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## Dark Trail: Mafia and Cartel Cooperation in the Global Cocaine Trade

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*Cooperation between the Italian mafia, particularly the 'Ndrangheta, and drug cartels in Latin America has been going on for decades. The Italian mafia played a key role in the distribution of cocaine to Europe, controlling about 80% of imports. Relations with major cartels such as the Gulf Cartel, Zetas, and PCC show that the Italian mafia avoided conflict in order to keep the transatlantic drug trade running smoothly. Operation Reckoning in 2008 uncovered smuggling routes from Colombia to New York, then to the port of Gioia Tauro, Italy. Although Mexico's criminal environment is full of violence, the Italian mafia maintains a strategy of cooperation without direct confrontation. Their dominance in the European market is getting stronger, as evidenced by the increase in the amount of cocaine seized during the COVID-19 pandemic. With huge profits and a wide network, the Italian mafia will almost certainly continue to maintain their presence in Latin America to ensure the stability of the global drug trade.*

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## Mutualism, Mafia and Cartels

Although official reports of cooperation between drug cartels and the Italian mafia have existed since 2012, the Italian mafia still has a great influence in South America to this day. The Italian mafia, especially a group called 'Ndrangheta, has almost certainly built a network in South and Central America to ensure the distribution of drugs runs smoothly. They are responsible for about 80% of cocaine imports to Europe, making them one of the major players in the international drug trade. [1] ; [2]

Their history of links with major cartels such as the Gulf Cartel, the Zetas Cartel, and the PCC (First Command of the Capital) suggests a strong possibility that organized crime groups in Mexico collaborated with the Italian mafia for the distribution of cocaine across the Atlantic. The Italian Mafia almost certainly avoids conflict or feud with other cartels in Latin and Central America. This is done because maintaining the smooth delivery of drugs is very important for the drug market in Europe. Latin America's strategic geographical location in cocaine production encourages the Italian mafia to maintain their presence and cooperation in the region, no matter the cost. [3]

## Historical Relationships

In 2008, Operation Reckoning led by the DEA (Drug Enforcement Administration) and Italian authorities uncovered the links between the Gulf Cartel in Mexico and the Italian mafia group 'Ndrangheta. In this operation, the Mexican cartel transported cocaine from Colombia to New York, then the Italian mafia smuggled the cocaine into the port of Gioia Tauro in Calabria, Italy. The operation also uncovered the laundering of more than \$57 million and the trafficking of up to 80 tons of cocaine. [4] ; [5]



*Figure 1. Brazilian drug lord Marcos Camacho or 'Marcola,' the first leader of the feared PPC gang, is seen leaving a hospital in Brasilia, Brazil on January 21, 2020. Source : <https://noticias.uol.com.br/>*

Drug trafficking networks are found in various regions of Central and South America. In 2014, for example, cocaine from Peru and Colombia was smuggled through the Panama Canal by hiding it in fish. This shipment reportedly reached 680 kilograms. In the same year, a Spanish citizen was arrested in Colombia for allegedly representing the Oficina de Envigado criminal group and tasked with establishing links to the Calabrian mafia. [5]

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The previous year, two members of the 'Ndrangheta were arrested in Sao Paulo, Brazil, one of whom was the head of the Latin American-Brazilian network who was also a liaison with the PCC (First Command of the Capital) group. The second leader of the PCC, Gilberto Aparecido Dos Santos, known as Fuminho, even met at least twice with 'Ndrangheta representatives between 2016 and 2017. [6] ; [7]

The existence of 'Ndrangheta is also seen in other countries such as Peru, the Dominican Republic, and Costa Rica. This shows how important the region is to a stable flow of cocaine. The expansion of trade routes and the involvement of various actors indicate that despite the challenging conditions in the region, criminal organizations such as 'Ndrangheta will almost certainly continue to maintain their presence in Latin and Central America.

## **European domination**

During the COVID-19 pandemic, cocaine seizures have increased significantly. In the port of Antwerp, an additional 6 tons of cocaine were found, while other locations such as Rotterdam in the Netherlands and Galicia in Spain also reported major discoveries. Although the pandemic affected many sectors, the large cocaine trade continued to run smoothly. Sea lanes are still a favorite method of smuggling drugs, taking advantage of the large number of containers that enter major ports in Belgium and the Netherlands every day. According to a report from the European Monitoring Center for Drugs and Drug Addiction (EMCDDA) in September 2020, there has been a huge increase in the amount of cocaine seized and its purity level. In 2014, 62 tons of cocaine were reportedly exported, while in 2018 the number increased to 177 tons—an increase of nearly 300%. [8] ; [9]

According to Giuseppe Governale, Italy's chief anti-mafia prosecutor, the 'Ndrangheta group has been referred to as "the most important criminal organization in the Western world". The mafia reportedly has a budget of \$59 billion, equivalent to 3% of Italy's GDP. The huge profits from the drug trade will almost certainly prompt the 'Ndrangheta to expand their ties with transatlantic criminal organizations such as the Mexican cartel. [10]

## **Conflictless Cooperation in Mexico's Criminal Environment**

Despite having a history of cooperation with the Zetas Cartel and the Gulf Cartel, it is unlikely that the 'Ndrangheta or any other Italian mafia group will escalate the level of violence or confrontation with other cartels. Their main focus is to keep profits from the drug trade. Conflicts between cartels have the potential to disrupt drug distribution, import, and production chains, causing great losses to their operations.

However, there are some conditions that seem to limit the magnitude of the Italian mafia's investment in Mexico's criminal environment. In Mexico City, the level of violence is expected to increase as the CJNG (The Jalisco New Generation Cartel) expands, one of the most powerful and violent cartels in Mexico.



*Figure 2. Members of the CJNG in the mountains of Michoacán. Source : <https://imagenes.elpais.com>*

The criminal environment in Mexico, which is very unstable, is in contrast to the situation in Italy, where cooperation between criminal groups is more common. Therefore, the relationship formed between the Italian mafia and the cartel in Mexico is most likely only cooperative and drug distribution, not full support or total control. This strategy ensures that mafia operations remain smooth without being directly involved in the bloody conflict in Mexico.

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