰

Culiacanazo 2.0

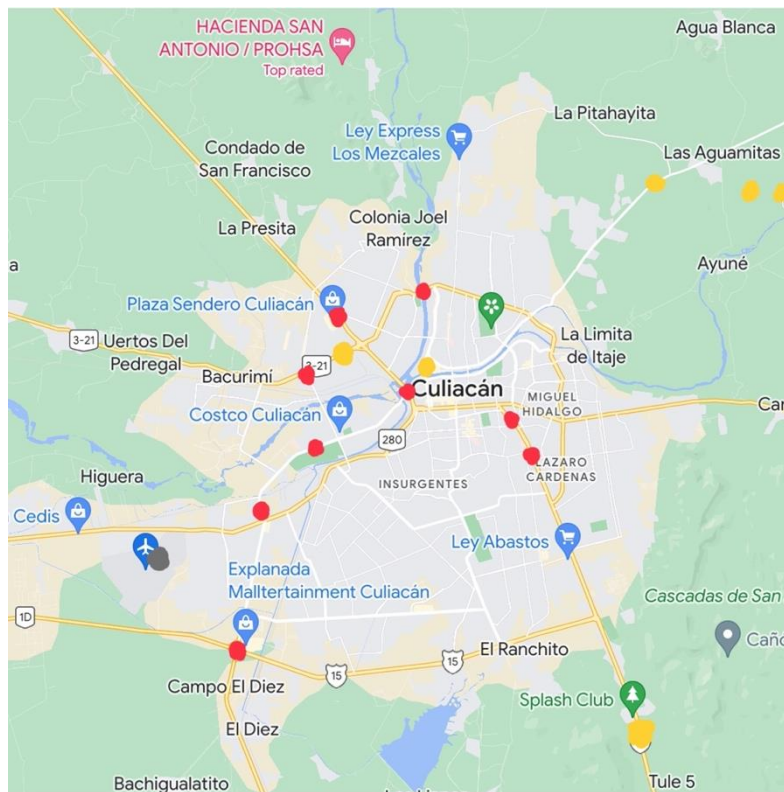
This operation occurred in the early hours of January 5, 2023.⁶¹ This time, the army was able to target Ovidio in the rural community of Jesús María, a small town of 5,062 people located North of Culiacán.⁶² This location is better suited for the capture as it has fewer civilians and is far enough away from Culiacán to avoid the armed forces being under siege inside the capital of Sinaloa (Culiacán).

The operation began with members of the National Guard supported by the army identifying several armed people in pickup trucks with homemade armor commonly used by organized crime.⁶³ The Mexican security forces formed a perimeter around the vehicles. They tried to persuade the people inside the vehicle to descend, at which point the armed individuals opened fire against the security agents.⁶⁴ The armed individuals then proceeded to take refuge in three different homes, from which they continued attacking the agents of the National Guard with 50-caliber machine guns.⁶⁵ The high caliber power of the criminal's weapons forced the security forces to call for air support, which resulted in the emergency landing of a plane used by the army from the damage caused by the 50-caliber weapons.⁶⁶ A UH-60M helicopter, better known as a 'black hawk' with a Gatling Dillon Aero M134D machinegun capable of shooting 3,000 rounds a minute was able to successfully defeat the armed

individuals and provide aerial cover for the ground units capturing Ovidio Guzmán.⁶⁷

During Ovidio's detention, security forces found him possessing weapons legally restricted to the Mexican army and air force in Mexico at 5:20 a.m. Pacific Standard Time, according to the national registry of detentions in Mexico.⁶⁸ Around 7 a.m., two military planes took off from the airbase in Santa Lucía, located in the State of Mexico, towards Sinaloa to help provide air support for the operation.⁶⁹ Immediately after his detention, members of the Sinaloa Cartel set up 19 blockades and aggressions in different parts of Culiacán. Figure 2 shows blockades in red and aggressions in yellow and grey.⁷⁰

Figure 2.



