

The Rise of Militias in Mexico

Citizens' Security or Further Conflict Escalation?

BY VANDA FELBAB-BROWN

This article explores the security and political effects of militia forces that emerged in Mexico in recent years in reaction to violent organized crime, most prominently in the states of Michoacán and Guerrero. Militia forces are not a new phenomenon in the country; in various forms and guises, they permeate the history of Mexico. Often, militia groups have been sponsored by the Mexican state, including as recently as in the 1990s government counterinsurgency efforts against a leftist anti-globalization insurgency, the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (*Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional*, EZLN).

The anti-drug-cartel militias that emerged after 2006, when then Mexican President Felipe Calderón declared a war on the drug cartels, however, emerged either more or less spontaneously or with the sponsorship of powerful politicians and businessmen, not as a state policy. In fact, for a good number of years the Calderón administration and that of his successor President Enrique Peña Nieto ignored them. Eventually, the behavior and visibility of the militia groups forced the government of Mexico to react.

Mexico is a middle-power country with a relatively strong economy; it is not a failing state. Nonetheless, the state has been historically weak or absent in large areas, including those where militias are currently strong. Such weakness of territorial presence and its closely related weakness of rule of law are not only a matter of a lack of governance capacity, but fundamentally also of the decisions the Mexican state and elite have made, namely, not providing the resources necessary to boost state presence in indigenous and rural areas, such as to the drug-cartel and militia-rife La Tierra Caliente of Michoacán and Guerrero. Consciously or by default, those areas have been relegated to socio-economic marginalization and underdevelopment. Laws have neither been enforced nor internalized and socio-economic survival and advancement are often dependent on participation in illegal economies. Rules, essential informal ones, are dispensed or

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enforced by individual powerbrokers, such as political *caciques*, powerful businessmen, or organized crime groups. The formation of anti-organized-crime militias is thus an expression of both the absence of the state and its continual rejection by locals who find it remote, irrelevant, undependable, or outright corrupt. However, just like other aspects of politics in Mexico, particularly in large parts of its rural areas, even the formation of the militias has been co-opted by organized crime groups.

Indeed, what emerges from the following analysis of militia formation in Michoacán and Guerrero and state responses to their spread is an overwhelming tendency for the militias to go rogue. Although the militias seemed to alleviate violence in the initial period, they soon became predatory and abusive themselves. No matter what the original motivations and justifications for militia formation, militias have a strong tendency to escape control by their overseers and engage in problematic and abusive behavior. Even when militias spontaneously emerge in response to abuse that local communities find intolerable, the militias have a strong tendency to deteriorate to such behavior themselves. The scale of such misdeeds often negates their previous usefulness, and the militias become a profound threat to order and rule of law and a new driver of conflict.

Rarely do local communities or official state structures have the capacity to keep militias in check. But the less effort the national government puts into developing official mechanisms of control, restraint, and rollback, the worse the predation and deleterious effects the militias will have on stability and the long-term legitimacy of local political dispensations. Although militias might be local, their effects are not: they have profound and

complex implications for political rivalries and balances of power throughout the political, militancy, and criminal systems.

Heat Rising in the Historically Hot La Tierra Caliente ... and Around

Amidst intense and shifting criminal violence, which since 2006 has resulted in the death of between 80,000 and 100,000 people in Mexico,¹ the country's mountainous center stands out. Although the intensity of homicides has been smaller there than in some of the northern cities, such as Ciudad Juárez, Tijuana, and Monterrey,² the central states of Michoacán and Guerrero are nonetheless very violent. For at least two years now, Guerrero has been one of Mexico's most violent states. Its rural areas are badly affected by the violence, and its main city, Acapulco, has held the dubious title of most violent city in Mexico since at least 2012.

In addition, for decades, Guerrero and Michoacán have been some of Mexico's most prominent locales for the illegal cultivation of poppy and production of heroin. These illicit economies have been greatly expanding since 2013 in response to growing demand in the United States for illegal opiates.

Large parts of their territories, including the so-called Tierra Caliente, have historically experienced minimal state presence. The underdeveloped Guerrero, in particular, has been one of Mexico's most lawless states, pervaded by insurgents, criminals, rogue politicians, and militant unions. Guerrero and Michoacán have also featured some of the most iconic episodes of Mexico's crime wars, including the killing of students in Iguala, Guerrero in September 2014,³ and the mass killing of presumed members of the Jalisco New Generation Cartel in Ecuandureo,

Michoacán in May 2015.⁴ Those two central states have seen the most visible expansion of “anti-crime” militias, capturing the attention of Mexico’s public and ultimately also the Peña Nieto administration.

