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Mexico Is Not Colombia

Alternative Historical Analogies for Responding to the
Challenge of Violent Drug-Trafficking Organizations

Christopher Paul, Colin P. Clarke, Chad C. Serena



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Preface

The full scope and details of the challenges posed by Mexico's violent drug-trafficking organizations are not well understood, and optimal strategies to combat these organizations have not been identified. The associated security challenges are not confined to Mexico; indeed, many are rooted in (or have spilled over into) neighboring countries, including the United States. Scholars often compare these security challenges with those faced by Colombia, but there are vocal critics of this approach. If Mexico is not like Colombia, what is it like? Clearly, there are historical security challenges (and corresponding resolutions) that are germane to contemporary Mexico. To answer the question posed above, it is important to evaluate the historical record, identify the correct comparisons, and make the correct inferences based on those comparisons. This study sought to make better historical comparisons with Mexico by identifying cases of "resource" insurgency (those in which insurgents do not seek to control the government but simply to eliminate state interference with their exploitation of resources), cases of warlordism or ungoverned territories, and cases of efforts to combat organized crime.

This report offers an overview of the study's methodology, including case selection and the analytic framework that guided the research. It also summarizes the primary findings from the comparison of the cases and puts forward several recommendations that Mexico's government could pursue in an effort to address and resolve its current security challenges. The full case studies are available in a companion report, *Mexico Is Not Colombia: Alternative Historical Analogies for*

Responding to the Challenge of Violent Drug-Trafficking Organizations—Supporting Case Studies, RR-548/2, available at http://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR548z2.html.

Readers of this series may also be interested in the related RAND report *The Challenge of Violent Drug-Trafficking Organizations: An Assessment of Mexican Security Based on Existing RAND Research on Urban Unrest, Insurgency, and Defense-Sector Reform*, by Christopher Paul, Agnes Gereben Schaefer, and Colin P. Clarke, MG-1125-OSD, 2011.

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Summary

Drug-related violence has become a very serious problem in Mexico. Violent drug-trafficking organizations (VDTOs) produce, transship, and deliver tens of billions of dollars' worth of narcotics into the United States annually. The activities of VDTOs are not confined to drug trafficking; they extend to numerous other criminal enterprises, including human trafficking, weapon trafficking, kidnapping, money laundering, extortion, bribery, and racketeering. Then, there is the violence: Recent incidents have included assassinations of politicians and judges; attacks on rival organizations, associated civilians (i.e., the families of members of competing groups or of government officials), and the police and other security forces; and seemingly random violence against innocent bystanders.

The full scope and details of the threat posed by VDTOs are not well understood, and optimal strategies to combat these organizations have not been identified. Furthermore, the associated security challenges are not confined to Mexico. Many are rooted in (or have spilled over into) neighboring countries, including the United States. Scholars often compare these security challenges with those faced by Colombia, but there are vocal critics of this approach. As indicated by the title of this report, we agree that Mexico is not Colombia. While certain characteristics of the Colombian case do provide useful lessons for Mexico, the historical record shows that security challenges (and their resolutions) from other times and places are also germane to contemporary Mexico and should not be overlooked. To more thoroughly and accurately examine the current security situation in Mexico, it is important

to evaluate this historical record, identify the correct comparisons, and make the correct inferences based on those comparisons. This is what we seek to do here.

The following key questions guided this research:

- What classes or categories of conflicts have characteristics in common with contemporary Mexican security challenges and thus might be good comparisons by being “like” Mexico?
- Which individual cases within those categories might be *instructive* comparisons?
- What specific challenges characterized those comparative cases, and which of those challenges does Mexico face?
- To what extent were those challenges resolved in the historical cases, and which of those solutions could provide useful lessons for Mexico?
- Ultimately, what can a range of different historical cases tell us about the prospects for and approaches to resolving Mexico’s security challenges?

Approach

Our principal approach to answering these questions involved conducting a series of historical case studies and comparing the challenges they faced (and the solutions they found) to the security situation in Mexico. This report, the first of two volumes, summarizes the 11 case studies—one of which is the Mexico case itself and one of which is Colombia—and assesses the extent to which Colombia is a good analogy for Mexico. We also evaluate the relative merits of the alternative comparisons. As this report explains, we chose the remaining nine cases carefully to maximize our prospects for finding reasonably informative alternative comparisons. A companion report, *Mexico Is Not Colombia: Alternative Historical Analogies for Responding to the Challenge of Violent Drug-Trafficking Organizations—Supporting Case*

Studies, RR-548/2, presents the detailed case studies that supported this assessment.¹

Finding the Right Comparisons

Policy is routinely informed by historical analogy, and policymakers regularly seek to learn the lessons of history. In commenting on the misuse of history, Ernest May concludes that policymakers frequently do not “pause to analyze the case, test its fitness, or even ask in what ways it might be misleading.” He continues, “Seeing a trend running toward the present, they tend to assume that it will continue into the future, not stopping to consider what produced it or why a linear projection might prove to be mistaken.”² In this context, the challenge is to identify the correct comparisons. If the violence that haunts Mexico is similar to the conflict that the Colombian government stared down, then Plan Colombia may indeed be a reasonable blueprint for dealing with Mexican VDTOs. However, if these two cases are qualitatively different (as we believe they are), then they would require at least partially different solutions. What, then, are the correct comparisons? What are the correct characterizations of the challenges posed by Mexico’s VDTOs, and which historical cases have the most in common with these contemporary challenges and can thus best inform an evaluation of Mexico’s policy options?

Colombia is often offered as an analog for Mexico, but it has also been derided as an inappropriate comparison.³ While Colombia cer-

¹ See Christopher Paul, Colin P. Clarke, and Chad C. Serena, *Mexico Is Not Colombia: Alternative Historical Analogies for Responding to the Challenge of Violent Drug-Trafficking Organizations—Supporting Case Studies*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-548/2, 2014.

² Ernest May, *“Lessons” of the Past: The Use and Misuse of History in American Foreign Policy*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1973, p. xi.

³ On Colombia as an analog for Mexico, see, for example, June S. Beittel, *Mexico’s Drug Trafficking Organizations: Source and Scope of the Rising Violence*, Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, January 7, 2011; Ted Galen Carpenter, *Mexico Is Becoming the New Colombia*, Washington, D.C.: Cato Institute, Foreign Policy Briefing No. 87, November 15, 2005; Vanda Felbab-Brown, *The Violent Drug Market in Mexico and Lessons from Colombia*, Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, Foreign Policy Paper No. 12, March 2009; Elyssa Pachico, “A Few Lessons from Colombia for Mexico,” *Colombia Reports*,

tainly faced a challenge from VDTOs, both the circumstances and the threat differed from contemporary Mexico in several important ways: the nature of the perpetrators, territory, geography, targets, and tactics; the character of the violence; and the state's ability to respond. For these reasons, we join critics in rejecting Colombia, by itself, as the most instructive analogy for Mexico.

Previous RAND research on Mexican security suggested four categories of cases with possible comparability or relevance to Mexico's struggle against VDTOs: cases of warlordism, cases of ungoverned territories, earnest efforts to combat organized crime, and "resource" insurgencies.⁴

Resource insurgencies are cases in which insurgents do not seek to win control of the state or establish their own government but simply to eliminate state interference with their exploitation of natural resources (such as diamonds, drugs, or timber). Cases of warlordism and ungoverned territories are similar to resource insurgencies, but in these instances the state does not sufficiently combat the rejection of its authority to earn the case the *insurgency* label. Whether or not they have become something more, Mexican VDTOs are certainly an instance of organized crime, so previous efforts to combat organized crime might provide fruitful analogies. Specifically, when governments

May 24, 2010; and Rory Carroll, "Hillary Clinton: Mexican Drugs War Is Colombia-Style Insurgency," *The Guardian*, September 9, 2010.

Disagreement with this comparison can be found in, for example, Paul Rexton Kan and Phil Williams, "Afterword: Criminal Violence in Mexico—A Dissenting Analysis," *Small Wars and Insurgencies*, Vol. 21, No. 1, March 2010; Renee G. Scherlen, "The 'Colombianization' of Mexico? The Evolving Mexican Drug War," paper presented at the Southern Political Science Association Conference, New Orleans, La., January 7–10, 2009; Ken Ellingwood, "Why Mexico Is Not the New Colombia When It Comes to Drug Cartels," *Los Angeles Times*, September 25, 2010; Kenneth Michel, *Mexico and the Cocaine Epidemic: The New Colombia or a New Problem?* thesis, Monterey, Calif.: Naval Postgraduate School, December 2010; Oxford Analytica, "Mexico/Colombia: Organized Crime Lessons Mislead," January 20, 2011; and "Mexico Drug War Not Comparable to Colombia: Obama," Reuters, September 10, 2010.

⁴ Christopher Paul, Agnes Gereben Schaefer, and Colin P. Clarke, *The Challenge of Violent Drug-Trafficking Organizations: An Assessment of Mexican Security Based on Existing RAND Research on Urban Unrest, Insurgency, and Defense-Sector Reform*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, MG-1125-OSD, 2011.

have actively opposed organized crime in other places and times, what has proven effective, and what pitfalls have been encountered?

By examining selected cases of warlordism, ungoverned spaces, resource insurgencies, and efforts to combat organized crime, we can identify which cases are genuinely analogous to contemporary Mexico (and in what respects) and which approaches to meeting these security challenges have proven successful or unsuccessful.

Case Selection

Figure S.1 outlines the case selection process that we used to identify the ten comparative cases. (See Chapter Three for a more detailed explanation of the process.) Table S.1 lists the ten selected cases.

Analytic Framework

Although all the cases have elements in common with Mexico and individually offer cautions, advice, or lessons for future Mexican security efforts, broad comparison remains somewhat tricky. We selected cases that fell into the four common categories mentioned earlier (warlord-

Figure S.1
Case Selection Process

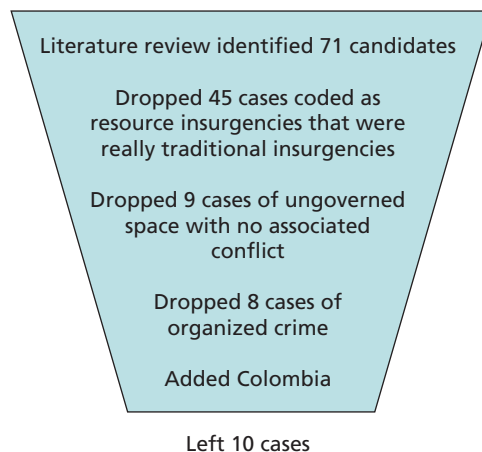


Table S.1
Cases Selected for Comparison with Mexico

Case	Years
Colombia	1994–2010
Peru	1980–1992
The Balkans	1991–2010
West Africa	1990–2010
The Caucasus	1990–2012
Somalia	1991–2010
Angola	1992–2010
Burma	1988–2012
Tajikistan	1992–2008
Afghanistan	2001–2013

ism, ungoverned spaces, resource insurgencies, and organized crime), but the detailed case studies—presented in the companion volume—revealed a wide range of challenges and solutions. Thus, there is no simple way to take the combination of efforts that “solved Colombia” and compare them with the efforts that “solved the Balkans,” then extrapolate a recipe for success in Mexico. However, with a little extra nuance and complexity we were able to compare how similar challenges were addressed more or less effectively across the historical cases and, where Mexico faces those same challenges, infer which solutions might work (or are more or less feasible than others).

Table S.2 lists ten challenges (A–J) that appeared in many of the historical cases. Mexico faces eight of these challenges. The columns in Table S.2 represent the historical cases (with Mexico in the last column), while the rows of the table are paired. The upper row of each pair shows the extent of the challenge at the peak of the conflict, and the lower row shows the extent of improvement or progress toward addressing the challenge at the end of the case-study period, usually the end of the conflict. So, for example, the uppermost and leftmost cells of the table indicate that Colombia suffered from high levels of violence

(challenge A) to a moderate extent (yellow shading) at the peak of the conflict there, but violence improved moderately (↑) by 2010.

Table S.2 also summarizes the comparative core of the analyses presented here, showing which historical cases faced which challenges (and the extent of those challenges) in common with Mexico—and against which of those challenges each government made progress or failed to make progress—allowing us to thoughtfully identify instructive points of comparison.

Results and Conclusions

Mexico Is Not Colombia, Nor Is It Any of the Other Cases




Through this research, we sought to identify the best possible comparative cases to use to make analogies to Mexico. We began with the observation that Mexico is not particularly analogous to Colombia, even though Colombia is the most frequently invoked comparison case. However, we are forced to conclude that none of the other cases we examined are much more analogous, and some are notably less so. *That said, all the cases, including Colombia, share some important contextual commonalities and challenges with Mexico and thus provide useful lessons.* The trick, then, is to isolate the aspects that provide the best opportunities for comparison and remain mindful of the differences. While there is not a single premium analogous case for Mexico, we identified several cases that should compete with Colombia as partial analogies in future policy discussions: Peru, the Balkans, West Africa, and the Caucasus.⁵ The remaining cases are much less analogous to Mexico but still provide lessons in discrete areas, even if their primary value is in serving as negative examples.

⁵ Our Balkans case study focuses primarily on Bosnia but also includes Kosovo and Croatia. Similarly, our West Africa case study is centered on Sierra Leone but also addresses Liberia, and our Caucasus case study uses Georgia (South Caucasus) and Chechnya (North Caucasus) as representative cases. We opted to compile these country cases to capture the regional effects of the security challenge and overlap among the conflicts there. The companion volume presents our detailed case studies (see Paul, Clarke, and Serena, 2014).

Table S.2
Challenges Faced and Improvement in the Historical Cases

Challenge	Colombia	Peru	The Balkans	West Africa	The Caucasus	Somalia	Angola	Burma	Tajikistan	Afghanistan	Mexico
A. High violence											
Progress toward resolving violence	↑	↑↑	↑↑	↑	↑	↑	↑↑	↑		↑	
B. Anomic violence or mayhem/ indiscriminate violence											
Progress toward resolving anomic violence			↑↑↑	↑		↑	↑				
C. Insurgency/competition for state control											
Progress toward defeating insurgency/securing state control	↑↑	↑↑	↑↑↑		↑		↑↑↑	↑			
D. Ethnically motivated violence											
Extent to which ethnic tensions were reduced			↑	↑				↑			
E. Lack of economic opportunities											
Extent to which economic opportunities improved	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑		↑↑	↑			
F. High level of weapon availability											
Extent to which weapon availability was reduced			↑	↑			↑				
G. Competition over a resource (e.g., drugs, diamonds)											
Extent to which competition ended or resource was secured				↑			↑↑	↑			
H. Ungoverned spaces											
Progress toward extending control in formerly ungoverned spaces	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑		↑	↑			
I. State/institutional weakness											
Extent to which state or institutions were strengthened	↑	↑	↑				↑		↑		
J. Patronage/corruption											
Extent to which patronage/ corruption was reduced/controlled	↑	↓	↑	↑	↑						

How to interpret Table S.2:

Level of violence		Level of improvement	
	Low or tolerable	↑	Moderate improvement
	Moderate	↑↑	Significant improvement
	High	↑↑↑	Massive improvement/complete resolution
		↓	Worsened

Lessons Highlighted in the Case Narratives

Each case study, regardless of whether it proved to be a particularly good comparison case for Mexico, offered some useful lessons, even if only as an example of what can happen if challenges like those faced by Mexico are allowed to run unchecked. Here, we summarize those lessons, with supporting cases listed in parentheses:

- Reform and improvement take time. (Colombia, the Balkans, Somalia, and Tajikistan)
- External supporters can really help. (Colombia, the Balkans, and West Africa)
- Improving governance and government capability can help address multiple challenges. (Colombia, West Africa, the Caucasus, and Afghanistan)
- Unity of effort among law enforcement and military forces is important. (Peru)
- Reducing ungoverned spaces by extending control and governance can help address multiple challenges. (Peru, the Caucasus, and Afghanistan)
- Improving social services and changing the economic opportunity structure can help decrease violence. (The Caucasus and Angola)
- Empowering locals can contribute positively to security. (Peru)
- Police reform can help reduce violence and support improved governance. (The Balkans and Somalia)
- Effective efforts to fight organized crime balance both prevention and repression. (The Balkans)

- Prioritizing the most dangerous and violent organizations can help reduce violence. (West Africa)
- Co-optation of drug-trafficking organizations can work, but it can also have less attractive overall outcomes. (Burma)
- Corruption and poor economic conditions can exacerbate other challenges. (All cases)

Factors Correlated with Improvement in the Historical Cases

As part of the cross-case comparative analysis, we coded a number of factors related to strategies or efforts that were undertaken to mitigate challenges in the historical cases. We then examined the correlation between the presence of those efforts and progress toward resolving the selected challenges for cases in which a given challenge was present. Although the number of cases involved is small enough that we do not report specific correlation coefficients, Table S.3 does indicate where we found a strong correlation between earnest efforts in an area and improvement toward resolving one of the challenges.⁶ Shaded cells indicate strong correlations.

However, correlation is not causation. In many of these relationships, especially given the frequency with which individual challenges are correlated with multiple areas of effort, correlations could be spurious, with the relationship depending on some third factor. To hedge against this possibility and get closer to causation, we sought to use the narratives to confirm these relationships. For each relationship, we used the case narrative to test the sequence of the relationship (that is, to confirm that the purported cause did, in fact, come chronologically

⁶ We coded many other factors that did *not* yield a correlation and thus are not reported in the table. Noteworthy in this regard are drug crop eradication efforts and specific strategies for dealing with an adversary (e.g., organizational decapitation efforts, focusing on groups one at a time, focusing on all groups simultaneously). This is not to suggest that those factors were not important in individual cases (indeed, the detailed case narratives suggest that some of these factors are important); they were not consistently correlated with improvement across the cases facing the challenges addressed in this study.

Table S.3
Efforts Consistently Correlated with Improvement in the Historical Cases

Effort Correlated with Improvement	Challenge							
	B	C	E	F	G	H	I	J
State-/institution-building or reform								
Focus on law enforcement, judicial reform								
Military professionalization								
Strengthening the economy/ increasing economic opportunities								
Decreasing negative opportunities								
Counterinsurgency								
Extending control over sovereign territory								
Extending firm control over a contentious commodity								
Mobilizing public outrage								
Combating corruption								
External intervention/peacekeepers								

NOTE: Challenge A is omitted from the table because progress toward resolving violence was an indirect result of challenges B, C, and D. See Table S.2 for descriptions of the challenges.

before the improvement in the challenge area). We then identified the extent to which the relationship contributed to the narrative explanation of the case, validating its presence as part of a plausible causal argument. Table S.4 presents the results of this validation exercise.

As anticipated, several of the correlations observed proved to be spurious correlations in one or more of the cases, lagging improvement in one or more challenge areas rather than preceding it. Others, while present as correlations, were judged not to be important contributors to

the resolution of challenges in a significant number of cases. Table S.4 shows only those efforts that were confirmed as important contributors to improvement in the listed challenge areas in multiple cases. Efforts highlighted with dark green shading were validated as strong contributors to improvement in the referenced challenge areas in almost every case in which they were present.

Table S.4
Efforts That Contributed to Improvement in the Historical Cases

Efforts That Contributed to Improvement	Challenge							
	B	C	E	F	G	H	I	J
State-/institution-building or reform								
Focus on law enforcement, judicial reform								
Military professionalization								
Strengthening the economy/ increasing economic opportunities								
Decreasing negative opportunities								
Counterinsurgency								
Extending control over sovereign territory								
Extending firm control over a contentious commodity								
Mobilizing public outrage								
Combating corruption								
External intervention/peacekeepers								

NOTE: Light green shading indicates that the effort was validated as contributing to improvement in some case studies. Dark green shading indicates that the effort was strongly validated as contributing to improvement in multiple case studies. Challenge A is omitted from the table because progress toward resolving violence was an indirect result of challenges B, C, and D. See Table S.2 for descriptions of the challenges.

Recommendations

Collectively, the historical narratives, the comparative analysis, consideration of the Mexican case in its own context, and a review of existing proposals and suggestions for Mexico in light of the lessons gleaned from the historical cases point to the following broad recommendations for Mexico's government to consider in its efforts to address the country's current security challenges:

- Focus efforts on the most violent of the VDTOs by both disincentivizing violence and removing the worst offenders.
- Engage in government institution-building and reform, with specific focus on
 - law enforcement and judicial reform
 - extending control over (and government services to) all sovereign Mexican territory.
- Engage in proactive counterviolence efforts, including anti-*mara* (anti-gang) laws and alternative opportunities for current and potential members (e.g., education, training, employment).
- Investigate ways to better leverage public outrage, vet and selectively support citizen militias, and push law-enforcement reform to the local level to enable legitimate community policing.
- Measure and evaluate the state's ability to control the use of force, enforce political decisions within sovereign territory, and repel attacks against security forces.
- Increase policymakers' willingness to accept international support, especially from the United States.

Note that we are not the first to make these recommendations. However, the fact that our empirical research echoes them is a strong endorsement indeed.

