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by Andreas E. Feldmann and Marc Lopez

Abstract

Security conditions in Mexico linked to the confrontation between security forces, organized crime groups (OCGs) and self-defense groups have deteriorated due to the rise of terrorist attacks. While Mexico has a history of violence, terrorism has not been a common practice. This article provides a brief analysis of existing trends by examining the nature of terrorism in Mexico and reviewing the way in which different armed parties utilize this tactic. It argues that terrorism arises in the context of a criminal war in which state security forces, self-defense groups and different OCGs have developed specific repertoires of terrorism that fit their organizational goals and character.

Keywords: Mexico, terrorism, criminal war, violence, crime, drugs

Introduction

Since the mid-1990s, Mexico has seen a steady and dramatic deterioration of security conditions linked to rising criminal activity. In this new phase of violence, Mexican security forces have been combating a plethora of organized crime groups (OCGs)[1] and, more recently, armed civilian-led self-defense groups. Violence in the country has reached unprecedented levels. Researchers conservatively estimate there have been approximately 150,000 crime-related casualties in Mexico since the so-called “War on Drugs” began in 2006.[2] In addition, an estimated 90,000–150,000 people have disappeared[3] while 357,000 people have been internally displaced and many more fled to the United States as refugees.[4] Other forms of violence, such as kidnappings, extortion, and racketeering, have also been increasing.[5]

A particularly ominous sign of the violence afflicting the country is the increased use of terrorist tactics[6], including targeted assassinations, abductions, massacres, disappearances, bombing attacks, torture, and sexual violence.[7] While Mexico has a history of violence, terrorism has not been a common practice, barring the use of state terror during the so-called “Dirty War” in the 1970s and limited insurgent terrorism in the states of Chiapas and Guerrero.[8] People of all walks of life ranging from innocent bystanders, journalists, and human rights activists to governmental and state officials (politicians, judges) and the relatives of armed parties’ operatives are being regularly targeted.[9] These acts clearly match extant definitions of terrorism, i.e., armed parties deliberately targeting civilians with violent acts in open defiance of cardinal principles of International Humanitarian Law (IHL) to instill fear in the wider community.[10] In what seems a typical feature regarding the use of terrorism in situations of armed conflict and/or situations of generalized violence, groups rely on different repertoires of terrorism that suit their organizational identities and goals.[11]

This article analyzes the range of terror tactics used by three different armed parties in Mexico: state security forces, criminal organizations and self-defense forces. The analysis highlights how distinct forms of terrorism vary according to distinct organizational features and situational logics and how these forms evolve over time. By exploring the use of terror in the context of a criminal war (see definition below), the article broadens our understanding of the crime-terror nexus.

Conceptualizing Violence and Terrorism in Contemporary Mexico

The rise of terrorist attacks in a setting characterized by conditions of violence linked to organized crime raises intriguing questions concerning the linkages between nonpolitical criminality and terrorism.[12] Any understanding of terrorist dynamics requires a sound diagnosis of the nature of violence in Mexico, in particular its complex configuration. Several factors account for this complexity. First, the size and regional variation of the country significantly impact violent dynamics, rendering local forms of violence particularly salient. Mexican OCGs are resourceful organizations that have amassed enormous fortunes and con-

siderable military capabilities including security specialists (e.g., former members of the Mexican security and special forces).[13] Most OCGs have attained control of slices of territory where they have become de facto authorities. Localized forms of violence have emerged against the backdrop of persistent divisions and splinter within OCGs in the highly unstable context of illegal markets. In the case of criminal groups, this is compounded by their predatory nature and their tendency to encroach on rivals' territory as they vie for so-called *plazas*, strategic locations for the transshipment of drugs into the United States, such as corridors, ports and border cities.[14]

Second, the clandestine nature of OCGs and their constant evolution creates a fragmented ever-changing criminal landscape. Turf wars between OCGs generate waves of violence and terrorism as these groups ebb and flow depending on their capacity to organize their business and withstand pressures from security forces and rival groups.[15] Violence is worsened by the capture, and/or killing of OCG members that often results in violent intra-cartel succession power struggles.[16]