Militias, whether genuine self-defense forces or private security forces of powerful Mexican politicians, have a centuries-old history in Mexico. Even in the post-WWII period, many municipal police forces in Mexico essentially functioned like personal (and often abusive) militia forces of the district mayor.⁵ Many municipal police forces in Mexico are deeply penetrated and often outright controlled by organized crime, as are many municipal governments, particularly in places like Guerrero and Michoacán. Historically, the Mexican government and military often recruited militias to fight insurgencies, such as in Guerrero and Chiapas. Adding to this

context are officially-sanctioned militias of indigenous communities – defined as indigenous community police forces and indigenous justice systems – which have been permitted under Mexico’s constitution for several decades.

However, over the past several years, the self-defense forces that emerged in response to the extortion and violence of criminal groups in Michoacán and Guerrero came to symbolize the weakness of the central state in providing public safety.

President Calderón and the Cartels’ Shuffle in Michoacán

The home state of former Mexican president Felipe Calderón, Michoacán was an early focus of his administration in response to the rapid growth of the violent criminal cartel La Familia Michoacana (LFM). In 2006, LFM was one of



J-H. Jansen

Poppy field

Mexico's most vicious drug trafficking groups, and its authority was expanding over large parts of the state, particularly in La Tierra Caliente. It engaged in brutal violence, visible on the streets of Michoacán.⁶ It launched an aggressive extortion campaign that targeted major businesses in the state, such as avocado growers and logging companies – not even businesses operating in the state capital of Morelia were immune. By 2009, LFM reportedly had influence over (or extorted anyway) perhaps as many as 180,000 sales outlets, including gasoline stations, truck shops, street markets, movie theaters, and other businesses. Its daily earnings were reported (likely highly exaggerated) to be USD 1.9 million.⁷

La Familia's control over some communities was pervasive. LFM would monitor the entries and exits of towns and villages, permitting or denying passage to anyone passing

through, sometimes extorting the person for money. Mixing religion and rituals under a cultish cloak, it also established "courts" and "dispute resolution" procedures for residents of areas under its influence. Indeed, some residents of Michoacán's Tierra Caliente as well as Morelia told me in spring 2011 that they actively preferred the courts of La Familia to the formal state justice.⁸ Others were just terrified, believing that the group had *halcones* (lookouts and informants) everywhere; had deeply penetrated mayors' offices, municipal councils, and local police forces; and could strike anyone.⁹ But La Familia also had to battle other criminal groups for turf, including the super-violent and expanding Los Zetas as well as smaller rivals, such as the Millenio Cartel. Over time, government action combined with these attacks from rivals hastened the demise of La Familia.



Diego Fernández

Mexican military in Michoacán

During the Calderón administration, Michoacán became one of the first areas where the Mexican military was deployed to combat criminal groups. Like elsewhere in Mexico, one of the military's key missions was to back up, and in some circumstances completely replace, Michoacán's municipal police forces which typically were undertrained, under-resourced, deeply corrupt, and completely overwhelmed by organized crime.

Equally important, the new military policing strategy – consisting of high-value targeting and searches at fixed checkpoints – failed to restore or, perhaps more precisely, expand state authority and control. Nonetheless, the high-value targeting strategy was capturing many of LFM's top leaders; and in the spring of 2011, *Los Piños* (the seat of the Mexican president) declared LFM dismantled.

Within weeks, however, a new criminal group, Los Caballeros Templarios, emerged and took over the illegal and informal markets in Michoacán that La Familia used to run. Although portraying themselves as a self-defense force to protect Michoacán residents and purge the area of organized crime, Los Templarios soon came to behave like the evil they purported to ostracize. Even more aggressively than LFM, they extorted legal, informal, and illegal businesses. In addition to kidnapping relatives of rich businessmen,¹⁰ they, too, demanded extortion fees from avocado farmers and logging companies, and expanded the extortion racket into iron ore extraction and shipping through Michoacán's principal port and economic hub, Lázaro Cárdenas. In March 2014, the Mexican government's special envoy for restoring rule of law in Michoacán, Alfredo Castillo, claimed that Los Templarios made more of their money from extorting the iron ore extraction, processing, and transshipment

operations than from drug smuggling or other extortion.¹¹ Regardless of whether this assessment of the cartel's financial portfolio is accurate, the Templarios, exploiting their strong territorial presence and a fearsome reputation, succeeded in turning themselves into a multi-faceted mafia with fingers in many illegal rackets in the state and widespread extortion.