Acknowledgments

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RAND administrative assistant Maria Falvo managed the copious citations in this report and the companion case-study volume and played a critical role in refining the presentation and formatting. We also thank production editor Matt Byrd, research editor Lauren Skrabala, and artist Mary Wrazen, who ushered the reports to their final form. Errors and omissions remain the responsibility of the authors alone.

Abbreviations

AFO	Arellano-Felix Organization
CFO	Vicente Carrillo Fuentes Organization
DTO	drug-trafficking organization
GDP	gross domestic product
NAFTA	North American Free Trade Agreement
PRI	Partido Revolucionario Institucional [Institutional Revolutionary Party]
SEDENA	Secretaría de la Defensa Nacional [Secretary of National Defense]
VDTO	violent drug-trafficking organization

Introduction

Drug-related violence has become a very serious problem in Mexico. Violent drug-trafficking organizations (VDTOs) produce, transship, and deliver into the United States tens of billions of dollars' worth of narcotics annually. The activities of VDTOs are not confined to drug trafficking; they extend to numerous other criminal enterprises, including human trafficking, weapon trafficking, kidnapping, money laundering, extortion, bribery, and racketeering. Then, there is the violence: Recent incidents have included assassinations of politicians and judges; attacks on rival organizations, associated civilians (i.e., the families of members of competing groups or of government officials), and the police and other security forces; and seemingly random violence against innocent bystanders. Mexican VDTOs now conduct car bombings, further elevating the threat to U.S. agents, facilities, and interests throughout Mexico.¹

The full scope and details of the threat posed by VDTOs are not well understood, and optimal strategies to combat these organizations have not been identified. Furthermore, the associated security challenges are not confined to Mexico. Many are rooted in (or have spilled over into) neighboring countries, including the United States. Scholars often compare these security challenges with those faced by Colombia, but there are vocal critics of the assumption that these two cases are analogous. As the analysis in this report makes clear, we agree that Mexico is not Colombia. Although the two countries share some

¹ Robert J. Bunker and John P. Sullivan, *Cartel Car Bombings in Mexico*, Carlisle, Pa.: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, August 2013, p. iii.

important contextual commonalities, including cultural and historical similarities, there are also many key differences, particularly as they relate to a range of such factors as adversarial group resources and motivation, targets of violence, the nature and extent of the violence, and the countries' governance and legitimacy, along with several related subfactors. While certain characteristics of the Colombian case do provide useful lessons for Mexico, the historical record shows that security challenges (and their resolutions) from other times and places are also germane to contemporary Mexico and should not be overlooked. To more thoroughly and accurately examine the current security situation in Mexico, it is important to evaluate this historical record, identify the correct comparisons, and make the correct inferences based on those comparisons. This is what we seek to do here.

The following key questions guided this research:

- What classes or categories of conflicts have characteristics in common with contemporary Mexican security challenges and thus might be good comparisons by being “like” Mexico?
- Which individual cases within those categories might be *instructive* comparisons?
- What specific challenges characterized those comparative cases, and which of those challenges does Mexico face?
- To what extent were those challenges resolved in the historical cases, and which of those solutions could provide useful lessons for Mexico?
- Ultimately, what can a range of different historical cases tell us about the prospects for and approaches to resolving Mexico's security challenges?

Approach

Our principal approach to answering these questions involved conducting a series of historical case studies and assessing their relevance to the security situation in Mexico. The key to success with this type of research is to identify and make the *right* comparisons—that is, to find

cases (or characteristics of cases) that are sufficiently analogous to provide useful and applicable lessons. This report summarizes our findings from ten case studies, in addition to Mexico. As indicated by the title of this report, we reject the oft-repeated maxim that Mexico is Colombia—that it is the most appropriate comparison case. Thus, we use Colombia as the exemplar case with which we compare Mexico and, by extension, our other cases as well. We chose the other nine cases carefully to maximize our prospects for finding reasonably informative alternative comparisons. A companion report, *Mexico Is Not Colombia: Alternative Historical Analogies for Responding to the Challenge of Violent Drug-Trafficking Organizations—Supporting Case Studies*, RR-548/2, presents the detailed case studies that supported this assessment.²

Finding the Right Comparisons

Policy is routinely informed by historical analogy, and policymakers regularly seek to learn the lessons of history. In this context, the challenge is to identify the correct comparisons. If the violence that haunts Mexico is similar to the conflict that the Colombian government stared down, then Plan Colombia may indeed be a reasonable blueprint for dealing with Mexican VDTOs. However, if these two cases are qualitatively different (as we believe they are), then they would require at least partially different solutions. What, then, are the correct comparisons? What are the correct characterizations of the challenges posed by Mexico's VDTOs, and which historical cases have the most in common with these contemporary challenges and can best inform an evaluation of Mexico's policy options?

Colombia is often offered as an analog for Mexico, but it has also been derided as an inappropriate comparison.³ While Colombia cer-

² See Christopher Paul, Colin P. Clarke, and Chad C. Serena, *Mexico Is Not Colombia: Alternative Historical Analogies for Responding to the Challenge of Violent Drug-Trafficking Organizations—Supporting Case Studies*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-548/2, 2014.

³ On Colombia as an analog for Mexico, see, for example, June S. Beittel, *Mexico's Drug Trafficking Organizations: Source and Scope of the Rising Violence*, Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, January 7, 2011; Ted Galen Carpenter, *Mexico Is Becoming the New Colombia*, Washington, D.C.: Cato Institute, Foreign Policy Briefing No. 87, Novem-

tainly faced a challenge from VDTOs, both the circumstances and the threat differed from contemporary Mexico in several important ways: the nature of the perpetrators, territory, geography, targets, and tactics; the character of the violence; and the state's ability to respond. For these reasons, we believe that no single analogy—including Colombia—can serve as an adequate model for Mexico.

Our earlier research on Mexican security suggested four categories of cases with possible comparability or relevance to Mexico's struggle against VDTOs: cases of warlordism, cases of ungoverned territories, earnest efforts to combat organized crime, and "resource" insurgencies.⁴

Resource insurgencies are cases in which insurgents do not seek to win control of the state or establish their own government but simply to eliminate state interference with their exploitation of natural resources (such as diamonds, drugs, or timber). A struggle over resources is just one of many elements that have defined conflicts in Angola, Burma, Lebanon, Liberia, Nigeria, Peru, Sierra Leone, Tajikistan, and elsewhere.

ber 15, 2005; Vanda Felbab-Brown, *The Violent Drug Market in Mexico and Lessons from Colombia*, Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, Foreign Policy Paper No. 12, March 2009; Elyssa Pachico, "A Few Lessons from Colombia for Mexico," *Colombia Reports*, May 24, 2010; and Rory Carroll, "Hillary Clinton: Mexican Drugs War Is Colombia-Style Insurgency," *The Guardian*, September 9, 2010.

Disagreement with this comparison can be found in, for example, Paul Rexton Kan and Phil Williams, "Afterword: Criminal Violence in Mexico—A Dissenting Analysis," *Small Wars and Insurgencies*, Vol. 21, No. 1, March 2010; Renee G. Scherlen, "The 'Colombianization' of Mexico? The Evolving Mexican Drug War," paper presented at the Southern Political Science Association Conference, New Orleans, La., January 7–10, 2009; Ken Ellingwood, "Why Mexico Is Not the New Colombia When It Comes to Drug Cartels," *Los Angeles Times*, September 25, 2010; Kenneth Michel, *Mexico and the Cocaine Epidemic: The New Colombia or a New Problem?* thesis, Monterey, Calif.: Naval Postgraduate School, December 2010; Oxford Analytica, "Mexico/Colombia: Organized Crime Lessons Mislaid," January 20, 2011; and "Mexico Drug War Not Comparable to Colombia: Obama," Reuters, September 10, 2010.

⁴ Christopher Paul, Agnes Gereben Schaefer, and Colin P. Clarke, *The Challenge of Violent Drug-Trafficking Organizations: An Assessment of Mexican Security Based on Existing RAND Research on Urban Unrest, Insurgency, and Defense-Sector Reform*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, MG-1125-OSD, 2011.

Cases of warlordism or ungoverned territories are similar to resource insurgencies, but in these instances the state does not sufficiently combat the rejection of its authority to earn the case the *insurgency* label. Warlordism has occurred in conflicts in Afghanistan, Angola, Burma, Kampuchea, Chad, Chechnya, Colombia, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Georgia, Kurdistan, Lebanon, Liberia, Mozambique, Peru, the Philippines, Sierra Leone, Somalia, Tajikistan, and Serbia. Examples of cases of ungoverned spaces include the Pakistan-Afghanistan border region, the Fergana Valley in Central Asia, parts of Yemen, the Sulawesi-Mindanao Arc in Southeast Asia, the East Africa corridor from Sudan and the Horn of Africa to Mozambique and Zimbabwe, West Africa, the North Caucasus, the Colombia-Venezuela border, and the Guatemala-Chiapas, Mexico, border. Ungoverned spaces can become *alternatively* governed spaces when criminal gangs or warlords “govern” the territory.

Whether or not they have become something more, Mexican VDTOs are certainly an instance of organized crime, so efforts to combat organized crime might provide fruitful analogies. When governments have actively opposed organized crime, to one degree or another, in other places and times, what has proven effective, and what pitfalls have been encountered? Governments have fought organized crime in Sicily, Russia and Ukraine, Colombia, Turkey, Albania, Bulgaria, Romania, Brazil, Thailand, Tanzania, and elsewhere.

By examining selected cases of warlordism, ungoverned spaces, resource insurgencies, and efforts to combat organized crime, we were able to identify cases and characteristics of cases that are genuinely analogous to contemporary Mexico, as well as which approaches to meeting these security challenges have proven successful or unsuccessful. The process by which we selected the cases is described in Chapter Three.

Labeling the Perpetrators and the Implications Thereof

One of the challenges in analyzing the violence in Mexico is defining the problem. Too many of the terms that could be used to characterize the problem or label the perpetrators, prior to any analysis, presuppose what the problem is and what the outcome of the analysis should be.

For example, several scholars have suggested that the security situation in Mexico can be characterized as a form of insurgency.⁵ Secretary of State Hillary Clinton referred to the drug violence in Mexico as an insurgency in an address on September 8, 2010, likening contemporary Mexico to the Colombia of 20 years ago.⁶ Others (including the Mexican government) have attacked the notion of labeling the drug violence as insurgency, suggesting it is not an appropriate characterization or that it makes for inappropriate analogies.⁷

Characterizing the problem as an insurgency also presupposes a range of possible solutions. This same problem appears when seeking a label to apply to the perpetrators of the violence in Mexico, with the chosen label betraying certain assumptions about the nature of these organizations or the best way to combat them. A variety of different labels have been applied, including “cartels,” “narcos,” “narco-insurgents,” and “criminal insurgents.”⁸ The default in academic and policy discussions seems to be “drug-trafficking organizations,” abbreviated DTOs. All these labels, including “DTOs,” have potential problems in their inaccuracy, insufficiency, or presupposing which solutions might be appropriate. For example, *cartels* is inaccurate.⁹ These organizations do not, in fact, collude to set prices, and to the extent that they do, that is far from their most salient characteristic. Any label that

⁵ See, for example, John P. Sullivan and Adam Elkus, “Plazas for Profit: Mexico’s Criminal Insurgency,” *Small Wars Journal*, April 26, 2009, and Bob Killebrew and Jennifer Bernal, *Crime Wars: Gangs, Cartels and U.S. National Security*, Washington, D.C.: Center for a New American Security, September 2010.

⁶ Quoted in Adam Entous and Nathan Hodge, “U.S. Sees Heightened Threat in Mexico,” *Wall Street Journal*, September 10, 2010.

⁷ See, for example, E. Eduardo Castillo, “Mexico Decries U.S. Official’s Reference to ‘Form of Insurgency’ by Drug Gangs,” *Washington Post*, February 10, 2011, and Kan and Williams, 2010.

⁸ “Narcoinsurgency” in Entous and Hodge, 2010; “criminal insurgency” in Sullivan and Elkus, 2009.

⁹ Naylor correctly defines a cartel as “a conspiracy in restraint of trade, an illegal clique to restrict quantity, divide up the market, and push up prices.” See R. Thomas Naylor, *Wages of Crime: Black Markets, Illegal Finance, and the Underworld Economy*, Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2004, p. 27.

includes *insurgency* may or may not be accurate, depending on how one defines insurgency; but, accurate or not, it presupposes the approaches that will be most appropriate to resolve the problem (one or more of the approaches to counterinsurgency). Similarly, a label that highlights the criminal aspect of the problem (e.g., “organized crime” or “criminal organizations”) while correctly describing much of the enterprise (the vast majority of these groups’ sustaining activities are illegal) presupposes the solution: Crime is fought by law enforcement. *Narcos* and *DTOs* are better terms in that they are accurate (they point to both the drug-trafficking activities of these organizations and the fact that they are organized) and do not presuppose who should bear responsibility for opposing them (as insurgency and crime characterizations do). However, both these terms are insufficient in scope. They do not capture the wider range of these organizations’ activities, including drug cultivation and production, bribery, kidnapping, other forms of trafficking, and other criminal pursuits. The most glaring omission is an explicit mention of *violence*. Elsewhere in the world (and in different historical periods in Mexico) the presence of DTOs has been linked to dramatically lower levels of overall violence, with isolated incidents being much more parsimonious and discriminating.¹⁰

Because we want to be as accurate as possible and provide a useful framework for the discussion of the problem without presupposing the answer, we use *violent drug-trafficking organizations* (VDTOs). This label recognizes that the primary (though certainly not the only) undertaking of these organizations is drug trafficking, that they are organized, and that a significant and salient part of the problem they cause is the violence they perpetrate. Occasionally, we use *drug-trafficking organization* (DTO) as a more generic category, especially when referring to less violent instances of such organizations in other countries or in Mexico’s past.

¹⁰ Consider, for example, the Yakuza involved in the methamphetamine trade in Japan (see H. Richard Friman, “Drug Markets and the Selective Use of Violence,” *Crime, Law, and Social Change*, Vol. 52, No. 3, September 2009), the Burmese opium trade in the 1990s, and drug trafficking in Mexico prior to the mid-1990s (see Richard Snyder and Angelica Duran-Martinez, “Does Illegality Breed Violence? Drug Trafficking and State-Sponsored Protection Rackets,” *Crime, Law, and Social Change*, Vol. 52, No. 3, September 2009).

Regardless of label, the truth is that Mexico's drug traffickers are now the best connected and efficient worldwide. Their network is expanding, and their contacts are multiplying. From Sao Paulo to Chicago, the influence of Mexican VDTOs can be seen throughout the hemisphere and beyond. As Moisés Naím concludes,

The diffusion of the drug business into the fiber of local and global economic life is much harder to fathom, let alone combat. Its political implications are ominous. Yet, more than any cartel, kingpin, or rebel warlord, it is this pervasive global mainstreaming of the business that the fight against drugs is up against today.¹¹

Benefits of This Approach

Mexico's government lacks a clear and comprehensive understanding of the threat and associated challenges. While the government has put forward a strategy for combating the VDTOs, there is significant uncertainty about its prospects for effectiveness. The U.S. government remains unsure how best to help Mexico, what to encourage Mexican officials to do (or to prioritize), and how best to combat contributing and related challenges from within U.S. borders.

Without improved understanding and insights from a range of appropriate historical cases, policymakers in both the United States and Mexico who seek to contribute to the resolution of these challenges will continue to lack good foundation for their decisionmaking and will likely employ underdeveloped theories based on poor or questionably applicable analogies, such as to Colombia or Iraq.

This report offers the following refinements to the scholarly understanding of Mexico's security challenges, which should support improvements in related policy- and decisionmaking:

- better characterization and understanding of the current Mexican security situation and the nature of the threat

¹¹ Moisés Naím, *Illicit: How Smugglers, Traffickers, and Copycats Are Hijacking the Global Economy*, New York: Anchor Books, 2005, p. 67.

- alternative comparison cases and a structure for identifying appropriate comparisons
- clear matching between successful strategies in historical contexts and how they relate to the Mexican context.

Organization of This Report

Chapter Two presents our index case, Mexico, describing the challenges and providing context. It also addresses the range of competing explanations for Mexico's security situation, setting up the comparative analysis that follows. Chapter Three describes how we chose the comparative cases. Chapter Four is the core analytic chapter, identifying ten challenges that characterized the historical cases and indicating which are shared by Mexico and which were resolved (and to what extent) in the historical cases. Chapter Five presents our conclusions and recommendations. The detailed case studies are available in the companion report, *Mexico Is Not Colombia: Alternative Historical Analogies for Responding to the Challenge of Violent Drug-Trafficking Organizations—Supporting Case Studies*, RR-548/2.¹²

¹² Paul, Clarke, and Serena, 2014.

Contemporary Violence and the Broader Context in Mexico

This chapter describes the Mexico case, the index case in this overall analysis. Note that while this report puts forward alternative perspectives on policy prospects for Mexico and is thus clearly about Mexico, it is at least as much—if not more—about the comparison cases. In some sense, Mexico is just one of the 11 cases treated in this report. Others have studied Mexico in its own context in much greater detail and at much greater length. Here, we draw from that excellent and extensive body of scholarship and summarize key points that are critical for comparative purposes.

Two Mexicos

There is much that is puzzling about Mexico's current situation. Mexico today seems extremely, and even paradoxically, disjointed. How can a democracy be so rife with institutionalized corruption? How can the world's 14th largest economy be home to such remarkable inequality? How can a government with such an extensive, functioning bureaucracy be discussed using the language of state failure? How can a country with a 93.5-percent adult literacy rate have such massive informal and illicit economies? Why does a country that has not fought a war since the Mexican Revolution ended in 1920 have such high levels of general weapon availability? How can a country with such high national health care standards have such an antiquated and moribund justice and prison system? Is the same country home to both beautiful

beaches filled with tourists and border towns with levels of violence comparable to Iraq and Afghanistan at the height of their insurgencies?

Yet, all of these descriptions are accurate. These and other disconnects add to the challenge of understanding the violence in Mexico and identifying solutions. Mexico is, in some respects, a highly developed and sophisticated country, but it is also backward or downright dangerous. The incongruities sometimes follow geographic divides (urban/rural, core/periphery, one state, but not the next) and sometimes coexist throughout the country. Positive and negative features can and do exist side by side. We note this by way of caveat: While the discussion here often focuses on weaknesses, failures, and shortcomings, that is because our overall emphasis is on a major security challenge and its comorbidities; we remain aware that Mexico has as many strong points as it does weaknesses. There are two Mexicos—a strong Mexico and a weak Mexico. Most of the challenges stem from the latter but also affect the former.

Conflict and Violence in Mexico

The attention-grabbing feature of the contemporary Mexican security context is the violence. Levels of violence observed in Mexico are comparable with those seen in war-torn countries—countries that have hosted civil wars, significant insurgencies, or murderous ethnic cleansing. Mexico has none of these conflicts, yet is experiencing severe violence. It has other problems that are commonly associated with a certain degree of violence: organized crime and drug trafficking. However, organized crime and the drug trade have flourished (and continue to flourish) elsewhere—including in Mexico itself in the past—with much more modest attendant violence than the extreme levels observed today. Were levels of violence more on par with those in other countries with drug-trafficking and organized crime problems, it would be much less of a concern in Mexico. But violence is much higher and hence a significant concern.

This section details the extent and character of the violence in Mexico. It also reviews some of the explanations offered on the ori-

gins of the country's concerning and distinctive degree of violence and describes past and ongoing efforts to improve the situation.

As noted, the scale of violence in Mexico is more characteristic of a country at war. In December 2010, Mexican Attorney General Arturo Chávez announced that more than 30,000 people had been killed in drug violence in Mexico since President Felipe Calderón took office in December 2006.¹ To put that into context, during the same four-year period approximately 43,000 civilians (not that many more) were killed in Iraq, a country in the later stages of a significant insurgency.² By the end of the Calderón presidency in 2012, estimated fatalities in violence related to drug trafficking continued to climb, with one scholar reporting 53,000 such deaths and a combination of Mexican media sources estimating the total of roughly 60,000.³ Preliminary data for 2013 suggest that an average of 1,572 people per month have been murdered since Enrique Peña Nieto took office, an average of 52 people per day and down only slightly from the estimated average of 56 people per day who were killed during Calderón's presidency.⁴ David Shirk notes the difficulty of making such calculations, pointing out that estimates will vary depending on how one distinguishes "trafficking-related" deaths from more routine crime and murder, as well as how one resolves methodological challenges associated with measurement.⁵ He suggests that official Mexican government estimates of 47,000 homicides connected with the VDTOs between 2006 and 2012 are likely a

¹ "Mexico's Drug War: Number of Dead Passes 30,000," BBC News, December 16, 2010.

² Iraq Body Count Project, *Documented Civilian Deaths from Violence*, data as of March 22, 2011.

³ Paul Rexton Kan, *Cartels at War: Mexico's Drug-Fueled Violence and the Threat to U.S. National Security*, Dulles, Va.: Potomac Books, 2012, p. vii, and Nick Miroff and William Booth, "Mexico's Drug War Is at a Stalemate as Calderon's Presidency Ends," *Washington Post*, November 27, 2012, respectively.