Third, an unconstrained and unaccountable state apparatus with a problematic human rights record has exacerbated already-alarming levels of violence and created an unpredictable, unstable context.[17] Mexican security forces are organized into a gargantuan, multilayered system which operates at municipal, state and federal levels. Far from being unified, Mexican security forces tend to operate in scattered ways, rarely cooperating and often competing with one another. Endemic corruption, regional differences and mutual distrust in a context characterized by criminal infiltration of security agencies, especially at the state level, exacerbate fragmentation.[18]

In addition, Mexico has also seen a rapid expansion of self-defense groups (commonly known as *auto-defensas*) that rose up in arms to confront OCGs in crime-ridden municipalities.[19] These militia groups have often refused to obey orders to disarm and have also confronted state forces. While purportedly created to combat criminal groups, most of them have turned into predatory groups and have committed serious excesses.[20] Many have been compromised by corrupt authorities and criminal groups and at times have mutated into criminal gangs themselves.[21]

The sudden and massive increase of violence in Mexico has initiated an intriguing debate concerning the real nature of this violence and how exactly to conceptualize it. A recent report on human rights practices states it is "staggering how little is known about killings and violence in Mexico." [22] Academics agree that the fighting in the country does not constitute a conventional civil war since political elements are largely absent, but they disagree on how to characterize it.[23] One author, Benjamin Lessing, argues that Mexico is experiencing a *criminal war*. In such contexts, he explains, OCGs seek to constrain rather than defeat the state by deploying violence to limit the latter's capacity to interfere in their operations. Further, he argues that the differences between criminal and rebel governance are related to the dynamics of territorial control and organizational goals. While organized crime groups can choose whether to rule or not, for rebel groups [proto-]governance seems to be a necessary condition for achieving victory.[24] Examining the Mexican case, other authors argue that limited state capacity opens the way for political and economic extortion and the creation of an alternative criminal order that resembles incipient state-making processes.[25] Our own work posits that terrorism in Mexico arises in the context of a criminal war that, at least in terms of the use of this tactic, resembles conventional civil wars, where armed parties (state and non-state) systematically rely on terrorist tactics to advance their strategic goals.[26]

Armed Parties: Repertoires of Terrorism

This section provides an analysis of existing patterns of terrorism by tracing the terrorism repertoires of the different Mexican armed parties. The examination is based on a combination of primary and secondary sources, including interviews, databases on violence, and human rights reports. We collected the information during three short field trips to Mexico City and Michoacán. While in Mexico, the authors conducted 15 semi-structured interviews with knowledgeable actors, including human rights activists, humanitarian workers, journalists, representatives of international organizations, mayors, as well as scholars and experts

on armed conflict.

In the following we summarize what we found on the security forces, the organized crime groups and the self-defence forces.

Mexican Security Forces

Agents of the state have been responsible for widespread atrocities, including the use of terrorism during their “war on drugs.”[27] Civilians, particularly those from humble backgrounds, are regularly victimized during searches and raids. State agents aggressively target civilians suspected of participating in, or sympathizing with, criminal groups. As Anaya Muñoz and Frey explain, “behind the smokescreen of criminal violence, state actors are engaging or acquiescing in human rights violations with almost total impunity.”[28] Reports also show that security forces rely on extrajudicial searches and arrests of civilians in order to discourage criminal activity. Specifically, testimonies reveal how security forces indiscriminately target people during routine checkpoint controls or on the street. These searches and/or arrests, which frequently occur following anonymous tipoffs, often lack reasonable cause or evidence of wrongdoing and most of the victims do not know why they were targeted.[29]

As to the tactics employed, thousands of testimonies note the widespread use of torture of civilians while in detention. Reports also note the use of targeted assassination as a tactic to ensure silence.[30] Massacres also appear to be part of the security forces’ repertoire of action, but they tend to be far less widespread and harder to confirm due to concerted efforts to cover up these incidents.[31] Security forces have also carried out a share of the large number of disappearances.[32] Most human rights experts interviewed explain that this modus operandi derives from the country’s ‘dirty war’ period (1960–1980), when many repressive techniques (e.g., torture, enforced disappearance and extrajudicial execution) were developed as part of the counterinsurgency training against Communism.[33] These days, however, the target is drug trafficking instead of Communism.[34] Nonetheless, the manner in which this repression is employed (i.e., random, capricious, sudden) clearly seeks to elicit widespread fear in communities to silence citizens and diminish their capacity to organize.