Militias Popping Up ... in Guerrero Too

By the spring of 2014, Los Templarios were the area's most feared authority. Despite their purported emergence in reaction to the abuses and excesses of La Familia Michoacana, the Templarios also overreached in their demands for extortion fees and obedience and triggered a backlash. As a result of this heavy-handedness, anti-Templarios militias began forming in Michoacán's countryside even before the influence of the Templarios peaked.

Anti-crime self-defense forces, such as in Michoacán's Cherán municipality, began emerging as early as 2011, but the Calderón administration did not pay much attention to them. Their expansion, visibility, and increasingly questionable behavior continued to grow through 2013. By then, the militias were arresting people whom they accused of working for the Templarios and other criminal groups, and held their own court trials and meted out sentences. They were particularly active in Michoacán's towns of Tepalcatepec, Buena Vista, and La Ruana, where they gathered whatever weapons they could find and seized control of police stations. When the self-defense forces began to beat up, expel, and detain not just municipal police officers, but also soldiers, the administration of Calderón's successor, President Enrique Peña Nieto, could no longer remain placid about their growth. But even detentions of militia members who

were engaged in the worst excesses, such as kidnappings of police personnel, did not appear to deter them.¹³

The militias also grew in the neighboring state of Guerrero, one of the most violent areas in Mexico during the Peña Nieto administration thus far, with 73.2 homicides per 100,000 in 2013, compared to the national average of 29.3 per 100,000 that year.¹⁴ Although its homicide rate decreased in 2014, Guerrero remained the second most violent state in Mexico.¹⁵ A plethora of small, fragmented, unstable, and highly violent criminal gangs emerged in the state in the wake of the federal government's high-value-targeting interdiction policy against the once dominant Beltrán Leyva Cartel. Like in Michoacán, the Jalisco New Generation Cartel from neighboring Jalisco has also been encroaching on their territory, triggering violent battles.

In Guerrero, the provenance and control of the militias seems even murkier than in Michoacán. Some of the self-defense militias appeared to be permeated by organized crime groups, such as the Jalisco New Generation Cartel.¹⁶ In fact, some cartels have begun labeling their own hitmen as self-defense groups and have attempted to penetrate and subvert the existing self-defense groups. At the same time, the militia forces in Guerrero have also been intricately intermeshing with the so-called "community police forces," legally permitted under Mexico's constitution and allowed to carry firearms, which operate mainly in indigenous communities. In the spring of 2013, there were 45 such community police groups in 14 of Mexico's 32 states.¹⁷ In Guerrero's municipality of Ocotito, for example, the local self-start-up militia force appeared to have the assistance of the Union of the People and Organization of the State of

Guerrero (Unión de los Pueblos y Organizaciones del Estado de Guerrero: UIPOEG) community police force.¹⁸

Moreover, an extensive whispering campaign emerged in both Guerrero and Michoacán that the militias might also be taking justice into their own hands more aggressively – such as by killing those they viewed as opponents. At minimum, they would trot around with machine guns, expel or arrest municipal police officers they saw as incompetent or corrupt, and block roads, using their own discretion to determine who could go in and out.

Can't Fight 'Em: Bring 'Em Into the Fold

The original reaction of high officials of the Peña Nieto administration was to denounce the militias. The president, for example, pointedly stated: "[W]hatever the denominations of these groups, the practice they have of taking justice into their own hands [is] outside the law, and my government will combat it."¹⁹ But at the same time, state officials in Michoacán continued hinting that the militia existence could be tolerated. In Guerrero, the contradictions between state and federal-level authorities and among state responses were even more pronounced: on the one hand, the state was providing the self-defense forces with funds, uniforms, and communications equipment, while on the other hand, it was arresting at least some militia members. In the spring of February 2014, as one of Guerrero's militia groups seized villages on the outskirts of the state capital, Chilpancingo, Mexico City dispatched military battalions and federal police units to stop them from moving into the city itself.

