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# CONGRESSIONAL TESTIMONY

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## Enhancing Federal, State, and Local Coordination in the Fight Against Criminal Illegal Aliens

Testimony before the  
Committee on Oversight and Government Reform  
Subcommittee on Federal Law Enforcement

U.S. House of Representatives

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Chairman Higgins, Ranking Member Lee, and distinguished members of the subcommittee. Thank you for your leadership on this issue and for inviting me to testify today.

My name is Joseph Humire and I have spent the past seven years, since the Central American caravans crashed the U.S. Southwest border in October 2018, studying the phenomenon of weaponized migration and border crises. This will be the focus of my testimony today and my intent is to provide a geopolitical context to the ongoing challenge of fighting to protect the U.S. homeland from criminal illegal aliens.

My research team at the Center for a Secure Free Society has spent countless hours conducting field research and we have visited a half-dozen borders along the migrant path from South America through Central America up to the U.S.-Mexico border. Surveying the San Ysidro Port of Entry in Southern California to the Brownsville-Gateway Port of Entry in the lower Rio Grande Valley of Texas. Our findings conclude that America's state and nonstate enemies and adversaries are using transnational criminal and terrorist networks as tools of asymmetric warfare to exploit the vulnerabilities presented by prior lack of border security and flawed immigration policy, to include sanctuary cities.



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The United States is facing the worst border and immigration crisis in its history. Since Fiscal Year 2021 (FY21) U.S. border authorities encountered 11 million migrants and an additional 2.2 million known gotaways who evaded Border Patrol between ports of entry. Add another estimated 1.5 million migrants that arrived in the U.S. through flawed immigration parole or humanitarian programs, such as the Cuba, Haiti, Nicaragua, Venezuela (CHNV) or the Uniting for Ukraine (U4U) parole programs, and others. The result is more than 14 million illegal aliens have arrived in America in the past four years, larger than the population of 45 U.S. states or the equivalent of adding another state the population size of Pennsylvania to the union.

If only .05 percent of this emerging illegal alien population in America is tied to or affiliated with criminal or terrorist organizations, we are facing a crime-terror contingent inside the homeland the size of the U.S. Army and U.S. Marine Corps combined. That is a national security emergency.

The U.S. border and immigration crisis creates an unprecedented challenge for President Donald Trump and his new administration. Only one month and a half into President Trump's term quick results are starting to show. Within the first ten days of the Trump administration, U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CPB) recorded an 85 percent decrease in Border Patrol apprehensions along the Southwest border compared to the same period in January 2024. February 2025 saw the lowest number of monthly encounters at the U.S. southern border in recorded history, with only 8,300 encounters last month. ICE arrests are increasing to approximately 14,000 in President Trump's first month in office, according to his Border Czar Tom Homan. Twice the average of the Biden administration. Through executive action and prioritizing border and immigration security, President Trump is restoring order to the immigration anarchy the country endured the past four years but more needs to be done.

Far from a problem of "root causes" derived from socio-economic hardship, natural disasters, or high-levels of insecurity, the center of gravity of the U.S. border and immigration crisis—that enabled no fewer than 14 million illegal aliens to enter the United States in four years—is **Weaponized Migration**. An academic concept that has empirical evidence and vast political science literature to define it. Weaponized migration is when state and non-state actors catalyze, manipulate, and/or induce mass migration to achieve political and geopolitical objectives. In the current context, these objectives go beyond coercion and focus on eroding sovereign borders and expanding territorial capture and control. Weaponized migration suggests that America's border and immigration crisis goes beyond simply a law enforcement challenge. It is a national security crisis, perhaps the greatest in our lifetime, causing an alarming threat to U.S. sovereignty and a humanitarian catastrophe for both Americans and migrants alike.



## Weaponized Migration: Border Security is National Security

On March 4, 2023, shortly after the one-year anniversary of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, a Special Flight Squadron landed in Venezuela to begin a three-country tour of Latin America by Vladimir Putin’s most trusted advisor, Nikolai Patrushev. Nicaragua and Cuba were also on the itinerary, but as Mr. Patrushev arrived in Caracas, an official Russian disinformation campaign in Spanish was launched to manipulate a narrative about the U.S. Southwest border crisis.