⁴ Molly Molloy, "The Mexican Undead: Toward a New History of the 'Drug War' Killing Fields," *Small Wars Journal*, August 21, 2013.

⁵ For more on the challenges associated with measurement, see Kelly M. Greenhill, "Counting the Cost: The Politics of Numbers in Armed Conflict," in Peter Andreas and Kelly M. Greenhill, eds., *Sex, Drugs, and Body Counts: The Politics of Numbers in Global Crime and Conflict*, Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2010.

lower bound, given media reports of 53,000 VDTO-related homicides for the same period, adding that the Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía report of 120,000 murders of all kinds over that period is certainly larger than the number of trafficking-related deaths, however defined.⁶ Persons missing but presumed dead are not included in any of these figures and would inflate any of them by an unknown amount.

Not only is this violence deadly, it is gruesome. “In one especially grim gauge of the mayhem, Mexican prosecutors revealed . . . that more than 1,300 people were beheaded in the country between 2007 and 2011.”⁷ It is also somewhat indiscriminate. Estimates suggest that about 7 percent of those fatalities were suffered by Mexican security forces, with the remaining victims being members of the VDTOs, individuals associated with those organizations, and innocent civilians.⁸ The challenge, of course, is distinguishing those latter two categories. While the gun-toting *sicarios* (assassins) are clearly part of the VDTOs, where does one draw the line to bound those “associated” with these organizations? The accountants who launder their money? The mules who smuggle the drugs? The farmers who do the cultivation? The street-corner pushers who sell the drugs? The children who serve as lookouts? The users? The families of any of these individuals? All these groups are, in some sense, “associated” with the VDTOs. So, when we are told that most of the killing occurs between VDTOs and is primarily (though certainly not exclusively) confined to those “associated” with these organizations, the level of criminality and guilt of the victims is not as clear-cut as the label implies.

Of course, the violence extends beyond the VDTOs and their affiliates, however broadly defined. In addition to fighting back against security forces, there have been targeted killings of off-duty military and police personnel (and, sometimes, their families). Dozens of city mayors, numerous police chiefs, and even a gubernatorial candidate

⁶ David A. Shirk, “The Drug War in Mexico: U.S.-Mexico Security Challenges in 2013 and Beyond,” briefing, San Diego, Calif.: Trans-Border Institute, Joan B. Kroc School of Peace Studies, University of San Diego, undated, slide 4.

⁷ Miroff and Booth, 2012.

⁸ Beittel, 2011.

have been assassinated.⁹ Journalists are also targeted, and to such an extent that, by the end of 2006, Reporters Sans Frontières ranked Mexico as second only to Iraq in terms of its danger to reporters.¹⁰

Then, there is the capricious, inexplicable violence: “The massacres of young people and migrants” and “the use of torture.”¹¹ There is also the case in which VDTO hitmen broke into a party expecting to find members of a rival organization, realized that it was the wrong apartment, but shot everyone there anyway. At another party in January 2013, VDTO members kidnapped 18 musicians from the band that was playing at the party; only one escaped, while the other 17 were shot and thrown down a well.¹² Among Mexican citizens, there is greater concern about personal insecurity than ever before.¹³ “La Inseguridad,” as Mexicans call it, includes kidnapping, torture, murder, robbery, and other forms of violence, as well as “simple fear of leaving the house.” It has surpassed all other public concerns, including drug trafficking and drug use.¹⁴ The violence is a near constant, with Mexican newspapers routinely publishing “la nota roja” (police blotter) with daily doses of gory photographs.¹⁵ Violence itself has become a cottage industry in Mexico.

While the violence is considerable and nearly constant, it is predominantly restricted to a few cities in a few Mexican states . . . except when it is not so constrained. Several scholars have noted that the violence is predominantly confined to border cities in border states (such

⁹ Beittel, 2011.

¹⁰ Reporters Sans Frontières, “Vera Cruz Crime Reporter Becomes Seventh Journalist Murdered This Year in Mexico, Making It Second-Most Dangerous Country for Press, After Iraq,” November 22, 2006.

¹¹ Beittel, 2011, p. i.

¹² Nick Miroff, “A Quieter Drug War in Mexico, but No Less Deadly,” *Washington Post*, February 1, 2013.

¹³ Agnes Gereben Schaefer, Benjamin Bahney, and K. Jack Riley, *Security in Mexico: Implications for U.S. Policy Options*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, MG-876-RC, 2009.

¹⁴ William Finnegan, “Silver or Lead,” *The New Yorker*, Vol. 86, No. 15, May 31, 2010.

¹⁵ Finnegan, 2010.

as Juarez in Chihuahua, Culiacan in Sinaloa, and Tijuana in Baja California), along a few other select interior areas that host traditional “plazas,” or drug-smuggling routes.¹⁶ Estimates suggest that roughly 80 percent of homicides occur in just 162 municipalities out of a total of 2,456 countrywide.¹⁷ Although this violence is focused in a few border cities, that focus is not exclusive. As a 2011 Congressional Research Service report noted,

Drug trafficking-related violence in Mexico has been brutal, and, in an apparent contradiction, both widespread and concentrated in relatively few municipalities. The violence, while highly concentrated along drug trafficking routes and in a small percentage of Mexican municipalities, has spread to almost every state and flared in the northern border states.¹⁸

Most of the violence has been concentrated in specific cities in border and transit areas, but it sometimes appears in other parts of the country (the other 20 percent), and it sometimes *moves*. On several occasions over the past six years, the violence spread to new parts of the country, following the changing alliances and rivalries of the various VDTOs.¹⁹ Most recently, this shift has occurred in the long-time tourist haven of Acapulco. Another such example was the 2010 explosion of violence in the wealthy industrial city of Monterrey when the Gulf Cartel and Los Zetas, the two major VDTOs in the area, began a turf war.²⁰ According to Sylvia Longmire,

If there is anything constant in Mexico’s drug war, it’s change. Cities that were thriving hubs of industry, education, and per-

¹⁶ See Kan and Williams, 2010, and Phil Williams, *Mexican Organized Crime and Violence: A Comparative Perspective*, forthcoming.

¹⁷ Sigrid Arzt, “Security Challenges for the Mexican State,” briefing, Pittsburgh, Pa.: University of Pittsburgh, September 2010, slide 25.

¹⁸ Beittel, 2011, p. 12.

¹⁹ Beittel, 2011.

²⁰ David Luhnow, “Elite Flee Drug War in Mexico’s No. 3 City,” *Wall Street Journal*, September 11, 2010a.

sonal wealth are now laden with crime scenes and the frequent sound of gunfire. Other cities where citizens dared not venture outside after dark are rebounding and seeing more tourists than ever before.²¹

Explaining the Outbreak of Violence

If the origins of the extreme levels of violence were both agreed upon and well understood, then presumably efforts to end the violence would have been more focused and more successful. Unfortunately, the origins of the violence are not well understood. As journalist Charles Bowden recounts in his 2010 book on the violence in Juarez,

I am sitting with a Juárez lawyer at a party, and he explains that there has been a failure of analysis. He tells me criminology will not explain what is happening, nor will sociology. He pauses and then says that we must study demonology.

Some blame the violence on a war between cartels, some blame poverty, some blame the army, some blame the army's fighting the cartels, some blame local street gangs, some blame drugs, some blame wages, some blame corrupt government.

But regardless of the blame, no one can figure out who controls the violence, and no one can imagine how the violence can be stopped.

But everyone grows numb. Murders slip off the front page and become part of the ordinary noise of life.²²

Many possible explanations for the violence have been offered; there is a slightly different hypothesis in almost every recent book or article about Mexico. In what follows, we categorize and synthesize many of these theses. Those that we address have face validity and

²¹ Sylvia Longmire, "Guadalajara: The Next Epicenter of Violence in Mexico?" *Small Wars Journal*, August 29, 2012a.

²² Charles Bowden, *Murder City: Ciudad Juárez and the Global Economy's New Killing Fields*, New York: Nation Books, 2010, p. 234.

are at least plausible. Most important for our purposes, many of these same explanations have been offered for the violence that occurred in the comparison cases. Whichever explanations prove to be correct—or most convincing—relative to the historical cases could offer insights for how to (or how not to) deal with such violence.

Insurgency or Criminal Insurgency

As discussed in Chapter One, several scholars and observers have explained the contemporary security situation in Mexico (and the attendant violence) as an “insurgency” or “criminal insurgency.”²³ This view suggests that violence in Mexico is at levels more characteristic of a civil war because what Mexico faces *is* a civil war, or something akin to it. Traditionally, an insurgency seeks to take over the state; the nuance in the “criminal insurgency” characterization is that insurgents fight to free themselves from the influence of the state without much interest in actually controlling it.

Of course, such characterizations are hotly contested. Not only do they have political consequences in Mexico and the United States,²⁴ but, as noted in Chapter One, how we define a problem guides how we think about it and seek to solve it.

In Paul Rexton Kan’s rejection of efforts to apply the insurgency label, he offers three compelling observations.²⁵ First, he notes that the characterization of the situation in Mexico as a form of insurgency inappropriately focuses attention on the violence directed against the state, missing the fact that the vast majority of the violence occurs *within* and

²³ For examples of those applying the “insurgency” label, see Hillary Clinton, transcript of speech to Council on Foreign Relations, Washington, D.C., September 8, 2010; Robert Haddick, “This Week at War: If Mexico Is at War, Does America Have to Win It?” *Foreign Policy*, September 10, 2010; Finnegan, 2010; and Entous and Hodge, 2010. For those employing “criminal insurgency,” see John P. Sullivan, and Adam Elkus, “Cartel v. Cartel: Mexico’s Criminal Insurgency,” *Small Wars Journal*, February 19, 2010; Robert J. Bunker and John P. Sullivan, “Cartel Evolution Revisited: Third Phase Cartel Potentials and Alternative Futures in Mexico,” *Small Wars and Insurgencies*, Vol. 21, No. 1, March 2010; Killebrew and Bernal, 2010; an Christopher Martinez, “Transnational Criminal Organizations: Mexico’s Commercial Insurgency,” *Military Review*, September–October 2012.

²⁴ Entous and Hodge, 2010.

²⁵ Kan, 2012.

between the VDTOs. For this reason, these arguments miss much of what is distinctive about the Mexican case. Second, he argues that calling the violence in Mexico an insurgency suggests that the appropriate responses be drawn from the realm of counterinsurgency rather than counternarcotics or law enforcement, and that this would be a mistake. Third, and in the same vein, he notes that the kind of transitional and postconflict incentives (the elements of the disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration process, such as an amnesty) are not the kinds of incentives that VDTO members will find compelling.

Competition and Other Market Forces

Many observers suggest that competition between the different DTOs has led to the violence. They cite a number of factors that have increased the intensity of that competition, leading to a corresponding increase in the intensity of the violence that accompanies this (sometimes literally) cutthroat competition.²⁶ Some characterize this extreme competition with special terms, such as “hypercompetitive market” or “high-intensity crime.”²⁷ The length of the supply lines, the scale of the profits, the number of competing groups, and the intensity of that competition combine to form a crucible that forges traditional or simple criminal organizations into more dangerous (and more violent) ones.²⁸

Here, we summarize the variety of factors hypothesized to contribute to increasing competition:

- market share increases due to the breakup of the Colombian cartels²⁹

²⁶ For examples of those invoking competition as part of their explanation for violence in Mexico, see Alfonso Reyes, “Plan Mexico? Towards an Integrated Approach in the War on Drugs,” *Small Wars Journal*, September 14, 2010; Williams, forthcoming; Kan, 2012; Beittel, 2011; and Vanda Felbab-Brown, *Peña Nieto’s Piñata: The Promise and Pitfalls of Mexico’s New Security Policy Against Organized Crime*, Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, February 2013.

²⁷ “Hypercompetitive market” is from Kan, 2012; “high-intensity crime” is from John Mueller, *The Remnants of War*, Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2004.

²⁸ Ivan Briscoe, “Lockdown in Vienna: The UN’s Drug Summit,” OpenDemocracy.net, March 23, 2009.

²⁹ Schaefer, Bahney, and Riley, 2009.

- market share increases due to a reduction in cocaine traffic through Florida, which shunted traffic to Mexico³⁰
- market share increases due to increased domestic drug use in Mexico³¹
- competition within organizations due to the capture or killing of leaders³²
- competition between VDTOs when law-enforcement pressure or other market forces cause them to splinter³³
- the long supply chain for cocaine, stretching from the Andes to cities of the United States, and the needed investment in sophisticated arsenals and intelligence technology to reduce risk exposure in the face of competition³⁴
- the signing of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), removing tariffs on trade and investment among Mexico, the United States, and Canada, increasing the flow of licit goods but also inadvertently doing the same for illicit goods³⁵
- Mexico's location as an obvious transit corridor between the world's largest producer of illicit drugs (Colombia) and the world's largest consumer of illicit drugs (the United States)³⁶
- The end of government collusion with the DTOs with the end of single-party rule in Mexico in 2000.³⁷

³⁰ Schaefer, Bahney, and Riley, 2009.

³¹ Schaefer, Bahney, and Riley, 2009. See also Kan, 2012.

³² Schaefer, Bahney, and Riley, 2009.

³³ Eduardo Guerrero, "Mexico's Challenges: Lessons in the War Against Organized Crime (2007–2011)," *ReVista: Harvard Review of Latin America*, Vol. 11, No. 2, Winter 2012.

³⁴ Kan, 2012.

³⁵ Kan, 2012.

³⁶ Carlos Nash Licona, "The Merida Initiative and Mexico's Legislative and Constitutional Reforms," *Small Wars Journal*, June 12, 2012. See also Sylvia Longmire, *Cartel: The Coming Invasion of Mexico's Drug Wars*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011.

³⁷ See Reyes, 2010; Williams, forthcoming; Finnegan, 2010; Guillermo Vázquez del Mercado Almada, "Five Ps for a Violence Reduction Strategy in Mexico, Part I," *Small Wars Journal*, March 5, 2012a; and George W. Grayson, *Mexico: Narco-Violence and Failed State?* New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Publishers, 2011.

Opportunity Structure

Clearly related to competition and market forces is the opportunity structure in Mexico, as well as the role it plays in driving Mexicans to join or associate with the VDTOs. Mexico suffers from significant economic inequality and high un- and underemployment. The VDTOs offer an attractive alternative.³⁸ Even simple domestic drug dealers earn more than five times what a construction worker (or a police officer) might.³⁹ This perverse opportunity structure is not confined to the cities. Growing unemployment, state budget cuts, and decreasing remittances to Mexico from expatriated migrants further increase the incentives for rural dwellers to participate in the drug trade, too.⁴⁰

For those willing to engage in criminal violence, the sky is the limit. “Amid the poverty in Mexico, the ability to earn a living as well as the opportunity to be viewed as a person of status are powerful enough incentives to join and stay in a cartel or gang,” says Kan.⁴¹ This is a Hobbesian world in which violence is met with violence, force with force. Part of this opportunity structure is the presence of a surplus of experts in violence.⁴² Many former soldiers (from Mexico and neighboring countries) and police are lured to the VDTOs by comparatively high wages and a lack of other employment opportunities. Coupled with the competition between organizations documented earlier in this section, the number of experts in violence employed by the VDTOs and the level of violence in which they engage become a bit more explicable.

A Byproduct of Fighting the Flow of Drugs

Another common observation is that the violence in Mexico stems in large part from the government’s efforts to combat the VDTOs. The general argument is simple: When the VDTOs are attacked, they fight back, and violence escalates. This argument certainly has face valid-

³⁸ Williams, forthcoming.

³⁹ Reyes, 2010.

⁴⁰ Killebrew and Bernal, 2010.

⁴¹ Kan, 2012, p. 30.

⁴² Kan and Williams, 2010.

ity. The same observation has been made about violence levels in Iraq: Where one side (the insurgents or the government) clearly controlled an area, violence was low.⁴³ Paradoxically, when counterinsurgent forces entered an area seeking to restore it to government control, the territory became contested, and violence rose considerably during that period. Violence only subsided when the government firmly established control of the area, resolving the matter. This created a situation whereby violence in an area the government sought to reclaim followed a pattern over time that looked like an inverted “U,” rising as the government entered and the area became contested, peaking as the insurgents further contested this extension of government authority, and then declining as the insurgents were killed, captured, or driven into hiding or to other areas of the country. Following exactly this logic, some have asserted that the increased violence in Mexico was a necessary and unavoidable byproduct of taking on the DTOs, or even a hallmark of success in that venture.⁴⁴ This logic equates to the things-have-to-get-worse-before-they-get-better school of thought.

Some make a more specific argument, asserting that it is not just the aggressive attacks on the narcos but the Calderón administration’s “high-value targeting, lack of prioritization, and lack of operational clarity” that led to the escalating violence.⁴⁵ Another form of this “violence begets violence” logic is the notion of vacancy chains. With each loss in a VDTO due to death or arrest, a vacancy is created within the organization, and that vacancy that will be filled almost immediately, in part because of the overall opportunity structure. That process can bring with it an increase in violence as competition to fill the vacancy can, itself, be violent or as those who are most accomplished in violence make stronger claims to superior positions.⁴⁶

⁴³ Eric M. Tope, “Counterinsurgency Lessons for Mexico’s Drug War: Interpreting Spasms of Violence,” *Small Wars Journal*, August 3, 2013.

⁴⁴ Guerrero, 2012.

⁴⁵ Felbab-Brown, 2013, p. 2

⁴⁶ Alex Stevens and Dave Bewley-Taylor, with Pablo Dreyfus, *Drug Markets and Urban Violence: Can Tackling One Reduce the Other?* Oxford, UK: Beckley Foundation Drug Policy Programme, Report No. 15, January 2009. See also H. Richard Friman, “Forging the

Anomie

While much of the violence stems from competition, and is a logical (following a perverted logic) and instrumental response to competitive pressures or pressure from law enforcement, some of the violence is neither logical nor instrumental: It is nothing but gruesome and troubling. In his book *Murder City*, journalist Charles Bowden tells the story of a year of violence in Juarez, Mexico. He recounts that he went to Juarez seeking answers, seeking understanding, and his failure to find a wholly satisfying explanation for the depravity he witnessed left him (understandably) troubled. To describe and begin to explain this level and type of violence, Phil Williams invokes a term from the classic sociology of Emile Durkheim and Robert Merton: *anomie*.⁴⁷ This “anomic violence” is illustrative of an individual-level breakdown in social norms and values, when violence surpasses the strictly instrumental, with “an additional dimension of irrationality, when violence becomes a way of life with little purpose beyond the empowerment of those who engage in it and no real links to a rational business strategy.”⁴⁸ It is, essentially, violence for the sake of violence. Many scholars observe this layer of irrational and inexplicable violence among the broader violence in Mexico; the characterization of such violence as anomic seems appropriate to us, and we use the term ourselves throughout this report.

Factors That Do Not Directly Lead to the Violence but Contribute to Conditions That Support Other Explanations

There are several additional arguments to parse the challenges faced by Mexico other than violence. Many of these explanations are one or more steps removed from the violence but can be clearly connected as contributors to the context in which the violence occurs. To foster a holistic view of the overall security challenge, we list and discuss the factors argued to be broader contributors to Mexico’s troubles.

Vacancy Chain: Law Enforcement Efforts and Mobility in Criminal Economies,” *Crime, Law, and Social Change*, Vol. 41, No. 1, February 2004.

⁴⁷ Williams, forthcoming.

⁴⁸ Williams, forthcoming, p. 13.

Deeper Social Roots

A prominent argument in the literature is that deeper social roots, specifically poverty and inequality in Mexico, are key reasons for the growth in the drug trade and attendant violence. Logically, this is one step removed from the “opportunity structure” argument, as inequality and poverty underpin the opportunity structure that pulls people to the DTOs (and to the violence). If one accepts that the opportunity structure is a key contributor to the violence, then remediation may well involve addressing the deeper social roots.

An example of this argument in action is the assertion that NAFTA, in addition to its role in increasing competition among the VDTOs, exposed small-scale Mexican agricultural producers to competition with big U.S. agribusiness, leading to job loss in the countryside, and incentivizing small farmers to grow marijuana instead of corn.⁴⁹ So, those who stayed in rural areas were more likely to become drug producers, and those who left rural areas for the cities faced the opportunity structure there, where the most lucrative opportunities were also associated with the drug trade.

Vicious Cycle of Gangs

Also related to the argument about opportunity structure are factors stemming from the “vicious cycle of gangs.”⁵⁰ Figure 2.1 maps the logic of the vicious cycle, which does indeed worsen with each complete circuit. Briefly, a lack of opportunities increases incentives for gang membership and gang-related activities, which puts pressure on government anti-crime and private security resources, which reduces resources available for investment in basic services, which further degrades the opportunity structure.