As the process unfolded, federal level officials learned that doing away with the militias

was not easy. Negotiating with the militias to effect their disarmament proved especially difficult, as militia members emphasized that they would be subject to retaliation and could only disarm after the criminal gangs, including the key leaders of the Templarios, were arrested. But forcibly dismantling the militias could set off a bloody and problematic fight between them and the federal government, in which assistance from local and state authorities could not necessarily be counted on. After all, the militias' own narrative claimed that they were merely defending themselves and their families and communities against the

brutality of the crime groups because the state had failed to do so, which indeed was often the case.²⁰

The increased deployment of Mexico's military into Guerrero and Michoacán, which President Peña Nieto boosted by 50 percent at the beginning of 2013, did not slow the formation, spread, and audacity of the militia forces. By the end of 2013, 47 out of Michoacán's 113 municipalities experienced their presence. In the neighboring state of Guerrero, they operated in more than half of the state's 81 municipalities by the spring of 2014.²¹ Areas that were key Templarios hotbeds in Michoacán,



Government of Mexico

President Nieto in Chilpancingo, Guerrero for presentation of his "Plan Nuevo Guerrero," which instituted a reconstruction and modernization agenda for the violence plagued state

such as Apatzingán, experienced dramatic fire-arm battles between the Templarios and the self-defense forces. Elsewhere, the self-defense forces set up checkpoints. In January 2014, the self-defense forces took over the municipal building in Parácuaro and blocked off entry points to the town, digging in for a battle with the Templarios, until the Federal Police negotiated its own entry. The militias also seized control of a nearby town, La Huerta. In some parts of Michoacán, the Federal Police began operating joint checkpoints with the self-defense forces. Membership in the militias swelled to the thousands, by some reports to as many as 20,000,²² though no reliable counts were conducted, and the militias had an incentive to exaggerate their strength. To accommodate the militias' insistence that they could only stop their vigilantism if the government arrested key leaders of the Templarios, the government launched a dragnet in Michoacán and over several months captured key Templario leaders.

When a prominent Templario leader known as "El Tío" was arrested in January 2014, Mexico's Interior Minister Miguel Ángel Osorio Chong announced that the government had negotiated a deal with the groups to absorb them into a new state security entity known as the "Rural Defense Corps." The deal specified that the corps would be temporary and required that the militia leaders would provide the government with a registry of their members. Putting a time limit on the existence of the militias was a highly appropriate provision since dismantling any unofficial and extralegal forces and vigilantes, however motivated, always needs to be the position of a state adhering to the rule of law.

Even so, there were good reasons to doubt the desirability of the arrangement. The fact that the government was not able to prevent

and dismantle the militias in the first place, and was essentially left to make a deal with them, was glaring evidence of the weakness of the state in the rural areas of Mexico. The deal also created a bad precedent, signaling that if one wanted to get on the payroll of the state and take the law and its enforcement into one's own hands (or cloak one's extortion and other crimes with legitimacy), one only had to set up a self-defense militia. More immediately, there were good reasons to be skeptical about the accuracy of the member registry handed over to the state by the militia leaders and the ability of the state to do its independent re-vetting of the militia members. Moreover, it was not obvious just how committed the militias were to the deal: a key militia leader, Dr. José Manuel Mireles, was not at the signing, and another militia group from the Ruana area was not only absent, but occupied the government building in the Peribán municipality that very same day. In Guerrero, the militias rejected a similar deal to be folded into an official rural defense force, claiming they did not believe Mexico's federal government was truly motivated to combat the criminal groups.²³

But, however problematic, the deal to form the Rural Defense Corps was clearly better than the previous policy of just allowing the militias to run loose and act without restraint. While not desirable, the Rural Defense Corps concept was likely the least bad option the government had available at that moment. It was only a matter of time before the unsupervised militias would start engaging in predation on local communities, designating as a criminal anyone who crossed them, arrogating "justice" to themselves, and further damaging the already poor bonds between the state and the population. And it was not too

far-fetched to imagine that they might be tempted to take over some illicit markets.²⁴

Indeed, such problematic developments surrounding the militias and their speedy descent into going rogue was exposed just a few weeks after the deal was signed. By the middle of March 2014, Mexican authorities arrested one of the top militia leaders, Hipolito Mora, indicting him for the murders of two members of a rival militia faction in Buenavista Tomatlán. Government authorities also detained 28 other vigilante members, accusing them of stealing and appropriating the property of alleged Templario members, such as ranches, land, and horses, while demanding money from local citizens for returning their property stolen by the Templarios.²⁵ Announcing the arrests, Mexican authorities implied that they would no longer tolerate the militias, now that the government had developed independent intelligence networks to go after the Templarios. In April 2014, an additional 100 militia members were arrested on charges that they were in fact criminals (some belonging to the Templarios) merely posing as self-defense forces.²⁶ The militias, including those of other factions, such as the Tepacaltepec group led by Mireles, claimed that the government was unjustly prosecuting them while failing to deliver on its part of the negotiated deal, and that Mexico's government still could not cope with security in Central Mexico without help from the militias.²⁷ Another vigilante spokesman, Estanislao Beltrán, admitted that some bad elements, including criminals, might have infiltrated the militias, but that the militias would clean their own ranks themselves and continue operating, though preferably under a government hat.

