

Cartels as Quasi-State Actors: From Criminal Enterprise to Regime-Like Power

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I. Introduction

Transnational criminal organizations, commonly referred to as cartels, are traditionally understood as profit-driven illicit networks engaged in trafficking, extortion, and violence. However, modern analysis in security studies and international law recognizes that some cartels evolve beyond conventional criminality.

In certain environments, these organizations begin to exercise territorial control, social regulation, and political influence, functioning in ways that resemble quasi-state or regime-like entities, though they lack formal sovereignty under international law.

II. Definitional Framework

1. Transnational Criminal Organization (TCO)

A transnational criminal organization is an entity that:

- Operates across national borders
- Engages in coordinated illegal activity
- Maintains structured hierarchy and continuity

2. Non-State Armed Group (NSAG)

A non-state armed group refers to:

- Organized groups capable of sustained violence

- Actors not formally part of a government
- Participants in irregular or asymmetric conflict

3. Quasi-State Actor

A quasi-state actor:

- Exercises de facto governance over territory
- Provides services or enforces rules
- Mimics state functions without legal recognition

4. Parallel Governance

A parallel governance structure exists where:

- A non-state entity replaces or competes with the state
- Civilian life is regulated outside formal institutions

III. Operational Characteristics of Cartel Governance

Cartels that evolve toward regime-like behavior typically demonstrate the following:

A. Territorial Control

- Establish checkpoints and enforce geographic boundaries
- Restrict movement of civilians and rivals

B. Monopoly on Violence

- Maintain armed wings with military-grade capability
- Use coercion to ensure compliance

C. Economic Regulation

- Impose “taxation” through extortion
- Control local markets, labor, and trade routes

D. Social Services and Legitimacy

- Provide food, housing, or financial aid
- Resolve disputes in lieu of courts

E. Political Influence

- Coerce or bribe public officials
- Influence or manipulate elections
- In rare cases, place affiliates into formal office

IV. Case Studies

1. Mexico: Cartels as Parallel Authorities

The Sinaloa Cartel and Jalisco New Generation Cartel:

- Exercise control over municipalities
- Provide goods and enforce local order
- Compete directly with state authority

Analysis:

These organizations represent quasi-state actors exercising parallel governance, though they do not achieve formal political legitimacy.

2. Colombia: Criminal Actor to Political Actor

The Medellín Cartel under Pablo Escobar:

- Built infrastructure for marginalized communities
- Cultivated public support
- Achieved election to national office

Analysis:

This case demonstrates direct penetration of formal political systems, a rare but critical example of cartel influence approaching governance.

3. Italy: Embedded Criminal Power

The Cosa Nostra:

- Operates through long-term political infiltration
- Influences legal and economic institutions
- Avoids overt territorial governance

Analysis:

Represents a model of covert political integration rather than overt regime formation.

V. Pathway to Regime-Like Behavior

The transformation from cartel to quasi-governing force generally follows this trajectory:

1. Illicit economic foundation (drug trade, trafficking)
2. Expansion through violence and territorial control

3. Establishment of civilian dependency
4. Development of governance functions
5. Political infiltration or influence

VI. Legal and International Constraints

Despite regime-like characteristics, cartels:

- Are not recognized as sovereign states under international law
- Lack legitimacy under frameworks such as the United Nations system
- Are typically classified as criminal or insurgent entities

However, their activities may implicate:

- Human rights violations
- Armed conflict thresholds
- Crimes associated with organized violence

VII. Conclusion

Cartels can evolve into entities that functionally resemble regimes, exercising control over territory, populations, and economic systems. Through coercion, service provision, and political infiltration, they may achieve de facto authority comparable to governance structures.

Nevertheless, they remain non-state actors without lawful sovereignty, operating in a space best described as quasi-state or parallel governance systems. Understanding this distinction is essential for legal analysis, policy development, and international response.

