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Profiles of Designated Cartels

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Profiles of Designated Cartels

Overview



Figure 1. Valle de Culiacá, Sinaloa, México

On February 20, 2025, the U.S. Department of State designated eight major narcotrafficking cartels and gangs as Foreign Terrorist Organizations (FTOs) and Specially Designated Global Terrorists (SDGTs). In May 2025, the designations expanded to include the Haitian gangs Viv Ansanm (G9) and Gran Grif, and in September 2025 to Ecuador's Los Choneros and Los Lobos.

These designations trigger strict OFAC sanctions, prohibiting U.S. persons and companies from:

- a) engaging in transactions with the designated entities, or**
- b) providing any form of material support to a cartels, their leaders, or affiliates.**

The implications for commercial actors across the Americas are profound. Companies found to be directly or indirectly facilitating affiliated businesses face potential civil and criminal penalties, reputational damage, and loss of market access. These actions effectively extend U.S. counterterrorism compliance obligations into Latin America, an area where regional compliance programs have historically focused on corruption, narcotics, and AML, but not terrorism financing.

While it has long been best practice to avoid cartel-linked enterprises, the formalization of these designations has exposed critical information and monitoring gaps. Cartels are adaptive, networked, and often embedded within local economies, blurring the line between illicit and legitimate commerce. Underfunded intelligence and enforcement infrastructure in many jurisdictions further complicates effective due diligence.

This paper aims to provide risk management and compliance professionals with a concise reference on each newly designated entity, including their origins, leadership, operational footprint, and points of intersection with legitimate industries. This information is intended to guide updates to risk classification matrices, enhanced due diligence protocols, and geographic exposure assessments.



Cartel Profiles

Tren de Aragua (TdA)

Inception & Origin: Originated as a prison-based gang in Tocarón, Aragua (Venezuela), expanding in the 2010s into a transnational criminal organization.

Designation: Designated FTO/SDGT on February 20, 2025.

Leadership: Led by Héctor Rusthenford “Niño Guerrero” Guerrero Flores, sanctioned alongside multiple lieutenants by OFAC in 2025.

Commercial Crossover: Involved in human trafficking, extortion, sex exploitation, and narcotics smuggling. Media and enforcement reporting describe logistics, construction microbusinesses, and real estate as laundering channels. TdA-linked procurement networks are also tracked for precursor materials.

Documented Footprint: Presence across Venezuela, Colombia, Peru, Chile, Panama, Brazil, and emerging projections into North America.



Tren de Aragua Areas of Demonstrated Influence



Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13)

Inception & Origin: Formed in Los Angeles in the 1980s among Salvadoran migrants, later proliferated through deportations across Central America.

Designation: Designated FTO/SDGT on February 20, 2025.

Leadership: Governed by the Ranfla Nacional, a senior board with members indicted in multiple U.S. terrorism and organized crime cases.

Commercial Crossover: Beyond extortion and drug trafficking, MS-13 systematically targets transport, retail, and small business sectors. Laundering documented through used-car lots, restaurants, and property flips, with upstream drug-supply links to Mexican cartels.

Documented Footprint: Strong presence in El Salvador, Honduras, Guatemala, Mexico, and the United States, with multiple DOJ cases across U.S. federal districts.





