Violence and Terrorism: A Perspective from Mexico

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Abstract: This paper emphasizes that it is extremely important to make particular evaluations of all kinds of violent acts that we face today, and that identifying the purposes of the performers, considering their ideological, social and economic reasons, and taking into consideration that, although a tough task, it will always be better to analyze and deal with a wide spectrum of violent manifestation, instead of labeling all of them as only one kind of threat.

Keywords: Socio-political process, armed groups, drug trafficking, cooperation

Since 9/11 in 2001, there has been a strong tendency to associate any kind of violence, of any origin, with the idea of terrorism. This is also followed by a disposition to react almost automatically with suspicions about its Islamic motivations.

In the middle of this situation, and in order to establish effective strategies to fight terrorist acts and groups all over the world, it is extremely important to make particular evaluations of all kinds of violent acts that we face today, identifying the purposes of the performers, considering their ideological, social and economic reasons, and taking into consideration that, although a tough task, it will always be better to analyze and deal with a wide spectrum of violent manifestation, instead of labeling all of them as only one kind of threat. Oversimplification will only make the challenge of understanding and fighting terror even harder.

Considering any kind of violent act or strong anti-establishment protest as a national security threat, and in one way or another relating it to a terrorist agenda, is a very common practice, and a useful instrument in the hands of states for particular situations. However, this practice can distort reality in a very serious manner; it can defuse the needed analytical exercise and the strategy for action.

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Nowadays, the strong perception of insecurity that prevails in Mexican public opinion is linked to a wide agenda of violence that includes:

a) Socio-political protest 
b) Armed groups  
c) Crime and drug trafficking organizations 

In the particular cases of acts that can be considered as terrorist, we must judge in a first place different actions developed by drug trafficking organizations or drug cartels, and of a second level of importance, some actions done by armed groups or guerrillas.

Let us look at these sources of violence.

**Socio-political Protest**

With a total population of 105 millions, the official statistics of the Social Development Secretary\(^1\) recognize that 47% of the population is living in poverty, and 18.2% is living in extreme poverty, with an illiteracy rate of 9%. If we also take into consideration that 10% of the richest people receive more than 42% of global income, and the poorest 10% received only 1.5% of the total, it is not difficult to imagine that such a kind of unfair distribution of richness is a strong motivation for protests by trade unions, political parties, and civil society organizations.

The triumph of Vicente Fox, heading the National Action Party (Partido de Acción Nacional, PAN), in the presidential elections of 2000 ended 71 years of political hegemony of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (Partido Revolucionario Institucional, PRI) in Mexico and started the so-called ‘transition towards democracy’ period. The new self-designated ‘Government of Change’ raised many different expectations in regard to democratization, development and relaxation of social tensions in general.\(^2\)

Fox’s administration (2000-2006) was characterized by: new permanent contradictions between the President and a Congress with diverse political integration, a continuation of neoliberal economic policies started during last PRI’s administrations, the growing enrichment of high

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\(^2\) This transcendental change in Mexican politics was explained mainly by: a) the deterioration of the image of the PRI (high level of corruption, weakness of the traditional social agenda, frustration in wide sectors of the electorate, the idea of a needed change and exploration of new options). In fact, for many voters it was more a punishment of the PRI, than a vote in favor of PAN; b) the very popular image of Vicente Fox, governor of the strong and well-managed State of Guanajuato, who started his campaign forming a group called Fox’s Friends and using his very successful slogan: ‘Vote for the Change’; c) the decision of former President Ernesto Zedillo and some sections inside the PRI to act in a more transparent manner, accepting new realities and the popular will in favor of democratic development, instead of imposing fraud as in the 1988 elections and other previous moments. Fraud in the 1988 Presidential elections was particularly infamous. On that occasion, a ‘computing system failure’ gave the victory to Carlos Salinas de Gortari (PRI, 50.4%), thereby ‘defeating’ Cúahutemoc Cárdenas (31.1% heading the National Democratic Front, which included leftist forces and former PRI militants).
classes, no clear effort against generalized corruption, growing levels of violence, failure of “Operation Secure Mexico”, further deterioration of the social security system and public education, strong efforts from the central political power to destroy the image of the main opposition leader, Andrés Manuel López Obrador, and the failure of the impeachment case against him due to great popular opposition and street demonstrations.

