

## Annual Award of Excellence 2018

### Honourable Mention

#### *Narcoland: Organized Crime-Related Violence in the Mexican State*

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#### Introduction

On Wednesday 4 August 2010, Mexico's President Felipe Calderón presented a frank picture of Transnational Criminal Organizations (TCO) and the security situation in Mexico. Calderón stated, "Their business is no longer just the traffic of drugs. Their business is to dominate everyone else... This criminal behavior is what has changed and become a defiance to the state, an attempt to replace the state."<sup>1</sup> Some observers would vehemently disagree with Calderón's assessment<sup>2</sup> but when viewed in relation to what

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<sup>1</sup> Tracy Wilkinson, "Calderon delivers blunt view of drug cartels' sway in Mexico," *Los Angeles Times*, 4 August 2010, <http://articles.latimes.com/2010/aug/04/world/la-fg-mexico-calderon-20100805>.

<sup>2</sup> Barry McCaffrey, "Mexico: Drugs, Crime and the Rule of Law," in *The Hybrid Warfare: Crime, Terrorism and Insurgency in Mexico*, proceedings of the Joint Policy and Research Forum (2011): p. 4.

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Calderón's policies had been, the statement should not surprise anyone. Calderón came to power in December 2006 and declared war on the TCOs by "sending 6,500 Mexican federal police and military personnel to the State of Michoacán in an enforcement action against La Familia Michoacána cartel."<sup>3</sup> In addition to the clear show of force, a central tenet of his national counter narcotics strategy was to kill or capture high-value targets (HVT). The hope was that by cutting the head off the snake, the criminal organization would be debilitated, enabling the restoration of the Mexican government's monopoly on the use of force.<sup>4</sup> This strategy resulted in over 90 HVTs being killed or captured by Mexican security agencies between 2007 and 2012.<sup>5</sup>

Initially, the results seemed successful. The *Justice in Mexico Project* Special Report by Heinle, Rodríguez, and Shirk highlights how intentional homicides actually hit an all time low in 2007. However, the reality quickly changed with a dramatic rise in intentional homicides over the next few years, peaking in 2011 with year-to-year increases of 58, 41, 30, and 5 percent.<sup>6</sup> Drawing from a variety of sources, including government and private sources such as *Reforma*, the authors of the Special Report concluded that anywhere between 30 and 60 percent of all intentional homicides reported by Mexico's *National Institute of Statistics, Geography, and Information*, were organized-crime related. While using intentional homicides reported by the *National Public Security System*, organized crime-related homicides accounted for anywhere between 40 and 60 percent of all intentional homicides reported.<sup>7</sup> The various sources used different datasets for intentional homicides, as well as different indicators of organized crime, including the use of high-caliber automatic weapons, torture, dismemberment, gun battles, and explicit messages involving organized-crime groups,

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<sup>3</sup> "A Line in the Sand: Countering Crime, Violence and Terror at the Southwest Border," a *Majority Report* by the *United States House Committee on Homeland Security Subcommittee on Oversight, Investigations, and Management* (November 2012): p. 35.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 36.

<sup>5</sup> George W. Grayson, "The Impact of President Felipe Calderón's War on Drugs on the Armed Forces: The Prospects for Mexico's 'Militarization' and Bilateral Relations," *External Research Associates Program Monograph*, U.S. Army War College Strategic Studies Institute (2013): pp. 4-14.

<sup>6</sup> Kimberly Heinle, Octavio Rodriguez Ferreira, and David Shirk, "Drug-Related Violence in Mexico: Data and Analysis Through 2013," *Special Report Justice in Mexico Project*, University of San Diego (April 2014): p. 2.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 24.

among others.<sup>8</sup> Also, there was a marked increase in the brutality of the violence perpetrated. “According to an independent tally by the Mexican newspaper *Reforma*, the number of victims of homicide showing signs of torture and decapitation increased dramatically between 2008 and 2012, with more than 4,000 victims of torture and almost two thousand decapitated,” showing an increase of 190 percent and 260 percent respectively.<sup>9</sup> One thing is for certain, organized crime-related violence had increased dramatically on a level not seen elsewhere in the Americas during Calderón’s administration.<sup>10</sup>

President Enrique Peña Nieto came to power in December 2012 and instead of calling for enormous changes to the existing counter narcotics strategy, Nieto simply sought adjustments. However, over the next few years the new administration had “actually deepen[ed] and entrench[ed] the previous administration’s strategy.”<sup>11</sup> “The Peña Nieto government has continued the military and federal police deployments” showing “significant continuity between his and Calderón’s security approaches.”<sup>12</sup> Moreover, Nieto has also continued targeting HVTs, which has resulted in a number of successful removals of major crime figures, such as Joaquín “El Chapo” Guzmán.<sup>13</sup> However, the narco-violence in Mexico has not become even remotely pacified; despite a significant decline in intentional homicides in 2013, intentional homicides have increased again more recently and remain high.<sup>14</sup> Last year, 2017, marked the highest homicides on record at 29,168, surpassing 2011, which was considered the bloodiest year of the Mexican’s “War on Drugs” with 27,213 homicides.<sup>15</sup> Although Mexico’s security situation under Nieto seems to mirror Calderón on the surface, the various TCOs have significantly evolved since 2006. The “fragmentation” or “Balkanization” of

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 22.

<sup>9</sup> Octavio Rodríguez Ferreira, “Violent Mexico: Participatory and Multipolar Violence Associated with Organized Crime,” *International Journal of Conflict and Violence* 10, 1 (2010): p. 55.

<sup>10</sup> Heinle, “Drug-Related Violence,” Figure 3, p. 7.

<sup>11</sup> Alejandra Hope, “Plus Ça Change: Structural Continuities in Mexican Counternarcotics Policy,” in *Center for 21st Century Security and Intelligence Latin America Initiative, Foreign Policy at Brookings* (2016): p. 8.

<sup>12</sup> June S. Beittel, “Mexico: Organized Crime and Drug Trafficking Organizations,” *Congressional Research Service* (2017): p. 3.

<sup>13</sup> Heinle, “Drug-Related Violence,” p. 3.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 20.

<sup>15</sup> Eli Meixler, “With Over 29,000 Homicides, 2017 Was Mexico’s Most Violent Year on Record,” *Time*, January 22, 2018, <http://time.com/5111972/mexico-murder-rate-record-2017/>

the TCOs, often attributed to successful high-value targeting, has also been “accompanied by many groups’ diversification into other types of criminal activity.”<sup>16</sup>

*Why did organized crime-related violence in Mexico increase dramatically over Calderón’s administration?*

This article examines the increase in organized crime-related violence in Mexico during Calderón’s administration. The change in counter-narcotics strategy carried out by the Calderón administration, its implementation, and the violent activities of the various TCOs during that time period will be assessed. By investigating the strategies employed by these two primary actors and perpetrators of the violence, the Mexican government and the various TCOs, my research will attempt to identify the various causes of organized crime-related violence. However, for the purposes of this paper I will not examine the possibility of lowering narcotics demand and consumption in the United States but rather assume that the demand will always remain constant. That being said, consumption trends in the US dramatically affect the development of TCOs and their activities and, therefore, will be analyzed.

Although the examination will take an inductive analytical approach, it will heavily draw on the rational-actor model, as laid out by Graham Allison and Philip Zelikow in *Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis*, in order to help identify important information and easily reference assumptions. However, it will consider not only states as the most important actors but also sub-state actors, such as the various TCOs. That being said, TCOs frequently splinter and different agencies within the Mexican security apparatus operate differently and, therefore, must not be considered unitary actors but a conglomeration of rational actors. Most importantly, the research will assume that these various actors are acting rationally, i.e. “consistent, value-maximizing choice within specified constraints” to a particular strategic problem.<sup>17</sup> By utilizing this model, the analysis will be able to focus on identifying important information relating to cause and effect between the violent outcome and the various actors strategic decisions. The rational actor model allows the analysis to

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<sup>16</sup> Beittel, “Mexico: Organized Crime,” p. 9.

<sup>17</sup> Graham Allison and Philip Zelikow, *Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis 2<sup>nd</sup> ed.* (New York: Addison Wesley Longman, Inc., 1999): p. 18.

assume that the various actors have a “utility function that consistently ranks all alternatives the actor faces and to choose the alternative that achieves the highest utility. Uncertain about the consequences, the actor is assumed to choose the alternative with the highest expected utility.”<sup>18</sup>

Therefore, the paper will first conduct a historical analysis of drug trafficking in Mexico to contextualize strategic decision-making by the various actors during Calderón’s administration, followed by an analysis of Calderón’s counter narcotics strategy, and then an analysis of actions undertaken by the various TCOs. Lastly, the paper will provide an assessment of the relationship between Calderón’s strategy and TCO actions. The case study will only investigate the major TCOs operating in Mexico within the time period indicated. Therefore, in regards to the case analysis of TCOs, the paper will center on the evolution of the Tijuana/Arellano Felix organization (AFO), the Sinaloa cartel, the Juárez/Vicente Carillo Fuentes organization (CFO), and the Gulf cartel, which have fractured and coalesced over the time period indicated.<sup>19</sup> Consequently, the paper will first conceptualize and define the main actors and the Mexican War on Drugs.