Cártel de Sinaloa

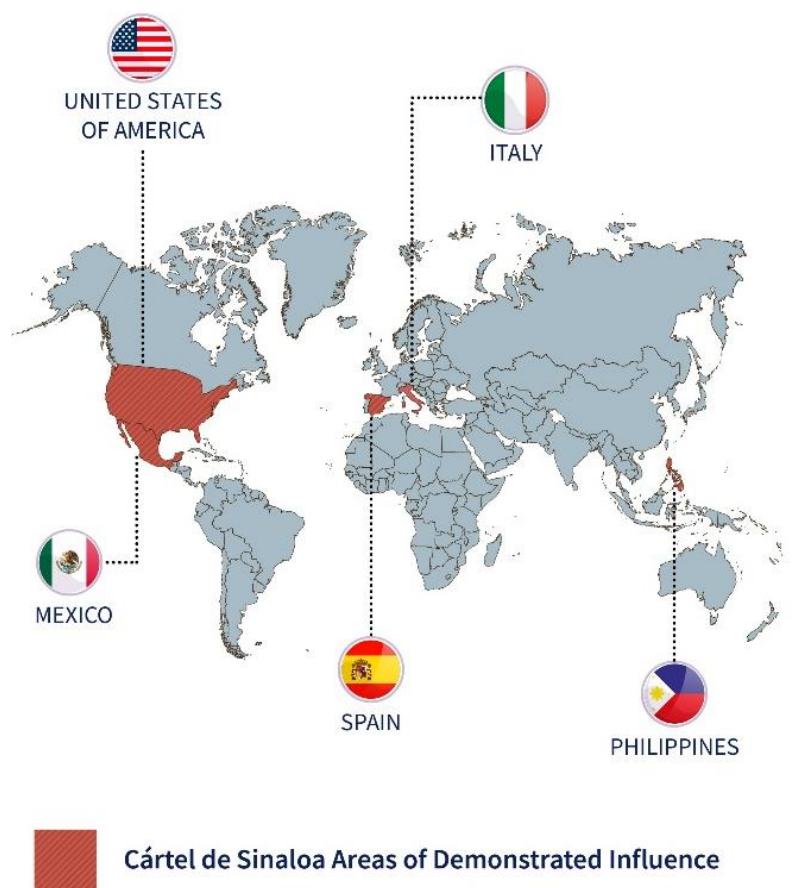
Inception & Origin: Emerged in the late 1980s from remnants of the Guadalajara Cartel.

Designation: Designated FTO/SDGT on February 20, 2025.

Leadership: Led by Ismael “El Mayo” Zambada and “Los Chapitos”, with both factions facing ongoing U.S. indictments and sanctions.

Commercial Crossover: Engaged in fentanyl, heroin, methamphetamine, and cocaine trafficking. Laundering channels include agriculture (avocados, ranching), fisheries, hospitality, mining, logistics, and real estate across Mexico’s Pacific corridor and U.S. border regions.

Documented Footprint: Core operations in Mexico, with networks extending into the U.S., South America, Europe, and Asia through global brokers.





Cártel de Jalisco Nueva Generación (CJNG)

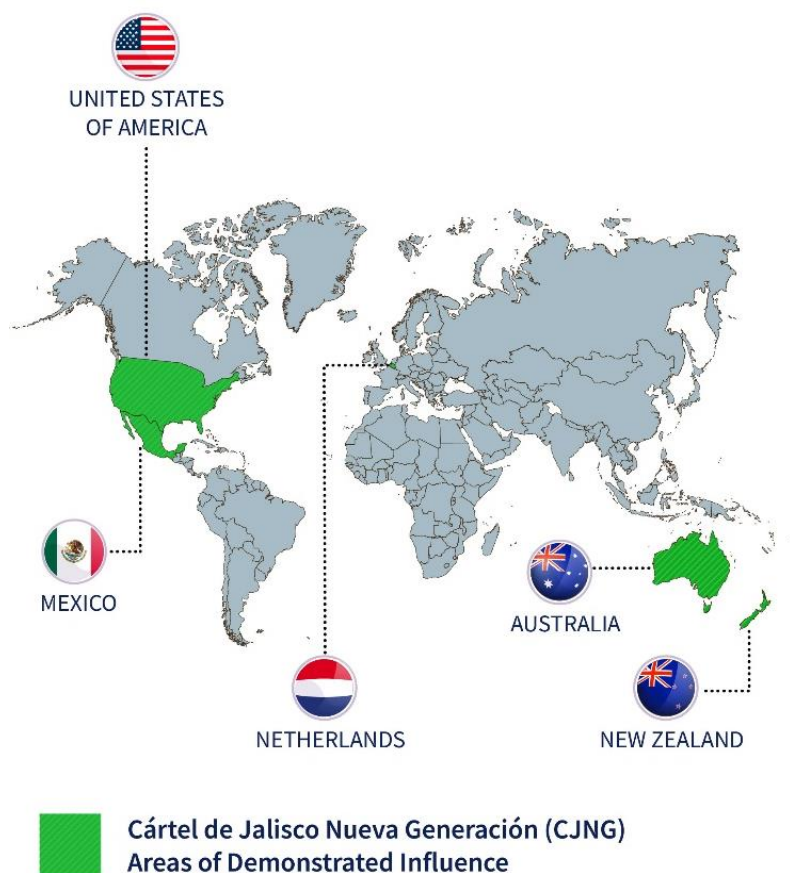
Inception & Origin: Formed around 2010 from Milenio and Valencia cartel elements.