Government map of the blockades and violent confrontations in Culiacán during Ovidio's second detention.⁷¹

As soon as federal agents captured Ovidio, the Air Force transported him by a plane to extract him quickly from Sinaloa to Mexico City for detention.⁷² This successful operation resulted from six months of surveillance and was better organized and supported than the first attempt

to detain Ovidio.⁷³ The Sinaloa Cartel members reacted similarly to the 2019 ‘*culiacanazo*’ and blocked all roads heading toward Culiacán.⁷⁴ Criminal members stole 250 vehicles in Sinaloa and burned 51 to blockade Culiacán.⁷⁵ Juan José Moreno Orzúa, colonel of infantry and two soldiers, were ambushed and killed by cartel members in the municipality of Escuinapa, Sinaloa.⁷⁶ To stop Ovidio from leaving Sinaloa, cartel members attacked the international airport in Culiacán and forced its closure.⁷⁷ Some videos show cartel members firing at planes from the Mexican air force and commercial planes parked at the international airport.⁷⁸ Cartel members also attacked a military air base in Sinaloa in a failed attempt to recapture Ovidio.⁷⁹ The operation resulted in the detention of 21 cartel members and the capture of several weapons and 40 pickup trucks, of which 26 were armored.⁸⁰ Twenty-nine people died in this operation, including ten soldiers and nineteen cartel members. Thirty-five soldiers also sustained injuries in the operation.⁸¹

Case Comparison and Discussion

Table 1. *Culicanazo* 1.0 in October 2019 to the *Culiacanazo* 2.0 in 2023

	<i>Culiacanazo</i> (Oct. 2019)	<i>Culiacanazo</i> 2.0 (Jan. 2023)
Urban versus Rural	Urban	Primarily Rural
Time of Day	Mid-Afternoon	Early Morning
Location	Culiacan (pop. 1 million)	Santa Maria (pop. 5,000)
Military or LEA Deaths	2	10
Cartel Member Deaths	8	19
Civilian Deaths	2	0
Wounded	21	35
Total deaths	14 ⁸²	29
Arrests	~49 ⁸³	21
Air support	No	Yes
Aerial exfiltration of HVT	No	Yes
Total Troops or LEAs Used	350	3500
Narco Blockades or Burning Vehicles	Yes (19)	Yes (9)
Sniper Rifles	Yes	Yes
.50 Cal Machine Guns	Yes	Yes
Successfully detain and hold Ovidio Guzmán?	No	Yes

Numerous areas of comparison emerge when comparing *Culicanazo* 1.0 in October 2019 to the *Culiacanazo* 2.0 in 2023. A point-by-point summary comparison of the two *Culiacanazo* incidents is provided in Table 1.

Most importantly, Mexican security forces had learned lessons from the earlier failure. It is also highly likely that the earlier failure was a humiliation for the military or law enforcement and a political defeat for the government of AMLO. His political enemies had hotly criticized the failure to capture Ovidio Guzmán and the decision to release him, though it is highly likely this decision saved civilian lives.⁸⁴ Further, other cartels became emboldened by the success of the Sinaloa Cartel in securing the release of one of their high-value members after an apprehension by the government.

This later played out in August 2022, when in the states of Jalisco and Guanajuato, the *Cártel de Jalisco Nueva Generación* (CJNG) engaged in widespread simultaneous violent responses to what appeared to be the apprehension of high-value members of the CJNG.⁸⁵ A similar wave of violence occurred in Tijuana a few days later.⁸⁶ Thus, these violent responses to high-value target apprehensions became commonplace and automated. Therefore, a significant cost to the public release of Ovidio Guzmán as the high-profile event may have emboldened copycats. The Mexican military understood the failures of the previous attempt to apprehend and hold Ovidio Guzmán and adapted in numerous ways.

It is important to note that these events happened before the 2019 *Culiacanazo*. In 2012, the CJNG set extensive roadblocks and large-scale violence in Guadalajara to thwart the capture of its leader, El Mencho.⁸⁷ In 2017, the Tlahuac-Chalco Cartel had a similar response to the 2017 arrest of its leader.⁸⁸ Thus, the *Culiacanazo* event is part of an ongoing trend. Still, given its size and media coverage, it likely inspired all organized crime in Mexico to double down on the strategy.