### *Conceptualization*

As Clausewitz aptly stated, “Strategy is the use of the engagement for the purpose of war” and “No one starts a war – or rather, no one ought to do so – without first being clear in his mind what he intends to achieve by that war and how he intends to conduct it. The former is its political purpose; the latter its operational objective.”<sup>20</sup> Consequently, it is immensely important to attempt to define in exact terms the War on Drugs and the Mexican cartels as well as their objectives as their natures determine the strategy to be employed. Scholars and practitioners have labeled organized violence in Mexico more recently due to the level of violence as a narco, or criminal, insurgency.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 20.

<sup>19</sup> Beittel, “Mexico: Organized Crime,” (2017) p. 9.

<sup>20</sup> Carl Von Clausewitz, *On War*, trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 133, 223.

<sup>21</sup> Angel Rabasa et. al., *Counternetwork: Countering the Expansion of Transnational Criminal Networks* (Santa Monica: Rand Corporation, 2017), p. 13.

However, one quickly runs into difficulties when applying such a label to Mexico's conflict. If "insurgency" is defined, as it traditionally is, as "the organized use of subversion and violence by a group or movement that seeks to overthrow or force change of a governing authority" then one must explain the Mexican cartels political aims.<sup>22</sup> Whereas the Taliban in Afghanistan clearly have the political aim of overthrowing and replacing the democratic western-backed government, the various Mexican cartels are not seeking such political aims.<sup>23</sup>

Benjamin Lessing highlights how "cartels focus their energy on changing the way policy is enforced," which he calls de facto policy; instead of stretching the concept of insurgency to include the Mexican Drug War, he classifies it as a "criminal war."<sup>24</sup> Rather than focusing on the fact that cartels use terrorist and insurgent tactics and weaponry, this conceptualization concentrates on the aims of the combatants, which determine the nature of the conflict most intuitively. Cartels have no interest in "toppling, replacing, or capturing the benefits that accrue to the state," nor does the state fight the cartels to capture the illicit market from the cartels; rather, the cartels fight the state simply to retain autonomy and prevent restrictions on their economic endeavors, and the state fights the cartels for that exact reason, not to capture the illicit market but to constrain it.<sup>25</sup> If the Mexican State were to collapse due to high levels of violence, the cartels would not replace the state and provide services, nor would they seek a monopoly on the use of force or develop diplomatic relations with other states. The Mexican War on Drugs is clearly not an insurgency and, therefore, should not be defined as such. Lastly, Lessing's definition uses *war* instead of *conflict* in order to emphasize the intensity and duration of the conflict. Using the Uppsala Conflict Data Program, which designates conflicts as wars when battlefield deaths rise above 1000, the Mexican criminal conflict no doubt passes the threshold making "war" an appropriate term in this context.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Rabasa, *Counternetwork*, p. 13.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> Benjamin Lessing, "The Logic of Violence in Criminal War: Cartel-State Conflict in Mexico, Colombia, and Brazil," *PhD. Diss.* (University of California, Berkeley, 2012), p. 20.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 19.

The term cartel has been used interchangeably with TCO thus far in the paper and will continue to be used, but this term also runs into difficulties when explaining and conceptualizing the Mexican criminal organizations. Traditionally, the term cartel is meant to describe an organization that collaborates with others to fix the price of a commodity. However, the concept was used advantageously by DEA to more effectively prosecute gangsters. Early cases against traffickers used the Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations Act, or RICO laws, which simply demanded that they prove that suspects were a part of an ongoing criminal organization. It was evidently easier to prosecute individuals if they were associated with a cartel, and “[t]he media was also quick to jump on the cartel label,” and the term became more commonly used thereafter.<sup>27</sup> Since the various Mexican criminal organizations do not necessarily do this sort of price fixing, it is more appropriate to label them as TCOs.

The term Drug Trafficking Organizations (DTO) implies that the organization deals exclusively with drugs, which falls short of describing the Mexican TCOs since they also are involved with the trafficking of weapons, humans and other goods, as well as other criminal economic activities such as extortion, kidnapping, and armed robbery. Furthermore, the term TCO also emphasizes that these organizations are *transnational*; that is, they operate across international boundaries, which is increasingly important in the context of Mexico. These organization not only traffic the majority of drugs in and through Mexico into the US, but also many of the precursors needed for drug production come from other countries. Moreover, “[o]ne of the best indicators of the transnational nature of the Mexican crisis of violence is the increasingly modern and sophisticated weapons, including high-caliber rifles, hand grenades, rocket launchers, and many other types of weapons, that are widely traded within illegal networks despite being forbidden in Mexico” indicating foreign involvement and networks.<sup>28</sup> Since this paper is examining the most important actors, it will focus on the largest TCOs, i.e. the Sinaloa, Gulf, Tijuana, and Juarez cartels. Moreover, since these actors have consistently been called cartels, this paper will use TCOs and cartels interchangeably despite cartels being an improper and inadequate label.

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<sup>27</sup> Ioan Grillo, *El Narco: Inside Mexico's Criminal Insurgency* (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2012), p. 61.

<sup>28</sup> Ferreira, “Violent Mexico,” p. 53.



## A Short History of Mexico's Narcotics Trade

It has been said that the first controlled substance violation occurred in the Garden of Eden, when Adam eat the forbidden fruit, and “we have been at it ever since.”<sup>29</sup> However, this examination argues that it began during the Dictatorship of Porfirio Diaz (1876-1911). It was during this period that opium began to be cultivated in the Sierra Madre Occidental, the Golden Triangle.<sup>30</sup> Oriental laborers began to filter into the region to work on the railroads and mines and, not surprisingly, they brought with them a cultural tradition of opium.<sup>31</sup> While pink opium poppies began to be cultivated in Mexico and opium dens began to pop up in towns. There was no illicit market because the drug was never considered a threat to the public nor the users deviant. That all changed with the Harrison Narcotics Act of 1914 instituted by the US government, which created Mexico's first opium and then heroin smugglers. Descendants of the Oriental workers quickly recognized the potential market for the drug north of the border, and the smuggling of alcohol during prohibition helped solidify this lucrative business.<sup>32</sup> However, by the 1930s, Mexican criminals had effectively usurped the Chinese control of the illicit trade through a series of racially motivated violence, after which opium production steadily grew.<sup>33</sup> It was not until the US “hippie generation” of the 1960s and 1970s that the Mexican drug traffickers began to really take shape with US drug consumption of marijuana exploding.<sup>34</sup>

After almost ten years of civil war from 1910 to 1920, a single party rose to power, the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), which ushered in the longest period of peace the country had ever seen. It was during this period that drug traffickers

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<sup>29</sup> Anthony Placido, “Perspective from the Ground: Criminal Threat, or National Security Concern?,” in *The Hybrid Warfare: Crime, Terrorism and Insurgency in Mexico*, proceedings of the Joint Policy and Research Forum (2011): p. 37.

<sup>30</sup> Grillo, *El Narco*, p. 23.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 25.

<sup>32</sup> Ioan Grillo, “Mexican Cartels: A Century of Defying U.S. Drug Policy,” *Brown Journal of World Affairs* 20,1 (2013): p. 254.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 254-255.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 255.



operated almost completely unabated. The party essentially “was not about ideology but about power” and “relied on corruption to keep ticking over smoothly.”<sup>35</sup> Labeled the “perfect dictatorship” by Nobel Prize-winning writer Mario Vargas Llosa, “corruption was not a rot but rather the oil and glue of the machine that is the government.”<sup>36</sup> It was during the administrations of Echevarría (1970-1976) and López Portillo (1976-1982) in particular that a de facto agreement between the Mexican government and the various drug traffickers began to take hold, developing a criminal state.<sup>37</sup>

The “Plaza system,” a tacit agreement between the state and drug traffickers was created during this period. The state would not restrict their illegal activities if drug traffickers paid local, state, and federal PRI officials bribes, limit their violence between themselves, and all actors, including the various cartels and the state, had to coordinate their activities rather than compete in order to limit the violence perpetrated.<sup>38</sup> The plaza refers to a particular police jurisdiction, but to traffickers it “appropriated the term plaza to mean the valuable real estate of a particular trafficking corridor” where a figure would emerge as the head of that corridor and coordinate all payments to cops and the right officials.<sup>39</sup> This system served the interests of the state and the traffickers very effectively. Coordinating their activities, limiting competition, and limiting violence was the choice with the highest expected utility for all actors involved. While the traffickers had to pay for the privilege of operating autonomously, the payments were a profitable alternative to challenging the state.

It is also during this period (1970s-1980s) that President Nixon carried out his “War on Drugs,” borrowing a “rhetorical strategy from his predecessor” Lyndon Johnson’s “War on Poverty.”<sup>40</sup> Heroin substance abuse had risen dramatically during the Vietnam War, as Southeast Asia accounted for the majority of the world’s opium

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<sup>35</sup> Grillo, *El Narco*, p. 35.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> Diego Esparza, Antonio Ugues Jr., and Paul Hernandez, “The History of Mexican Drug Policy,” a paper prepared for the annual meeting of the *Western Political Science Association* (March 2012): p. 6.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 6-7.

<sup>39</sup> Grillo, *El Narco*, p. 53.

