

Mexico's War on Crime: A Decade of (Militarized) Failure

Written by Mike LaSusa Tuesday, 06 December 2016



Mexican soldiers in a convoy

This week marks ten years since [Mexico's](#) government embarked on a militarized campaign against the country's criminal organizations, but while many criminal leaders have been captured or killed, a decade of confrontation has failed to substantially improve the nation's security situation.

On December 11, 2006, days after being sworn in, [Mexico's](#) then-President Felipe Calderón [announced](#) that his administration was deploying thousands of federal troops to combat organized crime in his home state of Michoacán.

Interior Minister Francisco Javier Ramírez Acuña said at the time that "the battle against organized crime is only just beginning, and it will be a fight that will take time."

Ten years later, Michoacán remains one of [Mexico's](#) [most violent](#) states.

Vigilante groups -- which have long [posed a dilemma](#) for local authorities -- [continue to operate](#) in the area. Several such groups are suspected of participating in criminal activities, rather than combating them.

And despite the recent capture of several top leaders, the dominant local criminal organization, the [Knights Templar](#), appears as willing as ever to

directly confront the authorities, reportedly [downing a government helicopter](#) during a September security operation.

In many ways, Michoacán is a microcosm of the larger problem, as high levels of violence persist at the national level, even areas where the government has spent millions on security. The months of August and September were the [deadliest](#) in [Mexico](#) in almost 20 years, with organized crime estimated to account for [nearly 60 percent](#) of the more than 15,000 homicides recorded so far this year.

Violence associated with organized crime is not only on the rise, but it also appears to be [spreading](#) to areas of [Mexico](#) that had not previously seen high levels of criminal activity. The state of Colima, which borders Michoacán to the north, may be the most extreme example of this trend. Homicides there have [spiked](#) by as much as 900 percent this year compared to last.

This [backsliding](#) on modest [security gains](#) in recent years has not gone unnoticed by the Mexican public. A recent survey [showed](#) that citizens' perceptions of security are in decline, and more than seven in ten respondents believe that the government's current strategy is making the country less safe.

In spite of this, the government of current President Enrique Peña Nieto has continued to rely on the armed forces to carry out internal security functions, particularly in areas with high levels of crime-related violence [like Michoacán](#). And representatives of Peña Nieto's Institutional Revolutionary Party (Partido Revolucionario Institucional - PRI) recently [proposed legislation](#) that would expand the armed forces' role in the drug war.

There are good reasons why the Mexican government opted for a militarized strategy to fight against criminal organizations. One of the most prominent is the marked [lack of trust](#) most Mexican citizens have in the civilian police. This distrust is not necessarily undeserved. Recent reports have found that [thousands of Mexican police officers](#) unfit for service are still on the streets. Meanwhile, [emblematic cases](#) involving corrupt police have made police reform even more urgent, but progress remains painfully slow.

In contrast, the military is widely viewed by the public as an effective crime fighting force. Because of its overwhelming size and physical presence, results are usually immediate, albeit unsustainable. It has high favorability ratings, and is seen as less corrupt than its police counterparts. At the height of Calderon's fight against organized crime, for instance, [Mexico's](#) military trailed only the US' and [Canada's](#) in terms

of trust, according to Vanderbilt's Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP) ([pdf](#)). This is especially true of the Marines, the unit most responsible for capturing and killing some of the country's top kingpins.

However, the militarization of public security has pushed [Mexico](#) into a seemingly endless spiral of violence. The military is about confrontation and controlling physical space, something that intensifies conflict rather than defusing it over the long haul. Add to this a record of [serious human rights abuses](#), and you have a recipe for backlash, especially in the poorer, more marginalized areas where the military is dispatched.

What's more, the use of the military has engendered dependence. The military has become, quite simply, a crutch to fill any security gap. This is made worse by the fact that states will happily outsource this job since it is both expensive, and politically and socially costly for local politicians.

In addition, militarization in [Mexico](#) has also been critiqued from a practical perspective. Unlike police, soldiers are not typically trained to carry out complex investigations of crime groups that could help prosecutors build cases that would dismantle such organizations. Sending the military to areas hard hit by criminal violence may help reduce violence temporarily, but often this approach simply pushes crime groups into other areas with less security force presence. And ultimately, it does nothing to alleviate the long term issues related to the institutions that ensure rule of law, namely the judicial system, the penitentiaries, and the Attorney General's Office.

This dynamic has been acknowledged even by top military leaders like General Salvador Cienfuegos Zepeda, who heads [Mexico](#)'s National Defense Secretariat (Secretaría de la Defensa Nacional - SEDENA). Earlier this year, Cienfuegos [said](#), "Not one of the people with responsibility for this institution is prepared to carry out the functions of the police...We don't do that. We don't ask for it. We have no taste for it and we are not comfortable in this role."

Although other government officials have [expressed support](#) for reducing the military's role in public security, it is unlikely that such a shift will happen in the near future. Recent police and judicial reform efforts have been slow-going and hampered by numerous setbacks, and public support for militarization in times of rising violence is likely to make demilitarizing public security a politically-unattractive proposition.

However, the record of the past ten years points to the conclusion that continuing the current militarized approach will yield similarly lackluster results. Making the politically difficult decisions to reform and

strengthen civilian institutions may be [Mexico](#)'s best hope for making long-term progress in the fight against organized crime. But until politicians make that leap, [Mexico](#) seems destined to maintain the current gruesome status quo between security forces and organized crime.