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## The Perceived Car Bomb Threat in Mexico

By Scott Stewart

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On April 5, Mexican newspaper El Universal reported that a row of concrete Jersey barriers was being emplaced in front of the U.S. Consulate General in Monterrey, Mexico. The story indicated that the wall was put in to block visibility of the facility, but being only about 107 centimeters (42 inches) high, such barriers do little to block visibility. Instead, this modular concrete wall is clearly being used to block one lane of traffic in front of the consulate in an effort to provide the facility with some additional standoff distance from the avenue that passes in front of it.

Due to the location and design of the current consulate building in Monterrey, there is only a narrow sidewalk separating the building's front wall from the street and very little distance between the front wall and the building. This lack of standoff has been long noted, and it was an important factor in the decision to build a new consulate in Monterrey (construction began in June 2010 and is scheduled to be completed in January 2013).

The U.S. Consulate in Monterrey has been targeted in the past by cartels using small arms and grenades. The last grenade attack near the consulate was in October 2010. However, the Jersey barriers placed in front of the consulate will do little to protect the building against small arms

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fire, which can be directed at portions of the building above the perimeter wall, or grenades, which can be thrown over the wall. Rather, such barriers are used to protect facilities against an attack using a car bomb, or what is called in military and law enforcement vernacular a vehicle-borne improvised explosive device (VBIED).

That such barriers have been employed (or re-employed, really, since they have been used before at the U.S. Consulate in Monterrey) indicates that there is at least a perceived VBIED threat in Mexico. The placement of the barriers was followed by a Warden Message issued April 8 by the U.S. Consulate General in Monterrey warning that “the U.S. government has received uncorroborated information Mexican criminal gangs may intend to attack U.S. law enforcement officers or U.S. citizens in the near future in Tamaulipas, Nuevo Leon and San Luis Potosi.” It is quite possible that the placement of the barriers at the consulate was related to this Warden Message.

The Mexican cartels have employed improvised explosive devices (IEDs) in the past, but the devices have been small. While their successful employment has shown that the cartels could deploy larger devices if they decided to do so, there are still some factors causing them to avoid using large VBIEDs.

### Some History

The use of IEDs in Mexico is nothing new. Explosives are plentiful in Mexico due to their widespread use in the country’s mining and petroleum sectors. Because of Mexico’s strict gun laws, it is easier and cheaper to procure explosives — specifically commercial explosives such as Tovex — in Mexico than it is firearms. We have seen a number of different actors use explosive devices in Mexico, including left-wing groups such as the Popular Revolutionary Army and its various splinters, which have targeted banks and commercial centers (though usually at night and in a manner intended to cause property damage and not human casualties). An anarchist group calling itself the Subversive Alliance for the Liberation of the Earth, Animals and Humans has also employed a large number of small IEDs against banks, insurance companies, car dealerships and other targets.

Explosives have also played a minor role in the escalation of cartel violence in Mexico. The first cartel-related IED incident we recall was the Feb. 15, 2008, premature detonation of an IED in Mexico City that investigators concluded was likely a failed assassination attempt against a high-ranking police official. Three months later, in May 2008, there was a rash of such assassinations in Mexico City targeting high-ranking police officials such as Edgar Millan Gomez, who at the time of his death was Mexico’s highest-ranking federal law enforcement officer. While these assassinations were conducted using firearms, they supported the theory that the Feb. 15, 2008, incident was indeed a failed assassination attempt.

Mexican officials have frequently encountered explosives, including small amounts of military-grade explosives and far larger quantities of commercial explosives, when they have uncovered arms caches belonging to the cartels. But it was not until July 2010 that IEDs began to be employed by the cartels with any frequency.

On July 15, 2010, in Juarez, Chihuahua state, the enforcement wing of the Juarez cartel, known as La Linea, remotely detonated an IED located inside a car as federal police agents were responding to reports of a dead body inside a car. The attack killed two federal agents, one municipal police officer and an emergency medical technician and wounded nine other people. Shortly after this well-coordinated attack, La Linea threatened that if the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration and Federal Bureau of Investigation did not investigate and remove the chief of the Chihuahua state police intelligence unit — who La Linea claimed was working for the Sinaloa Federation — the group would deploy a car bomb containing 100 kilograms (220 pounds) of explosives. The threat proved to be an empty one, and since last July, La Linea has deployed just one additional IED, which was discovered by police on Sept. 10, 2010, in Juarez.