<sup>40</sup> Jacob Christopher Parakilas, “The Mexican Drug “War”: An examination into the nature of narcotics-linked violence in Mexico, 2006-2012,” *PhD diss.*, London School of Economic and Political Science (2013), p. 68.

supply, and American soldiers returning home continued to seek the illicit drug.<sup>41</sup> Nevertheless, Echevarría did not implement any significant anti-narcotics programs, despite substantial American pressure, until his last year in office, which took the form of an anti-cultivation campaign called Operation Condor.<sup>42</sup> Nixon's response to Echevarría's unwillingness to curb the narcotics trade was Operation Intercept, in which he instructed border agents to inspect every car and person crossing the border. Amidst a "barrage of complaints, the government stopped Intercept after 17 days, evincing the grim reality that only selected vehicles could be checked."<sup>43</sup>

The aggressive eradication efforts of Operation Condor constituted the first major crackdown on drug trafficking by the Mexican State. Ten thousand Mexican soldiers entered the Golden Triangle, pushing traffickers into neighboring metropolitan areas such as Guadalajara, and were accompanied by massive eradication both by hand and by chemical spraying.<sup>44</sup> These efforts were bolstered by a generous supply of hardware from the US government, some 39 helicopters, 22 small aircrafts, and an executive jet.<sup>45</sup> Clearly, the carrot offered by the US influenced the Mexican government, but they also used the operation as an opportunity to go after leftist insurgents in the area.<sup>46</sup> This crackdown, as well as a fatal mistake of selling poisoned marijuana, caused marijuana consumers to look for new sources of the drug, which ignited Colombian drug production. In 1978, Mexican officials stopped authorizing the Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) verification flights after two years of the eradication campaign. The results of the operation were a stark reminder of the balloon effect endemic to the global narcotics market.<sup>47</sup> The balloon effect essentially derives from the phenomenon where if a balloon is squeezed in one area it expands in another. Likewise, when marijuana production was squeezed in Mexico, Colombian production increased.

Operation Condor did not end the Plaza system, nor did it end drug trafficking. Once the operation was over, the PRI continued to accept bribes and accept a de facto

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Esparza, "The History of Mexican Drug Policy," p. 7.

<sup>43</sup> Grillo, "Mexican Cartels," p. 256.

<sup>44</sup> Grillo, *El Narco*, p. 49.

<sup>45</sup> Grillo, "Mexican Cartels," p. 256.

<sup>46</sup> Grillo, *El Narco*, p. 50.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., pp. 50-51.

mutual understanding with traffickers. Due to the surge in drug consumption and demand in the 1960s and 1970s, “recreational drugs went from being a niche vice to a global commodity,” morphing Sinaloa peasant farmers into drug kingpins in a decade.<sup>48</sup> “By 1980, reports said the American drug market was worth over \$100 billion a year.”<sup>49</sup> It is during this explosion in consumption that Colombian cocaine began to flood the hungry US market, filling the pockets of drug traffickers such as Pablo Escobar and the Cali cartel, which then fueled violence in Colombia. This increased production and violence led to Colombia’s American-backed War on Drugs, orchestrated by Cesar Gavaria’s administration. Escobar was subsequently killed on 2 December 1993, followed by a rapid dissolution of the Medellin Cartel. Subsequently, the vacuum was quickly filled by the Cali cartel, but was quickly dismantled through a series of plea-bargains shortly thereafter.<sup>50</sup>

Solidifying the shift of power from Colombian cartels to Mexican cartels was a successful counter-drug effort that managed to almost completely close down the Caribbean trafficking routes for Andean cocaine. This enforcement action forced smugglers to adopt a land route across the Mexican border with the US, which demanded Mexican cooperation and collaboration.<sup>51</sup> Although the contacts between Mexican and Colombian cartels had been operational for some time, as well as the land routes, the increased Mexican share in the cocaine trade and the increased value of the land routes allowed Mexican cartels to build up their assets making them much more powerful by the 1990s.<sup>52</sup> Again we see the unintended consequences of successful counter-drug efforts. First, Operation Condor created a market ripe for Colombian cocaine, and then the successful closing of the Caribbean route forced traffickers to shift operations through Mexico.

While TCOs adapted their strategies to the changing market realities to best serve their profit-maximizing interests, the political and economic realities in Mexico

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid., p. 39.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., p. 43.

<sup>50</sup> Bruce Bagley, “The Evolution of Drug Trafficking and Organized Crime in Latin America,” *Sociologia Problemas E Práticas* 71 (2013): pp. 102-103.

<sup>51</sup> David S. Deuel, “Drug Cartels and Gangs in Mexico and Central America: A View Through the Lens of Counterinsurgency,” *Masters Thesis*, Joint Forces Staff College Joint Advanced Warfighting School (2010), p. 3.

<sup>52</sup> Lessing, “The Logic of Violence,” p. 97.

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were changing as well. In 1982, during the presidency of Miguel de La Madrid (1982-1988), the Mexican economy suffered a major shock and could no longer make its principal payments on foreign loans, which were owned primarily by major U.S. commercial banks. Due to increasing pressure from the US government and the International Monetary Fund, the Mexican government gradually adopted more liberal economic policies and sought closer ties to the strong US economy. This economic and political shift brought Mexico increasingly under the influence of the US and its rigid counter-drug efforts.<sup>53</sup> Nevertheless, it was not until 1985 that the De La Madrid administration carried out any substantial change in its counter-narcotics policy.<sup>54</sup>

A number of events occurred in the mid-1980s that precipitated and invigorated the anti-drug campaign north of the border and, subsequently, south of the border. In 1985, DEA agent Enrique “Kiki” Camarena was kidnapped by Guadalajara criminals, tortured, raped and killed. Moreover, two prominent sports stars died of cocaine overdoses. CBS then released its special report, “48 Hours on Crack Street,” which produced “one of the highest ratings for any documentary in TV history;” “[c]rack definitely sold” and the “war on drugs went on steroids.”<sup>55</sup> US pressure again forced the Mexican government to take a more aggressive approach towards drug traffickers. The Mexican government launched Operation Leyanda, which went after those thought responsible for Camarena’s murder, and was accompanied by manhunts for three of the top cartel leaders, Rafael Caro Quintero, Miguel Angel Félix Gallardo, and Ernesto Fonseca Carrillo. Furthermore, De La Madrid dismantled the Federal Security Directorate, which served as a crucial institution providing the structural linkage “between the ruling political class and drug traffickers.”<sup>56</sup> What followed was a complete destabilization of the Plaza system, which facilitated increased violent competition between the various cartels.<sup>57</sup> No longer could the PRI or any Mexican government thereafter collaborate with the cartels to the same extent, the US just had too much influence.

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<sup>53</sup> Esparza, “The History of Mexican Drug Policy,” p. 9.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10.

<sup>55</sup> Grillo, *El Narco*, pp. 66-68.

<sup>56</sup> Lessing, “The Logic of Violence,” p. 97.

<sup>57</sup> Esparza, “The History of Mexican Drug Policy,” p. 11.

Three forces continued through the next two Mexican administrations of President Carlos Salinas de Gortari (1988-1994) and President Ernesto Zedillo (1994-2000): market liberalization, culminating in the North America Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), fragmentation and competition within and between Mexican cartels, and an increasingly militarized anti-drug establishment. The PRI, led by President Salinas, “embraced free trade and modern capitalism” and the new NAFTA agreement increased cross border trade dramatically, making border cities, such as Tijuana, Juarez and Navedo Laredo, key transit points for billions of dollars worth of goods.<sup>58</sup> With all of the Guadalajara cartel leaders being arrested by 1989, the new generation of Mexican cartels were more wealthy, increasingly taking over the majority share of the cocaine trade, and more violently competitive against one another and the state.<sup>59</sup> The state was now seen as a direct threat to their operations and between 1994 and 1997 “there was an increased targeting of federal and state law enforcement.”<sup>60</sup> Lastly, under the Zedillo administration military officers were given positions “within the *Procuraduría General de República*, the principle anti-narcotics investigative agency, and the share of drug seizures carried out by the army rose.”<sup>61</sup> This trend of the militarization of Mexican anti-drug policy is crucial to understanding later developments in the Mexican War on Drugs.

During the period outlined above, three cartels proved dominant: the Tijuana, led by the Arellano Félix brothers, the Juarez, run by Amado Carrillo Fuentes, and the Gulf Cartel.<sup>62</sup> The 2000 election of President Vicente Fox (2000-2006) marked the end of 70 years of single-party rule by the PRI, replacing it with the *Partido de Accion Nacional* (PAN) party. Fox quickly introduced various institutional reforms and increased arrests, seizures, and extraditions; furthermore, he created the Federal Agency of Investigations “whose officials were trained by U.S. personnel to better combat drug trafficking.”<sup>63</sup> Fox also continued the trend of replacing a “top-down, hierarchical system with a more distributed system of authority,” which was more democratic but also further disturbed the tacit agreements between the cartels and the ruling

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<sup>58</sup> Grillo, *El Narco*, p. 77.

<sup>59</sup> Grillo, “Mexican Cartels,” p. 257.

<sup>60</sup> Esparza, “The History of Mexican Drug Policy,” p. 15.

<sup>61</sup> Lessing, “The Logic of Violence,” p. 98.

<sup>62</sup> Grillo, *El Narco*, pp. 78-79.

