

Unmanned Sicarios

How the War in Ukraine Is Enhancing Latin American Armed Groups’ Drone Capabilities

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In a war against an enemy with superior manpower and conventional arms advantages, Ukraine’s innovative use of weaponized drones has helped it make significant territorial gains, strike previously secure areas, and consistently stay ahead of Russia’s countermeasures across four and a half years of fighting.^[1] In Latin America, a growing number of armed groups are adopting Ukraine’s tactics, using drones in their own battles against local government forces and rivals. By 2025, Latin American armed groups carried out more than 100 drone attacks annually, and made Colombia one of the top 10 epicenters of terrorism on earth.^{[2][3]}

Reporting now indicates Latin America’s armed groups are doing more than simply taking inspiration from Ukraine, however. In 2025, a joint Ukrainian-Mexican investigation uncovered evidence that individuals with ties to Mexican cartels and Colombian insurgencies had enlisted in the Ukrainian Foreign Legion specifically to gain experience with weaponized drones.^{[4][5]} Their presence in Ukraine has coincided with a marked increase in these groups’ drone sophistication back home, particularly in Colombia, to devastating effect.

Cartels on the Front Lines



Country of Origin	Groups Obtaining Ukrainian Drone Training
Mexico	In 2025, authorities in Mexico discovered uniforms with patches of the Ukrainian flag at a “concentration camp” belonging to the Jalisco New Generation Cartel (CJNG). ^{[6][7]} By August 2026, the CJNG was deploying multiple drone units wearing identification wristbands modeled after those used by Ukraine and Russia. ^[8] Additionally, both the CJNG and the Sinaloa Cartel have been observed replicating Ukrainian drone defenses by equipping armored vehicles with anti-drone ‘cope cages’ in 2023 and 2024. ^{[9][10]}
Colombia	In August 2026, former Defense Minister Diego Molano Aponte claimed the National Liberation Army (ELN), Gulf Clan (EGC), and splinter groups from the FARC had all “been trained in Ukraine in the use of drones.” ^{[11][12]}
Brazil	In May 2026, photos of a suspected member of the Red Command (CV) surfaced on social media showing him wearing a Ukrainian cap. ^[13] That same month, Brazilian authorities determined a Brazilian volunteer who had returned from Ukraine was training CV members to use drones in Rio. ^[14]

Arriving in Ukraine

In 2025, two private security companies, Grupo ROKA Seguridad in Mexico and SEGURCOL SAS in Colombia, maintained ties with armed groups, helping send cartel affiliates to Ukraine by providing falsified documents, humanitarian visas, and transportation. Grupo ROKA Seguridad also allegedly smuggled personnel and weapons into Ukraine via the Polish Medyka–Shehyni border crossing.^[15]



A Ukrainian soldier holds a DJI Mavic 2 Pro quadcopter equipped with a VOG-17 bomb^[16]

Cartel affiliates reportedly served in Ukraine on one-year contracts, with cartel leaders “sometimes threatening their families to ensure they return,” as of 2026.^[17]

While Ukrainian authorities have attempted to stem the tide, Ukrainian officials have also actively downplayed the issue as the country struggles with manpower shortages. In September 2026, a Ukrainian Defense Ministry official claimed foreign recruits to the Ukrainian military were screened for possible “malicious intent,” adding, “those with bad intentions—even if any such people do come here—there aren’t many of them.”^{[18][19]} These claims are undermined by reports on the ground, with multiple

Colombian recruits claiming they were either aware of or had personally encountered affiliates of Colombian armed groups in Ukraine in 2026.^{[20][21]}

Applying Ukrainian Drone Expertise



Ukrainian Pegasus combat drone, 2025^[22]

Colombian Insurgents

In March 2025, the National Liberation Army (ELN) became the first regional armed group to successfully kill a Colombian soldier in a precision drone strike.^[23] Less than six months later, it was discovered Colombian insurgents had been receiving drone training in Ukraine.^[24]