The Sept. 10 incident bore a striking resemblance to the July 15 Juarez bombing. The device was hidden in a vehicle parked near another vehicle that contained a dead body that was reported to police. The Sept. 10 device appears to have malfunctioned, since it did not detonate as first responders arrived. The device was noticed by authorities and rendered safe by a Mexican military explosive ordnance disposal team. This device reportedly contained a main charge of 16 kilograms of Tovex, and while that quantity of explosives was far smaller than the 100-kilogram device La Linea threatened to employ, it was still a significant step up in size from the July 15 IED. Based upon the amount of physical damage done to buildings and other vehicles in the area where the device exploded, and the lack of a substantial crater in the street under the vehicle containing the device, the July 15 IED appears to have contained at most a couple of kilograms of explosives.

Seemingly taking a cue from La Linea, the Gulf cartel also began deploying IEDs in the summer of 2010 against law enforcement targets it claimed were cooperating with Los Zetas, which is currently locked in a heated battle with the Gulf cartel for control of Mexico's northeast (see the map here for an understanding of cartel geographies). Between August and December 2010, Gulf cartel enforcers deployed at least six other IEDs against what they called the "Zeta police" and the media in such cities as Ciudad Victoria in Tamaulipas state and Zuazua in Nuevo Leon. However, these attacks were all conducted against empty vehicles and there was no apparent attempt to inflict casualties. The devices were intended more as messages than weapons.

The employment of IEDs has not been confined just to the border. On Jan. 22, a small IED placed inside a car detonated near the town of Tula, Hidalgo state, injuring four local policemen. Initial reports suggested that local law enforcement received an anonymous tip about a corpse in a white Volkswagen Bora. The IED reportedly detonated when police opened one of the vehicle's doors, suggesting either some sort of booby trap or a remotely detonated device.

The damage from the Tula device is consistent with a small device placed inside a vehicle, making it similar to the IEDs deployed in Juarez and Ciudad Victoria in 2010. The setup and the deployment of the IED in Tula also bear some resemblance to the tactics used by La Linea in the July 2010 Juarez attack; in both cases, a corpse was used as bait to lure law enforcement to the scene before the device was detonated. Despite these similarities, the distance between Tula and Juarez and the makeup of the cartel landscape make it unlikely that the same group or bombmaker was involved in these two incidents.

## Car Bombs vs. Bombs in Cars

The IEDs that have been detonated by the Mexican cartels share a very common damage profile. The frames of the vehicles in which the devices were hidden remained largely intact after detonation and damage to surrounding structures and vehicles was relatively minor, indicating the devices were rather small in size. The main charges were probably similar to the device found in a vehicle recovered from an arms cache in Guadalajara, Jalisco state, on Sept. 10, 2010 — a liquor bottle filled with no more than a kilogram of commercial explosives.

In fact, most of the devices we have seen in Mexico so far have been what we consider “bombs in cars” rather than “car bombs.” The difference between the two is one of scale. Motorcycle gangs and organized crime groups frequently place pipe bombs and other small IEDs in vehicles in order to kill enemies or send messages. However, it is very uncommon for the police investigating such attacks to refer to these small devices as car bombs or VBIEDs. As the name implies, “vehicle borne” suggests that the device is too large to be borne by other means and requires a vehicle to convey it to the target. This means the satchel device that prematurely detonated in Mexico City in February 2008 or the liquor-bottle charge recovered in Guadalajara in September 2010 would not have been considered VBIEDs had they been detonated in vehicles. None of the devices we have seen successfully employed in Mexico has been an actual VBIED, as defined by those commonly used in Iraq, Pakistan or Afghanistan — or even Colombia in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

The only explosive device we have seen that even remotely approached being considered a VBIED was the 16-kilogram device discovered in Juarez in September 2010. This means that those who are referring to the devices deployed in Mexico as VBIEDs are either mistaken or are intentionally hyping the devices. Claiming that the cartels are using “car bombs” clearly benefits those who are trying to portray the cartels as terrorists. As we’ve discussed elsewhere, there are both political and practical motives for labeling the Mexican drug cartels terrorists rather than just vicious criminals.

That said, the Vicente Carrillo Fuentes organization and the Gulf cartel have demonstrated that they can construct small devices and remotely detonate them using cellphones, Futaba radio-control transmitters and servos (as have the still unidentified groups responsible for the Tula attack and the radio-controlled device recovered in Guadalajara in September 2010). Once an organization possesses the ability to do this, and has access to large quantities of explosives, the only factor that prevents it from creating and detonating large VBIED-type devices is will.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s in Colombia, powerful Colombian drug trafficking organizations such as the Medellin cartel used large-scale terrorist attacks in an effort to get the Colombian government to back off on its counternarcotics efforts. Some of the attacks conducted by the Medellin cartel, such as the December 1989 bombing of the Colombian Administrative Department of Security, utilized at least 450 kilograms of explosives and were incredibly devastating. However, these attacks did not achieve their objective. Instead, they served to steel the will of the Colombian government and also caused the Colombians to turn to the United States for even more assistance in their battle against the Colombian cartels.