When Mr. Patrushev touched down in Venezuela, the Kremlin’s propaganda machine started spreading an anti-American message across its Spanish social media platforms. The message, crafted by Russian state-owned media, read that *“there is no doubt, sooner or later, the southern neighbors of the United States will recover the territories that were stolen [from them]”* posted along with a picture of an old U.S.-Mexico border from an 1821 map of the Viceroyalty of Spain. A blatant reference to territories that Mexico lost during the Mexican American war. By going back to the future with the US-Mexico border, Russia’s disinformation campaign was meant to animate the spirits of many progressive and radicalized movements in the United States and Latin America that harbor deep anti-American sentiments.

**FIGURE 1: Russian Disinformation Campaign drawing a new U.S. Southern Border, 2023**



Nikolai Patrushev, secretary of Russia’s Security Council meets with Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro on February 28, 2023, while Russian state-owned media and its embassies in Latin America and Spain launch a Spanish disinformation campaign aimed at the U.S. Southwest border crisis.

Russia is not alone in this effort. China, Iran, Cuba, and Venezuela are all finding ways to capitalize on the U.S. border and immigration crisis, by partnering with or utilizing Transnational Criminal Organizations (TCO) to destabilize American communities and steal U.S. sovereignty. This is not exclusive to the United States. The same state and non-state alliance is acting against several other nation-states in the Western Hemisphere to increasingly blur the lines of sovereign borders and establish bi-national zones of “peace” to provide impunity to criminal organizations.



### ***Strategic Engineered Migration***

Nation states and non-state actors have used weaponized migration as an instrument of coercion at least 81 times since the advent of the 1951 United Nations Refugee Convention, which established refugee resettlement norms for those fleeing political or religious persecution. Since then, autocrats from around the world have used emigration as an instrument to achieve foreign policy objectives and geopolitical goals, often with a higher success rate than Western sanctions. According to the research of Dr. Kelly Greenhill, one of the world's foremost academics on weaponized migration, of the 81 instances she researched, weaponized migration worked at least 75 percent of the time, achieving a wide range of concessions from extracting financial aid to gaining diplomatic recognition. By comparison, sanctions only tend to work 40 percent of the time as a coercive measure to change the behavior of targeted nation-states.

Originally termed Coercive Engineered Migration, Dr. Greenhill calls the countries that weaponize migration “coercers” that normally target countries with two conditions. First, they are open societies that respond to pressures from public opinion and, second, they have laws that require custody and protection of refugees and potential asylees. In essence, weaponized migration is often a tool used against democratic nation-states by autocratic regimes that have weaker militaries or less of an ability to coerce their adversaries through conventional means. In her 2010 seminal book “Weapons of Mass Migration,” Dr. Greenhill defines coercion-driven migration as movements that are deliberately created to prevent or induce changes in political behavior or to extract concessions from targeted nation-states. She emphasizes that the United States has been an especially frequent target, with the tactic used against nearly every U.S. administration from Dwight Eisenhower in the 1950s through George W. Bush in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

For many Latin America analysts, Cuba is the most notable “coercer” having used weaponized migration on at least three occasions between the 1960s and the 1990s. Including the 1980 Mariel boatlift when Fidel Castro notoriously catalyzed the movement of more than 125,000 Cubans to the coast of Florida, many with criminal records. In this instance, the laundry list of concessions granted to the Cuban regime by then-U.S. President Jimmy Carter included “regularizing” Cuban immigration into the U.S. in exchange for returning 2,700 illegal Cuban aliens (known as “Marielitos”) who were deemed ineligible to remain in America due to serious crimes committed in Cuba or the U.S. or suffering from severe mental disorders. Others will point to Haiti, when, in 1994, exiled President Jean-Bertrand Aristide persuaded a reluctant U.S. to reinstall him in office in part by threatening to mobilize large numbers of Haitians to “take to the sea” and head for America.

Coercive Engineered Migration turns into Strategic Engineered Migration in October 2021 when Belarus catalyzes a mass migration and border crisis to “attack” Poland. The year prior, in May 2020, Belarus held a fraudulent election that garnered widespread condemnation from the European Union (EU) and international sanctions. Many dissidents fled Belarus into neighboring Baltic and Visegrad countries. Annoyed by the isolation, Belarus President Alexander Lukashenko unleashed chaos on the EU by catalyzing a border crisis against Poland and to a lesser extent Latvia and Lithuania the following year.



