

The War Against Drug Traffic and Ecocide: The Case of 'Operación Cóndor' in Sinaloa, México

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Murillo

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The war against drug trafficking and the so-called dirty war in México might seem to be one same thing but have been studied as two separate issues. Recently, a small group of scholars have been reviewing, from the political history point of view, the connection around these phenomena (Aviña 2018, 2016; Cedillo, 2018; Illades & Santiago 2014). There is, however, an overlooked area that helps to understand the complexity of the daily State formation in México: the socioenvironmental aspect. The main objective of this research is an exploration of these issues with the aid of environmental history, the socioenvironmental elements of the communist guerrillas, the counterinsurgency, and the war against drug trafficking.

These historical events could be observed from across the country but spotted in two main strategical regions. First, in the Southern states particularly Guerrero, with organizations such as el Partido de los Pobres and the Asociación Nacional Cívica Revolucionaria, and in Michoacán and Oaxaca, where the Mexican armada struck against the guerrilla and its support bases with anti-narcotics operations. Second, in the Northwest, where a similar situation occurred, but the scope of the insurgency was bigger in a regional perspective, due to Los Enfermos and the Liga Comunista 23 de Septiembre (LC23S) extended to Culiacán, the capital of Sinaloa. This region includes many fields in the central valleys and the mountainous zone known as the Golden Triangle, one of the most important areas to farm poppy and marijuana, and a strategic point for drug trafficking to the United States.

This article places Sinaloa as a case study to analyze the socioenvironmental aspects to recognize the construction process of the Mexican State's territorial hegemony and the actions taken against groups that doubted its power. To reach this objective, we analyze the years from 1974 to 1982, a period that evidence the rise of armed communism, as well as its fall, and the militarization of Sinaloa that expected to overthrow the guerrilla and reorganize the narco economy. We centered the study on the Operación Cóndor and how the State project was executed by the Army, Policía Judicial Federal (PJF) and local police, with the support of the Drug Enforce Agency (DEA) that declared the war against drug traffickers and how they committed an ecocide in the Sinaloa mountains.

Most of the historiography of México acknowledge the dirty war period (1965–1990) and the war against drugs as two different historical events, while there are some ways to address the condition and issues, in this situation both are necessary to understand the violent reality of the country. First, is the problematization, that is, who exercises violence, against whom, in what way and for what reason. Most of the studies on the area show how the Mexican State repressed political movements that questioned its hegemonic position, said condition led these groups to radicalize and subsequently rose up in arms. We start from this idea but with a historical-environmental perspective that links the rise of communist guerrillas, counterinsurgency, and the war against drug trafficking.

The common sense on the drug war matter was fueled by journalists and politicians who indicate that these historical events started in 2006, when Felipe Calderón won the presidency by electoral fraud and soon after, began a war

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against drug traffickers, having Michoacán's state as the 'laboratory' of this political project. Nevertheless, with a braudelian perspective of the '*longue duree*' (Braudel 2010). According to the Braudel premises of time as a social construct, we assume that the armed conflict initiated in the 1960s, characterized by counterinsurgency and massive drug busts, has become a medium term conflict due to its duration, since it has been active longer than fifty years we connect this 'new war' with an older one that began in the sixties, when the Mexican State implemented counterinsurgency operations, particularly on the south and northwest (Bonada 2023). Nearly simultaneously, the Army, Policía Judicial Federal and other force institutions selectively pursued drug traffickers, not to eradicate them, but to control them in a centralized way. To achieve this, they conducted various operations along the 1960–1970s decades (for example, CANADOR and Interception), most of them with the logistic and technological support of the DEA and CIA. This reached its peak in those years with the 'Operación Cóndor' (OC). It is important to emphasize that this war had its ups and downs but has stayed constant and a substantial part of the everyday Mexican State formation in its territorial/environmental matter.