A U.S. government investigator who assisted the Colombian government in investigating some of the large VBIED attacks conducted by the Medellin cartel notes that Medellin frequently employed Futaba radio-control devices in its VBIEDs like those used for model aircraft. A similar Futaba device was recovered in Guadalajara in September 2010, found wired to the explosives-filled liquor bottle inside the car. This may or may not provide the Mexican authorities with any sort of hard forensic link between the Mexican and Colombian cartels, but it is quite significant that the Futaba device was used in an IED in Mexico with a main explosive charge that was much smaller than those used in Colombia.

On April 1, 2011, the Mexican military discovered a large arms cache in Matamoros. In addition to encountering the customary automatic weapons, grenades and rocket-propelled grenade launchers, the military also seized 412 chubs (plastic sleeves) of hydrogel commercial explosives, 36 electric detonators and more than 11 meters of detonation cord. (The Mexican government did not provide photos of the explosives nor the weight of the material recovered, but chubs of gel explosives can range in size from less than half a kilogram to a couple of kilograms in weight.) This means there were at least a hundred kilograms of explosives in the cache, enough to make a sizable VBIED. Given that the cache was located in Matamoros and appears to have been there for some time, it is likely that it belonged to the Gulf cartel. This, like other seizures of explosives, indicates that the reason the Gulf cartel has used small explosive devices in its past attacks is not due to lack of explosives or expertise but lack of will.

### Assessing the Threat

When assessing any threat, two main factors must be considered: intent and capability. So far, the Mexican cartels have demonstrated they have the capability to employ VBIEDs but not the intent. Discerning future intent is difficult, but judging from an actor's past behavior can allow a thoughtful observer to draw some conclusions. First, the Juarez cartel has been hard-pressed by both the Mexican government and the Sinaloa Federation, and it is desperately struggling to survive. Despite this, the leaders of that organization have decided not to follow through with their threats from last July to unleash a 100-kilogram VBIED on Juarez. The Juarez cartel is not at all squeamish about killing people and it is therefore unlikely that the group has avoided employing VBIEDs for altruistic or benevolent reasons. Clearly, they seem to believe that it is in their best interests not to pop off a VBIED or a series of such devices.

Although the Juarez cartel is badly wounded, the last thing it wants to do is invite the full weight of the U.S. and Mexican governments down upon its head by becoming the Mexican version of Pablo Escobar's Medellin cartel, which would likely happen should it begin to conduct large terrorist-style bombings. Escobar's employment of terrorism backfired on him and resulted not only in his own death but also the dismantlement of his entire organization. A key factor in Escobar's downfall was that his use of terrorism not only affected the government but also served to turn the population against him. He went from being seen by many Colombians as almost a folk hero to being reviled and hated. His organization lost the support of the population and found itself isolated and unable to hide amid the populace.

Similar concerns are likely constraining the actions of the Mexican cartels. It is one thing to target members of opposing cartels, or even law enforcement and military personnel, and it is

quite another to begin to indiscriminately target civilians or to level entire city blocks with large VBIEDs. While the drug war — and the crime wave that has accompanied it — has affected many ordinary Mexicans and turned sentiment against the cartels, public sentiment would be dramatically altered by the adoption of true terrorist tactics. So far, the Mexican cartels have been very careful not to cross that line.

There is also the question of cost versus benefit. So far, the Mexican cartels have been able to use small IEDs to accomplish what they need — essentially sending messages — without having to use large IEDs that would require more resources and could cause substantial collateral damage that would prompt a public-opinion backlash. There is also considerable doubt that a larger IED attack would really accomplish anything concrete for the cartels. While the cartels will sometimes conduct very violent actions, most of those actions are quite pragmatic. Cartel elements who operate as loose cannons are often harshly disciplined by cartel leadership, like the gunmen involved in the Falcon Lake shooting.

So while the U.S. Consulate in Monterrey may be erecting Jersey barriers to protect it from VBIED attacks, it is likely doing so based on an abundance of caution or some bureaucratic mandate, not hard intelligence that the cartels are planning to hit the facility with a VBIED.