The Fox administration declared and insisted that it had reached some important achievements at the end of its mandate: economic stability, a growing level of social housing construction, the program ‘Opportunities’ (financing alternatives, educational programs, medical projects and other social needs) and a reduction of poverty and extreme poverty levels. These social programs were favored mainly by the high prices of oil and huge annual remittances from Mexicans working in the US (legally and illegally) reaching over even more than 20 billion dollars in 2005 and 2006. In fact, the 7% of annual economic growth promised by Fox during his electoral campaign was a distant goal compared with the oscillating 0 % to 4.6% GDP achieved in those years.

In spite of the fact that there were some detectable advances in democratic expressions (political and social manifestations, a higher level of openness in the press and media), it is also true that police-military repressive practices persisted, and increased notoriously during 2006 with the repression of mine workers in Michoacán, the excessive use of force and brutal violations of human rights in face of the popular protests in Atenco, and the coordinated action developed by the military and federal forces in order to end the six months conflict with professors and other social sectors in the state of Oaxaca. At the same time, the assassination of journalists in actions linked to their work is a new negative characteristic that appeared in recent years.

The 2006 Presidential campaign was a very tense one and presented new challenges. For example, traditionally a president designated his successor, but in this occasion Felipe Calderón (Fox’s Secretary of Energy) quitted searching for the presidential chair and generated strong contradictions with Fox. During most of the electoral race, Andrés Manuel López Obrador, head of the Party of the Democratic Revolution (Partido de la Revolución Democrática, PRD) and two other allied political parties, led the polls and seemed to have a sure victory. His coalition, For the Good of All, First the Poor People (Por el Bien de Todos Primero los Pobres), made some mistakes that help to explain why a notorious 10-point advantage was drastically reduced near the

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3 Even the some Fox family members have been strongly accused of corruption. The accusations were directed against Fox’s wife’s sons: the Bribiesca brothers. The case is still under investigation.


5 “Mexico has become the most dangerous country for journalists in the Americas. In the last eight years, at least 24 journalists and media workers have been killed, eight have disappeared and dozens have been threatened or attacked in direct reprisal for their work. The majority of these cases continue to be met with impunity, a situation that has led to a general state of self-censorship. The main obstacles for the work of journalist are organized crime, corruption, lack of political will and the failure of the Mexican authorities to provide protection and security to journalists”. International Press Institute, ‘Statement from the International Mission on Attacks against Journalists and Media’, Mexico City (25 April, 2008), at http://www.freemedia.at/cms/ipi/missions_detail.html?ctxid=CH0065&docid=CMS1209469073224&category=missions.
election date. Some of these were: Obrador’s attacks against high capital, his absence from the first televised debate between candidates, less favorable results in polls led him to criticize all polling companies and not to recognize them, and so on. These attitudes generated a high level of electoral confusion in important sectors of society that where then wooed by other participating parties.

At the same time, rightist political sectors developed various successful campaigns characterizing López Obrador as a danger to Mexico. In this effort, the President, in an alliance with the media, the Catholic Church, and entrepreneurs, interfered in the democratic process in an open war against Obrador. The candidate of the PRD was described as a new dictator that wanted to bring the country back to previous non-democratic stages, and was presented as “a promoter of an economic crisis”, “obstacle to foreign investment”, and a “menace to the stability” of high, medium and low level classes. PAN’s strategy also incorporated into its new discourse, some of the most popular demands.

The official results of the presidential elections of July 2, 2006 where: Felipe Calderón (PAN) 35.89%, and López Obrador (PRD-PT-C) 35.31%. So the margin of difference was only 0.58%.

These narrowed results generated a very deep post-electoral conflict and showed a strongly fractured society with manifestations of frustration and discontent in different parts of the country. The PRD transformed itself into the second political force, and the historical PRI fell down to a third place. The opposition demanded a full recount of votes and argued fraud (even cybernetic fraud), but only a partial recount was made.

Other actions taken by the opposition had contradictory and weakening results as were for example: the closing of Reforma Avenue in Mexico City during weeks, affecting people and business activity in an important part of the Capital of the country, the main constituency in favor of the PRD and Obrador, and the celebration of a National Democratic Convention that elected López Obrador as the ‘Legitimate President’ who formed a parallel ‘legitimate government’. These initiatives were refused by important groups of sympathizers, supporters and even by sections of PRD militants. The PRD, strengthened by the election results, suffered immediately because of the new internal divisions and lost important percentages of popular support.