The Government Response and AMLO Critics

Some AMLO critics like Jorge Castañeda have argued that the *Culiacanazo* of 2019 resulted from the history of the US-Mexico relationship and the Wikileaks release of U.S. diplomatic cables in 2010.⁸⁹ The release revealed a situation wherein the U.S. government provided SEDENA with the location of Arturo Beltran Leyva, leader of the Beltran-Leyva Organization

(BLO). The Mexican Military, likely due to risk aversion or corruption, did not act on the intelligence. U.S. officials then funneled the information to the Mexican Marines (SEMAR), which acted on the intelligence. The WikiLeaks revelations of the United States playing different Mexican security agencies off each other gave the appearance of a sovereignty issue and resulted in the resignation of Pascual, the U.S. ambassador to México.⁹⁰

Castañeda argues that experience may have been why the Mexican government half-heartedly went into the *Culiacanazo* event. It wanted to show the U.S. government it would act on the intelligence in the run-up to the negotiations of the USMCA, which became the successor trade deal to NAFTA. It feared that U.S. agencies would use it to sabotage the trade deal if it did not. Nonetheless, AMLO had long overtly rejected the kingpin strategy of targeting cartel leaders because Mexico's experience over the previous decade was that it only increased violence.⁹¹ Thus, the Mexican government pursued Ovidio with a small number of troops and was caught off guard by the Sinaloa Cartel response, according to Castañeda.⁹²

Implications and Lessons Learned Culiacanazo 1.0

The authors assess that Sinaloa Cartel had a preplanned response to a high-value apprehension in the city of Culiacán. In hindsight, the preplanned response is not surprising given the 2017 extradition of Chapo Guzmán to the United States and the desire of his sons to avoid that fate.

The Sinaloa Cartel plan went into effect within minutes of the apprehension of Ovidio Guzmán, leading some reporters to speculate that the cartel may have been alerted by some corrupt official.⁹³ Videos of the event show elements of the Sinaloa Cartel that had bulletproof vests, helmets, and heavy weaponry such as sniper rifles, 50 caliber machine guns (some mounted on the back of trucks), and, more importantly, a radio system to coordinate their efforts. The Sinaloa Cartel took control of critical chokepoints throughout the city to cut off military reinforcements. It used *narcobloqueos* or narco-blockades using vehicles at key choke points. They then lit the vehicles on fire with gasoline. The plumes of smoke added to the sense of chaos for all involved and may have limited air visibility and air support.

Despite the preplanned nature of the response, there may have been improvisation. There were reports of young men being recruited on the spot with offers of 20,000 pesos or about U.S. \$1,000 to join the fight. The prison break may also have been improvised, with the intent of sowing added chaos to pressure the government to release Ovidio Guzmán.⁹⁴

Operational Lessons Learned and Implemented

The Mexican government learned many lessons from the failed operation in 2019. These lessons led to the second and final operation to capture Ovidio. The first lesson applied was not to conduct an operation in the middle of the day. In an urban environment, operations conducted in the middle of the day can pose an additional risk for civilians in public places, as seen during the first operation to capture Ovidio.

Mexican security force's second lesson targeted Ovidio Guzmán in a rural area. This highlights the urban security issue, namely that in an urban environment, there are more choke points, more opportunities for a violent response, more potential hostages, and more potential for collateral damage. On the other hand, in the rural environment, there is far less opportunity for collateral damage and less urban environmental density to mount a defense in. Again, in the urban environment, one of the reasons why the Mexican government chose to release a video of Guzmán was to avoid significant civilian casualties.⁹⁵

The third lesson applied led the Mexican security forces to adapt by recognizing that Ovidio Guzmán would immediately need to be extracted by security forces from the areas under the protection and control of the Sinaloa Cartel. The failure to capture Ovidio during the first operation was partly because the security forces could not extract him from the city before criminals surrounded them. Rapid aerial exfiltration made easier by the rural environment was thus an essential adaptation.

The fourth lesson applied resulted in the government understanding it must be ready for and accept the inevitable violent backlash and prepare accordingly. This required the military and the AMLO Administration's political will to take casualties and violence. By preparing for this immediate backlash, in part by rapidly moving Ovidio Guzmán of Sinaloa Cartel-controlled territories, the Mexican government limited the ability of

the cartel to engage in a highly violent response. This would force the Sinaloa Cartel to engage in a perilous game, to inflict suffering on the local population whose support it on some level needs, as earlier research has shown, or continue pressing the government with violence.⁹⁶