Designation: Designated FTO/SDGT on February 20, 2025.

Leadership: Led by Nemesio “El Mencho” Oseguera Cervantes and family or regional lieutenants targeted by U.S. sanctions.

Commercial Crossover: Dominant in synthetic drug production, including fentanyl and methamphetamine. Also involved in timeshare fraud, real estate laundering, agriculture (limes, avocados), mining, construction, and logistics.

Documented Footprint: Operates across Mexico with reach into the U.S., Central and South America, Europe, Australia, and New Zealand.





Cártel del Noreste (CDN)

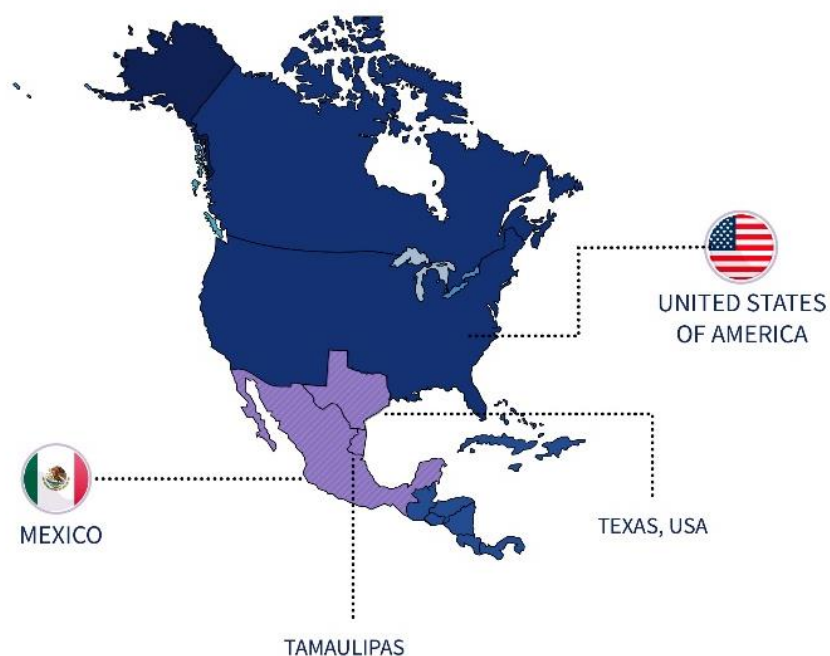
Inception & Origin: Formed from a 2014 splinter of Los Zetas.

Designation: Designated FTO/SDGT on February 20, 2025.

Leadership: Senior figures include Juan Gerardo “El Huevo” Treviño. OFAC highlights control zones around Nuevo Laredo and Laredo.

Commercial Crossover: Engages in drug trafficking, kidnapping, extortion, and fuel theft (huachicol), using logistics and warehouse firms near border crossings. Laundering is also linked to retail and real estate in Tamaulipas.

Documented Footprint: Concentrated in Tamaulipas in northeast Mexico, projecting into Texas and broader U.S. border markets.



Cártel del Noreste (CDN)
Areas of Demonstrated Influence



La Nueva Familia Michoacana (LNFM)

Inception & Origin: A successor of La Familia and Knights Templar groups consolidating in the 2010s.

Designation: Designated FTO/SDGT on February 20, 2025.

Leadership: Led by brothers Johnny (“El Pez”) and José Alfredo (“La Fresa”) Hurtado Olascoaga, sanctioned and indicted in 2024 to 2025.

Commercial Crossover: Active in methamphetamine and fentanyl production, extortion of agriculture and mining sectors, and laundering via real estate, trucking, and entertainment venues.