Organized Crime Groups [OCGs]

These groups have routinely resorted to terrorist acts to attain their objectives. Attacks include summary executions, massacres, bombings, and sexual violence.[35] The atrocities unleashed by criminal groups are complex and multifaceted. In one of the most compelling accounts on the matter, Williams indicates that the growth of gratuitous violence in Mexico defies conventional interpretations, making it “more complex and intractable than terrorism and insurgent violence.”[36] He also posits that violence is best characterized as a series of layers superimposed on each other and informed by different, competing logics (i.e., competition, outsourcing and factionalism) and takes issue with accounts depicting violence as *terror*. In line with Williams’ general thesis, we argue that only a subset of OCG violence corresponds to terrorism.

Specifically, we posit that OCG tactics mutated from a conventional repertoire of violence targeting rivals into outright terrorist practices whereby OCGs purposefully attack civilians to inspire fear. The use of terrorism on the part of OCGs obeys three complementary logics. First, criminal organizations often rely on this tactic while seeking control of territory and people to buttress their operational capacity.[37] Second, they resort to terrorism to deter state authorities from interfering in their business.[38] Finally, OCGs use terrorism in areas controlled by rival groups in an effort to shift blame to their rivals and attract the intervention of security forces (this practice is colloquially known as *calentando la plaza* (heating up the plaza)).[39]

The incorporation of terrorism as a tactic on the part of OCGs coincides with the escalation of turf wars following the gradual breakdown of the ruling party PRI’s *state protection racket* after democratization in the 2000s.[40] The uncertainty created by these changes prompted OCGs to form paramilitary wings to prevent rival organizations entering their territory while also trying to expand their own presence in rivals’ territory. [41] Most of these groups were composed of ex-military violence specialists[42] who brought their coun-

terinsurgency techniques developed during the Cold War to the drug war.[43] Among these techniques is the incorporation of direct attacks against civilians who defy OCG authority.[44] Over the years, Mexicans have become accustomed to the widespread use of what Villarreal dubs “spectacular violence.”[45] In order to maximize fear, OCGs display victims’ bodies in public places, often adding banners warning authorities, rivals and the public or uploading videos to Internet sites such as YouTube.[46]

A cursory analysis suggests that there is not only a difference between cartels, but also within cartels as they develop and evolve new repertoires of violence and terrorism. We analyzed three OCGs: The Gulf Cartel, Los Zetas, and the Knights Templar Cartel.[47] Each of these groups has its own preferred repertoire of terrorism.[48]

The Gulf Cartel displays an interesting trajectory that sets it apart from many other OCGs. Originally, it was a relatively nonviolent organization that resolved most conflicts through bribery and corruption.[49] Yet, over time and as the drug war progressed, it created its own paramilitary wing, Los Zetas, to whom it outsourced violent enforcement and turf protection. When Los Zetas left the Gulf Cartel, the latter began to resort to more violence in order to regain its control over the contested *plaza* and to match the growing influence of their former armed wing.[50] The Gulf Cartel resorted to high-profile violent acts designed to inspire fear in rival OCGs, potential enemies, and the public by staging public executions and abductions. An example was the assassination of Juan Jesús Guerrero Chapa, the former lawyer of Gulf Cartel leader Osiel Cárdenas, and his wife in broad daylight right outside of the Dallas/Fort Worth International Airport after it was revealed that Guerrero was a government informant.[51] The Gulf Cartel also became notorious for systematic kidnappings that were highly selective in their targeting despite their significant volume.[52] According to military sources, they primarily target potential recruits, or relatives of rival gangs with the intent of spreading terror.[53]

