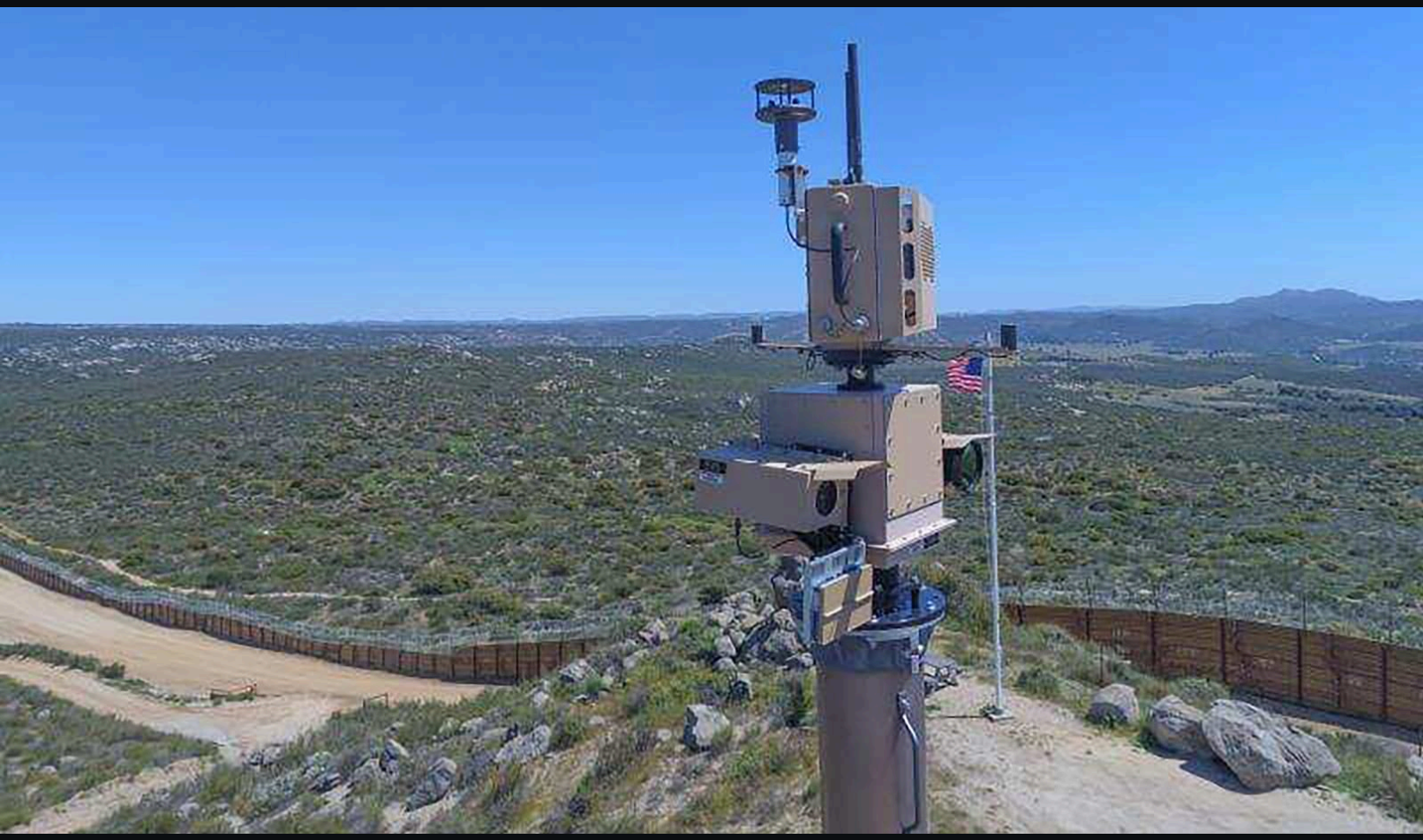


Photo: CBP Autonomous Surveillance Tower · CBP Photography · Public domain · Wikimedia Commons

OSINT · SITUATION ASSESSMENT

THIRTY-FOUR THOUSAND FLIGHTS

Drones have become routine tools for the criminal organisations on the U.S.-Mexico border: scouting for agents, guiding crossings and carrying drugs. The numbers are now large enough to measure in tens of thousands of flights a year, and in February 2026 a reported "cartel drone incursion" closed the airspace over El Paso. This report sets out what is known, what is disputed, and why detection along a border more than 3,000 km long is the core problem.

