How to solve the problem without generating even greater violence

By Vanda Felbab-Brown

Policies that focus on suppressing drug flows are often ineffective in suppressing organized crime. Under the worst circumstances, such as in Mexico or Afghanistan, policing policies, such as high-value targeting or eradication of illicit crops, can trigger intense criminal violence or strengthen insurgencies. But neither is legalization an effective shortcut to law enforcement. On its own, it is unlikely to address a host of problems associated with organized crime.

Illicit economies exist in some form virtually everywhere. For example, some part of the illegal drug economy – production, trafficking, or distribution – is present in almost every country. Although the drug trade is widely believed to be the most profitable illicit economy, dwarfing others such as the illegal trade in wildlife or logging, it is also affected by the intensity and impact of violence and corruption it generates in different regions and over time.

Like Colombia in the 1980s, Mexico today is blighted by violence. Although many of the same drug trafficking groups operate in both Mexico and the United States, their behavior is strikingly different: north of the border where their capacity to corrupt state institutions is limited and the level of violence they generate is small.

Indeed, what characterizes the US drug market today – most of which operates behind closed doors, off the streets, and over the internet – is how peaceful it is. Such variation is found in other contexts as well: the Yakuza, even while dominating the legal drugs trade, remains illegal economies.

By Vanda Felbab-Brown is Fellow in Foreign Policy at the Brookings Institution. She is the author of many works on illicit economies, organized crime, and internal conflicts, such as ‘Shooting Up: Counterinsurgency and the War on Drugs’ and the forthcoming ‘Afghan Aspirations, American Ambivalence: Strategies and Realities of Counterinsurgency and State-building’.