In July 2021, Lukashenko threatened to “flood” the European Union with “drugs” and “migrants” and later that year a wave of mass migration from mostly the Middle East rushed into Poland en route to other European countries. Within three months, an estimated 32,000 migrants from the Middle East, primarily Kurds from Iraq and Syria, traversed through Belarus into Poland, who accused Belarus of organizing “hybrid warfare” against the sovereignty of its country. Poland’s Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki went further and directly accused Vladimir Putin of being behind the border crisis, then declared a state of national emergency and approved an estimated 1.6 billion zloty (approximately US \$407 million) to build a border wall with Belarus. The neighboring Baltic countries of Lithuania and Latvia did the same, and twelve EU governments stated their support for building physical barriers along the borders with Belarus. Poland completed its 186 km border barrier and Lithuania completed the 502 km barrier in mid-2022.

In relatively short order, Lukashenko proved to be a major headache for the European Union and woke them up to how immigration could be weaponized. Yet, Lukashenko is still sanctioned by the EU and widely isolated from the international community. Coercion was only part of this border crisis. The Belarus-Poland border crisis introduced a new facet of weaponized migration that has more strategic dimensions going beyond coercion. The sophisticated employment of disinformation, NGOs, travel agencies, airlines, and transnational criminal organizations showed how weaponized migration has gone beyond being a pressure tool by weaker nation-states, to becoming a destabilizing tool for autocratic powers who seek to change the international order by changing boundaries.

To employ weaponized migration in the 2021 Belarus-Poland border crisis, Iran urged Iraqi Airways to establish direct flights to Minsk, the Belarusian capital. Russian-funded NGOs established travel agencies in Turkey and elsewhere to shuttle the migrants to Minsk while Moscow’s state-owned media, namely Russia Today (RT), actively portrayed Lukashenko as a victim and the EU as inhumane, delegitimizing border security. Meanwhile, China maintained a supposed “strategic silence” on the border crisis yet signed a strategic partnership with Belarus in December 2021 at the height of the crisis. The 2021 Belarus-Poland border crisis exposed the vulnerabilities and polarization in the EU’s immigration policies and prepped the battlefield for Russia’s invasion of Ukraine a few months later, in February 2022.

Today, Russian troops, mercenaries, and nuclear weapons are pre-positioned in Belarus. Russia’s allies, namely Iran and North Korea have deployed military assets to support Putin’s war in Ukraine. China announced it will build a major space station in Belarus. The Belarus border crisis went beyond coercion and was Strategic Engineered Migration to prep the battlefield for greater territorial control. Belarus was just the beginning. Within the Western Hemisphere, a very similar strategy was employed, using a state and non-state network to exploit the world’s largest movement of migrants, the Venezuela crisis, to “attack” the United States.



### ***Venezuela's Role in the U.S. Border Crisis***

In a March 2024 interview on CBS' 60 Minutes, former Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador (colloquially known as "AMLO") stated that to gain greater immigration and border security cooperation from Mexico, the U.S. must lift all sanctions on Venezuela and end the embargo on Cuba. When followed up by the reporter, asking: "if they [U.S.] don't do the things that you said need to be done, then what?" AMLO responded: then "the flow of migrants ... will continue." Even the CBS journalist understood this to be blackmail by then-Mexican president who gave the interview as he was leaving office a few months later to conclude a five-year term.

This AMLO interview on 60 Minutes illuminated the role that Venezuela plays as the "weaponizer" in strategically engineering and steering the world's largest mass migration, the more than 8.2 million Venezuelans that fled their country since 2014—to the U.S. Southwest border. More than 1.5 million Venezuelans have entered the U.S. since 2021 and is the fastest growing nationality arriving in America. This is about 10 percent of the overall encounters nationwide in the past four years. Prior to 2021, the numbers of Venezuelan nationals encountered on U.S. borders were in the thousands. This jumped to tens of thousands in Fiscal Year 2021, then hundreds of thousands in FY 2022, and ended with almost 314,000 encountered for FY 2024—a growth of 520 percent in four years. Add to this the Venezuelans that arrived in America through a humanitarian parole program or Temporary Protected Status (TPS) and it is easily another one-half million Venezuelans resettled in the United States since 2021.