<sup>63</sup> Esparza, “The History of Mexican Drug Policy,” p. 19.

government by increasing accountability and replacing officials with long standing agreements and relationships with the various cartels.<sup>64</sup>

Besides the further breakdown of the plaza system, another trend can be seen during this period that would foreshadow the violence to come. With no government to control boundaries between the different plazas and their cartels, and an increasingly competitive and lucrative drug marketplace, cartels began to recruit guns for hire that became increasingly violent using paramilitary tactics, terror, and kidnappings. Ramon Arellano Félix, one of the capos of the Tijuana cartel, “formed a notorious regiment of killers, recruiting Chicano gangbangers from San Diego and the bored sons of Tijuana’s wealthy families – a cadre that became known as narco juniors.”<sup>65</sup> This group introduced some particularly violent tactics such as the use of acid to devour bodies and *encobijado*, which was the “practice of wrapping up a corpse in sheets and dumping it in a public place, often with a threatening note.”<sup>66</sup> Also during this period the Gulf cartel recruited a number of deserters from the *Grupo Aeromóvil de Fuerzas Especiales* (GAFES), an elite U.S. trained anti-narcotics unit, to act as its hit squad that would later become their own independent cartel.<sup>67</sup>

The most significant turf war during President Fox’s tenure occurred during the mid-2000s between the Gulf cartel, backed by the Zetas, and the Sinaloa cartel, who had also recruited an “armed wing of its own, known as Los Negros.”<sup>68</sup> The clashes around Nuevo Laredo in 2005 stood out as particularly brutal, and served as a “laboratory for government strategy as well as cartel tactics.”<sup>69</sup> After Cardenas was indicted for assaulting agents and drug trafficking charges, not to mention a two million dollar bounty placed on him by the DEA, President Fox went after the capo. “[U]nlike old school capos” who would often surrender when facing government forces, Cardenas unleashed his Zeta paramilitary force, resulting in a half-hour gun-battle where he was

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<sup>64</sup> Parakilas, “The Mexican Drug ‘War,’” p. 102.

<sup>65</sup> Grillo, *El Narco*, p. 81.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> Lessing, “The Logic of Violence,” p. 98.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> Grillo, *El Narco*, p. 102.

finally arrested; he “became the first narco-insurgent,” wrote Ioan Grillo, and it quickly “became the new standard.”<sup>70</sup>

Witnessing what they believed to be a weakened rival, the Sinaloa Cartel moved into the territory, setting off the “first phase of the Mexican Drug War.”<sup>71</sup> The Zetas applied their brutal paramilitary tactics and struck fear in the streets, and “[s]oon every gang in the country would be doing the same thing.”<sup>72</sup> Operation Secure Mexico brought 700 soldiers and Federal Police into the region to suppress the violence. Widespread corruption throughout the local police force proved to also be a major impediment to quelling the violence. As sicarios, or hitmen, began to target police across the city, local police forces and Federal Police began to shoot at each other. The weak and corrupt Mexican system finally revealed itself.<sup>73</sup> By the time that Felipe Calderón came to power in December 2006, it is thought that there were four dominant Mexican cartels: the Tijuana, Juarez, Sinaloa, and the Gulf. By the end of his time in office, observers have indicated that these major organizations have fragmented into seven, then to nine, and now as many as 20 major organizations.<sup>74</sup>

Once the US began to put increasing pressure on the PRI government to adopt more liberal economic policies, more democratic institutions, and a more aggressive stance against drug traffickers, the PRI was faced with a conundrum. If they were to maintain the status quo, the corrupt Plaza System, they would meet political and economic backlash from the powerhouse of the US Equally problematic, if the PRI began to adopt the liberal democratic policies it would lose control of the country, including the tacit agreements with the various TCOs, which could easily result in TCOs challenging the state’s control over large sums of the country. Consequently, the PRI would have to take harsher measures against the TCOs, which very likely would lead to increased violence perpetrated by TCOs against the state. The least risky option for the PRI was to adopt the liberal democratic policies and a more aggressive stance against traffickers, in which the results were less certain and the consequences seemingly less immediate, than going against the much more powerful and influential

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid., p. 99.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., p. 100.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., p. 102.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., pp. 103-104.

<sup>74</sup> Beittel, “Mexico: Organized Crime,” p. 9.



US. Therefore, the decision taken by PRI officials and presidents during these important years were thought at the time to be rational and to have the highest expected payoff. What Mexico and President Calderón witnessed over the course of the early 2000s was only a taste of what the TCOs could unleash. What was to come would be much more violent and much more shocking.

### **Presidency of Felipe Calderón**

Within two weeks of being inaugurated, President Calderón launched an all out war on the Mexican cartels. He began by sending 6,500 Federal Police and military personnel into his home state of Michoacán to carry out operations against La Familia Michoacán cartel.<sup>75</sup> These large-scale, military-led, confrontational operations were unprecedented in size, scale, and duration. By the end of his term in office there were nearly 60,000 drug-related homicides<sup>76</sup>, and it is argued that drug-related homicides are reaching 80,000-100,000 as of 2017.<sup>77</sup> The rise in violence during Calderón's administration was, in part, a result of the heavy-handed strategy, which escalated tensions while initially suppressing violence in 2007. However, as the previous section has highlighted, the militarization of public security was already occurring and only escalated under Calderón.<sup>78</sup> Moreover, other trends, such as increased trafficking across the border and the coinciding increased market share of the narcotics trade controlled by Mexican cartels, were already well established by the time Calderón entered office. Nevertheless, organized crime-related violence did increase significantly over his tenure and he did at least accelerate and energize anti-drug policies held by previous administrations, providing a catalyst to the violence.

Given the rise in drug-related violence from 1,500 to 2000 between 2005 and 2006, Calderón was faced with few options.<sup>79</sup> Calderón was also struggling with his legitimacy as president. He won the 2006 election by an extremely slim margin, 0.58 percent of the vote, which accounted for just 240,000 votes. "Calderón's position was

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<sup>75</sup> "A Line in the Sand," p. 35.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 32.

<sup>77</sup> Beittel, "Mexico: Organized Crime," p. 2.

<sup>78</sup> Parakilas, "The Mexican Drug 'War'," p. 180.

<sup>79</sup> Grillo, *El Narco*, p. 107.

truly precarious” and, therefore, he had to “establish the legitimacy of his presidency quickly and decisively.”<sup>80</sup> Taking a page out of the history books showing drug wars were good politics, evident with both Nixon and Reagan, Calderón bounded his presidency to the fight against narco-traffickers.<sup>81</sup> This was also a reaction to public concerns. Mexicans showed in an opinion poll that insecurity was the number one challenge for the country in 2005 and 2006, while since 2007 it has been relegated to second after the economy despite the increase in violence.<sup>82</sup> The strategy was vindicated when Calderón’s approval rating went from 14 percent in 2005 to 49 percent in 2006, increasing again in 2007 when there was a marked decrease in the number of murders.<sup>83</sup> However, this low rate of drug-related violence did not last very long.

The people and, therefore the government, could not tolerate the level of violence occurring between TCOs, within TCOs, and between TCOs and government forces with innocent bystanders caught in the middle. Therefore, maintaining the status quo was not an option; nor was returning to the corrupt plaza system that existed under the PRI, which was now vanquished. Calderón decided to completely devote himself and his administration to an unconditional War on Drugs, signified well by a phrase he used extensively since 2007, “no truce and no quarter.”<sup>84</sup> The anti-drug strategies permeated throughout his tenure were founded on three significant policies that were trending but intensified under Calderón. First, the most popularly associated aspect of Calderón’s anti-drug policy was his administration’s adherence to a “fragment and control strategy.”<sup>85</sup> Consequently, the strategy was heavily predicated on a “broad-based decapitation strategy.”<sup>86</sup> This resulted in a heavy reliance on military personnel to carry out large-scale operations and maintain a larger share of public security, which leads to the second policy. Calderón’s administration sought to centralize political authority,

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<sup>80</sup> Lessing, “The Logic of Violence,” p. 99.

<sup>81</sup> Grillo, *El Narco*, p. 114.

<sup>82</sup> Sidney Weintraub and Duncan Wood, *Cooperative Mexican-U.S. Antinarcotics Efforts*, report of the CSIS Simon Chair in Political Economy, Center for Strategic and International Studies (2010): p. 18.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 29.

<sup>84</sup> Lessing, “The Logic of Violence,” p. 100.

<sup>85</sup> Jorge Chabat, “Drugs in Mexico under Calderon: The Inevitable War,” *Center for Economic Research and Teaching* (2010): p. 6.

<sup>86</sup> Parakilas, “The Mexican Drug ‘War’,” p. 109.

which has meant disproportionately the “militarization of public security.”<sup>87</sup> Lastly, and intimately tied to the first two policies, was an “intensified international collaboration, especially with the United States,” to which the Merida Initiative forms the core.<sup>88</sup> The next three sections will take a closer look at these three policies and how they were implemented.

### *Fragment and Control Strategy*

In order to grasp the logic of the “fragment and control” strategy, it is important to first understand Peter Lupsha’s three stages of organized crime. A *predatory* stage is where organized crime is made up of street gangs that pose no real threat to the legitimacy of the state because they are manageable by regular police enforcement. The *parasitic* stage is where organized crime infiltrates the state and is able to effectively influence it for its own benefit. Lastly, there is a *symbiotic* stage where organized crime is married to the state, essentially a criminal state or in this case, a narco-state.<sup>89</sup> Under PRI rule, Mexican organized crime could best be characterized as predominately symbiotic because the state ultimately was not challenged by such activities and actually benefitted from them. Towards the 1980s, these activities began to increasingly challenge state legitimacy, and by the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, organized crime had become completely parasitic. The fragment and control strategy sought to reverse the criminal evolution within Mexico to a predatory stage and then manage crime like most states.<sup>90</sup> In order to achieve this goal, the state had to weaken TCOs. Calderón never sought the ridiculous notion of completely eliminating drug trafficking, but rather “transform it into a public security problem” that then could be controlled by an effective police and judicial system.<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> Marcos Pablo Moleoznik, “Organized crime, the militarization of public security, and the debate on the “new” police model in Mexico,” *Trends in Organized Crime* 16 (2013): p. 179.