REPORT DETAILS

PUBLISHED	SUBJECT	SOURCE BASE
October 2026	Drone use by criminal organisations on the U.S.-Mexico border, and how it is detected	DHS Senate testimony, CBP figures as reported, local reporting, incident records
METHOD	**VERDICT**	**CONFIDENCE**
Compare official counts; separate confirmed events from claims	The volume is real and growing; detection coverage, not authority, is now the binding limit	Moderate
AUTHOR		
Ghulam Mujtaba, Ph.D.		

BOTTOM LINE

Drones are now a daily feature of the U.S.-Mexico border, and the main difficulty for the United States is detecting them. CBP detected 34,682 drone flights within 500 metres of the southern border in fiscal year 2025, more than four times the number on the Canadian border. Most scout for agents, watch over people smugglers or carry drugs; across the line in Mexico, cartels already use drones armed with explosives. In February 2026 a reported cartel drone incursion closed the airspace over El Paso. Official accounts and press reports still disagree about what was shot at. Detecting them along a frontier of more than 3,000 km is hard, because the drones are small, low, cheap and often flown at night.

34,682

DRONE FLIGHTS WITHIN 500 M OF THE MEXICO BORDER

◆ CBP, FISCAL YEAR 2025

7,678

ON THE CANADIAN BORDER

◆ SAME PERIOD, SAME MEASURE

> 27,000

DRONES DETECTED NEAR THE SOUTHERN BORDER

◆ SECOND HALF OF 2024, DHS TESTIMONY

< 8 hours

EL PASO'S "TEN-DAY" AIRSPACE CLOSURE

◆ FEBRUARY 2026

KEY QUESTIONS

How many drones cross or approach the U.S.-Mexico border?

CBP detected 34,682 drone flights within 500 metres of the U.S.-Mexico border in fiscal year 2025, against 7,678 along the Canadian border. A DHS official told the Senate that more than 27,000 drones were detected near the southern border in the second half of 2024 alone.

What happened in the El Paso airspace closure?

On 10 February 2026 the FAA closed the airspace over El Paso for a planned ten days, citing a cartel drone incursion; it reopened in under eight hours. Officials said the threat was neutralised, but press reports said a counter-drone laser had been used without FAA coordination and that one target was a party balloon. No cartel drone attack on U.S. soil was confirmed.

THE RULER — THE WHOLE ARGUMENT

What the numbers say

MEASURE	FIGURE	SOURCE
DRONE FLIGHTS WITHIN 500 M SOUTHERN BORDER, FY2025 NEW	34,682	CBP, as reported by Cronkite News
DRONE FLIGHTS WITHIN 500 M NORTHERN BORDER, FY2025	7,678	CBP, as reported by Cronkite News
DRONES DETECTED NEAR SOUTHERN BORDER JUL–DEC 2024	more than 27,000	DHS testimony to the Senate Judiciary Committee