The gangs, or *maras*, are intimately tied to the VDTOs, and sometimes actually integrated with the organizations. More often, they work as subcontractors of violence, enforcement, or distribution. There

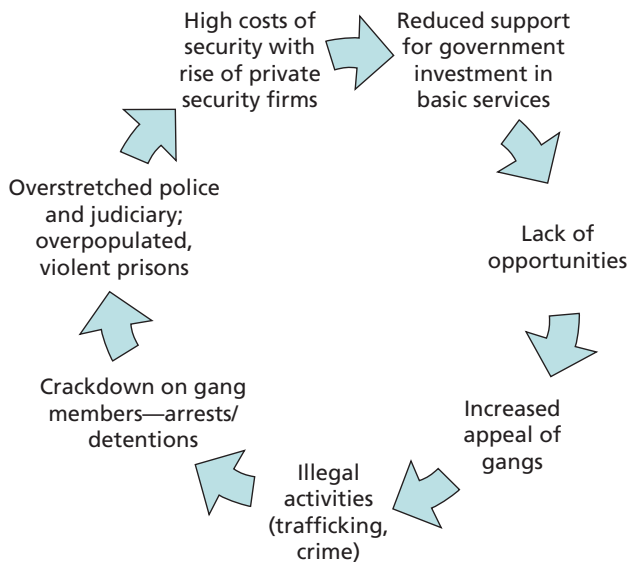
⁴⁹ Reyes, 2010.

⁵⁰ U.S. Agency for International Development, Bureau of Latin American and Caribbean Affairs, Office of Sustainable Regional Development, *Central America and Mexico Gang Assessment*, Washington, D.C., April 2006.

are at least five ways in which contemporary Central American street gangs threaten security:

- They strain governments' law-enforcement capacity.
- They challenge government legitimacy by calling into question the state's ability to provide security and basic services.
- They act as surrogate governments, extorting taxes and providing "protection" where they are allowed to do so.
- They dominate the informal economic sector, using violence and coercion to sustain enterprises that operate or support an unfair competitive advantage.
- They infiltrate police and other government entities in support of their other goals.⁵¹

Figure 2.1
The Vicious Cycle of Central American and Mexican Gangs



SOURCE: USAID, 2006, p. 10, Figure 1.

RAND RR548/1-2.1

⁵¹ Bunker and Sullivan, 2010.

State Failure

Another argument that has been used to explain Mexico's woes invokes the language of state failure. Most observers admit that Mexico is not a full-blown failed state. As RAND colleague Gregory Treverton notes, "Mexico is not a failed state in the sense of Somalia, but it has failed in two critical senses—legitimate authorities long ago lost both their monopoly over the use of force and their fiscal effectiveness, that is, their capacity to tax citizens enough so the state can function."⁵² Those that invoke failed-state language use it either to describe a hyperbolic threat of a possible future outcome or to call out the corruption, penetration, or capture of parts of the government or the general inefficiency or weakness of state institutions.⁵³ Some likely use it to raise the issue in importance on an already daunting foreign and security policy agenda.

The fact that this argument is made at all lends support to the "two Mexicos" thesis that we advanced at the beginning of this chapter. Mexico has a robust government bureaucracy that provides a wide range of services. Some of that bureaucracy is ineffective, and there are aspects of governance that are not being effectively executed or are not being effectively executed in significant swaths of the country.

Ungoverned Space

A final and related factor asserted as an enabler of violence in Mexico is ungoverned space. Ungoverned spaces are associated with a host of problems, including dominance by criminal organizations, transnational illicit smuggling, and the potential for a criminal/terrorist nexus;

⁵² Gregory F. Treverton, *Making Policy in the Shadow of the Future*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, OP-298-RC, 2010, p. 34.

⁵³ On Mexico's potential to become a failed state, see Joel Kurtzman, "Mexico's Instability Is a Real Problem: Don't Discount the Possibility of a Failed State Next Door," *Wall Street Journal*, January 16, 2009. On failures of governance in Mexico, see Luz E. Nagle, "Corruption of Politicians, Law Enforcement, and the Judiciary in Mexico and Complicity Across the Border," *Small Wars and Insurgencies*, Vol. 21, No. 1, March 2010; Finnegan, 2010; Robert J. Bunker, "Strategic Threat: Narcos and Narcotics Overview," *Small Wars and Insurgencies*, Vol. 21, No. 1, 2010a; and Grayson, 2011.

they also serve as breeding grounds for insecurity.⁵⁴ Ungoverned spaces can easily become *alternatively* governed spaces where criminal gangs or warlords impose their own order.⁵⁵ Where the law does not apply, illegal acts, including violence, are not meaningfully illegal.

Final Observations About the Causes and Contributors to Violence in Mexico

As we noted at the beginning of this section, all the explanations presented here are plausible and have at least face validity when it comes to identifying sources of the violence in Mexico, and most offer reasonably compelling arguments in context. While we lack sufficient evidence to be certain, we favor a multicausal view in which many of the factors described here have collectively caused and contribute to the ongoing violence in Mexico. All the listed enablers discussed in the context of our historical case studies are currently present in Mexico, and it is likely that some combination of pressures have spawned and maintained the violence there: Competition/market forces, the opportunity structure, and the way violence begets violence all interact to sustain violence in Mexico.

⁵⁴ Bartosz H. Stanislawski, "Transnational 'Bads' in the Globalized World: The Case of Transnational Organized Crime," *Public Integrity*, Vol. 6, No. 2, Spring 2004; Bartosz H. Stanislawski, ed., "'Para-States, Quasi-States, and Black Spots: Perhaps Not States, but Not 'Ungoverned Territories,' Either," *International Studies Review*, Vol. 10, No. 2, June 2008. For more on ungoverned spaces, see Angel Rabasa, Steven Boraz, Peter Chalk, Kim Cragin, Theodore W. Karasik, Jennifer D. P. Moroney, Kevin A. O'Brien, and John E. Peters, *Ungoverned Territories: Understanding and Reducing Terrorism Risks*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, MG-561-AF, 2007, pp. 7–12; Robert D. Lamb, *Ungoverned Areas and Threats from Safe Havens*, College Park, Md.: Ungoverned Areas Project, Center for International and Security Studies, University of Maryland, 2008; and Anne L. Clunan and Harold A. Trinkunas, eds., *Ungoverned Spaces: Alternatives to State Authority in Era of Softened Sovereignty*, Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2010b.

⁵⁵ Douglas Farah, *Transnational Organized Crime, Terrorism, and Criminalized States in Latin America: An Emerging Tier-One National Security Priority*, Carlisle, Pa.: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, August 2012; John P. Sullivan, "Criminal Insurgency in the Americas," *Small Wars Journal*, February 13, 2010.

The Violent Drug-Trafficking Organizations

There is a considerable volume of scholarship on individual VDTOs, their areas of influence, their criminal activities, their past and current leaders, their operations, and their specific depravities. This section provides a very brief introduction to the major organizations and the range of criminal enterprises in which they are involved.

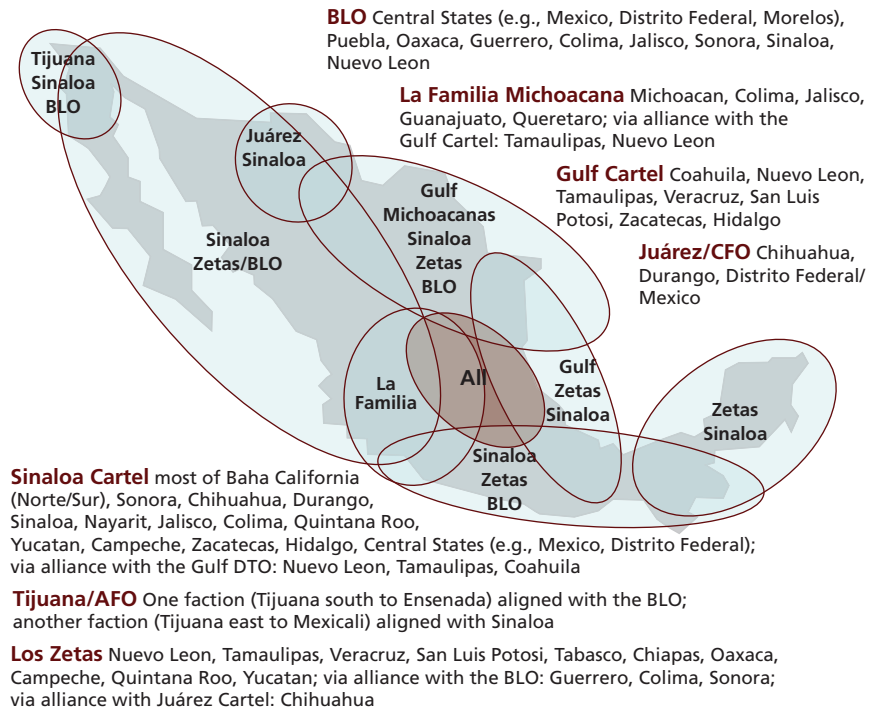
In the 1980s and early 1990s, there were important changes in the drug trade with consequences for the rise of Mexico's VDTOs. Most importantly, U.S. law-enforcement agencies thwarted the efforts of Colombian cocaine traffickers to transport their product into the United States via the Caribbean. As a result, Colombian traffickers increasingly subcontracted their cocaine trafficking to Mexican VDTOs and, eventually, these organizations took over and asserted exclusive authority over cocaine trafficking routes into the United States. According to a U.S. government source, more than 95 percent of cocaine destined for the U.S. market transits through Mexico.⁵⁶ Today, Mexico is both a major transit country for cocaine and a major supplier of heroin, marijuana, and methamphetamine to the United States.

When President Calderón was inaugurated in December 2006, there were four dominant DTOs: the Tijuana/Arellano-Felix Organization (AFO), the Sinaloa Cartel, the Juárez/Vicente Carrillo Fuentes Organization (CFO), and the Gulf Cartel. However, the constellation of such organizations in Mexico has changed as these larger, well-known, well-established players have broken into atomized units and new configurations. Currently, seven such organizations are dominant in Mexico: Sinaloa, Tijuana/AFO, Juárez/CFO, Beltrán Leyva Organization (BLO), Los Zetas,⁵⁷ Gulf Cartel, and La Familia Michoacana.⁵⁸ These groups are waging an increasingly violent turf war over key trafficking routes and *plazas*, ports of entry, and territory (see Figure 2.2).

⁵⁶ Statistic cited in James O. Fickenaue and Jay Albanese, "Transnational Organized Crime in North America," in Jay Albanese and Philip Reichel, eds., *Transnational Organized Crime: An Overview from Six Continents*, London: Sage Publications, 2014, pp. 44–45.

⁵⁷ The Los Zetas, former Mexican paramilitary members who were previously the Gulf Cartel's enforcers, have split off and formed a separate DTO, turning against the Gulf Cartel.

⁵⁸ Beittel, 2011.

Figure 2.2**Major Mexican Drug-Trafficking Organizations and Their Areas of Influence**

SOURCE: Adapted from U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration map, in Beittel, 2011, p. 7.

RAND RR548/1-2.2

Range of Enterprises

Eduardo Guerrero-Gutiérrez characterizes the DTOs, or “cartels” as he refers to them, into four categories:⁵⁹

1. national organizations (Sinaloa Cartel, Los Zetas and Gulf Cartel)
2. toll collector organizations (Tijuana and Juárez)

⁵⁹ Eduardo Guerrero-Gutiérrez, “Security, Drugs, and Violence in Mexico: A Survey,” paper presented at the 7th North American Forum, Washington, D.C., 2011, p. 10.

3. regional organizations (Los Caballeros Templarios [Knights Templar] and Cártel del Pacífico Sur [South Pacific Cartel])
4. local organizations (the remainder).

All four categories are involved in the drug trade and all employ violence, but the categories reflect their different scopes and scales.

Not only are all the major VDTOs polydrug enterprises (cultivating, producing, distributing, and transshipping multiple drugs), but they also engage in human trafficking, music and film piracy, money laundering, theft, and black-market resale.⁶⁰ These groups' violent activities go beyond efforts to defend their drug businesses and to interfere with the traffic of other organizations, extending to kidnapping, assassination, torture, extortion, casual murder, and "heinous acts intended to instill fear, promote corruption, and undermine democratic governance by undercutting confidence in government."⁶¹ Finally, some VDTOs (La Familia, in particular) engage in perverse forms of criminal governance, offering social services, infrastructure protection, or justice of a sort to establish patron-client relations and win the support of the population in a locale.⁶²

While Mexico has traditionally been a transshipment country, in recent years it has emerged as a prominent source of both methamphetamine and opiates. In 2008, Mexico generated 105 metric tons of black tar heroin and 38 metric tons of pure heroin. In 2009, Mexican poppy cultivation was thought to have been somewhere around 15,000 hectares.⁶³ The increase in the production of narcotics in Mexico has forced the country's government to reevaluate its counterdrug policy to include a greater emphasis on such strategies as crop eradication and crop substitution.

⁶⁰ John P. Sullivan, "Counter-Supply and Counter-Violence Approaches to Narcotics Trafficking," *Small Wars and Insurgencies*, Vol. 21, No. 1, March 2010.

⁶¹ Gordon James Knowles, "Threat Analysis: Organized Crime and Narco-Terrorism in Northern Mexico," *Military Review*, January–February 2008, p. 73.

⁶² Sullivan, 2010.

⁶³ Peter Chalk, *The Latin American Drug Trade: Scope, Dimensions, Impact, and Response*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, MG-1076-AF, 2011, pp. 13–14.

Efforts to Improve the Situation

With a number of plausible theses competing to explain the violence, and the reality likely being a complex combination of several (if not all) of these factors, what has been done? This section briefly documents some of the efforts undertaken during the Calderón administration, followed by some of the proposals and plans advanced by the (relatively new as of this writing) Peña Nieto administration.

Most of the efforts under Calderón—like those of the Vicente Fox administration from 2000 to 2006—came from or focused on the federal level.⁶⁴ These efforts have included the increased use of the Mexican armed forces in the drug fight, an increased reliance on and deployments of Federal Police, and efforts to reform the judiciary and otherwise manage corruption. The overall strategy has been characterized as an all-out assault on the VDTOs, seeking to confront and dismantle them by focusing on the capture or elimination of their leadership.⁶⁵ While these efforts have been fairly successful in eliminating VDTO leaders, they have not appreciably stemmed the violence or slowed the flow of drugs. When the leaders of these organizations are killed, captured, or cowed, new and often more violent leaders take control.

Use of the Armed Forces

Since the 1960s, the Mexican military has occasionally played a role in counterdrug operations. Historically, the locus of these efforts has been crop eradication. Under Calderón, this involvement was transformed and taken to new heights.⁶⁶ Less than halfway through his six-year term, the Mexican Army had deployed more than 46,000 troops in operations against the VDTOs.⁶⁷

Involving the military directly in the conflict brought several benefits. First, unlike the police, the military is much more likely to match if not overmatch the VDTOs in terms of firepower, combat training,

⁶⁴ Schaefer, Bahney, and Riley, 2009.

⁶⁵ Beittel, 2011.

⁶⁶ Schaefer, Bahney, and Riley, 2009.

⁶⁷ Reyes, 2010.

and tactics. Second, the Mexican military has traditionally been held in very high regard by the population, especially compared with local police forces. Third, the military has historically been isolated from the drug trade and the attendant taint of corruption, again unlike the police.⁶⁸

Despite these benefits, involving the armed forces has had a downside as well. Although the army usually overmatches the VDTOs, it is neither trained nor equipped for police work. “Soldiers are trained to pursue, capture, and kill—with little experience in urban settings.”⁶⁹ This mismatch resulted in widespread allegations of human rights violations, including “170 cases of torture, 39 ‘disappearances’ and 24 extrajudicial killings in five Mexican states” during the Calderón administration.⁷⁰ The army’s lack of investigative and other police skills has turned many of deployments into frightening occupations from the perspective of the average citizen, with Army roadblocks and indiscriminate firefights with the VDTOs an unwelcome hazard. According to William Finnegan, writing for *The New Yorker*, “Even in Juarez, the bloodiest drug battlefield in Mexico, residents have been calling for the Army’s withdrawal,” and the previously positive institutional reputation of the service has declined significantly.⁷¹ Finally, continuous involvement in the fight against the VDTOs has increased the exposure of the military to the influence of corruption, with many more military personnel “on the take” than ever before.⁷²

Increased Reliance on Federal Police

In addition to deploying the military in direct confrontation with the VDTOs, Calderón ordered more frequent deployments of federal

⁶⁸ Grayson, 2011.

⁶⁹ 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*, Carlisle, Pa.: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, January 2013, p. xi.

⁷⁰ Anne-Marie O’Connor and William Booth, “Torture Surges in Mexico’s Drug War, Rights Group Says,” *Washington Post*, November 9, 2013.

⁷¹ Finnegan, 2010.

⁷² Grayson, 2013.

police, sometimes jointly with the army.⁷³ Federal police units are far less likely to have been penetrated or corrupted by the VDTOs than are the local or state police, but they lack local and state police forces' familiarity with the populations and active organizations in particular areas of the country.

Short-term surges of federal police and military forces to areas where the VDTOs have overwhelmed the local police have resulted in temporary reductions in violence in those areas.⁷⁴ Such deployments have also driven drug-trafficking activities (and related competition and violence) to other locales, in a traditional response to localized security measures called "squeezing the balloon."⁷⁵

Institutional Reform and Fighting Corruption

Corruption has been a long-standing challenge in Mexico. While corruption went largely unaddressed prior to 2000, there were several efforts to change that pattern under the Fox administration. In reaction to corruption in that era's federal judicial police force, Fox dissolved the old organization and created a new one in 2001.⁷⁶ This was just one blow in an ongoing struggle against police corruption at all levels—federal, state, and local—as discussed later in this chapter. The past decade has seen a continuous stream of corruption allegations, investigations, and dismissals at all levels. Corruption is worst at the lowest levels, among the local police, for whom pay is low, equipment and training are minimal, and the threat of harm due to refusing bribes is constant and personal. But corruption is not confined to the local level. In June 2007, Calderón purged 284 federal police commanders, including the commanders of all 31 states and the federal district.⁷⁷

⁷³ Grayson, 2011.

⁷⁴ Reyes, 2010.

⁷⁵ For those unfamiliar with the expression, when one squeezes a balloon (applying pressure in a single area), the overall volume of the balloon remains the same; it just bulges in another area—like the transfer of criminal activity to another locale.

⁷⁶ Schaefer, Bahney, and Riley, 2009.

⁷⁷ Colleen W. Cook, *Mexico's Drug Cartels*, Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, October 16, 2007.

Aligned with the ongoing struggle against police corruption have been efforts to implement judicial reform. The capstone of this broader effort came in 2008, when the Mexican legislature passed a significant constitutional amendment transforming the judicial system from one based on written inquisitions and confessions to one based on investigations and an oral adversarial process (more like the system in the United States).⁷⁸ The implementation of this new system is not compulsory until 2016, however.

Continued Efforts to Counter the Supply of Drugs

The traditional cornerstone of the Mexican government's efforts to curtail the DTOs are those that fall under the category of "countersupply" activities. These efforts are focused in two areas: (1) interdiction, seeking to interrupt the transshipment of drugs, and (2) eradication, seeking to destroy domestic drug crops in the fields.⁷⁹ Both of these activities continue, and both remain somewhat problematic. Interdiction engenders a cat-and-mouse game with the DTOs as security forces try to find and close the paths the drugs travel and the DTOs try to establish new ones. Interdiction can also lead to outbreaks of direct violence as the VDTOs seek to reopen an interdicted pathway through force or to protect a shipment from being discovered by the police. Eradication, meanwhile, can bring additional hardship and poverty to already impoverished rural regions if it is not coupled with more comprehensive and targeted efforts to provide serious economic alternatives to domestic drug crop growers.⁸⁰

External Support

Mexico has received support from abroad as part of recent efforts to combat the VDTOs. "Long experienced in fighting cocaine cartels and Marxist guerrillas, Colombia is training thousands of Mexican policemen as well as soldiers and court officers to help contain drug

⁷⁸ Kan, 2012.

⁷⁹ Reyes, 2010.

⁸⁰ Reyes, 2010.

gangs that have turned parts of Mexico into virtual combat zones,” the *Washington Post* has reported.⁸¹

The United States has also offered support. Because of historical tensions of sovereignty, direct U.S. military support to Mexico is highly constrained, but as the violence worsens, so too does the pressure to find more ways to collaborate.⁸² The Mérida Initiative has committed over \$1 billion in U.S. aid to Mexico, primarily in the form of technical assistance and equipment. In the early phases of the program (which began in 2008), the assistance included helicopters, scanners, and forensic lab equipment, as well as training programs for law-enforcement officials and investigators.⁸³ The multiyear Mérida plan has four main objectives: break the power and impunity of criminal organizations; strengthen border, maritime, and air defense; work to improve Mexico’s justice system and its related institutions; and control gang activity while curtailing drug demand.⁸⁴

Although Mérida is promising in many respects, a number of concerns have emerged regarding the levels and types of assistance that should be provided and to whom, as well as the degree to which the nations involved are fulfilling their obligations under the agreement (such as human rights conditions).⁸⁵ Several studies have criticized the Mérida Initiative for focusing too much on technology transfer and not enough on capacity-building and institutional reform.⁸⁶ Judicial-sector

⁸¹ Juan Forero, “Colombia Shares Its Cartel-Fighting Expertise with Mexican Forces,” *Washington Post*, January 22, 2011.