<sup>88</sup> Chabat, “Drugs in Mexico under Calderon,” p. 8.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., p. 9.

In order to fragment these TCOs, the Calderón administration adopted an “aggressive kingpin strategy.”<sup>92</sup> By effectively targeting HVTs, much like the U.S. counter-terrorism strategy, Calderón hoped that the organizations would be weakened to an extent where police forces could maintain public security. This strategy was based largely on the decapitation strategy used by the Colombian government, with the help of the US, to take down the Medellín and Cali Cartel in the 1990s, except in one fundamental way. Instead of a “decapitation strategy” where the state “target[s] specific groups and attempt[s] to dismantle them from the top down,” Calderón attempted to target HVTs on an opportunistic basis in order to maintain neutrality.<sup>93</sup> This was especially important because of the Mexican government’s long history of corruption.

In a way, Calderón was a victim of his own success. “Between 2007 and 2012, 22 out of the 37 major organized crime figures were either captured or killed.”<sup>94</sup> The organizations fragmented like the strategy predicted, and power vacuums were then created sparking turf wars, either by a sub-group attempting the takeover of the larger organization or an outside cartel attempting to capitalize on the weakness of a rival.<sup>95</sup> While the strategy maintained the government’s perception of neutrality, it opened up opportunities for other TCOs to capitalize on the government’s targeting of their opponents because the Mexican government did not have the resources or manpower to go after all cartels equally. The results of which were not anticipated; the murder rate skyrocketed, other violent crimes increased significantly, and government officials were targeted. Civilians were increasingly caught in the middle, falling victim to the deteriorating security situation.

The kingpin strategy was successful in taking down many HVTs. To accomplish this task, the Mexican government had to deploy a significant proportion of their armed forces as well as Federal Police forces in large-scale operations. Although this expansive use of the military and Federal Police was not unprecedented, the scale and size of the

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<sup>92</sup> Alejandra Hope, “Plus Ça Change: Structural Continuities in Mexican Counternarcotics Policy,” in *Center for 21st Century Security and Intelligence Latin America Initiative*, Foreign Policy at Brookings (2016): p. 6.

<sup>93</sup> Parakilas, “The Mexican Drug ‘War,’” p. 183.

<sup>94</sup> Hope, “Plus Ça Change,” p. 6.

<sup>95</sup> “A Line in the Sand,” p. 36.

operations once Calderón expanded outside of the state of Michoacán was.<sup>96</sup> At its height, anti-drug operations included 96,000 combat troops, “almost 40 [percent] of all active personnel.”<sup>97</sup> Moreover, these large-scale federal operations that were the “keystone of Calderón’s security strategy” differentiated from previous administration in terms of time allotment.<sup>98</sup> The last aspect of Calderón’s counter-narcotics strategy was its unconditional nature, epitomized in a phrase he often used, “no truce and no quarter,” which made it clear to all actors involved that there was no room for bargaining.<sup>99</sup> Calderón would not stop until the cartels were severely weakened and he had restored public security, his legitimacy, and the state’s monopoly on the use of force. The political, economical, historical, and geographical realities of Mexico constrained Calderón’s options in carrying out a counter-narcotics strategy, demanding the next two pillars to also become a significant part of his administration’s counter-drug policy.

#### *Centralization and Militarization of Public Security*

Faced with the American military in Iraq, Donald Rumsfeld famously said, “[y]ou go to war with the army you have, not the army you might want or wish to have at a later time.”<sup>100</sup> This statement could not be more true for Calderón’s predicament. The reality that beset Calderón was a massively complex police system riddled with corruption left over from decades of PRI led corruption. “Policing responsibilities are divided between federal, state, and municipal governments; the forces are divided by both jurisdiction and by function,” which includes crime prevention and response, relegated to all agencies, and investigations carried out by state and federal forces under the attorney general’s offices.<sup>101</sup> This force was made up of approximately 350,000 police officers of which 90 percent were state and local (as of 2010), which were made

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<sup>96</sup> Parakilas, “The Mexican Drug ‘War’,” p. 173.

<sup>97</sup> Rabasa, *Counternetwork*, p. 66.

<sup>98</sup> Hope, “Plus Ça Change,” p. 6.

<sup>99</sup> Lessing, “The Logic of Violence,” p. 100.

<sup>100</sup> Parakilas, “The Mexican Drug ‘War’,” p. 174.

<sup>101</sup> Maureen Meyer, “Mexico’s Police: Many Reforms, Little Progress,” *Washington Office on Latin America* (May 2014): p. 5.

up of more than 1,600 police agencies (as of 2009).<sup>102</sup> Apart from the extraordinary difficulties of cooperation and communication between these numerous agencies, jurisdictions, and functions, these forces are perforated with corruption, abuse, and ineffectiveness.<sup>103</sup>

This reality caused Calderón to “consolidate a national public security system and develop a framework for police reform.”<sup>104</sup> The federal security budget nearly doubled over the course of Calderón’s tenure, which allowed the Federal Police to receive four times the amount of resources, triple in size, and become a more educated and professional force. By 2012, one quarter of all Federal Police were college graduates.<sup>105</sup> The Federal Police are separated into two functional forces; the “Policía Federal Ministerial, designed to focus on investigations, and the Policía Federal, intended to gather intelligence, combat organized crime, and operate under cover.”<sup>106</sup> The intent of this force was to bolster and provide the foundation for public security throughout the country of more than 100 million citizens. In addition to these efforts, Calderón also sought to professionalize and reform state and local police. Through the National Public Security System (SNSP), with direction from the National Public Security Council under the leadership of the president, state and local forces would receive subsidies and support in order to establish better training, vetting, and certifications in exchange for more oversight by the Executive Secretariat of the SNSP.<sup>107</sup> Calderón also put through a number of bills that were approved in March 2008, which greatly enhanced and empowered federal agencies in the War on Drugs, such as “authorization for intercepting private communications in case of organized crime activities with a judicial order issued afterwards.”<sup>108</sup> Moreover, significant judicial reform was established with oral trials replacing trials conducted secretly through written briefs, greatly enhancing transparency and, therefore, reducing corruption.<sup>109</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> Weintraub, *Cooperative Mexican-U.S.*, p. 32; Hal Brands, “Mexico’s Narco-Insurgency and U.S. Counterdrug Policy,” *Manuscript*, Strategic Studies Institute (2009): p. 14.

<sup>103</sup> Meyer, “Mexico’s Police,” p. 5.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

<sup>105</sup> Hope, “Plus Ça Change,” p. 6.

<sup>106</sup> Weintraub, *Cooperative Mexican-U.S.*, p. 32.

<sup>107</sup> Meyer, “Mexico’s Police,” p. 8.

<sup>108</sup> Chabat, “Drugs in Mexico under Calderon,” p. 7.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.

Nevertheless, all these reforms would take a significant amount of time to produce effective results on the War on Drugs, and therefore Calderón turned to the only other agency to retake public spaces and combat the cartels, the military.

Seeing that the municipal and state police forces were weak, ineffective, and infected with corruption, and the federal forces were relatively small for the task at hand, Calderón “indicated that the decision to increase military deployments was less an intentional strategy” than a security necessity.<sup>110</sup> By 2008, the security situation in Mexico was dire. There was no way that the feeble Federal Police could take on the massive task of providing public security in cartel hot-spots, take on the cartels in the HVT strategy, nor take over state and municipal police forces where necessary. The military was the only force large enough for the task. In 2006, the federal force had only 6,000 officers while the Army, Air Force, and Navy, which included a few thousand Marines, were made up of roughly 244,000 personnel.<sup>111</sup> While these forces had little combat experience prior to being thrown into the War on Drugs, and had meager land, sea, and air assets, it was no doubt better than the police forces in terms of combat readiness.<sup>112</sup> However, the armed forces strength was in providing physical security to the Mexican State and not in regional power projection or counter-insurgency/counter-narcotics that they were going to be conducting.<sup>113</sup>

Besides the necessary use of the military in the “168 ‘high impact operations’ from 2007 through 2012” carried out against various TCOs, the military also took on extensive public security roles.<sup>114</sup> George Grayson lists 36 public security posts traditionally filled by civilians filled by members of the armed forces in 2012, a rise from just six in 2009, including 36 percent of all public security positions.<sup>115</sup> Grayson also highlights some of the benefits of such a strategy, besides being absolutely necessary in some cases, of which three stand out. One, the level of experience these officers had in commanding troops, not only in combat but also in counter-narcotics and specifically countering tactics used by the Zetas cartel, was extremely valuable. Two, the military

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<sup>110</sup> Parakilas, “The Mexican Drug ‘War’,” p. 183.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 174.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 175.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 107.

<sup>114</sup> Weintraub, *Cooperative Mexican-U.S.*, p. 27.