By the first half of 2026, Colombian armed groups were launching a drone attack every day on average, causing at least 21 deaths.^[25] Many of these attacks involved tactics similar to those used in Ukraine. In February 2026, the ELN used fiber-optic drones—leveraged in Ukraine since at least 2024 due to their immunity to “soft kill” signal jamming equipment—to attack a military base near the Venezuelan border.^{[26][27][28]} Later, in April, the FARC Jaime Martinez Front became the first Colombian armed group to use drones in a swarm attack, deploying at least 15 weaponized drones to overwhelm the defenses of a military brigade.^[29] By August, the ELN deployed a swarm of at least 40 drones in one attack in Cesar and launched three additional, near-simultaneous drone attacks against police installations across two municipalities in Norte de Santander.^{[30][31]}

As another sign of their growing sophistication after training in Ukraine, the FARC Jaime Martinez Front used drones to disable a radar system in Cauca. The resulting damage blinded local security forces, facilitating at least 30 additional guerrilla attacks within 48 hours.^{[32][33]} Later, in September, an unidentified FARC group used at least three drones to attack a separate radar system in neighboring Valle del Cauca. Though they only managed to damage the radome, Colombia's surveillance infrastructure will remain a key target moving forward.^[34]

Mexican Cartels



A Ukrainian soldier trains with a DJI Matrice quadcopter similar to models used by the CJNG as of 2025^{[35][36]}

Though not to the same degree as their Colombian counterparts, Mexican cartels have also demonstrated a growing level of drone sophistication. While at least some of their experience comes directly from Ukraine, they also actively assimilate Colombian groups' drone expertise.^[37] As of 2026, the Jalisco New Generation Cartel (CJNG) had recruited hundreds of former FARC as fighters in Michoacan, while the Sinaloa Cartel maintained ties with the Gulf Clan (EGC).^{[38][39]}

This investment is already paying dividends. In 2025, the CJNG used a drone to carry an explosive into a heavily defended Tijuana prosecutor's office compound, and online videos showed cartels were overcoming their longstanding struggle with drone precision by carrying out targeted strikes.^{[40][41][42]} Over the next year, evidence suggested Mexican cartels were also experimenting with fiber-optic drones, though the cables' propensity to get tangled on tree branches evidently limited their effectiveness.^[43]

In September 2026, the CJNG demonstrated another leap, releasing first-person footage of the first known cartel "drone dogfight," in which a CJNG drone physically knocked a rival group's drone out of the air in Michoacan.^[44]

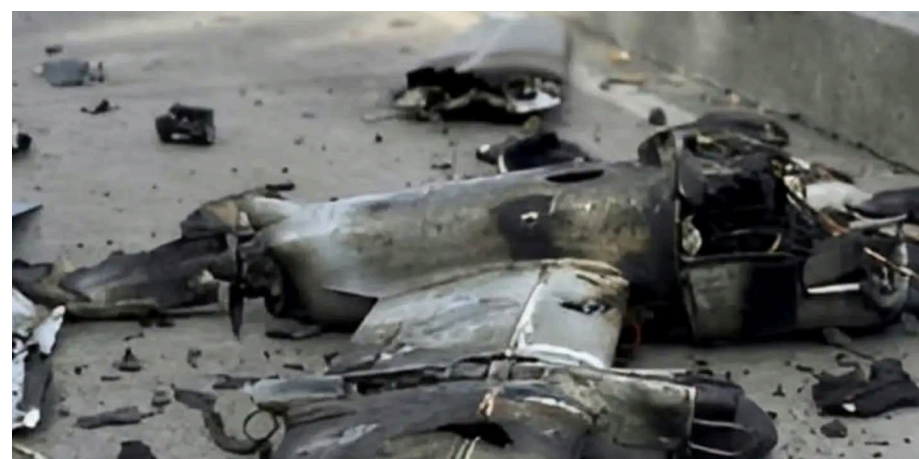
Brazilian Gangs

The use of weaponized drones by Brazilian gangs remains in its infancy. However, even here criminal groups are displaying a growing level of sophistication and aggression. In summer 2026, just months after reports emerged the Red Command (CV) was receiving drone training from a Brazilian volunteer who had returned from Ukraine, the CV began carrying out drone attacks in Rio against the Third Pure Command (TCP), a rival gang, the first known case of a Brazilian gang using weaponized drones.^{[45][46][47]}