Having splintered from the Gulf Cartel, Los Zetas share some repertoires of violence with them, but they have added unique elements to their approach that lead them to be considered the most violent OCG in the country. The Zetas have relied on a diverse set of terrorist tactics. Early on they incorporated acts such as massacres in order to tighten their grip on certain territories.[54] A case in point is the Allende massacre in 2011. Police officers taking bribes from Los Zetas were suspected of cooperating with the US Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA). The cartel’s response to such disloyalty was brutal. They invaded the town, sacking and burning as many as 40 houses and seven ranches as well as abducting hundreds of people in a rampage that lasted three days.[55] Once it was all over, 300 civilians had perished in the attack.[56] Terrorism is also used by the group in order to further expand its business portfolio.[57] The attack on Casino Royale in the city of Monterrey in 2011 is an example of this. Zetas operatives stormed the building and torched the people inside, killing 57 civilians. The attack served as a punishment against the owner for refusing to pay extortion money. The group has also been reported to use explosives, including grenade attacks and car bombings on civilian targets to solidify their control over certain *plazas*. [58]

The Knights Templar, for its part, which operates mostly in the western states of Michoacán and Guerrero, displays unique traits including religious posturing and their self-representation as a modern-day version of the Knights Templar from the Crusades.[59] Like other groups, it initially used money rather than violence to solve its problems, but as its control started to wane, it became increasingly predatory and violent. This began with the fracturing of its alliance with *Los Zetas* which prompted an acute wave of spectacular violence.[60] The cartel began to apply harsh methods, including the execution in public town squares of alleged criminals accused of kidnapping, rape, or murder.[61] They also began murdering rivals and suspected informants and some members of their families, cutting off their heads and tossing them in town squares. As time went on, they began targeting civilians with several terrorist tactics, including rape, forced recruitment, targeted assassination, abductions and use of explosive devices in public places.[62] Overall, the Knights Templar seemed keen to avoid the large-scale violence of other OCGs but enough to spread the message that they were in control and that they would kill anyone who opposed their power in an area.[63]

Self-Defense Groups

As indicated, a direct result of the violence impacting Mexico has been the emergence of paramilitary groups known as *auto-defensas*. A recent account identifies 31 major *auto-defensa* groups in 13 out of the country’s 32 states.[64] Many *auto-defensa* groups are set up by powerful local elites (e.g., avocado and lime growers, cattle ranchers, or mine owners) to defend their interests from extortion and sabotage on the part of OCGs. [65] Other groups correspond to variants of community policing forces formed by groups of citizens seeking to protect their land and forestry from criminals and from venal authorities. In addition to defending themselves against criminal groups, *auto-defensas* mobilized to root out rampant corruption, abuse and violence on the part of state agents linked to organized crime.[66] What unites the various self-defense groups is their common objective to protect themselves from OCGs and their frustration at the utter incapacity or unwillingness of the state to protect them.[67] However, while purportedly created to protect citizens from violence, most *auto-defensas* stand accused of committing crimes themselves, including the use of terrorist tactics. Felbab-Brown asserts many groups ended up going *rogue*, turning into abusive forces. A particularly problematic issue, she adds, is that many of these groups have been subverted by criminal organizations and/or corrupt state officials.[68]

Because many self-defense forces are regionally organized and many have been infiltrated by OCGs and the state, it is hard to discern a unified modus operandi.[69] A study by the Mexican National Human Rights Commission on *auto-defensas* in the state of Michoacán provides at least some sense of the groups’ violent repertoires. This study from 2015 found that between 2006–14 these groups perpetrated 13,964 violent acts: of these, 52% were homicides, 23% rape, 8% kidnappings and 27% acts of extortion.[70] More fine-grained qualitative descriptions of *auto-defensas* provide further context and point out that while *auto-defensas* employ terrorism, they do so less systematically than OCGs. Wolff describes how *auto-defensas* in Michoacán, many composed of indigenous groups, attacked and lynched narcotraffickers and corrupt authorities. Retaliatory attacks of this nature do not amount to terrorism.[71]