Simply by engaging in this second attempt to capture Ovidio Guzmán, the Mexican government was effectively signaling that it was willing to accept any violent response by the Sinaloa Cartel. Otherwise, it would simply not have tried to arrest him. Thus, by successfully capturing, rapidly moving, and holding Ovidio Guzmán, the Mexican government was dealing a psychological blow to the Sinaloa Cartel that would deflate cartel members and, thereby, the length and level of violent response. It is also highly likely the Mexican security apparatus had its analysts assessing the level of response by the Sinaloa Cartel, which would likely determine that the Sinaloa Cartel would be constrained in the amount of violence it could use in any attempt to recapture Ovidio Guzmán based on its need for the support of the population. This would force the cartel into a calculus, a violent response versus other potential mechanisms, such as legal machinations to retrieve Ovidio Guzmán via the legal system.

As a tactical operation, *Culiacanazo 2.0* was a success for the Mexican government and military. The military was able to capture, detain, and hold Ovidio Guzmán. The stain of the embarrassment of his release in the *Culiacanazo 1.0* of 2019 had, on some level, been avenged by the government, reestablishing some level of deterrence by demonstrating Mexican government and security forces capabilities vis-à-vis violent cartels. Whether or not México can consider it a long-term operational success will also depend on the Mexican legal institutions' success in determining whether he can be extradited to the United States or by trying him successfully and legally in México and then incarcerating him for an extended period. The arrest and detention of Ovidio Guzmán is not likely to be considered a strategic success for the Mexican government insofar as the Mexican drug war will continue, and the leadership of the Chapito's faction of the Sinaloa Cartel is sufficiently decentralized that his arrest in a vacuum will have limited disruptive impact.

The authors assess that targeting the families in the military barracks as hostages in the *Culicanazo 1.0* may have been successful in that event but triggered a strong state reaction from the military.⁹⁷ It is important to note

that the military has played an essential role in Mexico's battle with organized crime. In the Cienfuegos affair, it has demonstrated that the Mexican army has political leverage and support.⁹⁸ The targeting of military families in the *Culiacanazo* 2019 was no doubt viewed as an affront and necessitated a response from the military, making the events of January 2023 inevitable.

Conclusion

Finally, a comparison of the two attempts to apprehend Ovidio Guzmán, a significant leader of the Sinaloa Cartel, supplies illuminating lessons learned. In the first attempt, a failure, the Mexican government faced the realities of poorly planned urban operations against highly organized, well-financed, violent non-state adversaries. The coordinated response by the non-state adversary suggested preplanning, strong communications, command and control, including pre-existing radio systems, a factor earlier research has shown assisted major Mexican cartels in controlling territory.⁹⁹ The urban dimension supplied many challenges. For example,

1. The well-coordinated adversary could use the city's geography, including bridges and other chokepoints such as highway toll booths, to control and cut off the flow of reinforcements to the government.
2. The urban dimension allowed the cartel to respond rapidly with many belligerent forces. In an improvised fashion, the cartel's ability to offer 20,000 pesos for every volunteer willing to fight allowed it to surge its numbers rapidly in a matter of hours. This suggests that the cartel violence has left México with a glut of willing young killers seeking employment opportunities.¹⁰⁰
3. The urban environment supplied more hostage opportunities, including the family military barracks.
4. While a lack of planning was also likely to blame, the lack of air support and air exfiltration of Ovidio Guzmán was likely a key component of the failed operation.
5. The Mexican government was more accepting of casualties and the lethality of a high-value apprehension in January 2023 than in the 2019 *Culiacanazo*. Twice as many people died, but civilian casualties and the threat to civilian lives were far lower than in the first attempt.

6. The time of day may have also aided the second response. Targeting the apprehension in the early morning may have helped to catch the cartel off guard. The time of day, combined with the rural environment, meant that much of the cartel response was not in the location of the apprehension; in other words, the Sinaloa Cartel targeted and fired upon planes to prevent Guzman's exfiltration via air but he was nowhere close to their attacks.

Taking a step back from the success of the second HVT operation, what is the strategic orientation an HVT operation fits into? These are the questions the AMLO Administration, and any future Mexican Administration must ask broadly before it engages in these strikes, lest Kingpin apprehensions appear *ad hoc* and in foreign interests (U.S. government pressure or trade related). Strategically, the Mexican government must answer this fundamental policy question before any operational lessons learned from these events will matter as part of a coherent policy to reduce violence and criminality in Mexico.

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