Documented Footprint: Present in Estado de México, Michoacán, and Guerrero, with U.S. distribution corridors.



La Nueva Familia Michoacana (LNFM)
Areas of Demonstrated Influence



Cártel del Golfo (Gulf Cartel)

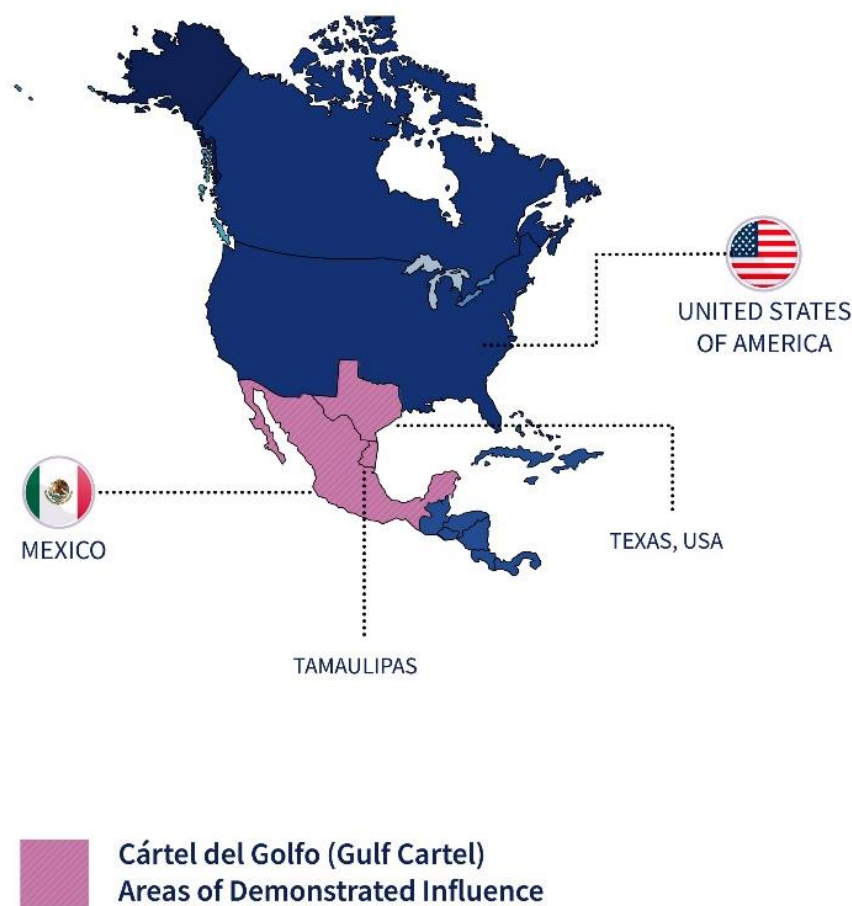
Inception & Origin: One of Mexico's oldest cartels, with origins in the 1930s.

Designation: Designated FTO/SDGT on February 20, 2025.

Leadership: Highly factionalized structure, including Cyclones and Escorpiones. Recent enforcement actions highlight violence and leadership arrests around Matamoros.

Commercial Crossover: Principal activities include cocaine and methamphetamine smuggling, human trafficking, and fuel theft. Laundering occurs via logistics, trucking, agriculture, and border real estate.

Documented Footprint: Core base in Tamaulipas, influencing Texas and U.S. distribution hubs.





Cárteles Unidos (United Cartels)