President Calderón participated in the empowerment ceremony in front of The Congress of the Union, in spite of PRD strong opposition to that, and formed a cabinet in favor of promoting foreign and national capital, investments, and announcing a “strong hand” in internal policy. A fundamental part of his new agenda was the immediate assignment of a central role to military forces in defending law and order, and fighting insecurity threats coming from drug cartels, in what was conceived as a “long and costly campaign in resources and human beings”. Calderón announced higher salaries to all military personnel, and the high level of social recognition of the institution was stressed.

**Armed Groups**

In Mexico, as in other different parts of Latin America, there were important guerrilla movements in the 1960s. The main guerrilla groups that operated in the mountains of the state of Guerrero
during the ‘60s (headed by Lucio Cabañas and Genaro Vázquez), were immersed in the revolutionary atmosphere of those years, highly inspired by the example of the Cuban Revolution.

After the defeat of the guerrillas by military means, and the repression of the famous Mexican student movement of 1968, there was a long period of almost total disappearance of that kind of armed movement. That is why the upsurge of the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional, EZLN) on January 1, 1994 in the State of Chiapas was a very surprising event that started the so-called ‘second wave’ of armed groups in Mexico.

After its sudden appearance and short direct fighting against military forces, a cease fire was declared and a long period of dialogue and negotiations started.

Since those first moments in 1994, the EZLN established some independent municipalities in areas in the northern part of Chiapas State. We can say that all the process has been mainly characterized by some advances in the negotiating platform, a kind of partial implementation of the agreements, and a permanent parallel strategy of military pressures and counterinsurgency tactics that has affected the negotiating and confidence building process. The formula of Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) included in conflict resolution theory was not applied and in fact the EZLN kept armed.

Although the EZLN is still today an armed movement, it has frozen its military actions, and gives total priority to a political platform that defends Mexican indigenous groups’ demands and rights.

As positive aspects we can point out:

a) The cease fire and the starting of the dialogue (1994);

b) The approval of a congressional law supporting dialogue, reconciliation and peace with dignity in Chiapas (1995) regulating the compromise by the state in order to stop military action and not to capture EZLN leaders;

c) The creation of the Commission for Concord and Pacification (Comisión de Concordia y Pacificación, COCOPA) integrated by representatives of political parties with Congressional representation;

d) The signing of San Andrés Agreement in 1996 as a result of the negotiating process on indigenous culture and rights.

As negative ones we may consider:

a) The permanent military presence through all Chiapas that motivates periodical declarations of ‘Red Alerts’ by the EZLN;

b) The creation of paramilitary forces (like Justice, Peace and Development) that act with total impunity and pressure constantly in different Zapatistas areas using the argument of land conflicts;

c) The development of a counterinsurgency strategy that includes: military operations arguing fighting against drug crop cultivation; development of propaganda campaigns; limits on international observers; constant pressures on potential or real social bases of Zapatista support; repressive actions like in Acteal in 1997; displacement of local populations;
arbitrary detentions; development programs conceived without consulting with the Zapatistas nor with the local factors in a classical project ‘from the top’, and so on.

At the start of Fox’s mandate, some Zapatista prisoners were released, some military check-points were temporarily closed, and a new law on indigenous rights and culture was passed by the Congress. This Law of 2001, though evaluated as a better one, was strongly criticized and considered ‘treason’ by the EZLN because it did not supported the full autonomy of indigenous groups. As part of its refusal strategy, the EZLN created in 2003 the five Good Governance Councils (Juntas de Buen Gobierno) and the Snails (Caracoles), that is, social webs supporting education and health in the autonomous Zapatista municipalities. In this way, the EZLN opted for a civic resistance alternative instead of a military one, consolidating parallel forms of self-governance.

During the tense year of 2006, the EZLN insisted on the need to create a ‘Wide Political Front’, forging an alliance with different forces in Mexican society – students, workers, farmers – and creating “a national program of transformation, clearly left-inspired and anti-capitalist”. The EZLN criticized all political parties participating in the electoral campaign and developed The Alternative Campaign touring different states through all the country, insisting on developing a peaceful political alternative, which even included, for the first time since the start of the conflict, public TV appearances of Subcomandante Marcos in Mexico City.