The guerrilla and the drug trafficking war have been studied along from political and social history (Sánchez Parra 2013, Fernández Velázquez 2021, 2018, Cañedo 2017, Enciso 2015). However, our perspective addresses these problems as one, with a socio-environmental view. This is conceivable by the insurgent point of view, with the territorialization of the guerrillas in the Sinaloa Valleys and the Sierra Madre Occidental, the roots of the agrarian clash. By the counterinsurgency side, the Mexican State have displayed a complex technoscience operation (Cuví 2018, Picado 2018) that covered highways and barracks construction, helicopter operations and airplanes that threw herbicides (paraquat and gramoxone) to destroy poppy and marihuana fields in the Sinaloa mountains. These actions were shown by the army's occupation -comparable to the Vietnamese War- of many towns and 'rancherías', human rights violations, extrajudicial detentions, rapes, massacres, disappearances, and water and crops contamination of the zone.

This violent state from the 1970s restructured drug trafficking in México and weakened the possibilities of a left-wing armed conflict through repression and militarization on the Sinaloa's valleys and mountains that operated as a counterinsurgency tool and through the conversion of the 'gomeros' into a new and bigger enterprise that would be known in the 1980s as the 'Cartel de Guadalajara'. So, in this work, we demonstrate the braudelian principle of medium term of the drug war in Mexico with Sinaloa's case. At this point it is important to emphasize that the complexity of the region is marked by the Sierra Madre and its adjoint valleys most territorialization, so, the main issue we present is an investigation advance centered only on Sinaloa. Our goal is to understand how the Mexican State applied socio-environmental strategies in Sinaloa to reinforce its hegemony against communist guerrilla and drug traffickers. To understand this process, we take The OC as a case study.

Communist Insurgency and its Link to the War against Drug Traffic

Before analyzing the guerrilla issue and the anti-narcotic operations, it is necessary to provide some background of drug's environment previous the 1970s. Authors like Astorga and Fernández Velázquez (Astorga 2016; Fernández Velázquez 2018, 9) highlighted that during the first half of the century, poppy and marijuana crops were not hidden in the mountains, and could be found near Culiacán. However, the main business was in the 'other' Sinaloa, known as 'Los Altos' on a mountain range that reached more than 3000 meters above sea level. The business was led by the municipalities neighbors from Badiraguato and its rancherías. These men were known as 'gomeros', who traveled from there to Culiacán for contacting and sell the product they had and then shipped to the border of the United States (Fernández Velázquez 2018, 13).

The marijuana and poppy crops were not the only source of income in Los Altos but were the most important considering the low monetary value that represented a little region to the Mexican State. The real interest of the State and Sinaloa's bourgeois was placed into the rich valleys, characterized by a great availability of water from the rivers that have their origins – paradoxically- in the forgotten mountain towns. Most of the agricultural infrastructure was in Guasave, Los Mochis, Culiacán and other near valleys. The unfairness of the situation forced many residents of Los Altos to work in the tomato (Culiacán Valley), cotton (Guasave) and other fields (Fernández Velázquez 2018, 11).

Drug cropping expanded to the mountains – as did repression and massacres. An example of this occurred in April

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1971, before the Operación Cóndor, the biggest anti narcotic operation in the twentieth century, when, under the pretext of fighting drug trafficking, the Army struck against the El Realito village in Santiago de los Caballeros, Badiraguato (one of the main centers for drug cropping in México). According to El Informador, some troopers were ambushed when they accessed to El Realito. On the gunfire, one of them deceased and another got injured, meanwhile, twelve villagers were murdered (El Informador 1971). Days later, was popular knowledge that among the events casualties were found four women and two children (El Informador, 1971). These events were far from being isolated. Since those years to the present, the Mexican State would commit multiple massacres, rapes, among other acts to subdue communities (Bonada, 2022a). In addition, it is important to highlight the number of victims on both sides due to most of the times, civilian casualties were greater than those from the law forces.

On 1972, the army launched Operation Canador, a predecessor project for the OC. Under a signed document from the Secretary of Defense, Hermenegildo Cuenca Díaz, duties were established, said duties were meant to grow by the time, among them was the collaboration between the Army, PJF, Procuraduría General de la República (PGR) and other local forces to explore and destroy crops and laboratories, to accomplish it, the army brought 52 infantry battalions and 20 cavalry regiments under the jurisdiction of the 35th military zone, amid other forces. In addition to that, the Mexican Air Force equipped with eight Fight Squads, three of transportation, one recognition, one Light Bombardment and one of Search and Rescue, was being distributed in eight air bases which would be working in 28 military zones distributed among the Mexican geography, with special emphasis On the Country's north (SEDENA, 1972).