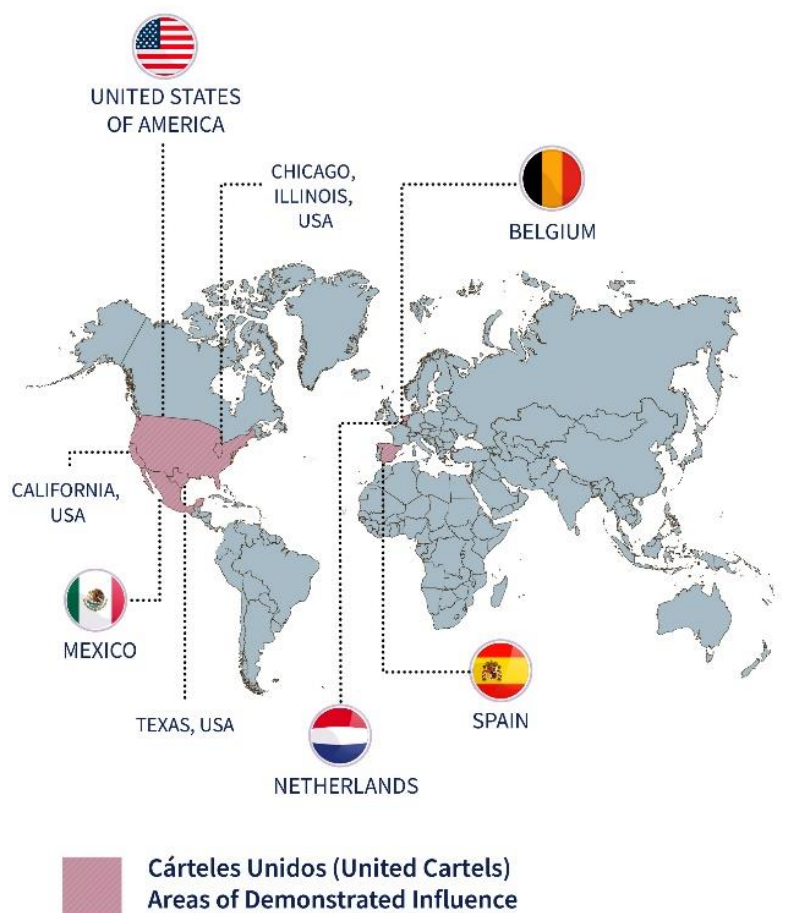
Inception & Origin: A Michoacán-based alliance that includes Los Viagras and Tepalcatepec factions, formed in the mid-2010s.

Designation: Designated FTO/SDGT on February 20, 2025.

Leadership: Regionalized structure, leaders include Juan José “El Abuelo” Farías. DOJ charges were filed in August 2025 following the FTO designation.

Commercial Crossover: Involved in synthetic drug production, extortion of agriculture, and laundering through agribusiness, logistics, construction, and real estate.

Documented Footprint: Core presence in Michoacán, with activity in Jalisco, Estado de México, and U.S.- and Europe-bound supply chains.





Gran Grif

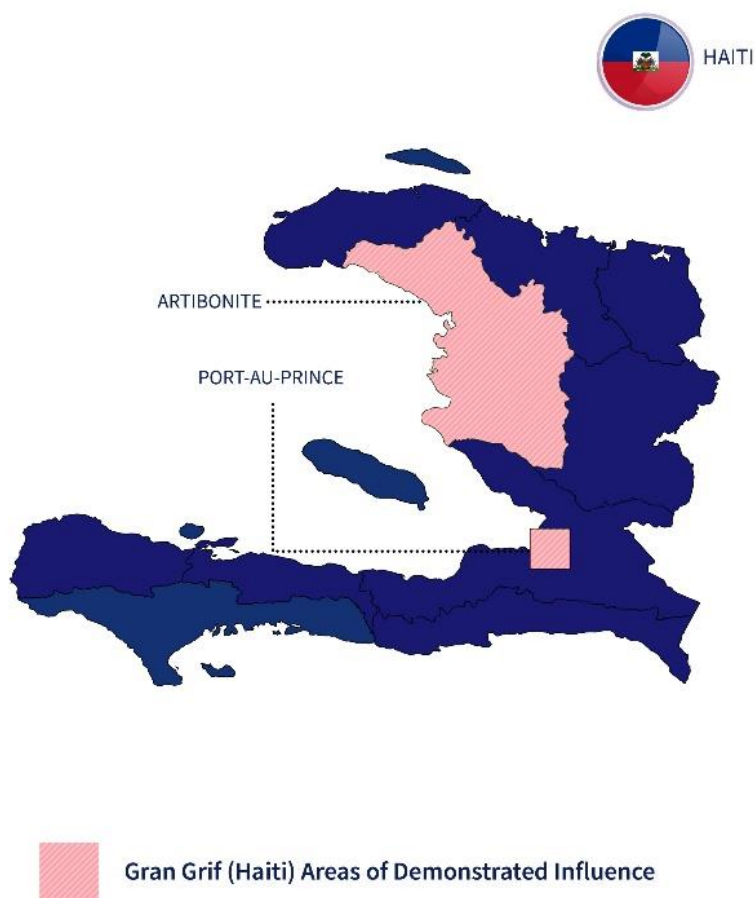
Inception & Origin: Emerged around 2016 in Artibonite, Haiti.