Thus, in April 2014, the federal government announced that the self-defense groups

agreed to disarm by May 10 – but the deadline was missed and the militias showed little interest in obeying the basic deal struck in January 2014. At the same time, José Manuel Mireles declared that the self-defense groups under his influence would now work with federal forces in cities like Morelia, Uruapan, and Lázaro Cárdenas to take down *all* remaining members of the Templarios, including middle-level managers, thus changing the terms of the deal and parameters of the disarmament of his militias. He also stated that as part of a new deal with the government, the federal authorities agreed to release many of the arrested self-defense group members.²⁸

The deal between the government and the militias started breaking down almost as soon as the ink on the paper had dried. Some militias joined the Rural Defense Corps, receiving guns, uniforms, and salaries from the government, while others continued to drag their feet. For the rest of 2014, the Mexican government kept negotiating with the various militia factions, arresting leaders and members of some, only to release them later. Nonetheless, by December 2014, most of the major militia factions in Michoacán, including those of Hipolito Mora and his rival Luis Antonio Torres, known as “El Americano,” were nominally folded into the Rural Defense Corps.

But, their nominal presence in the state-sanctioned outfit did not guarantee that the state had adequate control over the behavior of the militias. In the middle of December 2014, Mora's and Torres's factions engaged in a bloody shootout with each other in the town of La Ruana, leaving 11 people dead, including Mora's son. Mora and Torres handed themselves over to state authorities, and later were indicted with homicide and kidnapping charges. Nonetheless, once again, in a

powerful indictment of the persisting weakness of Mexico's justice system and its inability to effectively prosecute perpetrators, both men were later released because of a lack of evidence and other judicial deficiencies.

Equally problematic, violence among and between the Torres and Mora factions and a new offshoot of Los Templarios, Las Viagras, continued into January 2015. Official military and federal police forces also began responding with greater violence toward the militias, including in a notorious incident after one of the militia forces tried to seize the town hall of the city of Apatzingán.²⁹

In both Michoacán and Guerrero, violence and the rise of the militias effected Mexico's midterm elections held in June 2015. In Michoacán, the leader of one militia faction, Enrique Hernandez, was assassinated in March as he tried to campaign on the ticket of the left-leaning Movement for National Regeneration, or Morena, party.³⁰ He had earlier spent three months in jail, but was released for a lack of evidence.

On the Loose, Coopted, and Getting More Brazen

Meanwhile in Guerrero, the federal state did not manage to even sign a deal with the militias, let alone enforce it. Various militia groups, whether genuinely indigenous police forces or fronts for local criminal gangs, continued to arrest and detain soldiers and government officials, and homicide and extortion rates remained high.³¹ The election campaign in 2015 took place amidst bitter memories of the Iguala massacres and widely-assumed state complicity, widespread intimidation by rival militias and organized crime groups, disappearances, and assassinations of local government officials and political candidates.

One of the most dramatic incidents involving Guerrero's self-defense forces took place in early May 2015 in the town of Chilapa. Although small in size, Chilapa is strategically located on the foothills of a major poppy growing area and serves as a major logistical hub for the drug trade since it has the only gas station in miles. Following an assassination of a local political candidate in April 2015, 300 civilians armed with rifles, machetes, and sticks, followed by pickup trucks with men sporting high-caliber weapons, seized the town. Although the Mexican military and federal and municipal police were present, they failed to act against the self-proclaimed self-defense group. Whether out of intimidation, indifference, complicity, or on orders from higher up, the military and police stood by for several days as the militias controlled the town, set up checkpoints, and detained people. At least 11 of those detained (and perhaps as many as 30) have not been seen since. Townspeople believed that the self-defense force, which after several days left on its own accord, was actually the criminal gang Los Ardillos, fighting over the important heroin-turf with another gang, Los Rojos.³² Regardless of whether the armed invasion was by a self-defense force run amok or the self-defense label was appropriated by an organized crime group, its effect on the community was the very opposite of increasing security.