Given their past ties to Colombian armed groups, it is likely Brazilian gangs such as the First Capital Command (PCC) will soon make greater leaps by recruiting and seeking drone training from Colombian FARC fighters.^{[48][49]}

Future Cartel-Drone Developments

More Advanced Unmanned Systems



Crashed VTOL drone in Guadalajara, September 2026^[50]

Latin American armed groups, which have generally relied on inexpensive commercial drones, are already transitioning to more advanced systems.^[51] In September 2026, a Mexican intelligence official claimed that at least one cartel had acquired a drone capable of carrying more than 150 pounds of explosives or contraband and operating for multiple hours, while another had acquired Chinese drones “that can be equipped with rifles” and was learning how to operate them.^[52] The same month, an unidentified, high-value vertical-take-off and landing (VTOL) drone crashed in Guadalajara, the stronghold of the CJNG.^[53]

Some armed groups could potentially acquire Russian and Iranian drones such as the Shahed-type variants through ties to those countries’ Latin American allies.^[54] For instance, the Colombian ELN’s alliance with corrupt Venezuelan officials could grant it access to Iran-inspired models including the ANSU-100, ANSU-200, and Zamora V-1.^{[55][56]}

Latin American armed groups could also begin to manufacture their own drones. In July 2026, the ELN reportedly used an “artisanal drone” in a failed attack against a pipeline field in eastern Colombia.^[57] Mexican cartels dabbled in drone manufacturing, contracting local drone industry workers to build custom drones “according to their needs” in the mid-2010s.^[58] Latin American cartels could take a page from the Yemeni Houthis in this regard, using artificial intelligence (AI) models to design more advanced systems, as the Houthis used Anthropic’s Claude.^[59]

Self-Driven Attack Drones

One key development to watch is armed groups’ adoption of drones driven by AI. In 2026, both Russia and Ukraine used AI-piloted systems to attack their enemies with greater accuracy and range.^[60] The use of these systems by Latin American criminal organizations, many of which are already experimenting with AI in other fields, is imminent.^[61]

In Colombia, some armed groups are already pre-programming drones with routes and targets before launch, a basic form of “autonomous navigation.”^[62] On one occasion, the ELN combined this tactic with drone swarming, programming 40 drones “to shoot any

member of the Army who might be found” patrolling a rural area in Cesar.^[63] Full automation is the next logical step.

Weaponized Sea Drones

Ukraine has also been a pioneer in the use of unmanned surface vessels (USV) in combat, including the Sea Baby and Sargan 3000.^[64] Latin American armed groups may be developing similar capabilities, as exemplified by the seizure of an unmanned semi-submersible vessel off Colombia’s Caribbean coast in July 2025. In this case, the vessel was found empty, leading authorities to hypothesize it was “being tested” by its suspected owner, the EGC.^[65]

A Step Ahead



A Colombian police officer armed with an anti-drone rifle^[66]

As of 2026, regional governments were seeking to contain the cartels’ growing drone sophistication. In Colombia, the Ministry of Defense unveiled an advanced, multilayered CUAS defense system known as the Colombian Anti-Drone Shield.^[67] However, the cartels are always a step ahead in this deadly game of cat and mouse, as the ELN demonstrated when it used a swarm of at least 20 weaponized drones in a coordinated attack that bypassed a Colombian military compound’s defenses less than three months after Bogota’s new system was announced, killing multiple soldiers.^{[68][69]}

Security forces’ inability to keep up with armed groups’ drone advances will persist long after the war in Ukraine ends, as cartels, gangs, and insurgents will maintain access to drone training through other actors and military theaters. The FARC already has a history of receiving drone training from Iran and Hezbollah, while 2026

evidence indicates the Brazilian CV is sending recruits to Russia.^{[70][71]}

Just as these groups increase their own capabilities by leveraging international ties, world governments must do so as well. Even the world's most advanced militaries struggle to defeat adversaries with advanced drone arsenals, and Latin America's armed groups are poised to emulate just such drone advances.^[72] In order to close that gap, world governments and militaries must develop and share effective countermeasures. Otherwise, the cartels and their global allies will remain ahead, with ever deadlier consequences.

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