Designation: Designated FTO/SDGT on May 2, 2025.

Leadership: Linked to Luckson Elan and other sanctioned commanders.

Commercial Crossover: Engages in systematic extortion, river transport control, and money laundering through import or export storefronts and real estate.

Documented Footprint: Concentrated in Artibonite, with operational reach into Port-au-Prince trade corridors.





Viv Ansanm (G9 Family and Allies)

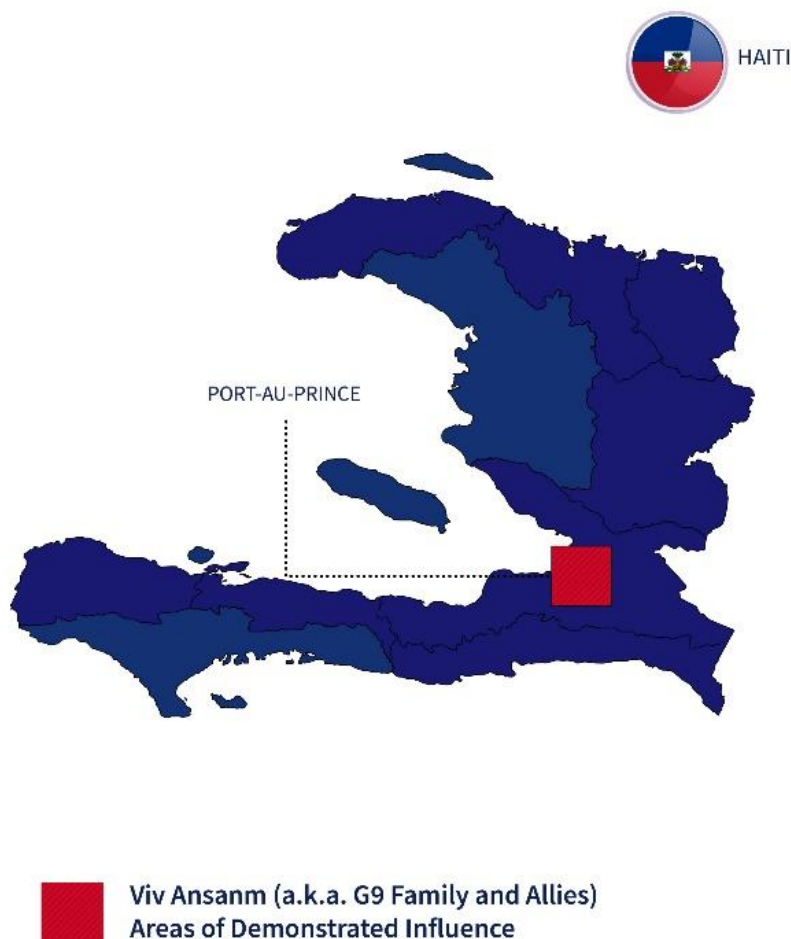
Inception & Origin: A coalition formed in September 2023.

Designation: Designated FTO/SDGT on May 2, 2025.

Leadership: Led by Jimmy “Barbecue” Chérizier, under active U.S. sanctions and criminal proceedings.

Commercial Crossover: Controls port transport, customs, and fuel depots around Port-au-Prince. Laundering via construction firms, NGO fronts, and real estate. Its control over logistics critically affects commercial and humanitarian operations.

Documented Footprint: Dominant across Port-au-Prince and surrounding communes.