Conclusions and Policy Implications

In some ways, the willingness of the government to act against the militias, including to arrest and prosecute some, has been more encouraging than its other anti-crime policies.³³ The original plan of folding them into the Rural Defense Corps was the least bad option; however, the government has failed to

effectively enforce the policy with the militias. In Guerrero, the government has not even been able to convince them to sign any deal. In both Michoacán and Guerrero, many of the militias have become important sources of conflict and abuse, hardly acting as a stabilizing force. Indeed, the Mexican government needs to retain the resolve to monitor the militias diligently; prosecute those who engage in criminal acts, such as extortion and murders; and use any opportunity it can to roll them back and dismantle them – even if such efforts have not been going well so far. Partnering with militias might seem like a seductive option in the short term at a moment of crisis,

but spells long-term problems for security, rule of law, and state legitimacy, as much in Mexico as in Colombia or Afghanistan. To the extent that Mexico's struggle against criminality is not merely about reshuffling who has control and power in the criminal market, but about a broader extension and deepening of the rule of law and accountability in Mexico, any official endorsement of the militias fundamentally contradicts that project.

From a policy perspective, the most salient findings include the following:

- In Mexico, militias seemed to have the least proclivity toward abuse of local and



Popular outrage expressed in graffiti regarding the mass disappearance of a busload of students last September in Iguala. It reads, "They took them alive. We want them back alive. Solidarity with the 43 disappeared students." Iguala's mayor and his wife were arrested by Mexican officials after evidence was found that they, and several local police, collaborated with a crime syndicate, Guerreros Unidos (United Warriors), on the abduction.

rival communities when they emerged spontaneously from the local community, faced a particularly abusive external force in the form of outside criminal groups, and if major rifts and conflicts were absent from the community of the militia's origin.

■ Nonetheless, even then, local community structures have often been unable (or unwilling) to restrain the behavior of the militias.

■ In the absence of effective supervision by and support from strong official forces, such as powerful domestic or outside military or police forces, militias in Mexico quickly turned to predation and abuse, no matter what their original motivations and self-justification.

■ Under President Peña Nieto, the Mexican federal government has made more of an effort to regularize the militias, including by folding them into official, if ad hoc and presumably temporarily-created, police structures. The government also set limits on what kind of activity the militias can engage in and established some vetting procedures of members. But it has been unable to fully implement and enforce these formal rules. Though the Mexican government has been willing to indict and arrest militia leaders for the most notorious abuses perpetrated by their units, such as murders, kidnapping, and extortion, the ineffective prosecution of such crimes has largely subverted their efforts.

■ No matter what their origins and motivations, the rise of militias profoundly changes local balances of power. Consequently, both local and outside actors seek to appropriate the militias or establish rival ones. In Mexico, even when the militias rose to oppose the brutality and extortion of

criminal groups, cartels sought to take them over or establish rival "militias."

■ Such competition over control and establishment of militias was also present in official government structures: Mexico's municipal and state government officials often had militia policies directly contradictory to those of the federal government.

In short, although the formation of militias may have originated as a local matter, the security and political effects the militias had did not remain contained within a small locality or a village. The balances of power they affected were much broader. So were the contagion effects they set off. No matter what their motivations and control mechanisms on paper, militias have a strong tendency to go rogue and be easily appropriated by those whom they purport to fight. Ultimately, the rise and spread of militias diminishes state strength and legitimacy. **PRISM**

Notes

¹ Kimberly Heine, Cory Molzahn, and David Shirk, "Drug Violence in Mexico: Data and Analysis through 2014," Justice in Mexico Project, April 2015, <https://justiceinmexico.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/2015-Drug-Violence-in-Mexico-final.pdf>. In July 2015, the Mexican government released new data showing that between 2007 and 2014, 164,000 were murdered in Mexico. Cited in Jason Breslow, "The Staggering Death Toll of Mexico's Drug War," *PBS Frontline*, July 27, 2015, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/foreign-affairs-defense/drug-lord/the-staggering-death-toll-of-mexicos-drug-war/>. Not all of the murders were linked to drug trafficking, though many may have been permitted by the chaos in the criminal market triggered by fighting among the drug cartels and Mexico's war on the drug cartels. Many murders are also highly likely to have been unreported, with discovering of mass graves occurring regularly. Easily, at least half of the murders in Mexico since 2007 can be attributed to organized crime. For further details and debates on the drug numbers, see, for example, Molly Molloy, "The Mexican Undead: Toward a New History of the 'Drug War' Killing Fields," *Small Wars Journal*, July 21, 2013, <http://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/the-mexican-undead-toward-a-new-history-of-the-%E2%80%9Cdrug-war%E2%80%9D-killing-fields>.