Meanwhile, in Culiacán and many cities of Sinaloa, the Liga Comunista 23 de Septiembre (LC23S) built a solid organization in the Universidad Autónoma de Sinaloa (UAS), while, 'Los Enfermos' was a clandestine group, part of the LC23S and had its stronghold in the university. Their main goal was to articulate peasants' struggles across valleys and mountains of the state and install an armed revolution as a way to transform the capitalist State into a socialist one.

Scholars like Sánchez Parra (2013) and Adela Cedillo (2018) have studied this process. In *Estudiantes a las armas*, Sánchez Parra analyzes the transformation of the student movement in the UAS to an armed guerrilla that tried to deploy an armed struggle. On the other hand, Cedillo was articulating an attempt to build a guerrilla focus on the Golden Triangle between 1973–1975.

The projects that established a guerrilla uprising in Sinaloa are linked by the agricultural context, characterized by the agrarian reform failure and the subsequent land concentration, where, Los Enfermos, a communist student organization of the Universidad Autónoma de Sinaloa and the Liga Comunista 23 de Septiembre saw an opportunity to build a social support to the upcoming revolution, so they attempted to the agrarian struggle front and conduct their demands towards a communist uprising.

On October 28, 1973, said organizations attempted to articulate a general strike on the state that would allow guerrilla warfare in a Leninist sense (Periódico Madera, 1974), where a brigade of Los Enfermos arranged an express meeting in a farmer strike and with the workers aid, ambushed the police and injured two of them (Periódico Madera, 1974). This would be an experiment of what they achieved in January 1974, that was the major guerrilla's maneuver in Mexico before the Zapatista uprising, known as the 'sky assault'.

This occurred from January the 16th to 18th, in 1974, when the LC23S and Los Enfermos arranged an armed attack through many farmlands on the key valleys of Sinaloa, with gunfire and Molotov cocktails strikes on the streets of Culiacán. Those maneuvers were supported by guerrilla cells in some cities of Sonora. The main objective was to provoke the repressive forces of the State and articulate an urban/rural guerrilla in the Sonora and Sinaloa valleys (DIPS, 1974) and line it up to a guerrilla focus on the Sonora, Sinaloa and Chihuahua mountains, a military surveillance zone and the presence of drug traffickers. These events did not go unnoticed by the U.S. Embassy. In their report of January the 18th, they reported to the Department of State the actions implemented by around 300 members of the LC23S, the shootouts in Culiacán's downtown, the burning of crops and the movement of troops to control the uprising (U.S. Embassy in México 1974).

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To close this section, it is necessary to ask why the LC23S chose the northwest farmers as key participants in the insurgency? The Mexican revolution and the ejido (common land) project failed on the land distribution and maintained a landowner class that concentrated the best soil, water, and technology, so, the LC23S and the UAS students saw allies that could potentially help them to set up a social revolution with an epicenter in the northwest. However, their goals were not achieved within other things, because of their logistic limitations and the inequity of forces with the repressive enforcement. The sky assault was the peak of the guerrilla warfare in Sinaloa, since then, a significant deterioration began, caused by repression and militarization. Paradoxically, the drug business was growing, despite anti-narcotic operations. The years after the sky assault would be distinguished by military operations that would prepare the field to a permanent militarization in Sinaloa, with the war against drugs as pretext.

The Concept of Ecocide in the Context of the War against Drug Traffic in México

The war against drugs is an emerging study field in environmental historiography (Bonada 2023, 2022a, 2022b, 2018). It is a complex process where many edges converge. In the Operación Cóndor case, we perceived the counterinsurgency, the militarization and the paradoxical drug cropping activity growth along the decade as the anti-narcotic operations were expanded when The Mexican State, with the United States' aid, added more troops and technology. This last matter is important in the understanding of the socio-environmental impacts of the war against drugs and, to grasp this affair, we need some analytic tools provided by the environmental history of wars.