<sup>115</sup> Grayson, “The Impact of President Felipe,” p. 17.



culture is deeply committed to discipline and professionalism that state and local police are lacking. Three, the military consistently is held in higher confidence than state and local forces and even federal forces.<sup>116</sup>

Despite this clear preference for the armed forces to carry out counter-narcotics operations, scholars such as Marcos Pablo Maloeznika find it extremely dangerous and counter-productive for the military to take on such a public security role. He argues that the military is based on a state-centric approach aimed at ensuring state security from external and internal challengers by the use of force. This approach is in opposition to a citizen-centric approach that police forces are trained to carry out, which “centers on the protection of life and the proper implementation of the fundamental rights enshrined in the Constitution, international treaties, and applicable domestic legislation; the maintenance of order and public calm and the prevention and punishment of crimes.”<sup>117</sup> This fundamental difference, Maloeznik argues, explains why police use force as a last measure while the military is “trained to use heavy weaponry in a lethal way” right away.<sup>118</sup> This argument against the militarization of public security is compounded by the significant rise in human rights complaints reported to the National Human Rights Commission. In 2006, there were only 182 complaints, but by 2009 there were approximately 2,000.<sup>119</sup> Nevertheless, a 2009 survey showed that a majority of respondents, 56 percent, “considered it more important for the government to try to maintain law and order than to protect personal freedoms” and “after three years of extensive military deployment, a majority of the public still favored the use of the military and its antinarcotics efforts.”<sup>120</sup> However, it has already been established that the military was the only tool the government could use in its extensive counter-narcotics operations and to restore public security. This expansive use of the military, as well as the development of more effective police forces, demanded a significant amount of finances and resources. US policymakers were well aware of the deteriorating security situation in Mexico and were more than willing to cooperate and support Calderón in his War on Drugs.

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<sup>116</sup> Ibid., pp. 23-24.

<sup>117</sup> Marcos Pablo Moleoznik, “Organized crime, the militarization of public security, and the debate on the ‘new’ police model in Mexico,” *Trends in Organized Crime* 16 (2013): p. 183.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid., pp. 183-184.

<sup>119</sup> Weintraub, *Cooperative Mexican-U.S.*, p. 26.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid., p. 27.

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*Intensified Cooperation*

Over Calderón's tenure, Mexican-US relations went through a serious makeover. On the strategic level, cooperation between the two countries was solidified in a number of bilateral agreements, memorandums of understanding, and other legal apparatuses. On the operational level, intelligence sharing became more common and productive between security and intelligence agencies from both countries.<sup>121</sup> The Merida Initiative, which went into effect in October 2007, made up the core of the renewed relationship. The initiative allotted 1.6 billion US dollars, 1.4 billion of which went to Mexico, in funding to Mexico and other Latin American countries for purchasing new equipment and improve training in counter-narcotics.<sup>122</sup> It also demanded that each state commit to addressing their share of internal problems associated with transnational crime.<sup>123</sup> Although the initiative increased US counter-narcotics assistance tenfold, the delivery of aid was slow. Two years into the program only nine percent of appropriated funds had been delivered, mostly due to bureaucratic politics as well as pushback on Americans' demand for appropriate oversight over the distribution of the funds.<sup>124</sup> It was not until a year, and numerous revisions, after the initiative went into effect that the US Congress enacted the first appropriations bill. Moreover, relative to the infamous Plan Colombia, US assistance to Mexico was modest, especially when considering the distance Mexico is to the US compared to Colombia.<sup>125</sup> When the original Merida Initiative ended in 2010, the plan was quickly reasserted and expanded to include a 21<sup>st</sup> Century Border Initiative to facilitate trade while providing better security.<sup>126</sup>

The Merida Initiative was based on " 'four pillars': disrupting and dismantling criminal organizations, institutionalizing the rule of law, building a twenty-first century border, and building strong and resilient communities."<sup>127</sup> Although the first phase included purchasing large amounts of equipment, especially aircraft, by 2010 there was

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<sup>121</sup> Hope, "Plus Ça Change," p. 7.

<sup>122</sup> Parakilas, "The Mexican Drug 'War'," p. 107.

<sup>123</sup> "A Line in the Sand," pp. 43-44.

<sup>124</sup> Parakilas, "The Mexican Drug 'War'," p. 107.

<sup>125</sup> Weintraub, *Cooperative Mexican-U.S.*, p. 38.

<sup>126</sup> "A Line in the Sand," p. 44.

<sup>127</sup> Weintraub, *Cooperative Mexican-U.S.*, pp. 38-39.

an increased focus on building institutions.<sup>128</sup> The funding can be separated into three different clusters based on objective: cluster one includes counter-narcotics, counter-terrorism, and border security; cluster two includes public security and law enforcement; cluster three focuses on institution building and rule of law. By far the largest proportion of funds went to the first two clusters, exemplifying the enforcement approach of both the US and Calderón's counter-narcotics policies.<sup>129</sup> The US counter-narcotics approach has traditionally been premised on a counter-supply strategy and, therefore, Calderón's policies also seem to emanate the same approach.

The US 2008 National Drug Control Strategy makes it clear that interdiction and capacity building of foreign counter-narcotics institutions, in order to disrupt cartel activities, is higher on the rung than lowering domestic consumption and "demand, promoting social and economic development in source countries, or pursuing alternative strategies for combating the drug trade."<sup>130</sup> This focus was also clear in Plan Colombia, the US counter-narcotics assistance package to Colombia, and has been the staple of US counter-narcotics strategy for decades, so it should come as no surprise. Hal Brands argues that such a strategy is "short-sighted" by "focusing on the most visible manifestations of the drug trade, rather than grappling seriously with the deeper, more difficult issues that drive that business."<sup>131</sup> Nevertheless, Calderón's has fostered a significantly cooperative relationship between the American and Mexican military and law enforcement, for better or worse.

It is also important to note that there is significant continuity between President Calderón's counter-narcotics strategy and President Nieto's. The strong US-Mexico relationship has more or less continued under President Nieto; the two nation's cooperation is now embedded in the daily workings of Mexican security agencies.<sup>132</sup> Two changes are worthy of note. One, Nieto has reestablished the central role that the Interior Ministry had over security issues by folding the Public Security Ministry into the Interior Ministry, allowing its control over the Federal Police and federal penitentiary system, reflecting further centralization. Two, Nieto has developed better

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<sup>128</sup> Ibid., p. 38.

<sup>129</sup> Brands, "Mexico's Narco-Insurgency," p. 22.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid., p. 25.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid., pp. 35-37.

<sup>132</sup> Hope, "Plus Ça Change," p. 10.

coordination with and between different government security agencies.<sup>133</sup> Other than these two adjustments, President Nieto has actually strengthened and entrenched many of Calderón's policies, showing significant continuity. This may show just how limited the government's options were and are in combatting these criminal organizations.

### **Transnational Criminal Organizations**

This paper rejects the belief that the Mexican War on Drugs is an insurgency, but rather best categorized as a criminal war. The TCOs are not insurgents, nor are they terrorists, because ideology and/or political ends do not motivate their actions. However, organizations such as La Familia Michoacán have challenged this criterion; nevertheless, all the other major TCOs do not cross the threshold from economic goals to political ambitions, although their economic goals may demand political means and objectives. The various cartels, or TCOs, operating in Mexico are organizations that may be best put as "Clauswitzian in the sense that their criminal activities are simply a continuation of business by other means."<sup>134</sup> Consequently, TCOs can be seen as rational actors within an illegal marketplace and "exhibit rent-seeking rather than ideological behaviour."<sup>135</sup> Throughout the evolution of drug-trafficking in Mexico, criminal decision-making can be seen as serving their best interests, weighing the costs and benefits, and committing to what each actor saw as most profitable while least risky. Where there is a demand, there is an economic actor to fill the supply, especially when the prospects are extremely lucrative. This rational decision-making can also be seen in how TCOs reacted, adapted and evolved during Calderón's crackdown and can explain why cartels have increasingly used violence as a means to achieve their goals.

#### *Coalescing and Fragmentation*

The splintering of major cartels did not begin during Calderón's administration. Prior to 2006, there were some significant changes in the makeup of TCOs in Mexico.

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<sup>133</sup> Ibid., p. 7.

<sup>134</sup> Parakilas, "The Mexican Drug 'War'," p. 129.

<sup>135</sup> Ibid.

Focusing on the period of increased violence under Calderón's administration, it is often recognized that the period began with four major TCOs: the Tijuana/AFO, the Sinaloa cartel, the Juarez/CFO, and the Gulf cartel.<sup>136</sup> Over the time period under analysis, those organizations experienced significant structural changes due to fragmentation or alliances developed due to the intensified turf wars. The kill or capture of HVTs, especially bosses or capos, by the government has provided the catalyst in many cases for either intra organizational rivalries or challenges from other cartels attempting to gain territory and/or new markets.

The AFO, once one of the most powerful TCOs, due to their control of the important Tijuana-San Diego border plaza/trafficking route, had decreased significantly in power over Calderón's administration. By October 2008, the last of the five brothers belonging to the Arellano Felix family were captured in Tijuana. The vacuum created by the loss of these head figures, caused the organization to split into two factions. "Eduardo Teodoro 'El Teo' Garcia Simental, a former AFO lieutenant, aligned himself with the Sinaloa cartel", sparking a "surge of violence in Tijuana."<sup>137</sup> With the arrest of Simental in 2010, violence has markedly decreased and it is believed that Fernando Sanchez Arellano, a nephew of one of the AFO founders, had taken over and either made a deal with the Sinaloa cartel or went under the radar.<sup>138</sup> Either way, the spike in violence can be partially attributed to the power vacuum created by the arrest of AFO leaders and the resulting attempted takeover by the Sinaloa cartel.