Los Choneros (Ecuador)

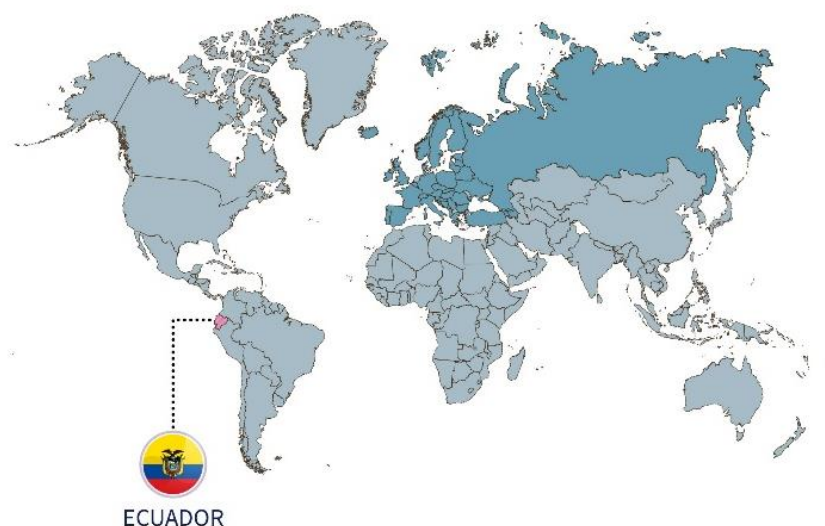
Inception & Origin: Originated in Manabí during the 1990s to 2000s.

Designation: Designated FTO/SDGT on September 4 to 5, 2025.

Leadership: Formerly led by Jorge Luis “Rasquiña” Zambrano, now under José Adolfo “Fito” Macías, extradited to U.S. custody.

Commercial Crossover: Facilitates cocaine export via banana and shrimp supply chains, with laundering through export firms and coastal real estate.

Documented Footprint: Operates in coastal Ecuador, including Guayaquil and Manabí, with transnational ties to Sinaloa and the Gulf Clan, projecting to Europe via maritime routes.



Los Choneros (Ecuador)
Areas of Demonstrated Influence



Projection to Europe via maritime routes



Los Lobos (Ecuador)

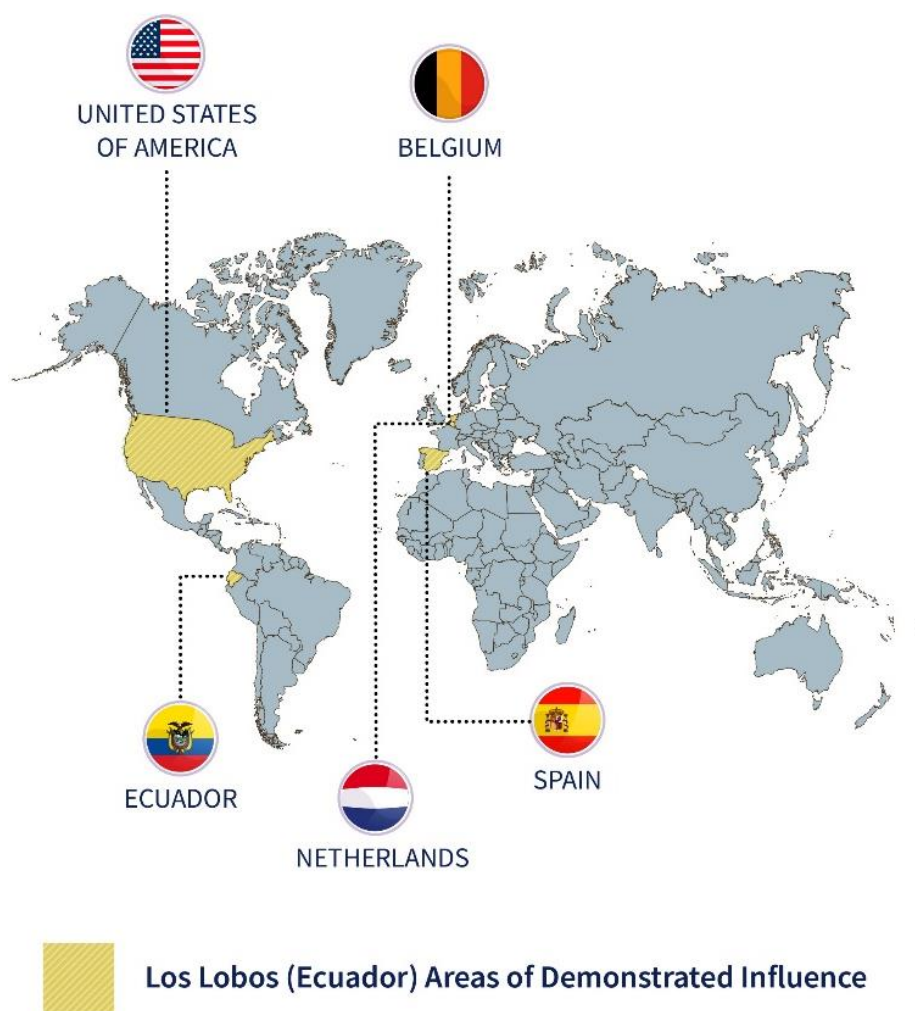
Inception & Origin: Formed in 2020 as a splinter from Los Choneros.