⁸² Entous and Hodge, 2010.

⁸³ Killebrew and Bernal, 2010. See also Inigo Guevara Moyano, *Adapting, Transforming, and Modernizing Under Fire: The Mexican Military 2006–2011*, Letort Paper, Carlisle, Pa.: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, September 2011. As part of the Mérida Initiative, the United States supplied eight Bell 412EP helicopters to enhance the mobility of Mexico’s forces.

⁸⁴ Clare Ribando Seelke and Kristin M. Finklea, *U.S.-Mexican Security Cooperation: The Mérida Initiative and Beyond*, Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, February 16, 2011, p. 7.

⁸⁵ Clare Ribando Seelke, *Mérida Initiative for Mexico and Central America: Funding and Policy Issues*, Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, August 21, 2009.

⁸⁶ See, for example, Seelke, 2009, and Schaefer, Bahney, and Riley, 2009.

training has been slow compared with the police professionalization programs funded by Mérida.⁸⁷

One thing the United States is *not* doing is sufficiently interrupting the flow of arms across its border into Mexico. The debate about gun control in the United States is stuck in neutral. Attempts by states to change laws that would make the purchase of firearms more difficult are often met with opposition by a range of individuals and groups. This has not gone unnoticed in Mexico. As Mexico's assistant secretary of public safety asserted in May 2007, "The firepower we are seeing here has to do with a lack of control on that side of the border."⁸⁸ The problem is real: A U.S. Government Accountability Office report, citing data from the U.S. Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms, reported that 90 percent of the weapons captured in Mexico come from the United States.⁸⁹

Missing: Counter-Gang Efforts

One strand of effort that has been absent on Mexico's side of the border but prominent in the social policies of other countries that have struggled with drug trafficking is the passage of aggressive anti-gang laws. In several U.S. states and in both El Salvador and Honduras, laws allow law-enforcement agencies to arrest gang members for illicit association and ban certain types of congregation.⁹⁰ Some Mexican municipalities have adopted such ordinances, but their adoption is not widespread, nor is it occurring (or promoted) at the national level.

Limited Overall Effectiveness

Overall, efforts to combat the VDTOs during the Calderón administration were limited in their effectiveness. It is true that many senior leaders were killed or captured, but chains of succession or an ineffec-

⁸⁷ Seelke and Finklea, 2011, p. 10.

⁸⁸ Quoted in Mark Stevenson, "Mexico Asks U.S. to Help Stop Arms Flow," Associated Press, May 16, 2007.

⁸⁹ U.S. Government Accountability Office, *Firearms Trafficking: U.S. Efforts to Combat Arms Trafficking to Mexico Face Planning and Coordination Challenges*, Washington, D.C., June 19, 2009.

⁹⁰ USAID, 2006.

tive judicial system minimized the impact. It is also true that many thousands of tons of drugs were captured, but many thousands more tons were delivered, sustaining the extreme profitability of the enterprise. Finally, many areas were pacified, but only temporarily, and at what cost to human rights and the reputation and level of corruption of the armed forces? Many corrupt officials and police personnel were prosecuted or fired, but corruption remains pervasive.⁹¹

Public opinion polling suggests that 56 percent of Mexico's population thinks that government efforts have made the country *less* safe, and, while 29 percent think the army is defeating the drug traffickers, far more (42 percent) think the traffickers are winning.⁹² A *Washington Post* retrospective on the Calderón administration declared that the fight against drugs and related violence had reached what is "essentially a stalemate."⁹³

Changes with the New Administration

Inaugurated in December 2012, the Peña Nieto administration was in its first year as of this writing. Peña Nieto's rhetoric differs somewhat from his predecessor's, but it remains to be seen whether the efforts pursued by his administration will be substantially different. His declared intentions include the prioritization of social and economic issues and a refocusing of efforts on reducing VDTO violence while simultaneously curbing the excesses of the military.⁹⁴ Peña Nieto has announced another round of police reorganization, including the establishment of a unified police command system and other proposals for improving coordination among diverse law-enforcement organizations.⁹⁵ The largest and most concrete of his proposals are plans for a 10,000-member national gendarmerie (*gendarmería nacional*)

⁹¹ Peter Chalk, "Mexico's New Strategy to Combat Drug Cartels: Evaluating the National Gendarmerie," *CTC Sentinel*, Vol. 6, No. 5, May 2013.

⁹² Guerrero-Gutiérrez, 2011.

⁹³ Miroff and Booth, 2012.

⁹⁴ Felbab-Brown, 2013.

⁹⁵ Felbab-Brown, 2013.

and expanding the Federal Police by at least 35,000 officers.⁹⁶ These plans will take time to realize, and it will be longer still before the national gendarmerie has any noticeable impact. In the meantime, the new administration's practices are not dissimilar to those of the previous administration. There have been some early reports of success, however. In July 2013, the Mexican military captured Miguel Ángel Treviño Morales, the leader of Los Zetas.⁹⁷

Key Features of the Mexican Context

Having described the character of the violence in Mexico, detailed explanations offered for that violence, and some of the efforts undertaken to contend with it, we now turn to some of the other key features of the Mexican context. Elements of context both contribute to a better understanding of Mexico's overall security situation and provide the information necessary to make (and validate) comparisons with the historical cases.

Security Forces and Organization

Previous RAND analysis found a duplication of services in a number of Mexican security agencies and general instability in the country's security structure because roles, responsibilities, and authority were not clearly defined.⁹⁸ This earlier effort also found that ambiguous and overlapping responsibilities had created a gap among federal, state, and local security forces. At each of these levels, security forces were unsure of their roles and responsibilities and, in many cases, failed to share information with one another because their relationships were contentious.⁹⁹ Another RAND study used a panel of experts to assess Mexico's security sector, finding minimal to lacking capability to

⁹⁶ Enrique Peña Nieto, "U.S., Mexico Should Build on Their Economic Ties," *Washington Post*, November 23, 2012.

⁹⁷ Catherine E. Shoichet, "Mexico Captures Major Drug Lord," CNN, July 16, 2013.

⁹⁸ Schaefer, Bahney, and Riley, 2009, pp. 15–17.

⁹⁹ Schaefer, Bahney, and Riley, 2009, pp. 18–19.

counter drug trafficking, combat terrorism and insurgency, and secure porous land and maritime borders.¹⁰⁰

Complex and Duplicative, Lacking in Coordination

There are many pieces to the Mexican security apparatus, with numerous duplicative and overlapping efforts and responsibilities. For example, consider the responsibility for drug interdiction. Such activities are implemented by the Secretary of the Navy, the Secretary of National Defense (Secretaría de la Defensa Nacional, or SEDENA), the Secretary of the Interior, the Secretary of Public Security, and the state and local police.¹⁰¹ Drug investigations, on the other hand, are carried out by municipal police, the Federal Agency of Investigation, and sometimes SEDENA.¹⁰² Such complexity and redundancy is unavoidable due to the sheer number of organizations:

In total, there are more than 1,661 independent police forces in Mexico, with jurisdictions at the federal, state, and municipal levels. Most policing services are provided at the state and local levels. Mexico has approximately 350,000 federal, state, and municipal police officers, but about 90 percent (317,000) are governed by state and local authorities. The remaining 33,000 officers are under federal control.¹⁰³

Cooperation among these many entities is a perennial issue, complicated not just by the total number but also by limited trust between organizations.¹⁰⁴ Every organization (sometimes quite reasonably) assumes that every other organization is at least partially penetrated or compromised by the VDTOs; thus, information shared or cooperation offered may, in fact, benefit the traffickers. This logic leads to stovepipes, which hinder the collection and analysis of intelligence. This

¹⁰⁰ Paul, Schaefer, and Clarke, 2011.

¹⁰¹ Schaefer, Bahney, and Riley, 2009.

¹⁰² Schaefer, Bahney, and Riley, 2009.

¹⁰³ Schaefer, Bahney, and Riley, 2009, p. 18.

¹⁰⁴ Shelley De Botton, "Mexican Police: Unify to Optimize," *Comunidade Segura*, August 11, 2008.

same set of concerns constrains the ability of U.S. law enforcement to work with Mexican organizations: The number and overlap of the organizations makes it difficult to know which to work with, and the level of trust remains low. There have been many known instances in which sensitive information about VDTO targets was shared with different Mexican police entities and ending up being leaked.¹⁰⁵

Numbers

The scale of Mexican policing is roughly comparable to that of neighboring countries. The nationwide police force is on the order of 430,000, with an additional 60,000 military personnel performing law-enforcement duties.¹⁰⁶ This amounts to roughly 370 police officers per 100,000 citizens, or approximately 150 percent of U.S. levels. However, these statistics capture all levels of law enforcement—federal, state, and municipal. Federal police account for only 8.5 percent of the total, and most municipal police are underpaid, undertrained, under-equipped, corrupt, or all four.¹⁰⁷

The quality of the municipal police forces is seen as a significant problem. A U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration agent describes the problem as follows: “Local cops are the tip of the spear. . . . In the U.S., we’d struggle to do anything without our partners in local law enforcement.”¹⁰⁸ Average municipal police wages are around \$350 per month (about the same as construction work), with no extra compensation for work-related hazards.¹⁰⁹ When investments are made in the police, they traditionally go to equipment or infrastructure rather than salaries or training.¹¹⁰ Both the army and federal police are better-paid

¹⁰⁵ Graham H. Turbiville, Jr., “Firefights, Raids, and Assassinations: Tactical Forms of Cartel Violence and Their Underpinnings,” *Small Wars and Insurgencies*, Vol. 21, No. 1, 2010.

¹⁰⁶ Arzt, 2010.

¹⁰⁷ Laurence Kerr, “Wither Mexico?” *Milken Institute Review*, Third Quarter 2008.

¹⁰⁸ Quoted in David Luhnow, “To Root Out Dirty Police, Mexico Sends in a General,” *Wall Street Journal*, December 23, 2010b.

¹⁰⁹ Kan, 2012.

¹¹⁰ Schaefer, Bahnney, and Riley, 2009.

and better-trained, though, as noted earlier, the army is trained for traditional military activities, not policing.

Comparison with the VDTOs

Compared with the “troops” commanded by the VDTOs, Mexican security forces often measure up poorly. Compensation for members of trafficking organizations far outstrips that of even the best-paid government security personnel. While VDTO armament and training vary widely, police are often overmatched by VDTO forces using superior weapons and tactics, sometimes including armored vehicles and heavy weapons. Mexican military forces are rarely overmatched but are sometimes equally matched, and they sometimes face VDTO soldiers recruited from within their own ranks or the ranks of neighboring countries’ militaries.¹¹¹

This lack of parity between security forces and the VDTOs—especially with regard to pay—contributes to another major challenge facing Mexican security forces: corruption.

Trust and Reputation

According to public opinion polls, 80 percent of the population considers the police to be corrupt, though the military still enjoys a relatively high level of institutional respect.¹¹² The lack of trust in the police and other authorities by average citizens is a severe impediment in the fight against the VDTOs.¹¹³ Most crimes in Mexico go completely unreported or, worse, are reported to local organized crime bosses for their brand of justice.¹¹⁴

Government and Governance

As briefly discussed at the beginning of this chapter, Mexico has a large, and largely functioning, federal bureaucracy. However, that

¹¹¹ Phil Williams, “Drug Trafficking Organizations and Violence in Mexico: ‘The Players Change but the Game Continues,’” briefing, October 5, 2010.

¹¹² Schaefer, Bahney, and Riley, 2009.

¹¹³ Reyes, 2010.

¹¹⁴ Finnegan, 2010.

characterization hides several critical weaknesses in Mexican government and governance.

Political History

As might be expected, several of the weaknesses in contemporary Mexican governance stem from the country's political history. From 1921 to 2000, Mexico was nominally democratic but ruled by a single party on the corporatist model: the Institutional Revolutionary Party (Partido Revolucionario Institucional, or PRI).¹¹⁵ This long-running, stable political situation led to a number of peculiar arrangements that concentrated power in certain interest groups, protected elites, and members of the government, among other outcomes discussed at length in the literature on the topic. Most importantly, the PRI enabled and supported a certain degree of institutional corruption, including collusion with and tolerance for illegal drug traffickers. The situation changed in 1976, when the economic stability that had supported the PRI's long domination disappeared and led to a brutal spiral of currency devaluation brought on by low productivity growth, poor fiscal and monetary discipline, speculative capital flight, and poor management of external debt.¹¹⁶ It was not until the 2000 election, however, that enough had changed in Mexico to allow a different political party, the National Action Party (Partido Acción Nacional), to seize the reins of power. The new administration faced a number of challenges, including growing drug traffic and drug-related violence and the antiquated institutions that ossified government bureaucracy over almost 80 years of one-party rule. Despite ambitious rhetoric and a great deal of earnest effort, the changes advanced during the Vicente Fox administration were attenuated greatly by the institutional inertia in the Mexican government.¹¹⁷

One of the legacies of the PRI has been democratic fragility. Although the institutions of the Mexican state maintained the appearance of democracy, a combination of old and new corruption has left

¹¹⁵ Kerr, 2008.

¹¹⁶ Kerr, 2008.

¹¹⁷ Kerr, 2008.

a hollowness to government institutions.¹¹⁸ Mexico-specific democratic peculiarities include a ban on the reelection of chief executives (every Mexican president serves for six years and no more) and the absence of a run-off election system if no candidate earns a plurality (as is the case in most other democracies).¹¹⁹

Weak Institutions

The most important legacy of the decades of PRI rule is the weakness of many Mexican institutions. The Mexican government is quite broad in scope, as witnessed by its control over the petroleum industry, its role as the principal supplier of electricity, its financing of public education and universities, and its diverse retirement and health care programs; however, these institutions remain weak in their execution, ability to plan and strategize, and ability to implement policy cleanly, fairly, and transparently.¹²⁰

Two examples of institutional weakness are particularly telling. The first is the Mexican state's virtual inability to collect taxes. The single largest contributor to the Mexican government's budget is the state-controlled petroleum industry.¹²¹ While this extraction does fund the state, it also consumes funds that might otherwise be spent to modernize oil production and processing. The collection of income and other individual-level taxes represents a paltry 12 percent of gross domestic product (GDP), on par with basket-case economies like Haiti's.¹²²

The second example of institutional weakness is in the reporting, investigation, and prosecution of crimes. U.S. congressional testimony in 2009 reported that only one in five crimes is reported in Mexico, only 13 percent of those crimes are investigated, and a mere 5 percent

¹¹⁸ Kan, 2012.

¹¹⁹ Grayson, 2011.

¹²⁰ Grayson, 2011.

¹²¹ Treverton, 2010.

¹²² Grayson, 2011.

reach trial.¹²³ Similar numbers were reported in 2013, with 15 percent of crimes being reported and an abysmal conviction rate of about 1 percent.¹²⁴ The low conviction rate is not due only to byzantine procedures and inefficiency (though those factors play a large role): A 2002 United Nations report estimated that between 50 and 70 percent of Mexican judges were corrupt.¹²⁵ The end result is that not one of the dozen or so top VDTO leaders captured alive during the Calderón administration has been tried and convicted in a Mexican court. They have been either held for years without trial or extradited to the United States.¹²⁶

Weakness in the Hinterlands

Although many Mexican institutions are hollow, inefficient, or lacking transparency, institutional weakness is at its worst in the country's hinterlands, particularly the border regions.¹²⁷ Harkening back to the days of the Wild West or after the collapse of state authority during the Mexican Revolution, there are large swaths of Mexico that are lightly populated and largely free of government involvement.

Much of the border between Mexico and the United States is part of this hinterland. The border is some 1,969 miles (3,169 km), spanning four U.S. and six Mexican states, with roughly 30 border-city pairs (one on each side of the border).¹²⁸ While parts of the border are heavily fortified, patrolled, and secured, other parts—particularly

¹²³ Joy Olson, executive director, Washington Office on Latin America, testimony before U.S. House of Representatives, Committee on Appropriations, Subcommittee on State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs, March 10, 2009.

¹²⁴ "Study: 98.5% of Crimes Go Unpunished in Mexico," *Latin American Herald Tribune*, March 14, 2013.

¹²⁵ United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Independence of Judges and Lawyers, *Report of the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Independence of Judges and Lawyers: Mission to Mexico*, January 24, 2002, p. 18.

¹²⁶ Miroff and Booth, 2012.

¹²⁷ John P. Sullivan and Adam Elkus, "State of Siege: Mexico's Criminal Insurgency," *Small Wars Journal*, August 19, 2008.

¹²⁸ Alberto M. Melis, "Foreword: A View from the Borderlands," *Small Wars and Insurgencies*, Vol. 21, No. 1, March 2010.

areas deep in the desert and away from roads and tracks—are not even fenced.

Obviously, the DTOs prefer to operate and engage in transshipment where the state can maintain only a minimal presence, which makes the hinterland eminently more attractive; however, these organizations also rely on roads and infrastructure, which make transshipment easier and more comfortable. These preferences have driven efforts to remove or limit state involvement in areas that are not totally within the confines of traditional hinterlands. Mexico's VDTOs can and do create temporary and more durable "zones of impunity" where crime runs rampant and they can operate without restrictions.¹²⁹ These zones are first and foremost free from the influence of the government, and sometimes that is sufficient. Other times, however, the VDTOs establish their own governance, collecting taxes, creating checkpoints, and enforcing their own rough form of justice within the zone.¹³⁰ The Mexican government begrudgingly acknowledges the existence of such zones, and, while it does not name them, these areas clearly include parts of the Tierra Caliente Mountains; the "Golden Triangle" tristate area in the Sierra Madres at the junction of Sinaloa, Chihuahua, and Durango; the Isthmus of Tehuantepec; and neighborhoods in most border cities.¹³¹

Corruption and Cooptation

Observers have said, "Corruption is not a characteristic of the system in Mexico. It is the system."¹³² Years of elite enrichment at the hands of the state have created a pervasive culture of graft and corruption at all levels of the Mexican government.¹³³ Adding the physical and fiscal resources of the VDTOs to that context was a volatile mix, taking corruption to new and obscene heights. The threat of "¿Plata o plomo?"

¹²⁹ Grayson, 2011.

¹³⁰ Justin Peele, "The Case of Mexico: A Hard Pill to Swallow," *Small Wars Journal*, April 20, 2012.

¹³¹ Grayson, 2011.

¹³² Nagle, 2010, p. 97.

¹³³ Nagle, 2010.

(silver or lead, accept the bribe or be shot) is a powerful incentive to corruption even for the well-intentioned.¹³⁴

Contemporary corruption in the Mexican government and among the country's security forces goes well beyond patronage and graft, extending to levels of penetration that in some areas constitutes capture.

Ubiquitous bribery and coercion of major and minor officials in security and other institutions by DTOs does more than just sneak cellphones into prison cells: It also opens police road blocks; unlocks prison doors; renders police and security forces blind, deaf, and speechless; reveals military and police plans for pending actions; and purchases not-guilty judgments or dismissals in the Mexican judicial system. It buys lists of informants and facilitates the dissemination of disinformation. Applied brutality and rewards also gain a measure of silence and cooperation from citizens. The employment of informants and the use of squads of street-level observers continually generate information of value.¹³⁵

Corruption of this magnitude is pervasive. Twice in recent years, Mexico's highest-ranking anti-drug official has been dismissed and arrested for taking payoffs from the very drug kingpins his office was charged with pursuing.¹³⁶ The VDTOs have attached themselves to every layer (and many lawyers) in the Mexican government, slowly criminalizing it. In many areas, substantial chunks of Mexican government institutions have been turned, with police regularly employed to protect drug shipments or even carry out hits on behalf of the VDTOs.¹³⁷ One source estimates that the VDTOs spent \$5–10 million to influence the outcomes of mayoral contests in 2006.¹³⁸ Another

¹³⁴ Robert J. Bunker, "The U.S. Strategic Imperative Must Shift from Iraq/Afghanistan to Mexico/the Americas and the Stabilization of Europe," *Small Wars Journal*, October 7, 2010b.

¹³⁵ Turbiville, 2010, p. 139.

¹³⁶ Kurtzman, 2009.

¹³⁷ Sullivan and Elkus, 2008.

¹³⁸ Grayson, 2011.

source calculated the cost of poorly functioning institutions to ordinary Mexicans, determining that if Mexico were to reduce corruption and raise regulatory standards to U.S. levels, the country's nominal GDP per capita would increase by roughly \$18,000 per year (that is, more than double).¹³⁹

Civil Society

Mexican civil society is a clear-cut example of the bifurcated nature of the "two Mexicos." On one hand, there is a major segment of the population that is intimidated by both the government and the VDTOs, trusts neither, and will look away from any atrocity with the simple hope of getting through another day themselves. On the other hand, there are hints of social cohesion and organization, pockets of protest and resistance against the excesses of the VDTOs, the government, or both.¹⁴⁰

Lack of Belief in the Government

A public opinion poll found that 59 percent of Mexicans think the DTOs are winning.¹⁴¹ Most Mexicans reject the notion that newly elected and appointed officials can change the status quo, and they believe that the present level of violence and corruption are a fixed feature of the political landscape.¹⁴² In some parts of the country, few turn to the police, because the police are not trusted and are not seen as investigators of crimes.¹⁴³

¹³⁹ Kurtzman, 2009.

