ORION FORUM

Mexican Cartels and South Africa’s Shift to Meth Production

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The Trump administration has made confronting drug cartels a central national security priority, designating the largest Mexican networks as Foreign Terrorist Organizations and dedicating significant resources toward securing the Americas. But those organizations are not confined to the Western Hemisphere. Mexican-linked methamphetamine production has emerged in Africa, first surfacing in Nigeria around 2016 and has since appeared in Kenya, Mozambique, and elsewhere on the continent.

South Africa has become a significant node in that expansion. The country is no stranger to the drug trade: its geography, porous borders, and commercial links have long made it a transit point for narcotics moving between South America, Asia, and Europe, and domestic manufacturing of synthetic substances has given local networks experience in drug production. What is new is the scale and who is running it. This analysis examines that shift: the pattern of industrial-scale lab discoveries pointing to cartel involvement, the structural conditions that make South Africa attractive to foreign producers, and the advantages cartels gain by manufacturing there.

From Transit Point to Production Site

South Africa’s role in the international drug trade is shifting from primarily a transit destination to a production hub. What is new is not the existence of or production of synthetic drugs in the country, but rather the scale and transnational nature of the production. In just two years, four major drug-production facilities have been uncovered by law enforcement, with all resulting in the arrests of foreign nationals, including Mexicans. In July of 2024, South African Police Services (SAPS) discovered a lab in Limpopo province with over $121 million worth of chemicals to produce crystal meth, arresting five suspects including three Mexican nationals.

In November of 2024, police in Gauteng province raided a crystal meth lab worth over $6.5 million in Rietfontein, Tshwane, and arrested one Mexican national. In September 2025, five Mexicans and one South African were arrested after police discovered a meth production facility outside Volksrust in Mpumalanga province. And, most recently in May of 2026, police dismantled an industrial-scale facility in Swartruggens of North West province, seizing nearly 500kgs of methamphetamine worth around $60.5 million. Six Mexicans were arrested, as well as suspects from Mozambique, Zimbabwe, and South Africa. The presence of Mexican nationals in all these major lab busts points heavily to Mexican cartel involvement, with the former head of Hawks, an elite crime investigative unit in SAPS, stating that he suspected many of these Mexicans had links with the Sinaloa cartel.

Location / Region	**Province**	**Date of Raid**	**X (Longitude)**	**Y (Latitude)**	**Amount**
Groblersdal	Limpopo	July 2024	29.3957	-25.1610	**> $121 million (R2 Billion)**
Rietfontein, Tshwane	Gauteng	November 2024	28.2410	-25.7070	**> $6.5 million (R100 Million)**
Volksrust	Mpumalanga	September 2025	29.8809	-27.3672	**$20 million (> R330 Million)**
Swartruggens	North West	May 2026	26.8373	-25.6558	**$60.5 million (R1 Billion)**

The frequency of these lab busts, the scale of each lab, and the presence of Mexican nationals likely tied to cartels signal that SA no longer serves primarily as a transit point in the international meth economy, but as a large-scale production hub.

The relationship between Mexican operatives and SA networks likely runs on knowledge transfer. Information from the labs seized so far indicates that the Mexican nationals were unlikely to hold high-level managerial authority, but rather served as cooks and chemists, transferring technical expertise to local partners. Mexican meth production methods have grown increasingly sophisticated, yielding a final product of consistently high purity. This makes Mexican producers attractive partners for criminal actors abroad. The SA networks, for their part, supply the cartels with suitable production sites, typically in rural areas with limited law enforcement presence, along with an understanding of local operating environments, logistics, distribution chains, and protection.

What Makes South Africa Attractive

Several structural conditions make SA an especially attractive site for cartels to set up production facilities. The country's strategic geography and porous land borders – which have long been exploited to move drugs between South America, Asia, and Europe – offer both concealment for remote drug labs and easy transportation of chemical precursors and synthesized narcotics. SA's licit trade ties also contribute to the country's attractiveness for drug production. Established international trade corridors offer cartels existing routes to conceal drugs and move them to large consumer markets.

Further, SA's strong trade relationship with China means that precursors can be imported relatively easily due to the huge volumes of licit trade between these two countries. Low enforcement capacity at major ports means that illicit imports can enter the country somewhat easily. Durban Harbour, the largest trading port in Sub-Saharan Africa, handles around 60% of SA's container traffic, while enforcement capacity and container monitoring are limited. Huge volumes of licit trade that can conceal illicit products, paired with busy ports with low enforcement capacity, create a permissive environment for criminal networks to import and export products, be that cocaine flowing into SA, chemical precursors flowing between China and SA, or SA-produced crystal meth flowing to consumer markets.