The Biden administration's failed immigration policies and weak border security the past four years are certainly the pull factors incentivizing the mass influx of Venezuelans into the United States. The push factors are tied to the economic and humanitarian crisis in Venezuela. That crisis, however, hit its peak in 2019 and mostly impacted South America, as the majority of the 8.2 million Venezuelans that emigrated traveled first to Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, Chile, and Argentina. Some also went to Spain and Brazil; but didn't start arriving in the United States in significant numbers until the pandemic after the Venezuelan government built an air and land bridge into Mexico and the Darién Gap on the Colombia-Panama border.

Venezuela's Air Bridge is a critical logistical piece of its weaponized migration strategy because it is the primary method of transport for Venezuelans shuttled to the U.S. Southwest border. In 2020, at the start of the pandemic, Venezuela halted its air travel to most of the world except for Cuba, Nicaragua, Bolivia, Turkey, and Mexico. The latter, Mexico, became the top destination for Venezuelan state-owned flights operated by its sanctioned national airline CONVIASA that flew more than 120 round-trip flights from Venezuela to Mexico that year, namely to Cancun, Cozumel, and Toluca. The following year, in 2021, Venezuelan flights more than doubled to 300-plus round-trip flights and the number of airlines increased from two to nine, mostly state-owned or controlled. By 2022, there was a 600 percent increase in Venezuelan flights which maintained in 2023 before dropping slightly in 2024. Venezuelan TCOs such as the Tren de Aragua capitalized on this movement to erect a human smuggling network from Venezuela to Mexico and into the United States.



Venezuela’s Land Bridge is the other critical logistical piece of its weaponized migration strategy that contributed to removing the most prominent physical barrier between Central and South America—the once uncrossable Darién Gap. The treacherous jungle on the land border of Colombia and Panama, inhabited by indigenous tribes and an ecological reserve, was for centuries a physical barrier to prevent mass migration to the north. Then NGOs from the United Nations, Europe, and American charities, built infrastructure with the Panamanian government to attend to a growing number of illegal migrants crossing the Gap. According to the Panamanian National Border Service, SENAFRONT, there were no more than 226 encounters along the Darien Gap in 2009. Throughout the next decade, migrant encounters incrementally rose to between 8,000 to 25,000 encounters. Then, in 2021, the mass migration on the Darien Gap exploded to 133,726 encounters, followed by a record-breaking 520,085 migrant encounters in 2023. The number dropped slightly last year to 302,203 encounters (still remarkably high) with 70 percent of the migrants trekking across the Darién from Venezuela.

Understanding that organized crime controls the human smuggling routes in the Darién Gap, the Venezuelan government deployed its state sponsored TCO, the Tren de Aragua, to steer Venezuelan migrants along the Colombian coast to Cartagena and Medellin, where buses transport the mostly Venezuelan migrants to Acandí and Necoclí, the closest Colombian border towns to the Darien Gap. A series of Venezuelan NGOs and travel agencies with questionable financing were established along this route. In Venezuela, the Tren de Aragua colluded with the state immigration agency, SAIME, and the state tourism ministry to control the Venezuelan human trafficking and human smuggling industry—a move that clashed with the Gulf Clan (aka “Gaitanista Self Defense-Forces of Colombia” or AGC), the largest Colombian TCO that largely controls the migrant and drug flows along the Darién.

On March 2, 2024, a major brawl broke out at one of the main migrant reception centers in San Vicente within the Darién region, resulting in the destruction of 10 vehicles and burning down at least 10 modules. Panamanian authorities arrested 44 migrants in the aftermath, and temporarily closed the migrant center. According to former Panamanian border officials, there is evidence that suggests the migrant brawl in San Vicente was induced by the Tren de Aragua to destroy the records of border crossings from suspected criminals and terrorists that trekked through the Darién Gap.