The Popular Revolutionary Army (Ejército Popular Revolucionario, EPR)\(^6\) was created in the state of Guerrero in 1996. From this, many other groups have originated, in a process reflecting not only internal contradictions, but an argued political strategy of developing façade organizations. It is very difficult to have an exact idea of the total number, power, and real geographic presence of these groups. Many are considered as such once they send messages and communiqués declaring their formation, strategy and purposes. There are many inventories and lists of these groups (estimating them at 30, approximately), but Mexican intelligence sources identify only nine “subversive or bursting groups”.\(^7\) (See Map Main Armed Groups.)

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\(^6\) Formed on May 1, 1996, the Ejército Popular Revolucionario unified various groups. They have developed some action against police and military units. It is also known as Partido Democrático Popular Revolucionario-Ejército Popular Revolucionario due to its political branch.

\(^7\) Those are: Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional; Ejército Popular Revolucionario; Ejército Revolucionario del Pueblo Insurgente; Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias del Pueblo; Comando Jaramillista Morelense 23 de Mayo; Ejército Villista Revolucionario del Pueblo; Comité Clandestino Revolucionario de los Pobres Comando Justiciero 28 de Junio; Tendencia Democrática Revolucionaria-Ejército del Pueblo; and Coordinadora Guerrillera Nacional José María Morelos. According to an official statement by Ricardo Cabrera Gutiérrez, head of the special unit on terrorism and arms-trafficking of the Procuraduría General de la República (PGR), quoted in Silvia Otero, ‘Operan en México nueve grupos subversivos: PGR’, *El Universal* (October 10, 2006), at http://www.eluniversal.com.mx/notas/vi_380388.html.
The explosion of three bombs in Mexico City on November 6, 2006 (claimed by a group of five guerrilla movements) was explained as an answer to the government’s repressive violence, already mentioned, and the tensions derived from the presidential post-electoral conflict. Although many sectors of the political establishment and part of Mexican opinion considered this a terrorist act, others explained that these groups wanted to have an impact, showing potential and capacity to act, and noted that the bombings were planned according to a careful strategy of action directed to avoid human casualties (direct or collateral) or generalized chaos, in a kind of ‘limited terror’. A month later, those groups, recognizing the high level of criticism to their actions, decided to give up similar armed attacks and announced they would give preference to the political road.

In the months of July and September 2007, the EPR claimed responsibility for a series of bombings of pipelines operated by PEMEX, the national oil company. Several pipelines transporting oil and natural gas were severed by the explosions in different points in the States of Guanajuato, Querétaro, Veracruz and Tlaxcala. (See Map Bombing of Pipelines 2007.) EPR statements said the group carried out “surgical harassment actions” and that their purpose was to pressure the Mexican government into clarifying the disappearances of some of their members.

These “harassment” or “sabotage” actions were officially considered “criminal acts” and a threat to national security, and in spite of the fact that the perpetrators avoided any direct human injuries, thousands of people were rushed from their homes in order not to be affected by the gas leak and oil burns. If we also take into consideration the high cost of repairing the damage, the enormous economic loses of hundreds of millions of dollars due to the disruption of energy to huge industrial conglomerates, the many populations that were also affected, and the frightening effect that these kind of actions have on the international influx of capital and investment towards Mexico, we are able to talk about “economic terrorism”.

It is interesting to note that in April 2008 the EPR proposed the creation of a “mediating commission” to start a dialogue with the central government in order to obtain the liberation of

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8 A total of 8 bombs were placed in various places. Three of them exploded in buildings of the PRI, the Federal Electoral Tribunal, and an office of the Scotiabank-Inverlat very late at night, avoiding human casualties. The location of 5 others was communicated to the police and they were deactivated. It seems that the organizations were conscious of the negative impact that this kind of action could have on Mexican public opinion because in the present situation, they could easily be classified as terrorist activities and as a strong threat to national security, affecting considerably the legitimacy of the organization’s political criticism and opposition to the governmental attitudes and actions. During the Fox administration, 33 investigations related to explosives attacks were developed. There are no final conclusions in any of the cases. ‘33 averiguaciones por explosivos sin resolver’, Milenio (November 7, 2006), at http://www.milenio.com/mexico/milenio/.