The Sinaloa cartel is regarded as the most powerful Mexican TCO during this time period, controlling an estimated 45 percent of the drug trade by 2012. It inherited the massive empire from the Guadalajara cartel in the late 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Headed by Joaquín "El Chapo" Guzmán, the organization allied itself with the CFO and the Beltrán Leyva organization (BLO) to form the "Federation" to fight the Gulf cartel who had allied itself with La Familia. The Federation split violently when in January 2008 "Alfredo Beltrán Leyva, brother of the syndicate's leader, Arturo, and a leading lieutenant in the organization" was arrested, which was believed to be due to "El

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<sup>136</sup> Beittel, "Mexico: Organized Crime," p. 9.

<sup>137</sup> June Beittel, "Mexico's Drug Trafficking Organizations: Source and Scope of the Rising Violence," *Congressional Research Service* (2012): p. 9.

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10.

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Chapo's" collaboration with authorities.<sup>139</sup> The BLO significantly decreased in power due to the fighting with the much more powerful Sinaloa cartel, as well as a number of major setbacks credited to Mexican forces; of note was the "killing of Arturo Beltrán Leyva during a raid conducted by Mexican Marines" in 2009.<sup>140</sup> For their part, the CFO, after the split in 2008, had also suffered from violent competition with the Sinaloa cartel throughout the rest of Calderón's administration. Increasingly, the CFO had diversified by conducting domestic drug sales in Juarez while battling with street gangs such as "the Artistas Asesinos and the Mexicales, representing the Sinaloa cartel."<sup>141</sup>

Arguably the most significant change that occurred, in regards to the violence, was the Zeta's split from the Gulf cartel, of which the exact date is contended. As the enforcer wing of the Gulf cartel, the Zetas had been growing in strength and power since they were hired by Osiel Cárdenas Guillén. Guillén, with his elite trained Zetas, successfully defended much of their territory in the mid-2000s when the Sinaloa cartel aggressively pushed into their territory after Cárdenas had been arrested, resulting in massive bloodshed. Although Cárdenas was able to run his drug empire successfully from jail for a number of years, violence finally broke out over his succession in early 2007. Following this structural weakening, the Zetas began to contract out their violent services to other TCOs, such as the BLO and CFO. By 2010, the Zetas were essentially an independent organization and when, on 5 November 2010, Osiel's brother Antonio Ezequiel Cárdenas Guillén, was killed in a gun battle with Mexican Marines, the Zetas increased their violent competition with their former ally, which continued for the rest of Calderón's administration.<sup>142</sup>

Lastly, it is worth noting an outlier, La Familia Michoacán (LFM) whose brutally violent crimes entered the spotlight beginning in 2006. Starting out as a vigilante group, it slowly entered the drug trade, specializing in methamphetamine production and smuggling. Most strikingly it had been recognized as a "hybrid fusion of criminal drug enterprise entity and Christian evangelical beliefs' combining social, criminal, and religious elements in one movement."<sup>143</sup> As a result, this organization has more

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<sup>139</sup> Ibid., p. 15.

<sup>140</sup> Ibid., pp. 15-16.

<sup>141</sup> Ibid., p. 11.

<sup>142</sup> Beittel, "Mexico's Drug Trafficking Organizations," pp. 14-15.

<sup>143</sup> Ibid., p. 16.

frequently been associated with a traditional insurgency because some activities are not as easily rationalized as profit-driven, such as their spiritual connotations, code of ethics, and so called “social work.”<sup>144</sup> However, upon further examination, these activities serve to create social cohesion within the organization and justify their actions to a public that otherwise may be hostile. An independent study of this group’s motivation is needed, but for the purposes of this paper the group will be considered another TCO, not an insurgency. While the group was associated with the Zetas when they were working under the Gulf cartel in order to oppose the Federation’s encroachments on its territory, when the Zetas split from the Gulf cartel La Familia increasingly combatted them. Two prominent leaders were eliminated; LFM’s spiritual leader Nazario Moreno González was killed by Mexican Federal Police in 2010 and José de Jesús Méndez Vargas was arrested in 2011, cracking the organization into two: the Knights Templar and the remnants of LFM who were increasingly in conflict at the end of Calderón’s reign.<sup>145</sup>

This intensified violence due to competition between TCOs and within TCOs can be at least partially attributed to the increased pressure from Mexican authorities. The increased violence can also be seen as an inevitable result of rational actors within TCOs. Since TCOs primary activities are drug trafficking, by taking control of numerous profitable trafficking routes and production centers they become more resilient to competition, lowering transaction costs, and increasing profits.<sup>146</sup> Furthermore, these organizations act like rational economic actors, making use of transaction cost economics, by contracting out certain activities when calculated to be efficient or necessary, like the Gulf cartel did with the Zetas.<sup>147</sup> Similarly, when the different TCOs formed an alliance of convenience to fight rivals, they quickly disintegrated when the various actors saw alternative opportunities that looked profitable. This intense competition resulted in higher drug-related homicides but also resulted in diversification of criminal economic activities that also contributed to the violence.

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<sup>144</sup> Rabasa, *Counternetwork*, p. 51.

<sup>145</sup> Beittel, “Mexico’s Drug Trafficking Organizations,” pp. 16-17.

<sup>146</sup> Rabasa, *Counternetwork*, p. 22.

<sup>147</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 23.



*Diversification*

Although the drug trade, and more specifically the cocaine trade, form the core operations of Mexican TCOs depending on many internal factors, such as the breakdown of criminal networks or relationships, and external factors, such as successful interdiction efforts or consumption trends, exert influence over where these organization's focus their efforts and resources based on profit-maximization calculations.<sup>148</sup> These factors have caused Mexican TCOs to diversify their activities, gradually adapting to the given circumstances. For instance, when marijuana consumption spiked in the US, Mexican cartels began to move massive amounts of marijuana along their well-developed linkages through the heroin trade. In the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, Mexican TCOs have utilized existing supply chains and logistics to diversify into the production, trafficking and sale of other narcotics, such as methamphetamine, to build up their resilience to market trends, competition, and enforcement pressure, but they have not stopped there.<sup>149</sup> These organizations are transnational *criminal organizations*, not simply *drug trafficking organizations*.

The cartels have ventured out and invested in other profitable market activities, such as human smuggling, weapons trafficking, kidnapping, extortion, and racketeering.<sup>150</sup> Human smuggling for the purposes of sexual exploitation is particularly troubling. It is estimated that "each year approximately 25,600 females...are trafficked across the U.S. Southwest border" and the business is "estimated to generate 16 billion annually."<sup>151</sup> Furthermore, there is an estimated 46,849 individuals trafficked across the border for the purposes of forced labor.<sup>152</sup> Another exceptionally violent market area that cartels have capitalized on increasingly is kidnapping for ransom and as a means of political influence. A report claimed that there was an increase of 317 percent in kidnappings between the period of 2005 and 2011. Moreover, these kidnappings are unfortunately more likely to end with physical and mental damage for the victims since the perpetrators have "often abandoned 'codes of conduct'" in regards to hostage

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<sup>148</sup> Ibid., p. 18.

<sup>149</sup> Ibid., p. 19.

<sup>150</sup> Ibid., p. 18.

<sup>151</sup> "A Line in the Sand," p. 18.

<sup>152</sup> Ibid.

treatment.<sup>153</sup> Another particularly violent new market for Mexican cartels is extortion. This market has been vigorously capitalized on by the Zetas; for instance it was reported that approximately 300 mining operations were “being pressured to pay between \$11,000 and \$37,000 per month to operate in that particular cartel’s plaza.”<sup>154</sup> According to some estimates, armed robbery increased by 47 percent and extortion by 110 percent between 2007 and 2012.<sup>155</sup> Nevertheless, not all TCOs diversify to the same extent or in the same way. The more extensive, in terms of territory, cartels such as the Sinaloa, Gulf, and the Zetas can and have diversified extensively due to their considerable access across the country and to valuable oil pipelines, which provide an exceptionally lucrative theft scheme. Other cartels, such as the AFO and CFO, have to rely primarily on enforcing tolls on the traffic of narcotics through their corridors and prove less diversified during Calderón’s administration.<sup>156</sup>

These activities do not simply affect the higher echelons of the Mexican public, but all levels down to the street vendor, further exasperating violence in Mexican society. Besides these particularly violent economic activities, Mexican cartels have also invested in intellectual property rights theft, hijacking bulk cargo, import/export fraud and agricultural theft.<sup>157</sup> All these activities undermine the authority of the state, as well as create an environment of violence and fear within the Mexican public. Some scholars contend that such activities are a sign of successful government enforcement efforts, while others argue that such activities are a sign of “organizational vitality and growth.”<sup>158</sup> It is more likely that both are correct, that increasing pressure from the Mexican government has caused TCOs to diversify in order to make themselves more resilient and, therefore, have grown in strength and impact.

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<sup>153</sup> Ibid., p. 37.

<sup>154</sup> Ibid., p. 38.

<sup>155</sup> Beittel, “Mexico’s Drug Trafficking Organizations,” p. 18.

<sup>156</sup> Ibid., p. 20.

<sup>157</sup> “A Line in the Sand,” p. 37.

<sup>158</sup> Beittel, “Mexico’s Drug Trafficking Organizations,” (2012) p. 18.