Auto-defensas that emerged more recently in an area known as *Tierra Caliente* and associated with the leadership of José Manuel Mireles, Estanislao Beltrán (aka Papa Smurf) and Hipólito Mora utilized more brutal methods including torture, summary executions, and abductions.[72] At least some of these attacks purposefully targeted civilians with the intention of inhibiting resistance and sending a message to the wider community.[73] In his rich account of violence in the state of Guerrero, Kyle describes how in their attempt to thwart OCG security schemes, *auto-defensas* have also engaged in attacks against civilians with alleged links to organized crime, carrying out abductions, targeted assassinations, and engaging in torture.[74]

Table 1 summarizes the prevalent terror tactics used by Mexican armed parties. As can be seen, while all five groups resort to terrorism, each of them has developed its own particular repertoire of action.[75] Interestingly, distinctions exist both among different categories of actors (state, *auto-defensas* and OCGs) and within a single type of group, e.g., OCGs.

Table 1. Repertoires of Terrorism by Mexican Armed Parties

Repertoires of Terrorism	Torture	Abduction	Massacres	Targeted Assassinations	Public Displays of Violence	Bombings
Auto-Defensa	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	No	No
State Security	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	No	No
Gulf Cartel	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	No
Los Zetas	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Knights Templar Cartel	No	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes

Source: Authors’ own elaboration based on reports by human rights, intelligence, and media organizations, and selected interviews with Mexican sources, including human rights specialists, scholars, and authorities.

Conclusion

Our analysis suggests several policy implications for the Mexican government. It is evident that each of these armed groups is engaging in a different form of terrorist activity due to competing logics. Therefore, any policy recommendation must match such logics. In order to reduce the use of terrorism by its own security forces, the Mexican government should reconsider the wisdom of outright confrontation with all OCGs. Instead it should focus more on seeking to gradually retake and rebuild the communities that have been overrun by criminal syndicates. The international community could buttress such efforts by providing foreign aid that directly supports this endeavor. Specifically, funds need to be allocated toward reestablishing law and order and to provide alternative economic opportunities within afflicted communities. Currently, Mexican security forces operate as occupation forces within territories dominated by OCGs, something that incentivizes them to use Cold War-era anti-insurgency tactics that also include the use of terror. Such a move could also have an added benefit of reducing the tension with *auto-defensa* groups that feel as if they are fighting a two-front war, one against OCGs and the other against the state. Specifically, policies should be implemented to create a line of cooperation between *auto-defensa* groups and state security forces. This cooperation ought to be contingent on mutual transparency that would help lessen the propagation of terror tactics and other human rights abuses. It would also have the added effect of creating a united front against OCG forces that have taken advantage of the distrust between the other two parties. With regards to OCGs, the state should avoid outright confrontation with all of them as it is an inefficient use of manpower. Instead, it should signal that it will go after the most violent ones. Such a move would create incentives for OCGs to decrease their use of terror and other violent tactics. Of course, it would be desirable to neutralize or, at the very least, cripple all major OCGs, but absent that option, shutting down the most violent ones can help protect lives that otherwise might be lost in a policy of total war.

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Notes

[1] In 2021, major OCGs included Sinaloa, Los Zetas, Tijuana/AFO, Juárez/CFO, Beltrán Leyva, Gulf, La Familia Michoacana, the Knights Templar, and Cartel Jalisco Nuevo Generación (CJNG). Scores of other smaller organizations operate on a local level, many of which are subcontractors when it comes to violent 'work' for the most powerful OCGs. See "Justice in Mexico. Organized Crime and Violence in Mexico 2021," Special Report UC San Diego, 2021. Available at URL: <https://justiceinmexico.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/OCVM-21.pdf>.

[2] Guillermo Trejo (2021), "Mexico's Illegal Democratic Trap"; in: Tom Carothers and Andreas E. Feldmann (Eds.) *Divisive Politics and Democratic Dangers in Latin America*. Carnegie Endowment for Democratic Peace. Available at URL: <https://carnegieendowment.org/2021/02/17/exico-s-illiberal-democratic-trap-pub-83786>.

[3] Ibid.