Venezuela is not alone in weaponizing migration to the United States. They are part of an anti-American, authoritarian axis in Latin America and the Caribbean that includes criminalized states in Cuba, Nicaragua, and Bolivia—two of the three are hotbeds and transit points for weaponized migration to the U.S. Southwest border. In April 2022, as an unprecedented surge of Cuban migrants arrived at the U.S. Southwest border, the State Department agreed to host senior Cuban officials in Washington D.C. for migration talks. The year prior, in November 2021, the Cuban regime coordinated with the government of Nicaragua to lift Nicaragua’s visa restrictions on Cuban nationals. This quiet step led to a mass exodus of Cubans to Nicaragua, through charter flights and travel agencies with suspicious links to the Venezuelan government. The Biden administration capitulated to this weaponized migration by making a major shift in U.S. foreign



policy to Cuba in 2022 through financial concessions to the Cuban military by lifting travel restrictions for de facto tourism, removing all limits on remittances paid through Cuban military-controlled platforms, and reinstating family parole programs for Cubans.

Today, we are in a similar situation with Venezuela. The Trump administration initially negotiated to have deportation flights resume to Venezuela and receive their nationals who have removal orders by U.S. authorities. After receiving four flights and no more than 500 Venezuelan nationals, Caracas has not received another deportation flight since February 20. According to President Nicolás Maduro, this is because the U.S. canceled General License 41 which carved out an exemption for American oil companies, namely Chevron, to operate in Venezuela. The Venezuelan government did not meet its expected repatriation obligations well before the cancellation of oil licenses on March 4 and likely realized will not get any concessions from the Trump administration.

Venezuela started its weaponized migration strategy at the onset of the U.S. border crisis. In 2018, it was discovered that the Venezuelan government financed politicized NGOs in Honduras, such as Pueblo Sin Fronteras (PSF) responsible for organizing the Central American caravans. Venezuela's interests in weaponizing migration align with its function as a platform for external state actors, namely China, Russia, and Iran, who have employed the ways and means of asymmetric warfare to destabilize the Western Hemisphere. Venezuela engaged in this strategy against Colombia, who was the initial target of its weaponized migration and is now facing unprecedented crime and violence along its northeast border with Venezuela, in the Catatumbo region of North Santander—providing a pretext for a binational border commission that violates the sovereignty of both nations. By 2021, the Venezuelan government in conjunction with the Mexican cartels and other TCOs employed weaponized migration against the United States. The result is the erosion of the Southwest border and the unleashing of new TCOs, such as the Tren de Aragua, onto American streets.

TCOs, aided by nation-states and terrorist organizations, operate from inside the U.S. and in land and maritime border areas, undermining the stability and security of all U.S. communities, not merely towns along the U.S.-Mexico border. Transnational criminals and terrorists work the seams of U.S. law resulting in their operational advantage over disaggregated U.S. local, territorial, state, tribal, and Federal agencies. The objective of weaponized migration is to destabilize U.S. social and government structures by increasing the cost of social burdens; expanding crime and violence and establishing a “beachhead” of subversive personnel available for directed attacks inside the U.S. and against critical infrastructure and high value targets to create fear and paralysis. As well as degrade deployment and replenishment of U.S. forces to military operations abroad.