¹⁴⁰ There is a debate in the literature about whether high levels of generalized trust and "social capital" among the law-abiding population are enough to prevent the transplantation of mafias or organized crime. This research does not seek to settle the debate, but we nonetheless recognize its relevance for those interested in pursuing the cleavage. For more background, see Federico Varese, *Mafias on the Move: How Organized Crime Conquers New Territories*, Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2011.

¹⁴¹ Finnegan, 2010.

¹⁴² Dennis J. Castellanos, "Book Review: Cartel: The Coming Invasion of Mexico's Drug Wars," *Small Wars Journal*, December 1, 2011.

¹⁴³ Finnegan, 2010.

Intimidated Population

In addition to lacking confidence in the government, the population is intimidated by the VDTOs. The VDTOs are credible; they carry through on their threats. In the areas in which the VDTOs operate, the population is too cowed to offer security forces any support, even if it were inclined to do so.¹⁴⁴

Public Outrage

Though cowed in many places, Mexico is not wholly without public outrage. An acknowledged grassroots seething against both the shortcomings of the government and the depredations of the VDTOs sometimes spurs action.¹⁴⁵ There are periodic protests—sometimes demonstrations with participants numbering in the thousands. In some parts of the country, self-defense militias have risen up, rejecting both the perceived corrupt government and the VDTOs.¹⁴⁶ Such groups have appeared in at least nine of Mexico's 31 states.¹⁴⁷ They claim (and appear) to be fighting violence and preventing kidnappings and extortion by the VDTOs, but there are concerns about respect for the human rights of those who are detained or tried by the vigilantes or that some of the groups might be cooperating with the VDTOs.¹⁴⁸ Such mobilizations, though a mixed bag from the government's perspective, suggest some positive potential within certain elements of Mexican civil society.

Embracing the VDTOs

In some places, the people resent or even actively oppose the VDTOs, while in others they are welcomed. For example, in parts of Michoacan, La Familia has provided employment, offered help to the poor, and taken steps to ensure public safety. As a consequence, citizens in these

¹⁴⁴ Sullivan and Elkus, 2009.

¹⁴⁵ Grayson, 2011.

¹⁴⁶ Nicholas Casey, "Mexico's Masked Vigilantes Defy Drug Gangs—and the Law," *Wall Street Journal*, February 2, 2013.

¹⁴⁷ International Crisis Group, *Justice at the Barrel of a Gun: Vigilante Militias in Mexico*, Latin America Briefing No. 29, May 28, 2013.

¹⁴⁸ "Heavily Armed Vigilantes Take Control of Mexican Town, 'Arrest' All of the Police," *New York Post*, March 27, 2013.

areas have no interest in the return of the government.¹⁴⁹ In Sinaloa, Joaquín Guzmán Loera (“El Chapo”) is venerated for his generosity in building up infrastructure and creating jobs. Like Colombian cocaine kingpin Pablo Escobar in the 1980s, “El Chapo” is viewed as a sort of folk hero.¹⁵⁰

Gangs/Maras

Mexico has a robust population of street gangs that some have referred to as “third-generation” gangs, with “turf” gangs being the first generation and “market” gangs, which engage in exploitive and illegal business, being the second. The third generation consists of transnational “mercenary” gangs that work for and contribute to larger criminal enterprises.¹⁵¹ These gangs are both a cause and a symptom of an unhealthy civil society. The gangs are often important partners of the VDTOs, subcontracting for intelligence collection, drug distribution, and violence.¹⁵²

Domestic Drug Use

Domestic drug use in Mexico has grown considerably over the past ten years. Under the PRI, DTOs primarily supplied the U.S. market; however, changes in the players and the traffickers’ processes led DTOs to offer payment in kind, and they eventually began to actively seek to expand the domestic drug market. As of 2010, Mexico’s domestic consumption was estimated at about 500 tons of illegal drugs per year, with an estimated annual profit of around \$400 million.¹⁵³ Such drug use has an insidious impact on civil society, creating a class of addicts among already impoverished populations and involving more and more Mexicans in the drug trade.

¹⁴⁹ Finnegan, 2010.

¹⁵⁰ Grayson, 2011.

¹⁵¹ Bunker and Sullivan, 2010.

¹⁵² Adam Elkus, and John P. Sullivan, “Los Zetas and MS-13: Nontraditional Alliances,” *CTC Sentinel*, Vol. 5, No. 6, June 2012.

¹⁵³ Reyes, 2010.

Economy

The Mexican economy is yet another example of “two Mexicos.” It was ranked 14th in the world in terms of GDP in 2012.¹⁵⁴ Mexico is the United States’ third-largest trading partner and one of its most important sources of oil.¹⁵⁵ Mexico’s economy encompasses a fairly broad range of sectors, including petroleum, minerals, agriculture, and manufacturing. However, this apparent diversity is somewhat illusory, with petroleum being the main driver of the economy and foreign remittances and tourism a distant second and third.¹⁵⁶

As noted earlier, Mexico suffers from high unemployment and underemployment.¹⁵⁷ The country has a significant problem with unemployed young people, called *los ni ni* (*ni estudia ni trabaja*; not in school, not employed), whose numbers exceed 7 million out of total labor force of approximately 50 million.¹⁵⁸ *Los ni ni* offer a prime recruiting pool for the VDTOs, and their existence offers some additional credence to the “opportunity structure” argument presented earlier.

Mexico also has a significant informal economy, with a “cash-and-carry” culture and tradition.¹⁵⁹ This facet makes it difficult to track all economic activity, increases the difficulty of collecting sales taxes (or fees for business licenses or for safety inspections), and eases criminal transactions.

Violence in Mexico is the result of myriad factors, as we emphasize throughout this report. Unlike the violence in some other countries, where a clear cause-and-effect narrative can be identified, the violence stalking Mexico is the result of a range of interconnected variables, including global systemic factors, state structural factors, and socio-cultural factors. To be sure, no single explanation is possible. Other

¹⁵⁴ World Bank, *World Development Indicators: Gross Domestic Product 2012*, data as of September 23, 2013.

¹⁵⁵ Kerr, 2008.

¹⁵⁶ Tracy Wilkinson, “Mexico Scrambles as Violence Threatens Tourism Zones,” *Los Angeles Times*, February 9, 2013.

¹⁵⁷ Paul, Schaefer, and Clarke, 2011.

¹⁵⁸ Finnegan, 2010.

¹⁵⁹ Grayson, 2011.

countries also suffer from poverty, inequality, and corruption but never experience the same levels of violence as Mexico, which is perhaps what makes this case unique. Nevertheless, Mexican security forces, government and governance, civil society, and the economy—while not necessarily serving as *root* causes for the mayhem—each exacerbate the violence, in context, in direct and specific ways.

Finding the Right Comparisons: Case Selection

As noted in Chapter One, we chose our comparison cases according to four possible classes that might wholly or partially correspond to Mexico: cases of warlordism, cases of ungoverned spaces, resource insurgencies, and earnest efforts to combat organized crime.¹ These

¹ The literature on warlordism included Troy S. Thomas, Stephen D. Kiser, and William D. Casebeer, *Warlords Rising: Confronting Violent Non-State Actors*, Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books, 2005; Philip G. Cerny, "Paradoxes of the Competition State: The Dynamics of Political Globalization," *Government and Opposition*, Vol. 32, No. 2, April 1997; Philip G. Cerny, "Neomedievalism, Civil War, and the New Security Dilemma: Globalisation as Durable Disorder," *Civil Wars*, Vol. 1, No. 1, 1998; Mark Duffield, "Post-Modern Conflict: Warlords, Post-Adjustment States and Private Protection," *Civil Wars*, Vol. 1, No. 1, 1998; Phil Williams, "Transnational Organized Crime and the State," in Rodney Bruce Hall and Thomas J. Biersteker, eds., *The Emergence of Private Authority in Global Governance*, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2002; Phil Williams, *From the New Middle Ages to a New Dark Age: The Decline of the State and U.S. Strategy*, Carlisle, Pa.: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, June 2008b; Alice Hills, "Warlords, Militia and Conflict in Contemporary Africa: A Re-Examination of Terms," *Small Wars and Insurgencies*, Vol. 8, No. 1, Spring 1997; Paul Jackson, "Warlords as Alternative Forms of Governance," *Small Wars and Insurgencies*, Vol. 14, No. 2, Summer 2003; Ana Pejcinova, "Post-Modernizing Afghanistan," *Central European University Political Science Journal*, Vol. 1, No. 5, December 2006; Leonard Wantchekon, "The Paradox of 'Warlord' Democracy: A Theoretical Investigation," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 98, No. 1, February 2004; Phil Williams, *Violent Non-State Actors and National and International Security*, Zurich, Switzerland: International Relations and Security Network, 2008a; Christopher Clapham, ed., *African Guerrillas*, Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1998; Sasha Lezhnev, *Crafting Peace: Strategies to Deal with Warlords in Collapsing States*, Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books, 2005; Kimberly Marten, "Warlordism in Comparative Perspective," *International Security*, Vol. 31, No. 3, Winter 2006–2007; Mancur Olson, "Dictatorship, Democracy, and Development," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 87, No. 3, September 1993; Gordon Peake, "From Warlords to Peacelords," *Journal of International Affairs*, Vol. 56,

four categories do not offer the only possible points of comparison with Mexico by any means; other cases could be comparable to Mexico along such dimensions as levels of drug trafficking, corruption, and overall economic health. The four categories we chose to pursue have several virtues. First, they can be isolated in time. That is, they are not steady-state, ongoing qualities of a country but states that emerged there, persisted, and then (ideally) declined or disappeared. Second, they are categories that have been provisionally applied to Mexico. Some scholars have labeled the Mexican security situation as an insurgency; others have decried the VDTOs as networks of organized criminals that also operate with such dominance in otherwise ungoverned spaces as to be equivalent to warlords. While some of these character-

No. 2, Spring–Summer 2003; John Rapley, “The New Middle Ages,” *Foreign Affairs*, May–June 2006; and Will Reno, *Warlord Politics and African States*, Boulder, Colo.: Lynne Rienner, 1998.

The literature on resource exploitation included Karen Ballentine and Heiko Nitzschke, *Profiting from Peace: Managing the Resources Dimensions of Civil War*, Boulder, Colo.: Lynne Rienner, 2005; Philippe Le Billon, “The Political Ecology of War: Natural Resources and Armed Conflicts,” *Political Geography*, Vol. 20, No. 5, June 2001; Michael L. Ross, “What Do We Know About Natural Resources and Civil War?” *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 41, No. 3, May 2004b; Michael L. Ross, “How Do Natural Resources Influence Civil War? Evidence from Thirteen Cases,” *International Organization*, Vol. 58, No. 1, Winter 2004a; Achim Wennman, “The Political Economy of Conflict Financing: A Comprehensive Approach Beyond Natural Resources,” *Global Governance*, Vol. 13, No. 3, July–September 2007; Achim Wennman, “Grasping the Financing and Mobilization Cost of Armed Groups: A New Perspective on Conflict Dynamics,” *Contemporary Security Policy*, Vol. 30, No. 2, August 2009; Svante E. Cornell, “Narcotics and Armed Conflict: Interaction and Implications,” *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, Vol. 30, No. 3, 2007; Vanda Felbab-Brown, *Shooting Up: Counterinsurgency and the War on Drugs*, Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2010; Naylor, 2004; Gretchen Peters, *Seeds of Terror: How Heroin Is Bankrolling the Taliban and Al Qaeda*, New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2009; Richard Snyder, “Does Lootable Wealth Breed Disorder? A Political Economy of Extraction Framework,” *Comparative Political Studies*, Vol. 39, No. 8, October 2006; Jeremy Weinstein, *Inside Rebellion: The Politics of Insurgent Violence*, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2006; Cynthia J. Arnson and I. William Zartman, eds., *Rethinking the Economics of War: The Intersection of Need, Creed, and Greed*, Washington, D.C.: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2005; Karen Ballentine and Jake Sherman, eds., *The Political Economy of Armed Conflict: Beyond Greed and Grievance*, Boulder, Colo.: Lynne Rienner, 2003; Mats Berdal and David M. Malone, *Greed and Grievance: Economic Agendas in Civil Wars*, Boulder, Colo.: Lynne Rienner, 2000; and Paul Collier and Anke Hoeffler, “Greed and Grievance in Civil War,” *Oxford Economic Papers*, Vol. 56, 2004.

izations are debatable (in fact, we dispute the appropriateness of characterizing Mexico as an insurgency), such characterizations have been offered widely in the literature and provide a useful starting point for identifying candidates for comparison. We point out where some of these cases, when scrutinized, have not turned out to be particularly comparable.

An exhaustive literature review revealed a total of 71 candidate cases that were exclusively labeled as warlord cases, resource insurgencies, ungoverned spaces, cases of earnest attempts by the government to combat organized crime, or some combination thereof.² Of the 71 candidate cases, six were labeled as strictly warlord cases, 53 were initially labeled resource insurgencies, nine were cases of ungoverned space, and seven were cases of earnest efforts by a government to combat organized crime. Upon further interrogation, five of the 71 cases proved to be a combination of warlordism, resource insurgency, and ungoverned space. We scored these cases across a range of discriminatory factors including the resource being exploited, adversarial group resources and

Some of the literature examined on ungoverned spaces included Clunan and Trinkunas, 2010b; Lamb, 2008; Stewart Patrick, "Are Ungoverned Spaces a Threat," Council on Foreign Relations Backgrounder, January 11, 2010; Rabasa et al., 2007; Stewart M. Patrick, "Weak States and Global Threats: Fact or Fiction," *Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 29, No. 2, Spring 2006; Robert I. Rotberg, ed., *State Failure and State Weakness in a Time of Terror*, Cambridge, Mass., and Washington, D.C.: World Peace Foundation and Brookings Institution Press, 2003; Robert I. Rotberg, ed., *When States Fail: Causes and Consequences*, Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2004; I. William Zartman, ed., *Collapsed States: The Disintegration and Restoration of Legitimate Authority*, Boulder, Colo.: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1995; Chester Crocker, "Engaging Failed States," *Foreign Affairs*, September–October 2003; and Stuart Eizenstat, John Edward Porter, and Jeremy M. Weinstein, "Rebuilding Weak States," *Foreign Affairs*, January–February 2005.

² In addition to the aforementioned literature, the following tables were especially helpful in thinking about cases: Snyder, 2006, p. 4, Table 1 ("Lootable Wealth and Civil War, 1960–1999"); Le Billon, 2001, p. 573, Table 1 ("Relation Between the Nature/Geography of a Resource and Type of Conflict"); Ross, 2004b, pp. 339, 343, and 345, Tables 1–3 ("Quantitative Research on Resources and Civil War," "Mineral Resources and Secessionist Movements," and "Gemstone and Drug Producers That Had Civil Wars in the 1990s"); Ross, 2004a, pp. 47–49, 53, 55, and 215, Tables 1–6 ("Civil Wars in the 1990s," "Civil Wars Linked to Resource Wealth, 1990–2000," "Summary of Findings," "Origins of Conflict," "Duration of Conflict," and "Intensity of Conflict"); and Cornell, 2007, p. 215, Table 1 ("Survey of Armed Conflict and Narcotics Cultivation").

motivation, targets of violence, the nature and extent of the violence, how the conflict was resolved, the country's governance and legitimacy, and several related subfactors.³ Based on this preliminary analysis, we pared down the case set as follows:

- We eliminated cases that had been preliminarily coded as resource insurgencies but turned out to simply be traditional insurgencies in which a resource played some kind of role (a total of 45 cases).
- We further assessed the remaining 26 candidate cases across several additional factors to evaluate how representative each was of the typology (resource insurgency, warlordism, ungoverned spaces, organized crime) it purportedly represented.⁴ We eliminated those that were *only* cases of ungoverned territory (leaving a total of 17 cases). The cases cut lacked any qualities of useful “caseness” in that there was no conflict, no explicit attempt to free these areas from governance, or no effort to bring them back into governance. In short, these candidate cases offered little with respect to policy insight that was relevant to Mexico. On the other hand, several of the cases of warlordism and nontraditional insurgencies included some ungoverned spaces but *did* involve conflict, contestation, resolution, and possible relevance for Mexico. For this reason, these cases were retained.
- The penultimate iteration of the case selection process considered how each case compared with the current context in Mexico, which led us to eliminate cases that were only associated with efforts to combat organized crime. These cases lacked temporal isolation; it was impossible to draw meaningful bounds around a case period or to identify a clear point of resolution or lack of resolution. Further, these cases appeared to lack many of the most salient characteristics of the contemporary Mexican security situation, especially when juxtaposed with the remaining cases of

³ Subfactors included, but were not limited to, greed, grievance, personalistic rule/fragmentation, coercion/intimidation, crime, terrorism, and sanctuary.

⁴ As part of this process, each case was further interrogated at the narrative level using existing data resources.

resource insurgency or warlordism, which had many more points of commonality with Mexico.⁵

- This reduction left nine cases, to which we added Colombia, for a total of ten. Although Colombia did not satisfy the case selection criteria, it is the most frequently offered comparison for Mexico and was thus important to include to ensure a comprehensive understanding of those arguments. Although it may not have been included in the case selection typologies, the characteristics of the conflict in Colombia correspond to many of the same target types.⁶

Figure 3.1 summarizes the case selection process, and Table 3.1 lists the ten selected cases.

In exploring these cases, we discovered several instances where a case included characteristics of a given category (warlordism, resource insurgency, ungoverned space, or organized crime) even though it was categorized as another type of case. Table 3.2 shows cases with significant overlap. Note that while we omitted organized crime as a selection category, most of the cases featured significant concerns regarding organized crime (though few efforts to combat it).

Each of the ten cases is discussed in detail in the companion volume to this report.⁷ The cases are presented in the same order as they appear in Tables 3.1 and 3.2.

⁵ A reviewer recommended that we include more obviously comparable cases, such as Sicily, Albania, and Russia. We considered these cases examples of organized crime, but they lack an easily discernable beginning, middle, or end. We do not dispute that they could be fruitful cases for comparison, but they did not meet our systematic case selection criteria.

⁶ Because we reject the oft-repeated maxim that Mexico is Colombia—that it is the most appropriate comparison case—we used Colombia as the exemplar case with which we compared Mexico and, by extension, our other cases as well. We took this approach even though our preliminary analysis of the case factors indicated that other comparative cases matched Mexico more closely than Colombia. Throughout this report, we discuss exactly how Colombia is and is not comparable.

⁷ See Paul, Clarke, and Serena, 2014.

Figure 3.1
Case Selection Process

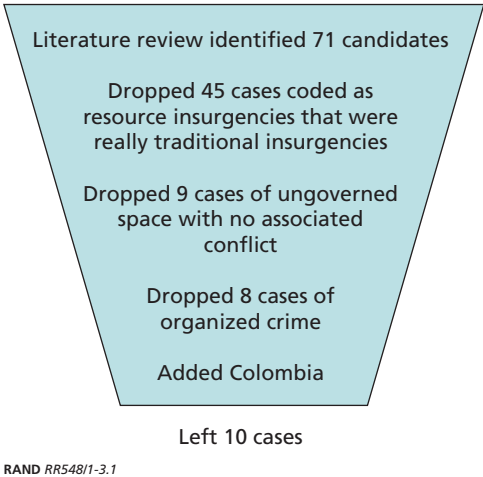


Table 3.1
Cases Selected for Comparison with Mexico

Case	Years
Colombia	1994–2010
Peru	1980–1992
The Balkans	1991–2010
West Africa	1990–2010
The Caucasus	1990–2012
Somalia	1991–2010
Angola	1992–2010
Burma	1988–2012
Tajikistan	1992–2008
Afghanistan	2001–2013

Comparing Mexico with the Challenges Faced and the Outcomes Reached in the Historical Cases

The cases considered here all have elements in common with Mexico and individually offer cautions, advice, or lessons for future Mexican security efforts, but broad comparison remains somewhat tricky. Although we selected the cases that fell into four common categories (warlordism, ungoverned spaces, resource insurgencies, and organized crime), the detailed case studies revealed that the challenges faced in each case country differed, as did the solutions pursued. Thus, there is no simple way to take the combination of efforts that “solved Colombia” and compare them with the efforts that “solved the Balkans,” then extrapolate a recipe for success in Mexico. However, with a little extra nuance and complexity we *can* compare how similar challenges were addressed more or less effectively across the historical cases and, where Mexico faces those same challenges, infer which solutions might work (or are more or less feasible than others).