In most of the 20th century wars, chemical weapons like mustard gas or napalm have been used to attack humans, nevertheless, this changed with the green revolution and the subsequent use of herbicides as tools to destroy enemy domains. The conjunctural affair was the Vietnam war and the U.S. Army's strains. According to Oastsvall (2013, 433), this condition requires a high-tech solution to destroy the dense jungles that functioned as shelters of the Vietcong. On this matter, the defoliation chemicals, along with herbicides and napalm were a useful weapon of counterinsurgency and environmental warfare, however, its width was limited considering the guerrillas succeeded despite the Vietnam's massive environment destruction. The impact and usage of these weapons opened a scientific discussion, hence the emerging of ecocide as a concept which is useful in this study.

In Latin American environmental history, technoscience as an idea has been designed to analyze chemicals handling in the green revolution, acknowledged as part of the Cold War (Cuvi 2018, Picado 2018). In this work the definition of technoscience is taken as the linking process amid science and knowledge production to solve problems. Authors like Cuvi (2018) consider technoscience development as a construction of colonial power in many ways as training and extracting traditional knowledge, producing maps, reports, books and many other science products to grasp their goals (2). In the war against drugs case, in Sinaloa, technoscience appeared in plan operations, intelligence reports, operation bases building, roads and helicopters usage, airplanes, radars, chemicals and many other tools to localize and destroy marijuana and poppy fields, laboratories and warehouses to be used by the Mexican Army, also the laboratories and warehouses, regarding the army actions, Javier Puente (2018) provides important ideas to understand the occupied communities perspective. In his work on the Peruvian armed conflict, the author states that the society saw the law forces as occupation and internal colonization, considered that the Peruvian State militarized and controlled the daily life of the towns in the war zone, committed many war crimes.

On January 16th, 1977, the Secretary of Defense, General Félix Galván, accompanied by civil and military chiefs, started the biggest anti-drug effort in México's history: The Operación Cóndor. This project consisted in a deployment of Army, PJF, state policies in the states of Chihuahua, Durango, and Sinaloa, being the IX military zone in Culiacán, the Capital of Sinaloa, the main base. The government announced with special emphasis the use of technology, with the employment of gramoxone (also known as paraquat) to destroy marihuana fields, and DMA-6 to be used against poppy. General Galván assured that fumigation by air could destroy 55 hectares in one day (El Noroeste 1977 C). This strategy was focused on the mountain areas of the three states that would be known as the Golden Triangle, being Badiraguato in Sinaloa, one of the key municipalities ever since the high production of poppy and weed started. Nevertheless, the valleys also had an important presence of the army by reason of the terrestrial transit to get to the U.S. by highway 15 and by air, with the use of clandestine airfields coming from the mountains.

By the condition of the OC, and how it was conducted, we can acknowledge that the Mexican state can be said to

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have engaged in criminality due to a couple factors. First, according to the human rights activist Salomón Monárrez, the destruction of the drug cultivated fields attended to the bribes paid to army members. It occurred that in certain towns the narcotics were ravaged while others remain intact (Cañedo 2017, 104). Secondly, it has to do with the human rights violations with many cases of rapes, murders, enforced displacement and disappearances, economic impact (Cañedo 2017, 104) and the socioenvironmental impacts of the campaign as depopulation, pollution and health impacts by the usage of chemicals. Below we will expand these issues.

This operation unleashed a wave of violence in Culiacán, the capital of Sinaloa, with 17 murders in only two weeks (El Noroeste 1977 A). Two months after the action began, Alfredo Reyes, deputy chief of Policía Judicial of Sinaloa was murdered (Fernández Velázquez 2018, 72). Meanwhile, in the Golden Triangle, the Guadalupe Hidalgo community, in Chihuahua, reported multiple crimes, such as disappearance, pillage and rape of women, all perpetrated by the Army and PJF, the main institutions involved on the OC. Members of the community stated to other authorities and the media that most of the people around were drug traffickers, but they were honest people. Also, they expressed that some traffickers had threatened them into seed marijuana or poppy. Those accusations reached to the president José López Portillo, who paid a visit to the town (El Informador 1978). These characteristic actions of the occupation armies (Puente 2018) were more intense in the towns by the mountain. The harassment to the region provoked an important exodus to the main economic centers of Sinaloa: Los Mochis, Culiacán and Mazatlán (Fernández Velázquez 2021, 208), which also meant the abandonment of their families, stock, and land (Fernández Velázquez 2021), so this migration was sheltered on the outskirts with a shortage of infrastructure.