Designation: Designated FTO/SDGT on September 4 to 5, 2025.

Leadership: Decentralized leadership, including Fabricio Colón Pico (“El Salvaje”).

Commercial Crossover: Engages in cocaine export via containerized banana and palm-oil shipments, with laundering through real estate, bars, and car dealerships.

Documented Footprint: Active in Ecuador’s port and prison systems, including Guayas, Los Ríos, and Azuay, with routes to Europe and prior connections to CJNG and Balkan networks.





Summary and Compliance Implications

High-Risk Industries

- **Agriculture and Agribusiness:** Avocados, limes, bananas, shrimp, and palm oil are repeatedly cited in laundering and extortion schemes.
- **Logistics and Transport:** Cartels leverage freight, warehousing, customs brokerage, and port operations for movement and concealment.
- **Real Estate and Construction:** Widely used for money laundering and to consolidate territorial control.
- **Mining and Natural Resources:** Targeted for extortion and infiltration, particularly in Mexico and Ecuador.
- **Retail, Hospitality, and Entertainment:** Used as low-profile conduits for illicit finance and influence operations.
- **NGO and Social Services, Haiti:** Infiltration risks via counterfeit humanitarian organizations and development fronts.

High-Risk Jurisdictions

- **Mexico:** Michoacán, Jalisco, Tamaulipas, Guerrero, Estado de México, and Colima.
- **Central America:** El Salvador, Honduras, Guatemala.
- **South America:** Ecuador, including Guayas, Manabí, and Los Ríos, and also Peru, Colombia, and Chile.
- **Caribbean:** Haiti, including Artibonite and Port-au-Prince.
- **Cross-Border U.S. Nodes:** Texas, California, Arizona, and major port or logistics hubs with Mexican trade exposure.

Compliance Recommendations

- Conduct enhanced due diligence, EDD, for all entities with operations or counterparties in the above-listed jurisdictions.
- Integrate FTO and SDGT screening into transaction monitoring systems, not solely OFAC-based sanctions checks.
- Update risk matrices to account for non-state terrorist actors within narcotics networks.
- Establish regional intelligence partnerships and use open-source data, including press, NGO, and law enforcement reports, to identify potential red flags.
- Reinforce vendor and supply chain audits, particularly in agriculture, logistics, and real estate sectors.



Conclusion

The formal designation of these twelve cartels as FTOs and SDGTs marks a fundamental shift in how the U.S. government defines and counters transnational organized crime. For compliance and risk professionals, these developments extend terrorism-financing risk beyond traditional conflict zones and into the Western Hemisphere's core commercial corridors.

Effective compliance now requires not only sanctions screening but contextual threat mapping, specifically identifying where legitimate sectors intersect with cartel economies. Firms that proactively adapt their frameworks will not only ensure regulatory compliance but also mitigate long-term exposure to geopolitical, legal, and reputational risks.



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