*Barbarous Violence*

TCOs operate much like any legitimate business driven by market forces and aiming to make profits, the essential difference is that TCOs operate within the black market, or illegal economy.<sup>159</sup> Therefore, there are no insurance mechanisms, such as legal contracts with an enforcement mechanism attached, to give TCOs security and certainty in their economic activities. Consequently, TCOs are forced to use violence, either implicitly or explicitly, as a means to enforce transaction agreements, among other informal agreements, providing a certain level of assurance and security.<sup>160</sup> Violence serves many purposes within the illegitimate market. Violence “serves as a means of defending or expanding a group’s sphere of influence, a medium of communication between groups that lack established contacts with each other, or a way to demonstrate seriousness of purpose and commitment to a particular goal.”<sup>161</sup> This dynamic, that can only operate within certain environments with certain constraints, helps foster what Jacob Parakilas has coined a “marketplace of violence” where violence is both a product, that can be bought, sold, or bartered, and a service, a “means by which disputes are resolved and contracts are enforced.”<sup>162</sup> This logic of the “marketplace of violence” can also explain the most barbarous violence perpetrated by these economic organizations.

The Los Zetas have been considered the most violent group in Mexico. The Zetas have adopted a particular brutality that seems to serve “no immediate operational necessity” including activities such as beheadings and skinning victims alive in order to “coerce and intimidate civilians and rivals alike.”<sup>163</sup> This strategy has arguably served them well. In a relatively short period of time, the group has gone from an enforcement arm of a major TCO to becoming one of the most powerful cartels in Mexico, surpassing its former employer. This increased influence and power was won not through respect,

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<sup>159</sup> Rabasa, *Counternetwork*, p. 26.

<sup>160</sup> Jacob Christopher Parakilas, “The Complexity of Narcoviolencia: Understanding the Mexican Drug Conflict as a Market of Violence,” *Interdisciplinary Political Studies* 2,1 (2012): p. 40.

<sup>161</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 42-43.

<sup>162</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 43.

<sup>163</sup> Rabasa, *Counternetwork*, p. 57.

but through fear. The credibility of the Zetas threatening brutality “serves as a trademark that eases its entry into” and “lowers the cost of penetrating a new area.”<sup>164</sup>

To be sure, other TCOs have witnessed their successful employment of brutal violence and have also taken on more brutal mechanisms. For example, Los Zetas former ally LFM were accused of throwing decapitated heads onto a dance floor in December 2006. The number of victims found to be tortured had risen dramatically from 2008 through to 2012, with more than 4,000 victims of torture representing an increase of 190 percent. Moreover the number of beheadings had also risen substantially with almost 2,000 decapitations over the same period, representing an increase of 260 percent.<sup>165</sup> The use of narco-messages “directed [at] government officials or rival cartels also grew by almost 220 percent to a total of 3,117 during the same period.”<sup>166</sup> These messages have ranged from notes attached to bodies left in public places to videos of executions and torture with explicit warnings to rivals. Other messages relate more closely to propaganda, where the message is meant to legitimize their activities or spread fear, and is directed at the greater populace.<sup>167</sup>

These acts of extreme violence, like terrorism although for economic gain not for political purposes, are often times meant to convey a message to a larger audience, i.e. the government, police, military, or the public more generally. Arguing that these violent acts constitute terrorism, Howard Campbell states, “the architects of narco-terror, are strategists who view narco-terror as a tactic in power struggles, not merely the bloody result of street fights, atavistic hatreds or personal vendettas.”<sup>168</sup> These acts are not acts of terrorism since their end goal is not political power but profit. However, like terrorists, TCOs use of brutal violence and messages are meant to persuade individual actors and groups, but unlike terrorists, they do this purely for economic gain. Cartels will use symbolic violence, such as “bodily mutilation, decoration or strategic placement of bodies” as well as “timing of killings to maximize news media

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<sup>164</sup> Ibid.

<sup>165</sup> Ferreira, “Violent Mexico,” p. 55.

<sup>166</sup> Ibid.

<sup>167</sup> Howard Campbell and Tobin Hansen, “Is Narco-Violence in Mexico Terrorism?,” *Bulletin of Latin American Research* 33,2 (2014): p. 167.

<sup>168</sup> Ibid., p. 163.

coverage and public impact.”<sup>169</sup> This brutality is a tactic and part of a larger strategy used by the cartels to effectively compete and ensure as much freedom of action to conduct their businesses in the most profitable way.

## **Discussion and Findings**

There are a number of key characteristics of Mexican TCOs that can be drawn from this research that explain why violence increased over the allotted time period. First it is necessary to restate exactly what TCOs are because their nature distinguishes the Mexican conflict from other regional conflicts and wars. Although functionally Mexican TCOs are almost indistinguishable from insurgents and terrorists, their underlying motive is economical. They do not seek political power only autonomy to carry out their illicit and lucrative business. Their primary goals are then ultimately economical, relegating their political actions as merely a means to achieve profit-maximization. For instance, by justifying their execution and dismemberment of a rival cartel member to the general populace, they are attempting to gain legitimacy and control of the area while also sending a message to anyone who opposes them in order ease constraints on their activities and, therefore, lower risk and increase profit. Unlike insurgents who would have done this so that they could challenge the state and ultimately secede the state, TCOs are merely seeking autonomy from the state to carry out their illicit behaviour. That being said, it would be useful to analyze such organizations and compare them to terrorists and insurgents to employ best counter-narcotics practices. However, one must realize that they are not the same and, therefore, cannot be countered exactly the same way.

A number of external forces, outside the control of the actors during Calderón’s administration, created the conditions that allowed violence to be exacerbated. First, the geographical location of Mexico to the US makes Mexico prime real estate for the trafficking of narcotics into the US. Consumption trends in the US dictated drug-trafficking activities, such as the massive increase of marijuana consumption in the 1970s and 1980s or the large heroin market of Vietnam veterans. Furthermore, the geographic distance that Mexico is to the gigantic political and economic powerhouse of

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<sup>169</sup> Ibid., p. 164.

the US also constrains the options of Mexican lawmakers. Second, 70 years of PRI rule and their corrupt plaza system allowed drug trafficking to foster and grow to the powerful organizations they were at the beginning of Calderón's tenure. Third, democratization and economic liberalization over the course of the late 20<sup>th</sup> and beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century created a dynamic border, where people and goods travelled relatively freely and frequently while democratization completely destroyed any hope that the Plaza System and the relative peace it established would survive into the next century.

All these forces caused numerous Mexican administrations to begin to conduct ever more aggressive stances against the cartels, from killing or capturing HVTs to all-out military assaults on cartel territories. By the time Calderón entered office in December 2006, he was given limited options. Nonetheless, Calderón's War on Drugs, with an inadequate force unable to secure all public spaces and effectively combat all cartels at once, caused the various cartels to fragment and compete. These TCOs, operating like rational economic, profit-maximizing organizations, reacted by taking the opportunity to violently compete against rivals as well as when necessary against the government. Likewise, they diversified their economic activities to offset the risks and profits lost in competition against rivals and government actions, which also increased the level of violence in Mexico. The "market place of violence" allowed violence to be bought, sold, and bartered with as a product and as a service by members of Mexican society, deteriorating the security situation. The increasingly brutal tactics are a product of the increased competition between TCOs and pressure from the government. Brutality is used to invoke fear, as well as send messages to rivals, the government, and the people to stay out of their way. Through this increased violence, they hope their activities will become unencumbered by other actors increasing their own profits.

While the violence cannot be completely blamed on Calderón's heavy-handed counter-narcotics strategy, there is no doubt that his strategy exasperated the conflict, causing a severe increase in violence in Mexico. By effectively targeting HVTs and capos, TCOs fragmented and created more competition that increasingly meant violent turf wars, diversification into other violent economic activities, and competitive brutality. That being said, the Mexican government was limited in options and in capabilities. Had the Mexican police been less corrupt, better equipped, and more

competent, Calderón may have been able to maintain a more acceptable level of public security, leading to a more durable and lasting security, the second component of the fragment and control strategy. Even with major police reform and the extensive deployment of military personnel, public security was not maintained. The opportunistic HVT strategy maintained the government's credibility as a neutral enforcer of the law, but with inadequate forces they were not able to effectively combat all TCOs equally. Consequently, the strategy simply fragmented some cartels temporarily, weakening them while their rivals continued to strengthen, and all the while the public became victim to the violent competition. Given the level of violence and the limited capabilities of the government, perhaps the Mexican government should selectively target TCOs that are especially brutal in order to deter them from using such tactics. If TCOs are indeed rational economic actors, then as pressure mounts and costs rise for those TCOs that are particularly violent, they should adopt less violent tactics in order to offset the risks. Nevertheless, President Nieto's continued reliance on the Mexican military and the broad HVT strategy speaks volumes to the conditions in Mexico as well as the means available. It is believed that there are, as of 2017, as many as 20 major TCOs operating in Mexico and, not surprisingly, violence has not subsided. This problem is not going away anytime soon. According to Alejandro Hope, there have been significant changes in US narcotics consumption that most likely had an impact on TCO's activities. For instance, Hope highlights how the gradual reduction in cocaine consumption in recent years may have decreased TCO's overall revenues.<sup>170</sup> However, Mexican TCOs most likely have taken on a larger share of the methamphetamine market and heroin production and trafficking. One last significant trend is that marijuana consumption in the US has increased significantly, but has coincided with legalization measures that may also have reduced TCOs revenues from that market.<sup>171</sup> Nevertheless, these consumption trends may only indicate a forthcoming more competitive market that could increase violence and diversification. Consequently, Mexico should prepare for the worst and look at new counter narcotics approaches.

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<sup>170</sup> Hope, "Plus Ça Change," p. 11.

<sup>171</sup> Ibid., pp. 3-4.



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