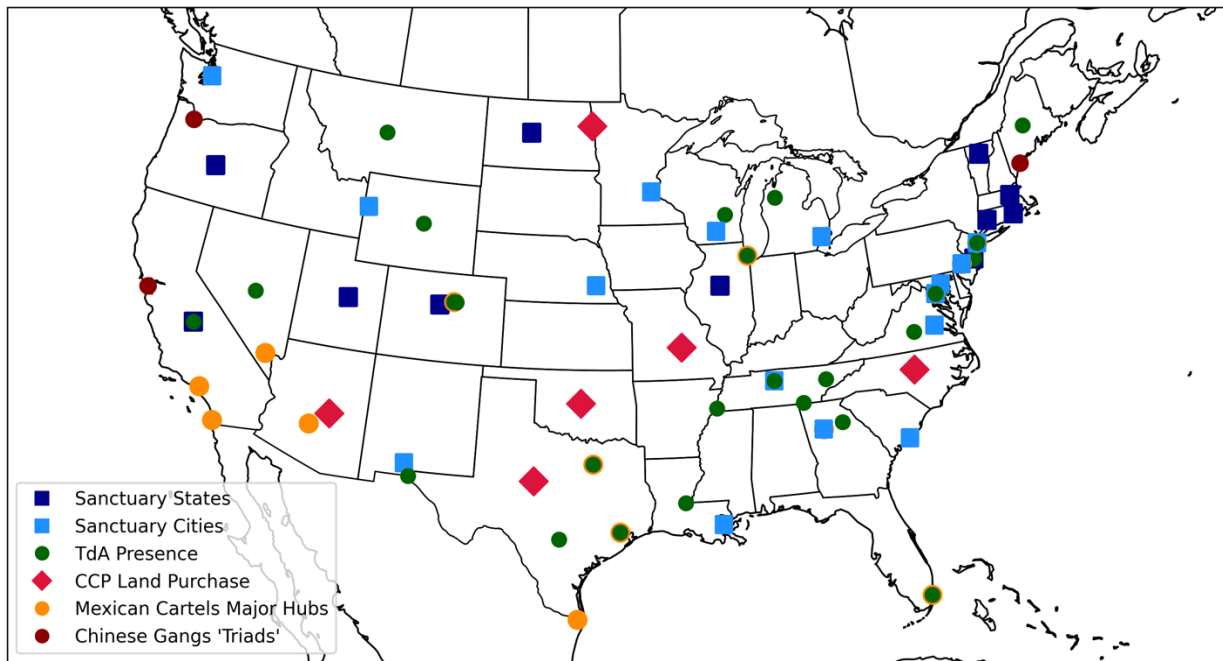
Figure 2 illustrates the documented presence of major TCOs in the United States, namely the Mexican cartels and the Tren de Aragua, overlaid with states where U.S. land purchases are made by the Chinese Communist Party and the presence of Chinese TCOs, such as the Triads. What is noticeable is that Oklahoma seems to be where China's state and non-state network





resides. Texas is the state with the most presence of Mexican cartels, while the northeast, has the largest presence of the Tren de Aragua, namely in New York. Correlation is not causation, yet the northeast has the most sanctuary cities that could be attracting a large contingent of criminal illegal aliens. Appendix A lists at least 20 major TCO and Foreign Terrorist Organizations (FTO) operating on American soil.

**FIGURE 2: Migrant Invasion Map of Major TCOs, China, and Sanctuary Cities**



Sources: U.S. State Department, DEA 2024 National Drug Threat Assessment, FBI Terrorism Investigation, Homeland Security Investigations

Within the concept of Strategic Engineered Migration, TCOs function as proxies of adversarial nation-states aiming for territorial expansion. The erosion of sovereign borders is a pretext for expanding illicit economies to capture new territories and blur the boundaries of state and non-state control. Weaponized migration poses a daily and direct threat to America's domestic tranquility and represents a near and long-term national security threat. Of all the executive actions taken by President Trump in his first month in office, the terrorist designation of major TCOs is perhaps the most meaningful to neutralize the weaponized migration strategy employed against the United States.



## **The Strategic Significance of Designating Cartels as Foreign Terrorist Designations**

One of the first executive orders signed by President Trump on January 20, 2025, was “designating cartels and other organizations as foreign terrorist organizations and specially designated global terrorists.” One month later, on February 19, the State Department issued Public Notice 12672 officially categorizing eight major TCOs as Foreign Terrorist Organizations (FTO): Venezuela’s Tren de Aragua, the Mara Salvatrucha or “MS-13” from El Salvador, and six major Mexican cartels. All eight organizations have a significant presence in the United States and are especially active along the U.S. Southwest border.

With the stroke of a pen, President Trump elevated Counter-Transnational Organized Crime (CTOC) to the highest levels of U.S. national security. Since 2001, Counterterrorism (CT) has engulfed national security circles as the top priority for U.S. law enforcement and intelligence agencies. CTOC was viewed for decades as a separate problem set, one that did not require the enhanced tools and authorities provided to law enforcement agencies in a post 9-11 environment. After flooding the U.S. with deadly drugs, such as Fentanyl, and sending violent criminals and gangs into American communities, it is argued that TCOs today are an equal if not greater threat to U.S. national security than terrorist organizations. A point made in Section 1(a) of the Executive Order (EO), where the president states that “international cartels constitute a national security threat beyond that posed by traditional organized crime.”

To establish this statement, the EO draws on two fundamental concepts grounded in empirical evidence and solid theoretical frameworks. The first is the concept of complex adaptive systems (CAS), which comes from social science theory and is often used in mathematical models. Applied to TCOs, it allows analysts to understand the evolution of organized crime from a top-down, centralized model prominent during the era of the Colombian cartels, to the more modern cartels in Mexico, which now are more dynamic, decentralized, nonlinear, and rely less on “kingpins” or command and control.

The Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) developed the Kingpin strategy in the early 1990s to start dismantling drug trafficking organizations that were, at the time, vertically integrated in terms of production and distribution. The strategy aimed to disrupt the command and control of major cartels, namely in Colombia, by targeting their supply chains and leadership. The Kingpin strategy had much success in dismantling the major cartels of the time and allowed the DEA to have a larger role within the intelligence community and the inter-agency process. In the 21st century the TCOs adapted and shifted to a more horizontal, decentralized model that relies less on centralized leadership and more on territorial control by networks with adaptive agents blending cartel activity into society. In a CAS structure, major drug cartels can easily spread into new territories to evade authorities and establish micro-trafficking routes that are prominent in areas where the state has little to no presence.



Prominent academics, such as Dr. Guadalupe Correa-Cabrera from George Mason University, have argued that major Mexican cartels have abandoned the kingpin model a long time ago in favor of a CAS structure that functions as a transnational enterprise. She argues this is a result of Mexican President Felipe Calderon's "decapitation" strategy against the cartels, which resulted in the fragmentation of their structures and the expansion into several countries throughout the Western Hemisphere, including the United States.

The other concept used in the EO is crime-terror convergence, which is when foreign terrorist organizations engage in a systematic and symbiotic relationship with major drug cartels. The crime-terror relationship is not centered on having the same strategic ends but rather on working within the same logistical ecosystem of illicit service providers that establish supply chains to the benefit of both cartels and terrorists. The same supply chain used to move cocaine or fentanyl is used to move weapons and terrorists. Fixers, financiers, and facilitators are all logistical service providers that converge within illicit economies to align international terrorists with major drug cartels.

A notable example of crime-terror convergence is the case of Ayman Joumaa, a Colombian Lebanese financier and facilitator for both the Mexican cartels, namely Los Zetas, and also for Hezbollah. In 2011, Joumaa was indicted by the Department of Justice and labeled a drug kingpin by the Treasury Department for moving massive amounts of cocaine into the U.S. and laundering hundreds of millions of dollars through the U.S. financial system and the Lebanese Canadian Bank through a network of used car dealers along the East Coast of the United States. According to Treasury, cash from drug sales in Europe, Latin America, and the Middle East was laundered through money exchanges in Lebanon, then wired to U.S. car dealers via the Lebanese Canadian Bank. The dealers then shipped cars to West Africa, and the proceeds from the sales of the cars were sent to Hezbollah in Lebanon. The Joumaa case is just the tip of the iceberg in unraveling Hezbollah's global criminal network, one that has made common cause with many major TCOs in Latin America and the Caribbean.

### **Issam Bazzi: A Case Study on Special Interest Aliens**

Since the beginning of FY2021, 400 individuals on the terrorist watchlist have been encountered between U.S. ports of entry nationwide. Of these 400 individuals, at least 99 have been released into American communities. The result is more than 50 terror cases in at least 30 U.S. states between April 2021 and January 2025 of Jihadists seeking to harm Americans from within the homeland. This includes cases of individuals providing material support to ISIS, Al Qaeda, and Hezbollah, or receiving military-style training from foreign terrorist organizations. The data depicts potential public safety and counterintelligence threats growing within the United States and shows how the surge of illegal aliens weakened U.S. national security and made American communities more vulnerable to those who seek to do harm. A useful case study to analyze illegal aliens with suspected ties to terrorism, is the case of Issam Bazzi, a Venezuelan Lebanese dual national that illegally entered the United States.



Issam Raef Bazzi is a 54-year-old, Lebanese-born, Venezuelan national arrested in November 2021 for illegally crossing the U.S. Southwest border. Despite being apprehended by U.S. Border Patrol after entering illegally near Brownsville, Texas, by swimming across the Rio Grande River, along with his wife and daughter—Bazzi was released by ICE on his own recognizance, reportedly due to health concerns for being overweight and at risk of COVID-19. Reports from Deadline Detroit and the Center for Immigration Studies indicate Bazzi was flagged on the FBI’s terrorist watchlist, with “highly derogatory information” and suspected ties to an unspecified terrorist group. As of January 2022, Bazzi and his family were living in Dearborn, Michigan, awaiting a March 2022 asylum hearing in Detroit. No public information on the outcome of this hearing or his current immigration status was found, suggesting his case may still be pending or details are not publicly disclosed.