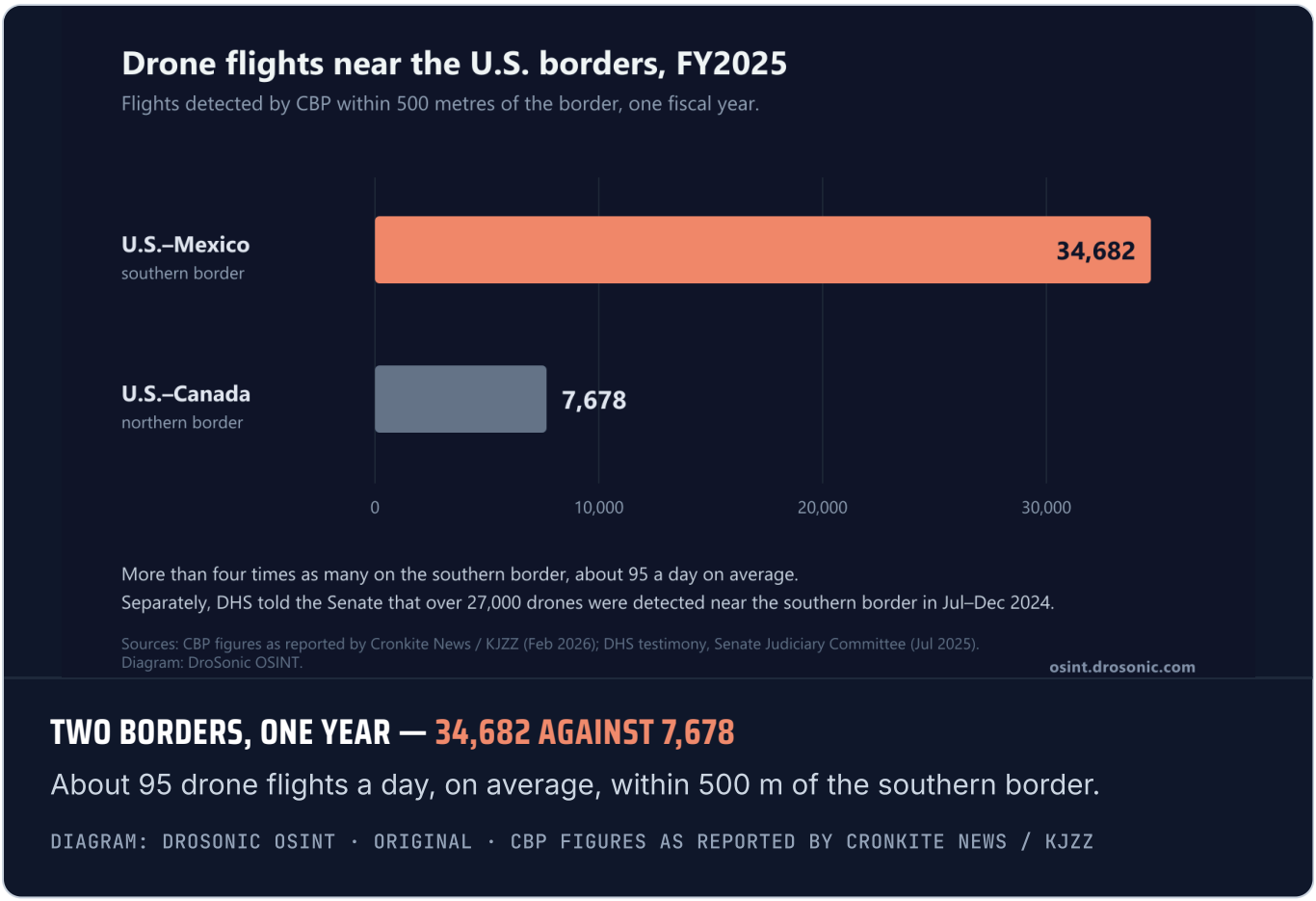
MEASURE	FIGURE	SOURCE
DRUG SEIZURES FROM DRONES JUL–DEC 2024	over 1,200 lb of meth and other narcotics	CBP, as reported

MOST RECENT FULL-YEAR FIGURE · DIFFERENT AGENCIES COUNT FLIGHTS, DRONES AND DETECTIONS DIFFERENTLY

FIELD 01 — THE SCALE

Tens of thousands of flights

In July 2025, DHS counter-drone official Steven Willoughby told the Senate Judiciary Committee that more than 27,000 drones were detected within 500 metres of the southern border in the last six months of 2024. He warned it was "only a matter of time before Americans or law enforcement are targeted in the border region." Mexico's president responded that there was no information on new drones at the border. KJZZ↗ A fuller-year figure followed: CBP detected 34,682 drone flights within 500 metres of the Mexico border in fiscal year 2025, against 7,678 along the Canadian border. Cronkite News via KJZZ↗



What the drones do is mostly mundane and effective:

— **Scouting.** Small, quiet drones watch for Border Patrol and police, and guide groups across. Criminal groups began using them this way around 2019.

— **Smuggling.** Larger drones carry drugs. CBP seized more than 1,200 lb of methamphetamine and other narcotics carried by drone in the second half of 2024, and traffickers have moved to custom drones that can lift up to 100 kg, according to the International Narcotics Control Board.

— **Attack, so far south of the line.** In October 2025 three explosive-laden drones struck a government building in Tijuana, about a mile from California. Cartels use armed drones against police and rivals inside Mexico; that violence has not reached the U.S. side. Cronkite News via KJZZ↗

FIELD 02 — EL PASO

A closure, and a dispute

On the night of 10 February 2026 the FAA closed the airspace over El Paso, and a similar area in New Mexico, for a planned ten days, citing "special security reasons". The administration said a "drug cartel drone incursion" had occurred and that "the threat has been neutralized"; the El Paso restriction was lifted in under eight hours. Press reports then told a different story: that Customs and Border Protection had used an experimental military laser against what it believed were cartel drones without coordinating with the FAA, and that at least one target "turned out to be a party balloon." The administration's drone claims were not independently corroborated, and no cartel drone attack within the U.S. had been recorded. Seven arriving and seven departing passenger flights were cancelled and medical evacuation flights rerouted. Wikipedia↗

Both accounts point the same way. Either a cartel drone reached U.S. airspace over a major city, or authorities could not reliably tell a drone from a balloon before firing a laser at it (radar faces the same problem with birds, as Is It a Bird? describes). In both cases the gap is the same: confident detection and identification of small objects in the air.