² For background on violence in these cities and on the rise of criminal violence in Mexico, see Vanda Felbab-Brown, "The Violent Drug Market in Mexico and Lessons from Colombia," Foreign Policy at Brookings, Policy Paper No. 12, March 2009, http://www.brookings.edu/~media/Files/rc/papers/2009/03_mexico_drug_market_felbabbrown/03_mexico_drug_market_felbab-brown.pdf; Vanda Felbab-Brown, "Calderon's Caldron: Lessons from Mexico's Battle Against Organized Crime and Drug Trafficking in Tijuana, Ciudad Juarez, and Michoacán," *Latin America Initiative Paper Series*, The Brookings Institution, September 2011, http://www.brookings.edu/~media/research/files/papers/2011/9/calderon-felbab-brown/09_calderon_felbab-brown.pdf; Vanda Felbab-Brown, "Pena Nieto's Piñata: The Promise and Pitfalls of Mexico's New Security Policy," Foreign Policy @ Brookings Paper Series, February 2013, <http://www.brookings.edu/research/papers/2013/02/mexico-new-security-policy-felbabbrown>; and Vanda Felbab-Brown, "Changing the Game or Dropping the Ball: Mexico's Security Policy under Enrique Peña Nieto," The Brookings Institution, Washington, DC, November 17, 2014, <http://www.brookings.edu/~media/Research/Files/>

Papers/2014/11/mexico%20security%20anti%20crime%20nieto%20felbabbrown/mexico%20security%20anti%20crime%20nieto%20v1%20felbabbrown.pdf.

³ Nick Miroff, "Mass Kidnapping of Students in Iguala, Mexico, Brings Outrage and Protests," *Washington Post*, October 11, 2014, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/worldviews/wp/2014/10/11/in-mexico-mass-kidnapping-and-slaying-of-students-in-iguala-brings-outrage-and-protests-against-gangs-and-government/>.

⁴ "Many Questions in Mexico Cartel Battle That Killed 43," *Associated Press*, May 23, 2015.

⁵ For a further background on the history of self-defense forces and militias in Mexico and an analysis of their pros and cons in the current period, see International Crisis Group, "Justice at the Barrel of a Gun: Vigilante Militias in Mexico," Latin America Briefing No. 29, Mexico City/Bogotá/Brussels, May 28, 2013, <http://www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/latin-america/mexico/b029-justice-at-the-barrel-of-a-gun-vigilante-militias-in-mexico.pdf>. See also, George Grayson, "Threat Posed By Mounting Vigilantism In Mexico," Strategic Studies Institute, September 2011; and Íñigo Guevara y Moyano, "Gendarmes, Rurales y Autodefensas," *El Excelsior*, March 16, 2014.

⁶ One notorious incidence of violence occurred in Michoacán's capital, Morelia, on September 15, 2008, when a grenade was thrown into a crowd celebrating Mexico's Independence Day. La Familia Michoacana was widely accused of the crime. It denied responsibility and accused the Zetas, which were later officially blamed for the incident.

⁷ Francisco Gómez, "Piratería, el otro frente del narco," *El Universal*, March 1, 2009.

⁸ Author's interviews in Michoacán, spring 2011. For a similar system of counterculture and of criminal groups providing not just employment, but also acquiring political capital and legitimacy and protection from local communities, see José Arturo Yañez Romero's study of the Iztapalapa borough of Mexico City, where pirated and stolen goods are distributed – "Modelo para el Estudio de la Inseguridad, El Caso de Iztapalapa, Center for U.S.-Mexican Studies, University of California-San Diego, May 2005. For a similar study of the fluid legal, informal, and illegal markets in Guadalajara's San Juan de Dios neighborhood, see José Carlos Aguiar, "Nuevos objetos en la agenda de seguridad pública: La 'lucha contra la piratería' en el Mercado de San Juan de Dios, Guadalajara," in José Carlos Aguiar and María Eugenia Suárez de Garay, eds. *Policía, seguridad y transición política: Acercamiento al estado del*

México contemporáneo (Amsterdam: Centre for Latin American Studies and Documentation, 2008).

⁹ Author's interviews in Michoacán, spring 2011.

¹⁰ Author's interviews in Michoacán, March 2011. Regarding the iron ore extortion, see Dave Graham, "Chinese Ore Trade Fuels Port Clash with Mexican Drug Cartel," *Reuters*, January 1, 2014, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/01/01/mexico-drugs-port-idUSL2N0JB02E20140101>.