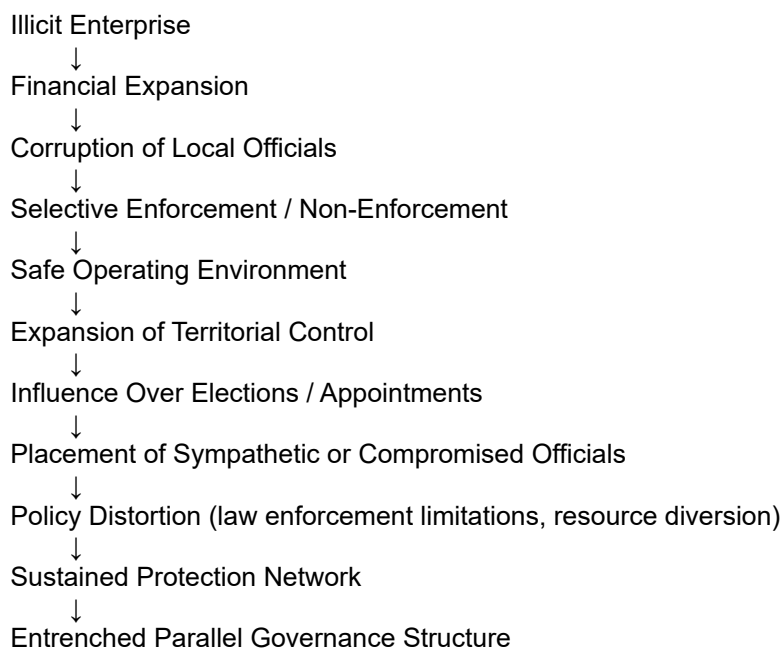
“While transnational criminal organizations lack formal recognition as sovereign entities, their capacity to exercise sustained territorial control, regulate civilian life, and influence political systems supports their classification as quasi-state actors exhibiting regime-like characteristics within the modern security landscape.”

I. Core Escalation Model (Cartel → Quasi-State Actor)



II. Political Support / Capture Overlay

This version explicitly integrates the role of political actors:



III. Combined Legal Framing Model

For a more formal presentation:



IV. Key Legal Concepts

- “De facto control” → at territorial stage
- “Monopoly on violence” → enforcement stage
- “Parallel governance” → civilian regulation
- “State capture” → political influence phase
- “Quasi-state actor” → final classification

V. The progression illustrated above demonstrates how a transnational criminal organization may evolve from an illicit enterprise into a quasi-state actor through the accumulation of economic power, territorial control, and political influence, including the potential complicity or support of public officials.

I. Core Escalation Model (Cartel → Quasi-State Actor)

Illicit Economic Activity



Capital Accumulation (drug trade, trafficking)



Recruitment & Armament



Targeted Violence & Intimidation



Territorial Control (checkpoints, restricted zones)



Monopoly on Force within Territory



Economic Regulation (extortion, “taxation”)



Civilian Dependency (jobs, aid, protection)



Parallel Governance (rules, dispute resolution)



Political Influence (coercion, bribery, leverage)



Political Protection / Complicity



Modern Mexican/Hispanic Conflict, US Territory

“Based on reports, Mexican political parties have been setting up outreach networks and operating out of **Texas** to court expat voters for elections. Additionally, reports from 2017 indicated that some Mexican politicians accused of corruption had fled to Texas.

- **Political Outreach:** Mexican political parties, including those involved in the 2024 election, established networks in Texas, particularly in Dallas, to engage voters living in the U.S..
- **Corruption Allegations:** There have been reports of Mexican politicians fleeing to Texas to avoid prosecution for corruption charges, according to the Texas Public Radio.
- **Consulate Activity:** Mexican consulates in Texas, such as in El Paso, are actively involved in binational affairs and assisting Mexican workers.
- **Drug Cartel Ties (2025):** The U.S. government has been reported to be tracking Mexican politicians with alleged ties to drug cartels, with investigations spanning from Tamaulipas to Sinaloa, Quintana Roo, Chiapas, Guerrero, and Michoacán.”

Border States Conflict

Summary:

At this time, the Union of Saints supports the continued revocation of visas and affirms the government’s ongoing actions in furtherance of this process.