EL PASO INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT — CLOSED FOR "TEN DAYS", OPEN IN EIGHT HOURS

The February 2026 restriction disrupted passenger and medical flights and caught local officials and airlines by surprise.

PHOTO: FORMULANONE · CC BY-SA 2.0 · WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

FIELD 03 — SEEING THEM

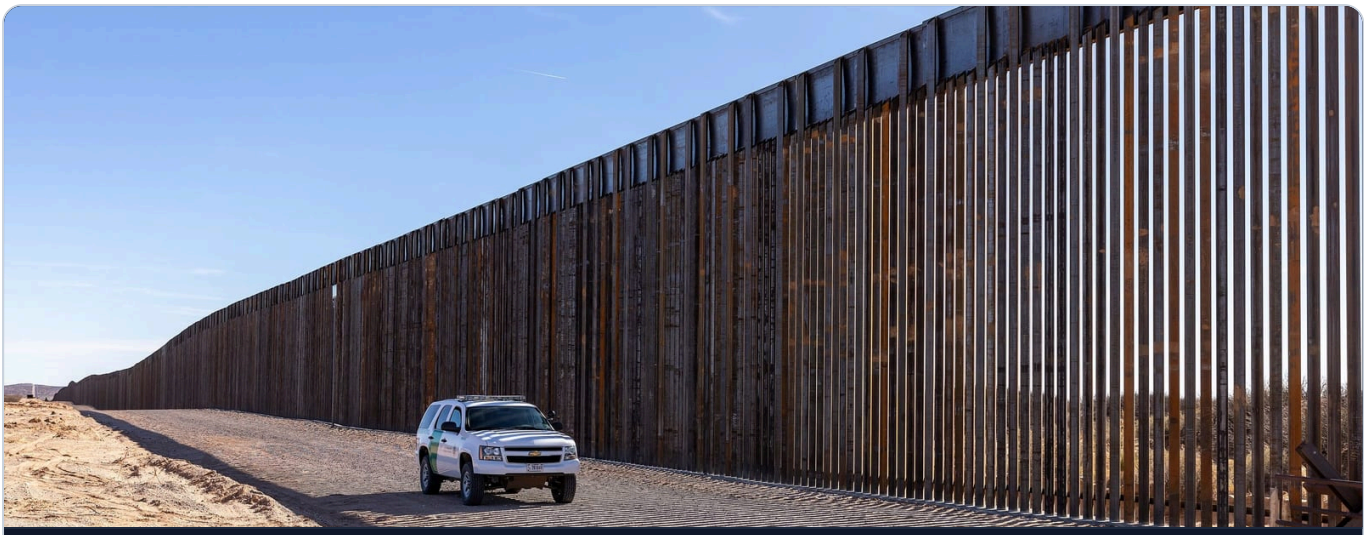
The border sensing problem

Border Patrol detects drones with radar, radio-frequency sensors and infrared cameras.[Cronkite News via KJZZ↗] Its autonomous surveillance towers, pictured above, scan with radar, point a camera at whatever moves and analyse the image, running off-grid on renewable power.[Wikimedia Commons↗] Each of those sensors runs into the problems this site has covered:

— **Radar** struggles with bird-sized drones flying low over broken terrain (see our radar series, especially Under the Horizon).

— **RF detection** misses drones that fly pre-programmed routes or use links it doesn't recognise (When Jamming Stops Working).

— **Cameras** need to be pointed, and the border is long and dark.



SANTA TERESA, NEW MEXICO — A WALL THAT DRONES FLY OVER

The border wall near El Paso. In February 2026 the airspace west of Santa Teresa was closed for three days alongside El Paso's.

PHOTO: U.S. CUSTOMS AND BORDER PROTECTION · PUBLIC DOMAIN · WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

The terrain makes it harder still: canyons, river bottoms and hills give low drones cover, and a drone flying a few metres above the scrub at night is easy to miss. The economics are against the defender too. A scouting quadcopter costs a few hundred dollars, and coverage has to be continuous across thousands of kilometres.