9 The groups were: Movimiento Revolucionario Lucio Cabañas, Tendencia Democrática Revolucionaria-Ejército del Pueblo, Organización Insurgente 1 de Mayo, Brigada de Ajusticiamiento 2 de Diciembre y las Brigadas Populares de Liberación.


11 According to the EPR, the commission should be incorporate distinguished personalities such as Carlos Montemayor (writer), Samuel Ruiz (archbishop), Miguel Angel Granados Chapa (journalist), Gilberto López (anthropologist), and The National Front Against Repression headed by Rosario Ibarra. ‘Propone
two of its militants that had disappeared since May 2007. The personalities suggested by the EPR accepted to participate in this effort, and the armed movement expressed its compromise of not developing any kind of violent action during the future negotiations, suggesting at the same time that the central government should stop its “harassing and intimidating actions against family members, friends and NGOs that showed solidarity with the disappeared militants”.12

Although the president of the National Action Party, Germán Martínez, refused to develop any kind of negotiation with groups that put “weapons on the table”, Calderon’s government gave a positive answer to the negotiating proposal in the next 24 hours, but established some conditions that could complicate the whole process from the beginning:

1- Developing a “direct dialogue” between the government and the EPR – the Mediating Commission should act only as “social witnesses”

2- The EPR must adopt a public compromise and suspend permanently all its violent and sabotage actions

3- The government will continue its investigations in order to clarify the case of the two EPR members, but at the same time will go forward with its work to identify the people responsible for the actions against PEMEX installations.13

Carlos Montemayor, one of the members of the new negotiating commission, said that it was very important that both parties opted for negotiating a political alternative, neutralizing the most recalcitrant tendencies inside each one that opposed dialogue, but insisted that ‘dialogue’ must not be confused with ‘capitulation’, nor ‘mediator’ with a ‘stone guest’ that will be able to be present during the process. “When a guerrilla force starts a political negotiation, it does not mean that it is proposing its own capitulation”.14

In May 2008, the role of the negotiating commission was accepted by the government, and a new opportunity for a dialogue seemed to be borne.

**Crime and Drug Trafficking Organizations**

Robbery, assaults, kidnappings, murder, trafficking, and many different illegal activities are common elements of daily life in Mexico. Cities such as Mexico City, Tijuana, Mexicali, 

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Monterrey and others, are centers of concentration for a high proportion of these acts.\textsuperscript{15} According to the International Crime Victimization Survey, a study sponsored by the United Nations, Mexico holds first place in armed aggression and armed robbery, bribery, and in the index of number of weapons per home.\textsuperscript{16}

‘Ordinary’ crime is commonly explained by the huge unbalances between extremely rich sectors and very poor people, the failure of many development programs, the deterioration of the social security system and public education, as well as the accelerated decomposition of the social fabric and the system of values.

Organized crime is also an example of this decomposition, but it has a different magnitude, with greater operational capacities, and involvement in highly rewarding activities linked to blackmailing, robbery, and kidnapping. The use of terrorizing strategies with extremely cruel acts and body mutilations is very common. This entire situation generates a permanent ‘high-risk’ sensation for the society and this is reinforced by the inefficiency of judicial power, and the permanent corruption that prevails in the police structures.

But the most violent actions and challenges to Mexican national security come from the very powerful drug cartels, which commonly commit crimes with the clear purpose of terrorizing state structures and the society.

A country with more than 11,000 deaths related to drug killings in seven years (1,691 in 2005; 2,221 in 2006; 2,673 in 2007)\textsuperscript{17} and with a projection of more than 3,000 in 2008, seems to be one facing a strong circle of violence and instability.

In Mexico there are hundreds of groups linked to illicit drug activities, but the most important cartels are: the Gulf, Tijuana, Juárez, Sinaloa, Milenio, and Itsno cartels. The Federation, formed in recent years by representatives of the Juárez, Sinaloa, and Milenio cartels, was considered as the most important and powerful in 2007 and at the beginning of 2008,\textsuperscript{18} but in the middle of 2008 started experiencing internal fractures.\textsuperscript{19} The Federation, whose nominal head is Sinaloa trafficker Joaquin ‘El Chapo’ Guzman, has been rattled recently by the reported desertion of the Beltran Leyva clan, considered a major trafficking gang. It joined the Gulf Cartel.

