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Trump's Venezuela Drug War Gambit and the Militarization Playbook at Home

Solidarity activist Michelle Ellner takes stock of the Trump administration's escalating rhetoric, militarization and migrant crackdown.

Michelle Ellner August 17,2025

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a counter-narcotics policy. In practice, it serves as a green light for open-ended U.S. military action abroad, bypassing congressional approval, sidestepping international law, and stretching

the definition of "national security" until it becomes a catch-all justification for the use of force. The directive allows the U.S. to target groups unilaterally labeled as both criminal and terrorist. Once that designation is made, the military can operate without the consent of the targeted country, a move that violates international law. In a region with a long history of U.S.-backed coups, covert wars, and destabilization campaigns, the risk of abuse isn't hypothetical; it's inevitable.

While the order applies across Latin America, Venezuela stands at the top of the list. The Trump

transnational cartels, and has doubled the bounty on him to \$50 million (double the bounty for

administration has accused President Nicolás Maduro's government of working with

Osama bin Laden). It's a lawfare tactic designed to criminalize a head of state and invite mercenaries and covert operatives to participate in regime change. The accusations fueling this escalation have grown increasingly far-fetched casting Maduro in turn as a partner of Colombia's FARC, the head of the "Cartel de los Soles," a patron of Venezuela's Tren de Aragua, and now, as an ally of Mexico's Sinaloa Cartel — a charge even Mexico's own president says has no evidence, revealing how politicized and unfounded this allegation is.

The core premise of the accusation is that Maduro is involved in a cocaine trafficking network of Venezuelan military and political figures called *Cartel de los Soles*. The Venezuelan government denies the cartel's existence, calling it a fabrication to justify sanctions and regime

change efforts. Multiple independent investigations have shown no hard evidence exists and

Insight Crime cite anonymous U.S. sources; those media stories are then cited by policymakers

that this narrative thrives in a media-intelligence echo chamber. Reports from outlets like

and think tanks, and the cycle repeats until speculation becomes policy.

Fulton Armstrong, a professor at American University and a former longtime U.S. intelligence officer, has stated that he knows no one in the intelligence community, apart from those currently in government, who believes in the existence of the *Cartel de los Soles*.

Drug monitoring data also contradict this narrative. The Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA) reports that only about 7 percent of U.S.-bound cocaine transits through the Eastern

Caribbean via Venezuela, while approximately 90 percent takes Western Caribbean and Eastern

Pacific routes. UNODC's 2025 World Drug Report likewise confirms that trafficking remains

concentrated in major Andean corridors, not through Venezuela . Yet Venezuela is targeted

anyway, not for its actual role in the drug trade, but because neutralizing its government has

become a pillar of U.S. foreign policy, seen in Washington as a step toward reshaping the country's political system and prying open its economy to foreign control.

MAIN COCAINE TRAFFICKING ROUTES
WITHIN THE AMERICAS BY WATER,
2023-2024



The pattern is familiar. In Panama (1989), Colombia (2000s), and Honduras (2010s), U.S. militarized anti-drug campaigns failed to dismantle supply chains or reduce trafficking volumes. What they did accomplish was shifting routes, militarizing criminal actors, and destabilizing governments, making the original problems harder to solve and the affected

This framing turns a political standoff into a declared security imperative. It broadens the range

of permissible military tools, from ISR (intelligence, surveillance, reconnaissance) to direct

The Mirror at Home: Militarization and Communities of Color

The same militarized logic driving U.S. policy in Venezuela is being applied inside the United

sustain and escalate military measures over time, regardless of the immediate pretext.

action.

societies more fragile.

The Real Threat

look the same.

Police Department under federal control and deployed the National Guard, citing a public safety "emergency," despite official data showing violent crime at multi-year lows. Even U.S. law enforcement statistics contradict the White House narrative, but the administration dismissed them, casting the city as overrun by "roving mobs," "wild youth," and "drugged-out maniacs."

States. In August 2025, President Trump signed an executive order placing the D.C. Metropolitan

stationed soldiers inside ICE detention facilities in over 20 states. In Los Angeles, Marines and National Guard units patrolled immigrant neighborhoods in a show of force, a deployment beaten back only by mass community resistance and the threat of labor action.

Whether it's a wall in the desert or barricades in front of the White House, the message is the same: perceived threats, real or manufactured, are met with troops, not talks. The playbook never changes: In Venezuela, the "threat" is cast as narco-terrorism; in the U.S., it's a "border

surge" or a manufactured public safety emergency built on racially coded depictions of Black

and Brown communities. In both cases, the logic is identical: treat political disputes and social

crises as security emergencies, sideline diplomacy and community solutions, usurp greater

executive powers, and make military force a routine tool of governance.

D.C. is only one example. The same militarized logic has sent thousands of troops to the U.S.-

Mexico border, converted military bases into detention centers from Texas to New Jersey, and

deeper project: expanding the military's role in governance and normalizing its use as a tool of political control both at home and abroad. In Latin America, that means more interventions against governments the U.S. wants to topple. At home, it means embedding the military deeper into civilian life, particularly in Black and Brown neighborhoods.

The communities in Caracas and Los Angeles, in the Venezuelan plains, and in the U.S.-Mexico

border may seem worlds apart, but they are facing the same war machine. Until we reject

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Venezuela and holds a bachelor's degree in languages and international affairs from the

militarization in all its forms, the targets will keep shifting, but the people under the gun will

Trump's "narco-terror" authorization uses the language of fighting drugs and crime to mask a

University La Sorbonne Paris IV, in Paris. After graduating, she worked for an international scholarship program out of offices in Caracas and Paris and was sent to Haiti, Cuba, The Gambia, and other countries for the purpose of evaluating and selecting applicants.

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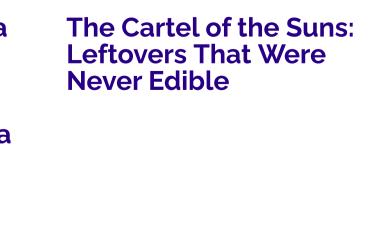
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