We identified two primary types of challenges faced in the historical cases: those related to *violence* and those related to *governance and corruption*. In fact, the outcomes of the various cases can be discussed along those two dimensions as well. Cases in which the government succeeded in both reducing violence to tolerable levels and delivering moderately effective governance were unambiguous successes.¹ Several

¹ The term *success*, itself, is not unambiguous. In all the cases considered, even where violence was considerably reduced and governance considerably improved, these challenges were not wholly eliminated. Violence and levels of personal insecurity became good enough or tolerable, as did governance, but in no case did levels of violence or quality of governance become “good” in comparison with the highest international standards. The cases that

cases achieved moderate success in only one of these two areas, so the strategies and efforts employed there might reveal what has consistently worked for violence or for governance, but not both. The results are summarized in Table 4.1.

To enable comparisons between the cases and with Mexico, we identified ten challenges that are fairly common across them. These challenges fall broadly within the violence and governance/corruption categories but allow us to explore in more detail the case characteristics and threats faced in those areas. Table 4.2 lists each of the ten challenges and their corresponding letter codes, showing the extent to which they were present in each of the ten historical cases (or are currently present in Mexico) and the extent of improvement by the end of the case. Though somewhat complicated, Table 4.2 shows which cases involved which challenges, how effectively the government dealt with those challenges, and the extent to which the country achieved its respective overall outcomes in the areas of violence and governance.

Table 4.1
Violence and Governance/Control of Corruption Outcomes in Historical Cases

Outcome	Colombia	Peru	The Balkans	West Africa	The Caucasus	Somalia	Angola	Burma	Tajikistan	Afghanistan
Violence										
Governance/control of corruption										
Overall (combination of violence and governance)										
	Good (or good-enough) outcome									
	Neutral, so-so, barely tolerable, or mixed outcome									
	Poor outcome									

showed improvement or resolution did so on their own relative scale; none was magically transformed into a Scandinavian-like country.

Within each challenge (pair of rows), we evaluate each case (the columns) based on the extent to which it faced a given challenge (with green shading indicating low or negligible presence, yellow shading denoting moderate presence, and red shading denoting high levels) and the extent to which it improved (indicated by arrows, with the new level of the challenge indicated by shading). For example, the topmost and leftmost cells of the table show that Challenge A, High Violence, was moderately present (yellow) in Colombia and that there was moderate improvement in addressing that challenge during the case-study period (↑). While the individual cases and challenges are somewhat interesting, the key takeaway from Table 4.2 for the purposes of this overall analysis is that *cases characterized by the same challenges Mexico faces (and to similar degrees) that managed to overcome them and realize relatively satisfactory overall outcomes are likely to offer the best lessons for Mexico.*

In the following sections, we provide an overview of each type of challenge and briefly assess progress toward resolving it in the selected cases. Tables 4.3–4.11 presents the results that are directly relevant to our analysis of Mexico.




Challenge A: Violence

Violence is an overarching theme in each of the cases examined in this report. However, all violence is not equal. As such, while we discuss overall levels of violence, we also offer a greater level of fidelity by discussing subcategories of violence, including anomic violence, ethnic violence, and violence aimed at challenging the state for control. Each type of violence presents its own set of associated challenges. Anomic violence can change the nature of society as the long-held practices and traditional mores of a nation are discarded and replaced with bloodlust. Ethnic violence contributes to sectarianism, factionalism, and a fissure between specific groups in society. Insurgent-led violence is typically violence with a purpose, whether the end goal is to usurp the government or carve out territory from which to exploit valuable resources.

Table 4.2
Challenges Faced and Improvement in the Historical Cases

Challenge	Colombia	Peru	The Balkans	West Africa	The Caucasus	Somalia	Angola	Burma	Tajikistan	Afghanistan	Mexico
A. High violence											
Progress toward resolving violence	↑	↑↑	↑↑	↑	↑	↑	↑↑	↑		↑	
B. Anomic violence or mayhem/ indiscriminate violence											
Progress toward resolving anomic violence			↑↑↑	↑		↑	↑				
C. Insurgency/competition for state control											
Progress toward defeating insurgency/securing state control	↑↑	↑↑	↑↑↑		↑		↑↑↑	↑			
D. Ethnically motivated violence											
Extent to which ethnic tensions were reduced			↑	↑				↑			
E. Lack of economic opportunities											
Extent to which economic opportunities improved	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑		↑↑	↑			
F. High level of weapon availability											
Extent to which weapon availability was reduced			↑	↑			↑				
G. Competition over a resource (e.g., drugs, diamonds)											
Extent to which competition ended or resource was secured				↑			↑↑	↑			
H. Ungoverned spaces											
Progress toward extending control in formerly ungoverned spaces	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑		↑	↑			
I. State/institutional weakness											
Extent to which state or institutions were strengthened	↑	↑	↑				↑		↑		
J. Patronage/corruption											
Extent to which patronage/ corruption was reduced/controlled	↑	↓	↑	↑	↑						

How to interpret the challenge tables in Chapter Four:

Level of violence		Level of improvement	
	Low or tolerable	↑	Moderate improvement
	Moderate	↑↑	Significant improvement
	High	↑↑↑	Massive improvement/complete resolution
		↓	Worsened

In the realm of violence, each of the ten historical cases fits within one of four broader categories:

- one that lacked a significant level of challenge A (violence) and thus was not a particularly violent case (Tajikistan)
- those that had challenge C (insurgency) but not challenge B (anomic violence) and were thus more traditional insurgency-counterinsurgency conflicts (Colombia, Peru, the Caucasus, Burma, Afghanistan)
- those that had challenge B (anomic violence) and had extreme levels of challenge D (ethnically motivated violence) and were cases of violent ethnic cleansing (the Balkans)
- those that had challenge B (anomic violence) but lacked the extreme levels of challenge D (ethnically motivated violence) and thus had concerning anomic violence (West Africa, Somalia, Angola).

Following that logic, Mexico, having challenge B but not challenge D, fits into this typology as a case of concerning anomic violence (challenge B). Matching on specific challenges, however, offers broader space for comparison. While the challenge of violence in Mexico has characteristics in common with the three African cases, Mexico certainly shares other challenges and other characteristics with other cases, too.

Table 4.3
Challenge A (Violence) in the Historical Cases

Challenge	Colombia	Peru	The Balkans	West Africa	The Caucasus	Somalia	Angola	Burma	Tajikistan	Afghanistan	Mexico
A. High violence											
Progress toward resolving violence	↑	↑↑	↑↑	↑	↑	↑	↑↑	↑		↑	
Overall outcome in terms of violence											

Challenge B: “Anomic” Violence or Indiscriminate Mayhem/Indiscriminate Violence

In a forthcoming paper, longtime Mexico observer Phil Williams characterizes much of the violence there as anomic violence.² Drawing on Emile Durkheim’s classic concept of anomie,³ this violence follows “the degradation of norms and inhibitions, as the use of violence is an end in itself.”⁴ Anomic violence goes well beyond instrumental violence, where violence has a purpose; fairly grisly violence can still be instrumental, if the goal is to intimidate or send a message.⁵ Anomic violence is grisly without purpose or beyond what is necessary for the purpose, and it defies normative prohibitions against such violence.

Anomic violence or indiscriminate mayhem constitutes a challenge separate from civil wars, insurgencies, or other forms of violent conflict motivated by politics. While many conflicts include atrocities, those are more often intended horrors, following a logic of some kind,

² Williams, forthcoming.

³ Emile Durkheim, *Suicide: A Study in Sociology*, New York: The Free Press, 1997.

⁴ Guillermo Vázquez del Mercado Almada, “Five Ps for a Violence Reduction Strategy in Mexico, Part II,” *Small Wars Journal*, March 7, 2012b.

⁵ Anomie is a concept describing a state of normlessness, a condition that occurs when desires go beyond what can be achieved in socially accepted ways. See Katja Franko Aas, *Globalization and Crime*, London: Sage Publications, 2013, p. 231.

Table 4.4**Challenge B (Anomic Violence or Mayhem/Indiscriminate Violence) in the Historical Cases**

Challenge	Colombia	Peru	The Balkans	West Africa	Caucasus	Somalia	Angola	Burma	Tajikistan	Afghanistan	Mexico
B. Anomic violence or mayhem/indiscriminate violence											
Progress toward resolving anomic violence			↑↑↑	↑		↑	↑				
Overall outcome in terms of violence											

and they are instrumental. Most critically, atrocities within the context of a struggle (such as control of the state) tend to end when that struggle is resolved; with anomic violence, that is not always the case.

Indiscriminate or anomic violence occurred in four cases: to a great extent in the Balkans, West Africa, and Somalia and to a lesser but still significant degree in Angola. Further, the mayhem in the Balkans was part of a campaign of murderous ethnic cleansing, a distinctly different challenge (discussed under challenge D).

Challenge C: Insurgency/Competition for State Control

Challenge C represents the more traditional form of interstate violence: competition between the state and one or more groups without distinctly anomic violence (though not necessarily without atrocities, as discussed earlier). Note that we do not characterize the security challenge faced by Mexico as an insurgency, but that is a contested characterization; as discussed in Chapter One, many scholars and observers do describe Mexico in this way. Because the approaches relevant to resolving violence due to an insurgency might be relevant to the Mexican context, we have included this challenge in the discussion.

Table 4.5
Challenge C (Insurgency/Competition for State Control) in the Historical Cases

Challenge	Colombia	Peru	The Balkans	West Africa	The Caucasus	Somalia	Angola	Burma	Tajikistan	Afghanistan	Mexico
C. Insurgency/competition for state control											
Progress toward defeating insurgency/securing state control	↑↑	↑↑	↑↑↑		↑		↑↑↑	↑			
Overall outcome in terms of violence											

Challenge D: Ethnically Motivated Violence

Several of the historical cases involved moderate levels of ethnically motivated violence (West Africa, the Caucasus, Somalia, Angola, Burma, and Afghanistan), but only one case involved the intersection of ethnically motivated violence and extreme mayhem that constitutes murderous ethnic cleansing (the Balkans). There is a significant body of literature on murderous ethnic cleansing, but, because Mexico does not have a high level of ethnically motivated violence, lessons for facing challenge D are not particularly relevant to this discussion (and thus not presented in a table). However, we have retained challenge D as a category because it is plausible that high levels of ethnic tension could constrain the effectiveness of an approach to resolving one of the other challenges (one that Mexico might share).

Challenge E: Lack of Economic Opportunities

Numerous scholars have asserted a relationship between violence and a lack of economic opportunities. Beyond the oft-noted correlation

between poor economic conditions and unrest,⁶ a lack of economic opportunities can reduce the opportunity costs for engaging in violence or criminality, or for joining criminal or insurgent organizations.⁷ The supposition is that those who have less to lose are more likely to take risks associated with such activities.⁸ All the cases examined here struggled with this challenge, and those that made significant improvements toward reducing the level of violence they faced also made significant improvements in their opportunity structure.

As discussed in more detail later in this chapter, there are two broad categories of approaches to resolving this challenge. One is to provide more opportunities through initiatives to spur economic growth, improve the health of the economy, or improve the provision of social services (such as education). The second is to limit bad alternative opportunities by reducing or eliminating insurgencies and criminal gangs, increasing law-enforcement and judicial effectiveness and

Table 4.6
Challenge E (Lack of Economic Opportunities) in the Historical Cases

Challenge	Colombia	Peru	The Balkans	West Africa	The Caucasus	Somalia	Angola	Burma	Tajikistan	Afghanistan	Mexico
E. Lack of economic opportunities											
Extent to which economic opportunities improved	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑		↑↑	↑			
Overall outcome in terms of violence											

⁶ Paul Collier, V. L. Elliott, Håvard Hegre, Anke Hoeffler, Marta Reynal-Querol, and Nicholas Sambinis, *Breaking the Conflict Trap: Civil War and Development Policy*, Washington, D.C., and New York: World Bank and Oxford University Press, 2003, p. xiii.

⁷ Denise DiPasquale and Edward L. Glaeser, *The L.A. Riot and the Economics of Urban Unrest*, Cambridge, Mass.: National Bureau of Economic Research, Working Paper No. 5456, February 1996.

⁸ Klaus Deininger, *Causes and Consequences of Civil Strife: Micro-Level Evidence from Uganda*, Washington, D.C.: World Bank, Policy Research Working Paper 3045, May 2003.

thus the risk of incarceration for bad behavior, controlling expropriable resources, controlling territory/space, and so on.

Challenge F: High Level of Weapon Availability

A panel of subject-matter experts found a high level of weapon availability to be the single most important factor contributing to vulnerability to outbreaks of unrest.⁹ Eight of the ten historical cases had extreme levels of weapon availability (as does Mexico), and only a few made any progress against it.

Weapon availability is a problem that is difficult to solve once the “genie is out of the bottle.” Fortunately, reducing weapon availability is just one of many levers available to modify the overall opportunity structure for engaging in violence and to reduce incentives for anomic, criminal, opportunistic, or insurgent behavior. High weapon availability does, however, increase pressure on the military and law enforcement in terms of their equipment and tactical capabilities: Better-armed adversaries require better-armed police and military

Table 4.7
Challenge F (High Level of Weapon Availability) in the Historical Cases

Challenge	Colombia	Peru	The Balkans	West Africa	The Caucasus	Somalia	Angola	Burma	Tajikistan	Afghanistan	Mexico
F. High level of weapon availability											
Extent to which weapon availability was reduced			↑	↑			↑				
Overall outcome in terms of violence											

⁹ Christopher Paul, Russell W. Glenn, Beth Grill, Megan P. McKernan, Barbara Raymond, Matt Stafford, and Horacio R. Trujillo, “Identifying Urban Flashpoints: A Delphi Derived Model for Scoring Cities’ Vulnerability to Large-Scale Unrest,” *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, Vol. 31, No. 11, 2008.

forces, and such a scenario will increase law-enforcement and military casualties, regardless.

Challenge G: Competition over a Resource

Drug trafficking (and, to a lesser extent, sales) and competition over routes, suppliers, customers, and profits are essential characteristics of the contemporary security situation in Mexico. Similarly, many of the historical cases involved competition over control of a commodity or resource and its production, transportation, and profits: either drugs or mineral wealth (diamonds). In many respects, drugs and diamonds are similar (easily transportable, high value-to-weight ratio, lucrative international markets, constraints on open border crossing), but there are also important differences. Prime among them is that diamond mines cannot be moved, and initial distribution channels are dictated by diamonds' fixed locations of extraction. In contrast, drug cultivation, production, and transportation routes are much more flexible. Because diamond mines are finite in number and geographically fixed, it is possible for a government to exercise almost complete control over diamond production (though weak states have a much harder time, especially those that lack a monopoly over the use of force). Similar control of drug production and trade is simply not possible to the same

Table 4.8
Challenge G (Competition over a Resource) in the Historical Cases

extent in most contexts, given the wide area in which drugs can be grown and the flexibility of production and transshipment.

Extending firm control over a disputed commodity led to a substantial reduction in related violence in several of the historical cases. Fortunately, where such control was simply not possible, other approaches to reducing violence were successful.

Challenge H: Ungoverned Spaces

Related to challenge E (lack of economic opportunities) is the presence of significant amounts of ungoverned space. Ungoverned spaces foster alternative opportunities to engage in crime, mercenary violence, or other opportunistic behaviors. Furthermore, ungoverned spaces can provide nonstate actors with a form of “shadow governance,” which, in turn, can sap the legitimacy of the state. Most of the historical cases had either moderate or severe levels of ungoverned space at some point, and those that achieved significant reductions in violence also made significant progress toward extending control in formerly ungoverned spaces.

Table 4.9
Challenge H (Ungoverned Spaces) in the Historical Cases

Challenge	Colombia	Peru	The Balkans	West Africa	The Caucasus	Somalia	Angola	Burma	Tajikistan	Afghanistan	Mexico
H. Ungoverned spaces	▲	▲	▲	▲	▲	▲	▲	▲	▲	▲	▲
Progress toward extending control in formerly ungoverned spaces	▲	▲	▲	▲	▲	▲	▲	▲	▲	▲	▲
Overall outcome in terms of violence	▲	▲	▲	▲	▲	▲	▲	▲	▲	▲	▲

Efforts Correlated with Improvement in the Historical Cases

As part of the cross-case comparative analysis, we coded a number of factors related to strategies or efforts undertaken in the historical cases. We then examined the correlation between the presence of those efforts and progress toward resolving the selected challenges for cases in which a given challenge was present. Although the number of cases involved is small enough that we do not report specific correlation coefficients, Table 4.12 does indicate where we found a strong correlation between earnest efforts in an area and improvement toward resolving one of the challenges.¹⁰ Each strong correlation is denoted with shading.

An examination of Table 4.12 reveals several trends. First, improvements in most challenge areas have numerous correlates. This is consonant with a general finding from our previous work on counterinsurgency: Good practices tend to run in packs—that is, governments that manage to defeat insurgencies (and, apparently, those that make improvements in addressing these other challenges) do so by doing many things right.¹¹

Second, some strategies are correlated with multiple challenge areas and some with only a few. For example, state-/institution-building or reform, military professionalization, strengthening the economy/increasing economic opportunities, decreasing negative opportunities, and extending control over sovereign territory are all correlated with improvement in at least five challenge areas; extending firm control over a contentious commodity and combating corruption are correlated with only one challenge each. Combating corruption is

¹⁰ We coded many other factors that did *not* yield a correlation and thus are not reported in the table. Noteworthy in this regard are drug crop eradication efforts and specific strategies for dealing with an adversary (e.g., organizational decapitation efforts, focusing on groups one at a time, focusing on all groups simultaneously). This is not to suggest that those factors were not important in individual cases (indeed, the detailed case narratives suggest that some of these factors are important); they were not consistently correlated with improvement across the cases facing the challenges addressed in this study.

¹¹ Christopher Paul, Colin P. Clarke, Beth Grill, and Molly Dunigan, *Paths to Victory: Lessons from Modern Insurgencies*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-291/1-OSD, 2013.

Table 4.12
Efforts Consistently Correlated with Improvement in the Historical Cases

Effort Correlated with Improvement	Challenge							
	B	C	E	F	G	H	I	J
State-/institution-building or reform								
Focus on law enforcement, judicial reform								
Military professionalization								
Strengthening the economy/ increasing economic opportunities								
Decreasing negative opportunities								
Counterinsurgency								
Extending control over sovereign territory								
Extending firm control over a contentious commodity								
Mobilizing public outrage								
Combating corruption								
External intervention/peacekeepers								

NOTE: Challenge A is omitted from the table because progress toward resolving violence was an indirect result of challenges B, C, and D.

correlated only with challenge J (patronage/corruption). This suggests that it is not necessary to combat corruption to address most of these challenges or that efforts to combat corruption were not sufficiently successful in these cases so as to meaningfully contribute to resolving other challenges, or both. The detailed case narratives in the companion volume discuss corruption in greater detail.¹²

¹² See Paul, Clarke, and Serena, 2014.

Third, most strategies that are correlated with multiple challenges are correlated with both violence-related challenges and governance-/corruption-related challenges. Where these strategies are plausibly causally related instead of just correlated, the multiple-domain strategies offer the best prospects for dealing with these challenges in other, similar cases, such as Mexico.

Chicken or Egg? Correlation and Causation in Meeting Challenges

It is worth noting that all these correlations are just that—correlations. Correlation is not causation, and that caveat is particularly relevant here. It is entirely plausible that some of the efforts or strategies listed in the rows of Table 4.12 only appeared successful when corresponding challenges began to improve, with that improvement being predicated on entirely different factors. *The detailed case narratives take the discussion a step closer to causation because they capture the nuance that supports causal arguments (specifically, sequence).* If, for example, efforts correlated with improvement in a challenge area are clearly under way before such improvement is observed, and if it can be logically and compellingly argued that these efforts contributed to that improvement, then we have a much more plausible causal argument. If, on the other hand, improvement in a challenge area predates the implementation of a given effort, then we will know that the correlation is spurious or that the relationship is reversed, with the improvement in the challenge area enabling the factor rather than the other way around.

Confirmation in the Detailed Narratives

In the companion volume, we use the same terminology (the same challenges and categories of historical efforts to meet those challenges) to describe the historical cases and frame the lessons that the individual cases offer for Mexico.¹³ Where appropriate, the case narratives also evaluate the possible causal contributions of the various strategies and efforts observed to be correlated with improvement in the different challenge areas. The next chapter concludes this report by

¹³ See Paul, Clarke, and Serena, 2014.

summarizing our findings and recommendations from both this cross-comparative analysis and from the individual case studies.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Mexico is not Colombia, but which historical cases are better comparisons? This chapter summarizes the conclusions that can be drawn from the case studies, and synthesizes several policy recommendations that should support progress in resolving the range of specific challenges associated with the broader security situation in Mexico.