- [4] See Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (2021), Data & Research, Mexico. Available at URL: <https://www.internal-displacement.org/countries/mexico>; Xóchitl Bada and Andreas E. Feldmann (2017), “Mexico’s Michoacán State Mixed Migration Flows and Transnational Links.” *Forced Migration Review* (56): pp. 12–14.
- [5] Daniel Wilkinson (2018), “Mexico Violence and Opacity,” *Human Rights Watch*. Available at URL: https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/10/17/mexico-violence-and-opacity?gclid=CjwKCAjwoduRBhA4EiwACL5RP74Ydvks6QZXcN1tUhzEuNx-IPVr1CXHeYcztQjq2SChxjLX_pyuqhxoCROIQAvD_BwE.
- [6] Following the seminal work by Schmid, “[t]errorism refers on the one hand to a doctrine about the presumed effectiveness of a special form or tactic of fear-generating, coercive political violence, and on the other hand, to a conspiratorial practice of calculated, demonstrative, direct violent action without legal or moral restraints, targeting mainly civilians, and noncombatants, performed for its propagandistic and psychological effects on various audiences and conflict parties.” Alex P. Schmid, (2011) *The Routledge Handbook on Terrorism Research*, London: Routledge, p. 86.
- [7] Brian J. Philips (2018), “Terror Tactics by Criminal Organizations: The Mexican Case,” *Perspectives on Terrorism* 12(1): pp. 46–63; Alexander Salt (2017); Alexander Salt (2017), “Blurred Lines: Mexican Cartels and the Narco-Terrorism Debate.” *Journal of Military and Strategic Studies* 18(1): pp. 166–188; Longmire, Sylvia M., and John P. Longmire (2008), “Redefining terrorism: Why Mexican Drug Trafficking is More Than Just Organized Crime.” *Journal of Strategic Security* 1(1): pp. 35–52.
- [8] In the Global Data Terrorism Database Mexico registers 633 terrorist attacks for the period 1970–2015. Available at URL: <https://www.start.umd.edu/gtd/search/Results.aspx?chart=overtime&search=MEXICO>. For historical accounts of violence and terrorism, see Alan Knight (2012), “Narco Violence and the State in Mexico”; in: Will Panster (Ed.), *Violence, Coercion and State Making in Twentieth Century Mexico: The Other Half of the Centaur*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, pp. 115–134; Mark Wright (2002), “The Real Mexican Terrorists: A Group Profile of the Popular Revolutionary Army,” *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 25(2), pp. 207–225; and Andreas E. Feldmann (2005), “A Shift in the Paradigm of Violence: Non-Governmental Terrorism in LA Since the End of the Cold War.” *Revista de Ciencia Política* 25(2): p. 9.
- [9] See June Beittel (2020), *Mexico: Organized Crime and Drug Trafficking Organizations*. Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service. Available at URL: <https://sgp.fas.org/crs/row/R41576.pdf>.
- [10] Other civilians, in particular operatives of non-state armed groups, are also regularly targeted. Yet, to the extent that they take part in the hostilities, they can be considered combatants in accordance with International Humanitarian Law (IHL) (i.e., they participate in hostilities, are under a responsible command and carry weapons openly). See Marco Sassòli and Antoine Bouvier (1999), *How Does Law Protect in War?* Geneva: International Committee of the Red Cross, p. 123.
- [11] See Andreas E. Feldmann (2018), “Revolutionary Terror in the Colombian Civil War,” *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 41(10), pp. 825–846.
- [12] On the connection between crime and terror, see Tamara Makarenko (2004), “The Crime-Terror Continuum: Tracing the Interplay between Transnational Organised Crime and Terrorism.” *Global Crime* 6(1), pp. 129–145.
- [13] David Shirk and Joel Wallman (2015), “Understanding Mexico’s Drug Violence,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 59(8), pp. 1348–1376.
- [14] Guillermo Trejo and Sandra Ley (2020), *Votes, Drugs and Violence: The Political Logic of Criminal Wars in Mexico*. New York: Cambridge University Press. See also David Teiner (2020), “Cartel-Related Violence in Mexico as Narco-Terrorism or Criminal Insurgency.” *Perspectives on Terrorism* 14(4): pp. 83–98; Flanigan, Shawn Teresa (2012), “Terrorists Next Door? A Comparison of Mexican Drug Cartels and Middle Eastern Terrorist Organizations.” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 24(2), pp. 279–294.
- [15] In a recent statement the Mexican government acknowledged the existence of 37 major groups. However, a recent investigation by the International Crisis Groups spoke of 198 active criminal groups in 2019. In addition to major OCGs, the report states that scores of other smaller organizations operate on a local level, many as subcontractors of violent ‘work’ for the most powerful OCGs. See Jane Esberg (2020), *More than Cartels: Counting Mexico’s Crime Rings*, International Crisis Group. Available at URL: <https://www.crisisgroup.org/latin-america-caribbean/mexico/more-cartels-counting-mexicos-crime-rings>.
- [16] Brian J. Phillips (2015), “How Does Leadership Decapitation Affect Violence? The Case of Drug Trafficking Organizations in Mexico,” *Journal of Politics* 77(2): pp. 324–36.
- [17] Military operations against this group started under president Ernesto Zedillo (1994–2000) but were deepened under President Felipe Calderon (2006–2012). Subsequent administrations including Presidents Enrique Peña Nieto (2012–2018) and Andrés Manuel López Obrador (2018-) have not substantially altered this approach.
- [18] Paul Kenny and Mónica Serrano (Eds.) (2012), *Mexico’s Security Failure: Collapse into Criminal Violence*. New York Routledge.