> **A tower that sees a truck at kilometres may never see a quadcopter skimming the scrub at night. The border's gaps are low, small and dark.**

FIELD 04 — AUTHORITY AND MONEY

What changed in 2026

The legal and funding picture shifted in 2025–26. The SAFER SKIES Act, in force since July 2026, lets trained state and local police detect drones and, with further certification, disable them. Our report Allowed to Listen, Not to Shoot covers it. DHS announced a $115 million plan to speed counter-drone procurement in January 2026, and FEMA awarded $250 million to the eleven states hosting World Cup events.[Cronkite News via KJZZ↗] Arizona gave peace officers immunity from lawsuits for shooting down suspected smuggling drones within 15 miles of the border. Authority and money are arriving faster than coverage.

CONFIDENCE

How sure we are, and what would change it

High confidence that drone use at the southern border runs to tens of thousands of flights a year. Several official figures agree on the order of magnitude, though they count different things (flights, drones, detections).

Low-to-moderate confidence in what happened at El Paso. Official statements and press reports conflict, and no official investigation has been published.

Our assessment is that detection coverage, not legal authority, is now the main constraint on countering border drones.

DROSONIC — OUR APPROACH

Filling the gaps between towers

A border is too long for any single sensor. DroSonic's design is a network of small passive acoustic nodes that classify drone sound on low-cost edge hardware and emit nothing, so they can be spread between towers and along known routes.[DroSonic↗] Each node has a short range, so coverage depends on how many nodes are placed and where.

DroSonic's U.S. provisional patent application covers detection, classification, localisation and tiered defeat cueing.[DroSonic↗] A prototype was tested against live drones at DIRT Days 26.04 in September 2026,[DroSonic↗] and the company joined the SOF RACER consortium in October 2026.[DroSonic↗] No border deployment has been announced.



DIRT DAYS 26.04 — A NODE, NOT A TOWER

DroSonic's test position at the field exercise. Along a border, nodes like this would fill the gaps between larger sensors.

PHOTO: DROSONIC · FIELD-TEST WRITE-UP

CLOSE — WHAT IT MEANS

Covering the gaps between towers

The border drone problem is a coverage problem. The drones are cheap and numerous, they fly low and mostly at night, and many of them send no signal an RF sensor will recognise. Radar towers and cameras will remain the backbone, but there are gaps between them where small, low drones fly unseen.

Passive acoustic sensing is suited to those gaps. Nodes are cheap enough to place densely along crossing points and canyons, run on little power, emit nothing for smugglers to detect, and hear drones whatever their control link. Ukraine has shown the model at national scale; our report Listening to the Sky describes it. At DroSonic we design for border and perimeter security as a primary use.

ABOUT DROSONIC

DroSonic builds passive acoustic drone detection: networked sensors that listen for drones instead of their radio signals, using acoustic AI and edge computing. DroSonic OSINT is our open-source research into the threat that technology is built to meet.

THE RECORD SO FAR

OCT 2026	Joined the SOF RACER consortium, which connects USSOCOM with commercial technology companies
SEPT 2026	Prototype tested against live drones at DIRT Days 26.04, a field exercise supported by CMI2 with U.S. Central Command and U.S. Army DEVCOM
SEPT 2026	Technical presentation at NDIA's Emerging Technologies for Defense conference on detecting fibre-optic and radio-silent drones
SEPT 2026	Filed U.S. provisional patent 64/148,522 on passive acoustic detection, classification, localisation and defeat cueing
JUL 2026	Pitched to the U.S. Space Force at Space Systems Command's Reverse Industry Engagement Day, Colorado Springs

How DroSonic detection works → · Where it is used → · Talk to the team →

THIS REPORT ONLINE

https://osint.drosonic.com/assessments/border-cartel-drones-detection.html

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DroSonic OSINT: open-source assessments on drones and counter-UAS from DroSonic, passive acoustic drone detection. drosonic.com · sudo@drosonic.com



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Ghulam Mujtaba, Ph.D., is the founder and CEO of DroSonic and leads its work on passive acoustic drone detection. A computer engineer with 13 years of experience building machine-learning systems for edge hardware, he holds a Ph.D. in computer engineering from Gachon University in South Korea, was an NSF postdoctoral fellow at West Virginia University in the United States, and is an Assistant Professor of AI and Data Science at Regis University in Denver, Colorado. An IEEE Senior Member, he has published more than 20 papers on deep learning, computer vision and multimedia for edge devices.

PROFILE ↗ LINKEDIN ↗ ORCID ↗

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1. KJZZ — Willoughby: 27,000+ drones within 500 m in H2 2024; 'only a matter of time'
2. Cronkite News via KJZZ — CBP: 34,682 flights within 500 m (FY2025); 7,678 northern border
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7. DroSonic — DIRT Days 26.04 field test, September 2026
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