Despite the facts, the campaign leaders were very optimistic, such an extent that they announced, barely a month into the operation, its ended up until May of that same year. In Badiraguato, the main base in the Golden Triangle, General Hernández Toledo reported the actions of 2,300 soldiers and federal agents in the area, like the capture of 42 drug traffickers, the destruction of 4,543 poppy and 713 of marihuana plantations, 100 tons of marihuana, five kilos of poppy, the seizure of thousands of guns (The governor Alfonso G. Calderón pointed that that quantity was enough for a small revolution) vehicles and tools. On the other hand, the general attorney, Aguilar Garza presumed the use of the most advanced technology with an extensive communications network, radars, helicopters, fumigation airplanes and the work of pilots and agronomists (El Noroeste 1977 B). In this sense, it is important to highlight the technoscience concept as an apparatus articulated by scientists, knowledge and tools applied in a 'war against drugs', that really was a war to reaffirm the Mexican State territorial hegemony through actors that can question it.

By mid-1977, the government announced the second phase of OC, with new commanders (CIA 1977). By October, more than 3000 troops arrived at Sinaloa to support the army and federal forces (El Informador 1977 B). These movements didn't change the negative impacts in the mountains. Following Cañedo (2017) and Fernández Velázquez (2018), we say that OC performed as a restructuration of drug business in México, but mainly in the northwest. It also worked as a counterinsurgency maneuver that militarized areas like Sonora, Sinaloa, and Chihuahua (with an important guerrilla presence) in the highlight years of these movements. Along with further social conflicts that changed their fighting repertoires, going from social revolution to the lookup for missing people in counterinsurgency and drug war context.

This can be seen in October 1977, when a group of 300 students of UAS, Tecnológico de Culiacán and Escuela Normal manifested in the streets of Culiacán to denounce the disappearance of eight students (SEDENA 1977 A). One month later, the contingent grew to 700 people that arrived at the government palace and had a political rally. After that, some students made graffities with slogans like 'MUERA LA OPERACIÓN CÓNDOR' (SEDENA 1977 B). The manifestations against war on drugs would relate to the search of disappeared and political prisoners of the dirty war, emerging organizations such as the Comité Nacional Pro Defensa de Presos, Perseguidos, Desaparecidos y Exiliados Políticos and the regional support to the candidate for presidency, Rosario Ibarra de Piedra, in 1982.

To close this section, it is important to make a balance of the impacts of the war against drugs in the region. According to the Comisión de Defensa de los Derechos Humanos en Sinaloa, the OC generated 100,000 displaced people in the three target states, Sinaloa being the most critical. In the years from 1976 to 1977, they documented, by the press, fourteen cases of power abuses (the campaign extended to the middle eighties). On the other hand, the Culiacán bar association made a study in the Sinaloa Social Rehabilitation Institute and found that 457 of a group of

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1,300 prisoners for 'crimes against health ' were tortured (Cañedo 2017, 101).

In the 21st century, with a new phase of the war against drugs commanded by the president Felipe Calderón, these consequences will be called 'daños colaterales ' ("collateral damage '), a concept that will be used in the present and can be read in a Marxist sense of the commodity fetishism as the concealment of the violence exercised by the State. Also, we can commemorate the famous phrase of the 18th brumaire of Louis Bonaparte that says: 'Hegel remarks somewhere that all great world-historic facts and personages appear, so to speak, twice. He forgot to add: the first time as tragedy, the second time as farce (Marx 1907, 5). This can be seen with the contrast of OC and Calderón's war against drugs: An ambitious project that sought to end drug trafficking definitively with a military perspective. However, the government's actions only left a country with thousands of murders, missing people, displacements and multiple human rights violations. In the Mexican case, more than two wars against drugs is in reality only one war, the one that the State made to stand for its territorial hegemony.