- [19] On these groups, see Michael Wolff (2020), “Insurgent Vigilantism and Drug War in Mexico,” *Journal of Politics in Latin America* 12(1): pp. 32–52; Eduardo Moncada (2019), “Resisting Protection: Rackets, Resistance, and State Building,” *Comparative Politics* 51(3): pp. 321–339. Javier Osorio, Livia Isabella Schubiger and Michael Weintraub (2021), “Legacies of Resistance: Mobilization Against Organized Crime in Mexico,” *Comparative Political Studies* 54(9): pp. 1565–1596.
- [20] International Crisis Group (2013), “Justice at the Barrel of a Gun: Vigilante Militias in Mexico.” Available at URL: <http://www.crisisgroup.org/latin-america-caribbean/mexico/justice-barrel-gun-vigilante-militias-mexico>. The degradation of self-defense forces is brilliantly described in Matthew Heineman’s documentary *Cartel Land* (2015).
- [21] Interview with mayors of 3 municipalities in the state of Michoacán who requested anonymity. Interview by author, Morelia Michoacán, December 2017. See also International Institute for Strategic Studies (2020), *The Armed Conflict Survey*. London: Routledge for the International Institute for Strategic Studies, pp. 85–87.
- [22] Human Rights Watch (2018), op. cit.
- [23] See Stathis N. Kalyvas (2015), “How Civil Wars Help Explain Organized Crime—and How They Do Not,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 59(8): pp. 15–40, on this matter, see also Shawn Teresa Flanigan (2012), “Terrorists Next Door? A Comparison of Mexican Drug Cartels and Middle Eastern Terrorist Organizations,” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 24(2): pp. 279–294.
- [24] Benjamin Lessing (2017), *Making Peace in Drug Wars: Crackdowns and Cartels in Latin America*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- [25] Guillermo Trejo and Sandra Ley (2021), “High-Profile Criminal Violence: Why Drug Cartels Murder Government Officials and Party Candidates in Mexico” *British Journal of Political Science* 53(1), p. 225; see also Jorge Mantilla and Andreas E. Feldmann (2021), “Criminal Governance in Latin America.” *Oxford Encyclopedia of Criminology and Criminal Justice*. Available at URL: <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190264079.013.697>.
- [26] Susanne Martin and Leonard Weinberg (2016), “Terrorism in an Era of Unconventional Warfare,” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 28(2): pp. 236–253; Jessica Stanton (2013), “Terrorism in the Context of Civil War,” *Journal of Politics* 75(4): pp. 1009–1022; Andreas E. Feldmann and Victor Hinojosa (2009), “Terrorism in Colombia: Logic and Sources of a Multidimensional and Ubiquitous Political Phenomenon,” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 21(1): pp. 42–61.
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