The Bazzi case is controversial among immigration and security officials with former Dearborn police chief expressing concerns over public safety, while relatives described Issam Bazzi as a mild-mannered former clothing store owner fleeing Venezuela due to political and economic turmoil. Review of corporate records and interviews in Venezuela reveal that Bazzi is far from a modest migrant seeking asylum in the U.S. and has close ties to high-ranking members of the Venezuelan government.

In Venezuela, Bazzi is known for his business activities on Margarita Island, a known Hezbollah hotbed near the Caribbean coast of the country. On the island he owned luxury apartments, yachts, and helped finance a commercial building with ties to the Venezuelan government. Bazzi maintained close connections to senior figures in the Maduro regime, notably with the former international commerce minister Yomana Koteich, and the family of Tareck El Aissami, a former Venezuelan vice president and minister accused of corruption, money laundering, with alleged ties to Hezbollah and is on the ICE Most Wanted List. Only weeks prior to making his trip to the U.S. Southwest border, Bazzi reportedly attended the funeral of relatives of Tareck El Aissami.

Bazzi’s profile fits more as logistical financier rather than a potential asylum seeker and his estimated net worth in Venezuela along with ties to the government suggest, at the minimum, there was no need for him or his family to take a dangerous journey across the U.S. Southwest border. The Bazzi case is an example of what DHS calls “Special Interest Aliens” or migrants that come from a collection of countries with a high density of terrorist presence. During the Biden administration, SIA encounters skyrocketed to unprecedented levels. Since FY2021 CPB encountered at least 1.7 million special interest aliens from 26 countries, including Venezuela who was recently added to the SIA list. Being on the SIA list does not necessarily bar a migrant from being admitted into the U.S. but it certainly requires a more careful screening of that migrant’s background and identity.



## Recommendations

Illegal immigration is an ongoing problem that predates the current crisis. The violence and lawlessness occurring from U.S. Borders into American communities is unsustainable and must be addressed immediately to preserve the safety and security of all Americans and migrants alike. Migrants are often the first to be exploited on both sides of the border and are extorted, manipulated, and threatened by TCOs who have evolved beyond traditional organized crime—waging campaigns of terror. The most effective form of migrant care is to rid their communities of the vicious TCOs that use migrant networks as human shields for advancing their nefarious objectives. The most important mission, however, is to protect American lives.

Most Americans are not fully aware or do not understand the magnitude of the problem of weaponized migration. This leaves a strategic void in our unity of effort to establish a truly whole-of-government and whole-of-society approach to solving this national security emergency. A unified mission, complete with a common understanding of the problem(s), and inter-agency collaboration at the Federal, State, Local, and even at the international level is needed. These are my recommendations:

1. Task the Director of National Intelligence (DNI) to oversee and ensure the effective operation of Federal/State fusion centers focused on public safety, national security, and counterintelligence threats from the convergence of TCOs, FTOs, and adversarial nation-states operating within the U.S. Homeland. A comprehensive review every 60 days with recommendations to solve border intelligence shortfalls should be mandated.
2. Ensure the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) implements 287(g) of the Immigration and Nationality Act (8 U.S.C. 1357(g)) to authorize state and local law enforcement agencies to perform the functions of immigration officers in relation to the investigation, apprehension, or detention of illegal aliens in the United States under the direction and supervision of the Secretary of Homeland Security.
3. Task the Department of Justice to establish a broad coalition of federal, state, and local prosecutors, law enforcement agents, intelligence officials, and subject matter experts to share best practices on investigating, arresting, and prosecuting the eight major cartels recently designated as FTOs by the White House and State Department.
4. The Department of Defense plays an important force multiplier role in providing logistical support to state and local authorities tasked with the mission of immigration and border security and deportations. This includes opening U.S. military facilities to serve as detention centers in coordination with ICE and DHS. Adding additional transport aircraft to bolster ICE's deportation flight capabilities. As well as providing ISR (Intelligence, Surveillance, Reconnaissance) assets to state and local entities that are inundated with criminal illegal aliens tied to major TCOs and FTOs operating on American soil.