Mexico Is Not Colombia, Nor Is It Any of These Other Cases

Through this research, we sought to identify the best possible comparative cases to use to make analogies to Mexico, drawing from cases of warlordism, resource insurgency, ungoverned spaces, and organized crime. We began with the observation that Mexico is not particularly analogous to Colombia, even though Colombia is the most frequently invoked comparison case. However, we are forced to conclude that none of the other cases we examined are that much more analogous, with some being notably less so. *That said, all the cases, including Colombia, share some important contextual commonalities and challenges with Mexico and thus provide useful lessons.* The trick, then, is to isolate the aspects that provide the best opportunities for comparison and remain mindful of the differences. While there is not a single premium analogous case for Mexico, we identified several cases that should compete with Colombia as partial analogies in future policy discussions: Peru, the Balkans, West Africa, and the Caucasus. The remaining cases are much less analogous to Mexico but still provide lessons in discrete

areas, even if their primary value is in serving as negative examples: Tajikistan, Angola, Burma, Somalia, and Afghanistan.

Lessons Highlighted in the Case Narratives

Each case study, regardless of whether it proved to be a particularly good comparison case for Mexico, offered some useful lessons, even if only as an example of what can happen if challenges like those faced by Mexico are allowed to run unchecked. These lessons are explored in greater detail in the case studies themselves.¹ Here, we summarize the most prominent and relevant lessons, with supporting cases listed in parentheses:

- Reform and improvement take time. (Colombia, the Balkans, Somalia, and Tajikistan)
- External supporters can really help. (Colombia, the Balkans, and West Africa)
- Improving governance and government capability can help address multiple challenges. (Colombia, West Africa, the Caucasus, and Afghanistan)
- Unity of effort among law enforcement and military forces is important. (Peru)
- Reducing ungoverned spaces by extending control and governance can help address multiple challenges. (Peru, the Caucasus, and Afghanistan)
- Improving social services and changing the economic opportunity structure can help decrease violence. (The Caucasus and Angola)
- Empowering locals can contribute positively to security. (Peru)
- Police reform can help reduce violence and support improved governance. (The Balkans and Somalia)
- Effective efforts to fight organized crime balance both prevention and repression. (The Balkans)

¹ See Paul, Clarke, and Serena, 2014.

- Prioritizing the most dangerous and violent organizations can help reduce violence. (West Africa)
- Co-optation of DTOs can work, but it can also have less attractive overall outcomes. (Burma)
- Corruption and poor economic conditions can exacerbate other challenges. (All cases)

Confirmed Correlations in the Case Studies

Table 4.12 showed the classes of strategies and efforts that were correlated with improvement in several challenge areas in the historical cases. In Chapter Four, we indicated that the narratives were used to confirm whether those observed correlations were more than just correlations, by identifying their sequence in the cases (resolving chicken-or-egg ambiguity) and validating their presence as part of a plausible causal argument. Table 5.1 presents the results of this validation exercise, though several findings are worth discussing.

State- and institution-building or reform efforts were successful in addressing a range of challenges, including strengthening the state, reducing corruption and patronage, and, to a lesser extent, providing economic opportunities. There was progress against corruption and patronage when countries and regions focused on law-enforcement and judicial reform. Here, too, providing economic opportunities was also a (less successful) byproduct. The most effective strategies to reduce levels of anomic violence involved extending control over sovereign territory and, in some cases, external intervention. (The former strategy also helped counter insurgencies, provide economic opportunities, eliminate ungoverned spaces, and stabilize the government). Finally, decreasing negative opportunities helped extend government control over contested resources while also bolstering the state and the economy in general.

As anticipated, several of the correlations observed tended to be spurious correlations in one or more of the cases, lagging improvement in one or more challenge areas rather than preceding it. Others, while present as correlations, were judged not to be important contributors

Table 5.1
Efforts That Contributed to Improvement in the Historical Cases

Efforts That Contributed to Improvement	Challenge							
	B	C	E	F	G	H	I	J
State-/institution-building or reform								
Focus on law enforcement, judicial reform								
Military professionalization								
Strengthening the economy/ increasing economic opportunities								
Decreasing negative opportunities								
Counterinsurgency								
Extending control over sovereign territory								
Extending firm control over a contentious commodity								
Mobilizing public outrage								
Combating corruption								
External intervention/peacekeepers								

NOTE: Light green shading indicates that the effort was validated as contributing to improvement in some case studies. Dark green shading indicates that the effort was strongly validated a contributing to improvement in multiple case studies. Challenge A is omitted from the table because progress toward resolving violence was an indirect result of challenges B, C, and D. See Chapter Four for descriptions of the challenges.

to resolution of challenges in a significant number of cases. Table 5.1 shows only those efforts that were confirmed as important contributors to improvement in the listed challenge areas in multiple cases. Efforts highlighted with dark green shading were validated as strong contributors to improvement in the referenced challenge areas in almost every case in which they were present.

The findings reported in Table 5.1 led us to conclude that five categories of strategies and efforts have been particularly effective when seeking improvement in addressing this largely shared set of historical challenges:

- state-/institution-building or reform
- focus on law enforcement, judicial reform
- decreasing negative opportunities
- extending control over sovereign territory
- external intervention/peacekeepers.

Recommendations from the Literature and Historical Case Studies

The existing literature on Mexico puts forward a range of recommendations drawn largely from analyses of Mexico in its own context, without the benefit of comparative analyses. In this section, we briefly review these recommendations and evaluate them in light of the historical evidence. Note that many of these strategies were tried in whole or in part in the historical cases, so there are some direct comparisons to be made.

Ways to Combat the VDTOs

Observers have recommended or criticized different approaches to combating the VDTOs. Here, we examine the most commonly cited approaches.

Organizational Decapitation

To date, one of the prominent strategies employed in Mexico has been decapitation, efforts to arrest or kill VDTO kingpins or other senior leaders. This strategy has been roundly criticized. As Bob Killebrew and Jennifer Bernal of the Center for a New American Security note,

Attempts by law enforcement to dismantle cartels by arresting or killing their leaders have produced mixed results because of the cartels' cellular structure and because actual control of cartel

operations constantly shifts. Elimination of well-known leaders usually empowers lesser-known individuals who operate anonymously until they too rise to prominence.²

Removing senior leaders can lead to fragmentation, which can increase intergroup competition, which can increase violence. Decapitation is seen as a threat to stability.³

The historical cases are more sanguine about decapitation. Peru made significant progress against Sendero Luminoso (Shining Path) by capturing Abimael Guzmán, and the elimination of particularly onerous warlords in West Africa was beneficial there, too. In Angola, the removal of Jonas Savimbi allowed the Angolan government to regain control of the diamond industry and was critical in defeating the National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (better known as UNITA). The obvious conclusion is to recommend thoughtful decapitation. Where leaders are exceptionally bloody-minded or push their organizations toward a structure and tactics that increase violence, their removal might well be beneficial. In a context like Mexico, with numerous competing groups, routine removal of “normal” leaders is likely to create succession turmoil (and associated violence), but it is unlikely to have a lasting impact on the drug trade or violence.

Pressure the System

Rather than attacking the tops of organizations, some observers recommend a bottom-up approach to attacking the VDTOs. They suggest a combination of attacks on the operational capability of the VDTOs and their profits.⁴ Rather than seeking to kill or capture the individual kingpins, it would better, they argue, to take out a whole layer of mid-level leaders, reducing the organization’s ability to operate and regenerate.⁵ Simultaneously, they note the VDTOs’ profit motive and suggest

² Killebrew and Bernal, 2010, p. 18.

³ Sylvia Longmire, “Why Arresting ‘El Chapo’ Might be a Bad Thing,” *Small Wars Journal*, October 31, 2012b.

⁴ Knowles, 2008.

⁵ Felbab-Brown, 2013.

asset seizures and efforts to interrupt profits and the enjoyment of those profits (beyond efforts to interdict the flow of narcotics).⁶ While the historical cases examined here are largely silent on this issue, the logic is sound.

Attack Specific VDTOs or Weaken Them Simultaneously

Observers have suggested two contrary approaches to attacking the VDTOs: selectively attacking individual organizations or attempting to weaken multiple groups simultaneously. Both views seem well supported, logically.

Those advocating selective targeting suggest using it as a disincentive to violence.⁷ Under such a scheme, the government would announce its intention to target the “most violent” group in an area and then do so.⁸ In principle, this should create a “race to the bottom” as the groups compete to avoid being most violent and attracting the resultant government attention. Such an approach attempts to make violence unprofitable, thereby reducing it. There are concerns about how the approach would work in practice, however. Mexican VDTOs are already fairly sophisticated in their use of propaganda and deception, and attributing violence to specific groups is fairly straightforward because they often make their responsibility known (accompanied by banners or messages to convey threats or warnings). If there were suddenly real disincentives to claiming responsibility for violence, such claims might well diminish or, worse, be “spoofed,” making it difficult for the government to determine which group is the most violent or poses the most serious threat to stability and thus deserves sanctions.

Paul Rexton Kan and Phil Williams instead suggest that the VDTOs be targeted simultaneously.⁹ Constant, steady pressure, they argue, could incrementally weaken all groups together and avoid “asymmetric reductions in the power of one or two drug trafficking

⁶ Grayson, 2011.

⁷ Felbab-Brown, 2013.

⁸ Mark Kleiman, “Surgical Strikes in the Drug Wars: Smarter Policies for Both Sides of the Border,” *Foreign Affairs*, September–October 2011.

⁹ Kan and Williams, 2010.

organizations which then make attractive targets for rivals to attack.”¹⁰ While this, too, sounds good in principle, it could be resource-intensive. We question the capability of Mexican security forces to apply sufficient pressure on all VDTOs simultaneously.

The historical cases support the selective targeting of particularly violent and heinous groups. In both West Africa and the Balkans, the targeting and elimination of groups responsible for atrocities improved the situation. Note that such targeting was not used as a disincentive to violence, as is most often proposed in the Mexican context, but simply to remove groups with particularly heinous track records from the equation. The removal of the most violent groups in both West Africa and the Balkans enervated the respective conflicts in both cases.

Avoid Further Militarization, Treat Violence as a Law-and-Order Problem

Those who criticize the characterization of the VDTOs as insurgent groups of one flavor or another (see the discussion in Chapter Four) recommend minimizing the use of the armed forces in Mexico.¹¹ They argue that military forces are not trained for police work and that lengthy exposure of military forces to corruption (amply available in Mexico) will have unfortunate long-term consequences.¹² A better solution, they claim, is to view Mexican drug violence as a law-and-order problem and avoid treating it with counterinsurgency or counterterrorism techniques.¹³

For all the reasons argued—the inappropriateness of military forces for police work, the need for locally familiar police to enable effective community policing and intelligence gathering, the benefit to civil society of legitimate judicial activity, the danger of corruption in the military—we agree with this recommendation, with an important caveat drawn from the historical cases. A comparison with other cases shows that treating the adversary as a law-enforcement problem

¹⁰ Kan and Williams, 2010, p. 229.

¹¹ Kan, 2012.

¹² Kan and Williams, 2010.

¹³ Kan and Williams, 2010.

is a luxury available in conflicts well past their apex, not something that any government faced with VDTOs can adopt at any time. In an ideal context, Mexican law enforcement would be strong enough, and the Mexican VDTOs weak enough, for the problem to be viewed in strictly law-enforcement terms. However, if that were the case, a study like this one would not be necessary, because the problem would not be that bad. Research on Mexican violence is necessary because there is a real potential for the instability generated as a result of this violence to spread outward, crossing borders and permeating multiple regions throughout the Americas. As long as the VDTOs overmatch the police in terms of weapons and tactics, and as long as the violence remains at such extreme levels, such a strategy is simply not practical. We conclude that this recommendation is currently more aspirational than practical: Mexico should seek ways to reduce drug-related violence and increase law-enforcement capabilities to such an extent that it becomes possible to treat the challenges posed by VDTOs as strictly law-enforcement problems.

Leverage the Law of Supply and Demand

A number of existing recommendations focus on the economic system of the drug trade itself.

Make Violence Unprofitable

This recommendation follows the same logic as selective targeting of the most violent VDTOs. If governments can put sufficient pressure on VDTOs to ensure that violence costs more than it nets, then participants in the illegal markets might police themselves.¹⁴ While the historical cases include instances in which targeting and eliminating the most violent groups reduced overall violence, none can offer good examples of specific successful efforts to make violence unprofitable.

Counter Demand

The literature is rife with various calls for improved counterdemand efforts. The United States is correctly identified as the primary market

¹⁴ David Luhnow and Jose de Cordoba, "War on the Other Terror," *The Australian*, February 23, 2009.

for drugs originating in or flowing through Mexico. Proposed counterdemand strategies include efforts to extinguish demand, coerce users through deterrence and punishment to limit demand, and fulfill demand either through product substitution or by decriminalizing and regulating the desired product.¹⁵ Successful demand reduction through whatever means could dramatically decrease the profits of the VTDOs, limiting the resources available to support other, more violent crimes and changing the overall incentive structure.¹⁶ Countering the seemingly insatiable U.S. demand for drugs will remain a challenge for every successive U.S. administration tasked with continuing the “War on Drugs.” No policy prescriptions to date have appeared to successfully address the dilemma of an unending demand for illegal narcotics. None of the historical cases involved successful counterdemand efforts.

Counter Supply

Countering supply is the traditional effort to combat the flow of drugs and focuses on eradicating crops and interdicting drugs in transit (including border control). While countersupply efforts can reduce the amount of drugs produced and delivered, they can have a number of unintended consequences, including increased prices, greater geographic displacement (shifting production or transit routes), expansion of production areas, and increased corruption.¹⁷ The historical cases include numerous instances of countersupply efforts; all such efforts were less successful than intended.¹⁸

Other Proposed Solutions

The literature includes several other suggestions and recommendations worth considering.

¹⁵ Robert J. Bunker and Matt Begert, “Counter-Demand Approaches to Narcotics Trafficking,” *Small Wars and Insurgencies*, Vol. 21, No. 1, 2010.

¹⁶ Brian Michael Jenkins, “Could Mexico Fail?” *Homeland Security Today*, Vol. 6, No. 2, February 2009.

¹⁷ Sullivan, 2010.

¹⁸ Sullivan, 2010.

Proactive Counterviolence

Most traditional efforts to counter violence are reactive: When violence occurs, perpetrators are investigated and prosecuted, or they are subject to other types of targeted enforcement after the fact. Several observers recommend proactive approaches, including anti-gang laws and civil injunctions, to disrupt the freedom of gangs to operate and associate.¹⁹ Such efforts can be joined by other preventative and remediation efforts, including protection and support for those who wish to leave gangs, employment and training programs, school-based violence prevention programs, and safe recreational opportunities.²⁰ While none of the historical cases considered here included efforts focused specifically on gangs, there is existing evidence of the success of such programs elsewhere.²¹ Further, our historical cases do suggest that improved economic opportunities diminish the attractiveness of joining or staying in a violent organization.

Collusion

Though not presented as a preferred option, some observers do look back to prior eras in the Mexican drug trade in which violence was used parsimoniously and with purpose, largely because the government and security forces turned a blind eye and colluded with the DTOs. Returning to the 1970s and 1980s and forming pacts with the VDTOs to reduce violence in exchange for tacit acceptance of the drug trade has been discussed as a possible alternative.²² Two of the historical cases, Peru and Burma, did feature collusion as part of an at least partially successful violence-reduction campaign. However, careful scrutiny of the overall outcome in both cases does not support this approach.

¹⁹ Sullivan, 2010.

²⁰ USAID, 2006.

²¹ USAID, 2006.

²² James A. Baker III, "A New Anti-Drug Strategy in Mexico?" *Baker Institute Blog*, June 26, 2012.

Strengthen the State

Numerous observers have proposed efforts to reduce corruption, increase legitimacy, and otherwise strengthen the Mexican state. These suggestions include fighting corruption and promoting police and juridical reform,²³ growing the capacity for community policing and public works,²⁴ extending rule of law and control over ungoverned spaces,²⁵ and stamping out corruption,²⁶ to name a few. The historical cases support the benefits of such efforts, by and large. They also caution, however, that such efforts take time and effort. Furthermore, as the West Africa case demonstrates, patronage can have a stabilizing effect on society and should not necessarily be derided as an evil without first considering the context.²⁷

In areas of softened sovereignty, the onus should be on state-building, state legitimacy, and state capacity.²⁸ In their book *Ungoverned Spaces*, Anne Clunan and Harold Trinkunas suggest that the state consider drawing alternative governance structures into a wider network that extends to nongovernmental organizations, international agencies, and states that can help shape norms that reinforce the sovereignty of the national government.²⁹

Mobilize Public Outrage

Kan and Williams recommend greater attention to mobilizing public outrage against the VDTOs.³⁰ Clearly, the VDTOs require some

²³ Kurtzman, 2009.

²⁴ Sullivan and Elkus, 2008.

²⁵ Grayson, 2013.

²⁶ Felbab-Brown, 2013.

²⁷ Detailed narratives for West Africa and the other country cases examined in this study are available in the companion report (Paul, Clarke, and Serena, 2014).

²⁸ Anne L. Clunan and Harold A. Trinkunas, "Alternative Governance and Security," in Anne L. Clunan and Harold A. Trinkunas, eds., *Ungoverned Spaces: Alternatives to State Authority in an Era of Softened Sovereignty*, Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2010a, p. 276.

²⁹ Clunan and Trinkunas, 2010a, p. 290.

³⁰ Kan and Williams, 2010.

degree of tacit public tolerance or passive acceptance, otherwise the authorities would be regularly tipped off about VDTO presence and activities, witnesses would be willing to testify, recruiting would be more difficult, and the amount of operational friction that the VDTOs encounter would be much greater. The historical cases offer support for the notion of mobilizing public outrage. While only one case, Peru and the arming of the *rondas campesinas* (peasant patrols), involved a specific government program aimed at mobilizing and leveraging public outrage, the public's support of efforts to combat the perpetrators of violence was important in several cases. When the public is engaged and citizens feel as though they have a stake in the country, there is less opportunity for VDTOs to extend control over ungoverned spaces.

External Support

The literature suggests that other nations—most often the United States—support Mexico as it pursues solutions to its violence problem.³¹ A variety of regional partnerships have been proposed with different types of recommended support, including funding, encouragement, materiel, training, and expertise. The historical cases echo the value of an external supporter, though the most successful external efforts (in the Balkans and West Africa) involved massive commitments of resources and external forces for a prolonged period and of a kind Mexico is unlikely to allow. Even if the United States remains limited in providing support, perhaps Mexico would be more amenable to working with other partners in the Americas, such as Colombia or Brazil.

Recommendations for Mexico

Based on the historical narratives, the comparative analysis, consideration of the Mexican case in its own context, and the review of existing proposals and suggestions, we make the following broad recommenda-

³¹ See, for example, Schaefer, Bahney, and Riley, 2009, and Killebrew and Bernal, 2010.

tions for Mexico's government to consider in its efforts to address the country's current security challenges:

- Focus efforts on the most violent of the VDTOs by both disincentivizing violence and removing the worst offenders.
- Engage in government institution-building and reform, with a specific focus on
 - law enforcement and judicial reform
 - extending control over (and government services to) all sovereign Mexican territory.
- Engage in proactive counterviolence efforts, including anti-*mara* (anti-gang) laws and alternative opportunities for current and potential members (e.g., education, training, employment).
- Investigate ways to better leverage public outrage, vet and selectively support citizen militias, and push law enforcement reform to the local level to enable legitimate community policing.
- Measure and evaluate the state's ability to control the use of force, enforce political decisions within sovereign territory, and repel attacks against security forces.
- Increase policymakers' willingness to accept international support, especially from the United States. The United States can be immensely helpful in training and equipping Mexican forces and mentoring Mexican police in intelligence-gathering tactics, techniques, and procedures.

These recommendations are not new; they have been offered in other studies and are a feature of many advocacy efforts. This study provides additional support and endorsement of these recommendations. Note that while most require action on the part of the Mexican government, regional partners and neighbors—especially the United States—can support (or continue to support) these the efforts recommended here through vocal policy encouragement as well as by providing funding, establishing funding conditions, and offering training, advice, and materiel support to the extent that Mexico will allow.

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Drug-related violence has become a very serious problem in Mexico. Of particular concern to U.S. policymakers, violent drug-trafficking organizations produce, transship, and deliver tens of billions of dollars' worth of narcotics into the United States annually. The activities of these organizations are not confined to drug trafficking; they extend to such criminal enterprises as human trafficking, weapon trafficking, kidnapping, money laundering, extortion, bribery, and racketeering. Then, there is the violence: Recent incidents have included assassinations of politicians and judges; attacks against rival organizations, associated civilians, and the police and other security forces; and seemingly random violence against innocent bystanders. Despite the scope of the threat to Mexico's security, these groups are not well understood, and optimal strategies to combat them have not been identified. Comparison between Mexico and Colombia is a tempting and frequently made analogy and source for policy recommendations. A review of these approaches, combined with a series of historical case studies, offers a more thorough comparative assessment. Regions around the world have faced similar challenges and may hold lessons for Mexico. One point is clear, however: Mexico is not Colombia. In fact, Mexico is not particularly like any other historical case characterized by "warlordism," resource insurgency, ungoverned spaces, and organized crime. Despite the lack of a perfectly analogous case, Mexico stands to benefit from historical lessons and efforts that were correlated with the greatest improvements in countries facing similar challenges. A companion volume presents in-depth profiles of each of these conflicts.



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