The war against drugs but particularly the Operación Condor can be appraised as an ecocide, in summary, due to the depopulation, farming fields destruction –legal and illegal ones– (CIA 1979) and human rights violations (where, in this context, communities are considered as part of the environment) articulated by a scientist group commanded by the Secretary of Defense and executed by the armada, the federal and state police forces. The chemical element is substantial in the understanding of the anti-narcotic operations new phase, even though the Academia Mexicana de Derecho Ecológico apprised that the manipulation of defoliants might cause serious health consequences in humans (such as liver and kidney diseases and might be linked to be a cause for Parkinson's disease, according to the European Union (Proceso 2022, 2023)). US Drug Enforcement Agency and the Mexican government officers chose to reject said allegations (Cañedo 2017, 102).

This issue still has relevance, because paraquat is yet planned to be used by the Mexican army to destroy poppy and marijuana crops, being the Mountain range of Guerrero the most affected by these actions, and one of the main boosters of the paraquat handling was Alejandro Gertz Manero, the Fiscalía General de la República chief (Proceso 2023, 2022).

Conclusions

The main goal for this chapter was to give some notes to develop a socio-environmental link between the Mexican guerrillas, counterinsurgency, and the war against drugs and to work and understand the so-called dirty war and the war against drugs as one historical event from an environmental history perspective. Hence, we assert that the evidence reinforces the argument of a medium term (Braudel 2010) armed conflict in México, with the Northwest rise of guerrillas (the 'Asalto al Cuartel Madera' in September 1965), the counterinsurgency in places like Guerrero during the seventies and the various anti-narcotic operations which culminated with the Operación Cóndor at the end of the decade and, On later years, the counterinsurgency/war against drugs would be extended across the country and endured until nowadays.

Nevertheless, the resistance against the State's violence in Sinaloa will endure through the years, passing from guerrillas to the civil organizations that counteracted the State's repression and looked for the disappeared and political prisoners. The pending issues would be the development of the relationship between the drug traffic and the State, the left-wing organizations reinvention and their work in a more violent context. From a technoscience perspective is important to go deeper into the uses and consequences of chemicals, the impacts into forced migration areas and regions permanent militarization like the Golden Triangle.

The Sinaloa and the northwest of México militarization continued along the next decades. Officially, the Operación Cóndor concluded on the first years of the 1980s, nonetheless, it kept its activities with other names. From the social movements point of view, the process changed the struggles in Sinaloa. For example, in 1974, the LC23S deployed guerrilla actions in Culiacán's Valley and other cities, like Navojoa and Hermosillo, to prepare a regional uprising. At the end of the decade, the social movement's main goal was the search for missing people and political prisoners from the counterinsurgency and the war against drugs.

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As for the connection among the State forces, organized crime and the Golden triangle area, until the 1980s, the OC reinforced the power of the first by its controlling with the armada and police forces, the action lead to one of the most important results on the reconfiguration of the organized crime, which was the 'Cártel de Guadalajara' creation, that became the main drug trafficking organization in said decade, and was the precedent of other 'cartels' (Zavala 2018) like Tijuana, Sinaloa and Juárez.[1] In the present, the Golden Triangle continues one of the two main areas for poppy and marijuana growth. Meanwhile, In the beginning of the twenty-first century, the violence in the mountains and valleys had grown since the renewal of the war against drugs executed by Felipe Calderón, president from 2006 to 2012, said war caused, along those years, a conflict that left many murders, disappearances and forced displacements caused by the hostilities engage among rival organizations and the State forces. Nowadays, the situation still faces problems regarding violence. nonetheless, the state of war in México is an historical event with decades of struggles between the State and groups that supposedly jeopardized its hegemonic power in the territory.

For environmental history, the changes and consequences gained from launching a war against drugs in Mexico is an ongoing task. Nevertheless, this investigation spotlights some socioenvironmental consequences left by the country's the armed conflict, as the mentioned State's armed strategy to reorganize the drug trafficking organizations and at the same time extinguish Marxist insurgencies. On the other hand, it is precise to highlight how said organizations responded by changing their relations with the State. Finally, it is necessary to observe the transformation of the struggle horizons, on account of the socialist construction, in was imperative to create a movement towards the search for missing persons and the release of political prisoners.

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Notes

[1] Some authors like Zavala, consider the word 'cartel' as a conceptual construct used by United States agencies to address a drug trafficking group that has total industry's monopoly. on the other side, they believe that it is imperative to use instead terms like criminal groups or companies

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