¹¹ Cited in Eduardo Castillo, "Knights Templar Drug Cartel Counts Iron Ore as Main Income Source," *The Associated Press*, March 17, 2014, http://www.elpasotimes.com/latestnews/cj_25359614/knights-templar-drug-cartel-counts-iron-ore-main.

¹² Miguel García Tinoco, "Liberan a Militares Secuestrados en Michoacán," *El Excelsior*, March 1, 2013.

¹³ Marguerite Cawley and James Bargent, "Following Arrest, Mexico Vigilantes Take Soldiers Hostage," *InsightCrime*, March 13, 2013, <http://www.insightcrime.org/news-briefs/vigilante-self-defense-groups-mexico>.

¹⁴ James MacAuley, "Self-Defense Group's Refusal to Disarm Increases Risk of Conflict with Military in Mexico's Guerrero State," *IHS Global Insight*, January 29, 2014.

¹⁵ Heinle, Molzahn, and Shirk (April 2015): 17-8.

¹⁶ Dudley Althaus, "Michoacán, Guerrero, and Mexico's Mixed Responses to Vigilantes," *InSight Crime*, February 13, 2014, <http://www.insightcrime.org/news-analysis/michoacan-guerrero-and-mexicos-mixed-response-to-the-vigilantes>.

¹⁷ Laurence Allan, "'Community Police' Disarm Police Officers in Violence-Plagued Mexican State," *IHS Global Insight*, May 10, 2013.

¹⁸ Richard Fausset, "Mexico Under Siege: Guerrero State Sliding into Chaos," *Los Angeles Times*, February 16, 2014.

¹⁹ Georgina Olson, "Combatiéremos defensa por propia mano: Enrique Peña Nieto," *Excelsior*, April 10, 2013.

²⁰ Some scholars also embraced the formation of the militias – see, for example, Patricio Asfura-Heim and Ralph H. Espach, "The Rise of Mexico's Self-Defense Forces," *Foreign Affairs*, July/August 2013, <http://www.laleadership.org/userfiles/30/Classes/806/Mexicos%20Vigilante%20Justice%20FA%20July-Aug%202013.pdf>.

²¹ Fausset, "Mexico Under Siege: Guerrero State Sliding into Chaos."

²² "Mexico to Draw Line on Vigilantes," Associated Press, March 14, 2014.

²³ Fausset.

²⁴ For how many of the self-defense forces – *rondas campesinas* – created to combat the Shining Path ended up as important local drug trafficking entities, having often been formed out of the *cocaleros* to start with, see Vanda Felbab-Brown, *Shooting Up*, pp: 54-67.

²⁵ "Mexico to Draw Line on Vigilantes."

²⁶ "Mexico Arrests 110 Posing as Vigilantes," *Agence France-Presse*, April 22, 2014, and "Mexico Arrests 46 Criminals Posing as Vigilantes," *Associated Press*, April 22, 2014.

²⁷ "Vigilantes Say Mexico Government Prosecuting Them," *Associated Press*, March 16, 2014.

²⁸ Laura Castellanos Enviada, "Acuerdan disolución de las autodefensas en Michoacán," *El Universal*, April 14, 2014; and Dalia Martínez, "Próximo, desarme de autodefensas: Castillo," *El Universal*, April 4, 2014.

²⁹ Tracy Wilkinson, "Death Toll Rises in Mexico's Roiling Michoacán State," *Los Angeles Times*, January 12, 2015.

³⁰ Assassinations of politicians are not rare in Mexico, and hardly linked solely to organized crime or militias. Since 2008, at least 24 political candidates have been slain in Mexico.

³¹ For a background on Guerrero and criminal violence there and its entanglements with the state's political system, see Chris Kyle, "Violence and Insecurity in Guerrero," Woodrow Wilson Center, January 2015, <http://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/Violence%20and%20Insecurity%20in%20Guerrero.pdf>.

³² For details, see, Deborah Bonello, "Five Days of Terror in a Mexican Town," *Los Angeles Times*, May 21, 2015; "13 People Missing in Southern Mexico after Vigilantes Withdrew From Violence-Wracked City," Associated Press, May 19, 2015. For violence in Guerrero, see also Daniela Pastrana, "Drug Violence Leaves a String of Ghost Towns in Mexico," *InterPress Services*, February 7, 2015.

³³ See, Felbab-Brown, "Dropping the Ball."