SA’s financial and banking systems also appeal to international cartels. The country has a sophisticated, globally integrated financial system that serves as a regional banking hub. However, this financial system is not well monitored and has long served as a hub for money-laundering. While the government has taken measures to improve monitoring, making it off of FATF’s grey list in October of last year, the country’s advanced, well-integrated, yet relatively easy-to-bypass financial architecture still makes it an attractive destination for criminal networks engaging in financial crimes.

The country’s preexisting, sophisticated criminal ecosystem is also valuable to international cartels looking to expand their presence. SA has vast, complex, and deeply entrenched local criminal networks that have history and experience in dealing with international groups. President Ramaphosa recently called organized crime SA’s most pressing challenge, and the ongoing Madlanga Commission has only brought the issue more into the spotlight. These groups are resilient, adaptable, resource-rich, and often embedded in government institutions. This makes them extremely valuable to international illicit groups, who can form alliances with local networks in exchange for access to these well-established criminal economies. This would also not be the first time local networks engaged in international supply chains: Western Cape gangs have had long relationships with Chinese syndicates, originally trading precursor chemicals for poached abalone.

Underlying each of these conditions is corruption. Corruption operates at the exact points where the drug economy meets the state. Porous borders, permeable ports, and resilient criminal networks are only permissive to the extent that the officials meant to police them can be bought or compromised.

The Madlanga Commission of Inquiry investigation highlights not only how corruption weakens enforcement in SA but how connected criminal activity is to state actors and agents. The Commission was established in July 2025 after the KwaZulu-Natal provincial police commissioner publicly announced that criminal syndicates had infiltrated police services. Testimony through 2026 has described the infiltration of SAPS and other agencies by criminal groups, including a case in which over $12.1 million worth of cocaine was stolen from state custody.

Testifying in the Commission has proven risky. In June 2026, a crime intelligence officer with access to evidence relevant to the Commission was shot in what police treated as an assassination attempt in the same week he was due to appear, and state witnesses have been killed in a Western Cape cocaine case linked to a criminal network known as the “Big Five”, itself under scrutiny from the Commission for law enforcement infiltration. The Hawks, an elite SAPS unit for Priority Crime Investigation, have drawn scrutiny over its former head’s, now suspended, alleged connection to the 2021 cocaine theft and his reported association with a businessman accused of bribing senior police officers who is now standing trial for financing multiple assassination attempts. What the Commission has exposed is the scale of criminal networks’ visibility into, and influence over, the institutions tasked with investigating them.

What Cartels Stand to Gain

South Africa’s appeal is not only about what the country offers, but about what cartels stand to gain by manufacturing methamphetamine there. Evidence primarily points to the Sinaloa Cartel and Cartel Jalisco Nueva Generación (CJNG) operating in SA, with Sinaloa the group more frequently cited in connection with the labs that have been uncovered so far. Producing in SA brings these cartels several distinct advantages, including market access, operational security, local partnerships, and geographic diversification.

Producing in SA affords cartels easier access to profitable markets, both in SA and Africa and abroad. Methamphetamine is one of SA’s most widely consumed drugs, and demand is rising both locally and across the continent. Mexican cartels that manufacture methamphetamine in SA bring supply closer to an expanding and more profitable market. It also opens easier access to lucrative markets further afield. Africa’s geography gives traffickers easier routes to reach high-value destination markets, such as Oceania, where methamphetamine is expensive and in high demand. Producing in SA allows cartels to serve those markets while cutting the length and cost of their supply chains. Manufacturing in SA also offers cartels operational advantages and lowers their exposure. Rather than shipping finished product into and across the continent, where it is vulnerable to seizure, cartels can produce closer to the market, thereby cutting transport costs and reducing risks of interdiction.

Cartels are also incentivized to produce in SA because they can partner with local criminal networks, which act as a force and a profit multiplier. Cartels do not need to relocate their leadership and key personnel in order to produce in SA; the model runs on knowledge-sharing. Expertise is exported through chemists who can train and equip local partners, while those partners handle much of the on-the-ground work. This model keeps relatively few, and relatively expendable, cartel personnel exposed, so an arrest or lab seizure does little systemic damage to the organization as a whole. In return, cartels are plugged into established criminal networks that supply things like market knowledge, local protection, and access to a criminal ecosystem that would be harder for the cartels to reach on their own. These partnerships are mutually beneficial and increase profit for the cartels at minimal risk.

It is also worth noting the convenient timing of this expansion. Relocating production to SA is a profit-driven business decision in its own right, but it is a particularly well-timed one. A production base spread across continents means that intensifying pressure in the Western Hemisphere is less able to disrupt the enterprise as a whole.

This does not make South Africa a narco-state, nor has it displaced Mexico or Southeast Asia as a center of global methamphetamine production. But the evidence listed here – four large-scale lab busts in two years, consistent presence of Mexican nationals, and a knowledge-transfer arrangement – points to a pattern of production rather than isolated lab busts. Cartels have established a functioning production capability in South Africa, one embedded in local criminal networks and shielded by compromised law enforcement, that has persisted across multiple sites and repeated disruption. This development is not contained within the country's borders. The second analysis in this series will discuss what this means for regional stability, the international drug trade, and U.S. counternarcotics and strategic interests.

Implications for U.S. security

South Africa's emergence as a cartel production hub carries three implications for U.S. security: it undermines American counternarcotics strategy, opens alternative revenue streams for adversarial actors, and weakens a state whose stability remains a U.S. strategic interest.

Underlying each of the following implications is a single dynamic: the production boom is deepening an organized crime crisis that is already straining SA. Local manufacturing has fed rising domestic meth consumption, handing cartels a growing market and embedding them further in the country's criminal economy. The ongoing Madlanga Commission has worked to expose how deep criminal encroachment into state institutions runs. Mexican cartel production feeds directly into this criminal landscape, adding capital, expertise, and profit opportunity to criminal networks that are infiltrating the institutions meant to police them. It is through this weakened and compromised state that the following implications operate.

SA's emergence as a production hub and the presence of Mexican cartels undermine U.S. counternarcotics policy. New manufacturing bases extend cartels' access to profitable markets, and the resulting revenue and reach make these organizations more powerful, transnational, and resilient. The shift also complicates interdiction: rather than shipping finished product that is vulnerable to seizures en route, cartels can move manufacturing closer to the market, dispersing operations across more jurisdictions, thereby making enforcement harder. This is especially consequential given the FTO designations of many Mexican cartels, including those that are operating in SA. While these designations are aimed at Western Hemisphere security, they attach to the cartels themselves. Their expansion into SA places a designated terrorist organization's production operations beyond the region the policy was built to address.

Expanding cartel production could provide other adversarial actors in sub-Saharan Africa access to alternative revenue streams. In its 2026 testimony, AFRICOM warned that African terror groups are increasingly financed by drug cartels, a development it frames as a direct threat to U.S. national security. A growing domestic meth market, driven in part by cartel-aided production in SA, is a profitable one, and it sets favorable conditions for revenue-seeking armed groups to become involved in one form or another. ISIS-Mozambique, already active in the region, is one such candidate. The broader risk is that SA's expanding production base helps establish the conditions for a crime-terror nexus to take hold.

Cartel-driven organized crime threatens to weaken a country that remains strategically important to the U.S. South Africa is a major supplier of critical and strategic minerals, primarily platinum-group metals (PGMs), that the U.S. relies on. Even amid an aggressive tariff campaign against Pretoria, the US carved out exemptions to protect the flow of PGMs. A South Africa that is weakened by organized crime, including Mexican cartel production enterprises, is a less stable and less reliable source of PGMs.

Great power competition is also a variable to consider. SA sits at the center of the contest between the U.S. and China for influence across the continent. A state weakened by international criminal networks is a more capturable one. Even with strained U.S.-SA relations, the country's stability is an American strategic interest, and the gradual erosion of that stability poses a risk to that interest.

What To Monitor

Several indicators will signal whether South Africa's role as a production hub deepens or stalls.

Geographic spread: Whether industrial-scale production emerges in neighboring states would indicate that cartels are treating southern Africa as a theater rather than SA as a single node. The precedent for this already exists: Mexican-linked meth production appeared in Nigeria around 2016, then moved through East and southern Africa before reaching SA. This suggests a pattern of expansion rather than a fixed foothold. Production sites tied to Mexican networks have since been uncovered in Kenya as well. In January, two Mexicans with reported links to the Sinaloa cartel were arrested in Mozambique. Continued attempts to establish production in neighboring states would confirm that cartels are pushing a regional expansion rather than consolidating around SA alone.

Export patterning: Whether methamphetamine seizures in international markets, such as in Oceania, East Asia, or Europe, increasingly originate from SA would signal that SA labs are playing a larger role in global meth economies. Though the origin of the product is not always conclusive, seizures like the one in Sydney Airport in January of this year, where authorities intercepted 39kgs of methamphetamine in the luggage of a passenger arriving on a flight from SA, serve as valuable indicators. The majority of meth that reaches Australia originates in North America; a meaningful shift in this picture toward South African-produced meth would establish the country as a larger node in the international meth economy.

Institutional trajectory: The Madlanga Commission's final report, currently due in November of this year, and whether its findings translate into prosecutions and institutional reform, will help shape how permissive an environment SA remains. Meaningful accountability would narrow the space in which cartels and their local partners operate, while continued impunity would widen that space.

Maritime dimension: Finally, the Cape of Good Hope's increasing strategic importance bears watching. With the Red Sea and Strait of Hormuz disruptions pushing the bulk of Asia-Europe and Asia-US East Coast shipping around the Cape, a shipping lane of growing global importance now runs along a coastline where criminal networks are expanding. The implications of that convergence remain uncertain, but they are worth tracking.