Fighting between the Beltran Leyvas and the Gulf Cartel's gunmen, the Zetas, has caused much of the nation's violence. The Federation and the Gulf Cartel reportedly negotiated a truce in 2007,
which diminished the violence for several months. But the bloodshed resumed in the spring of 2008 as the cartels wrestle for dominance.  

In general, we can say that sometimes cartels work together, but remain independent organizations. On many other occasions, they are strong rivals and fight one another in order to control areas of influence and trafficking routes. Divisive, formative and restructuring dynamics are also present. (See Map Cartel Areas of Influence.)

The fight against drug-trafficking violence, considered since long time ago as a threat to stability and national security, received top priority in the new administration of President Felipe Calderón, who has used the army as the driving force in his effort to destroy the cartels, sending 25,000 troops into action in an unprecedented campaign.

Part of this new strategy was the creation by President Calderon of a new Public Security Superior Academy and an elite military special operations force, the Corps of Federal Support Forces, which is an army unit specializing in anti-drug efforts and that will answer directly to his office, and will deal with “critical situations that endanger social peace and public security”.

But the great and costly operations developed by the Mexican armed forces to destroy local areas of production, intercept trafficking routes, and fight the cartels directly, seem to have been only partially effective since the start of this offensive in December 2006.

In a first stage, the impact of military operations produced the so called “cockroach effect” – a chaotic dispersion and a certain level of surprise to the cartels. But afterwards, the drug cartels started to challenge the government initiative in an open and defiant manner, attacking and killing police officers, members of the security and intelligence institutions and even threatening high ranking officials, governors, and the President himself.

The first semester of 2008 showed an intensification of warfare between cartels themselves and between the government and cartels. In May, there was a particularly strong spiral of violence, when the daily average of deaths and assassinations related to drugs increased from 7 to more than 13.

During those months there were some fruitful operations by the government, with shipments interdicted, leaders detained, weapons confiscated an so on, but at the same time the drug cartels answered in an even stronger manner, and were able to eliminate some very high ranking security officials in charge of the main operations, for example, Esteban Robles, Commander-in-Chief of

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The Judiciary Policy of Mexico City, and Edgar Millán, regional coordinator of Preventive Federal Police.

The case of Millán’s assassination was a very illustrative of the infiltration and treason inside the security structures. He was shot dead in his own home in Mexico City in a plan masterminded by the Sinaloa cartel. He was the highest-ranking law enforcement responsible for overseeing most of Mexico’s counternarcotics efforts.

For many observers and analysts, Mexico is enduring a situation that is very similar to a country at war, with so many deaths related to drug trafficking. The public is getting used to watching this tragedy on television, with murders and horrifying beheadings that turn into a bigger challenge to the authorities, renew pressures on traditional collaborators of the cartels, and terrorize society with ‘warning messages in order to freeze any possible cooperation with the authorities.’ So we can talk about ‘narco-terrorism’.

This war is especially hard given the drug cartels’ high fire power (with the latest and most advanced military weapons – on many occasions better that the ones the police and other state forces have) with strongly armed and well-trained organizations such as the Zetas and the Kaibiles, both working in the Gulf cartel, or the Negros and Pelones, working for the Sinaloa cartel.

Some Los Zetas members are former Mexican Special Forces soldiers with expertise in the use of heavy weaponry, specialized military tactics, sophisticated communications equipment, intelligence collection, and counter-surveillance techniques. Many of them were trained in US sponsored programs. They have a sophisticated spy network employing taxi drivers, store clerks, street vendors and members of the local police to keep them informed of the movements of federal officers.

In May 2008, there were strong indications that the Zetas were becoming a new drug cartel independent of their previous leaders of the Gulf cartel. They were re-dividing sections of Mexican territories and starting a war against The Federation. This new organization could be transformed in the most violent cartel ever seen in Mexico and, according to some officials, it could beat any cartel currently known “and become a real national security problem for Mexico and the United States”.

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25 The assassination of journalists following drug issues is also frequent and occurs in an atmosphere of impunity and with no application of justice. Some of the beheadings are followed by the exhibition of the heads in public places.
26 Former Guatemalan Special Forces soldiers.
Today, there is a new factor that is increasingly becoming involved in narco-terrorism: the extremely violent gang Mara Salvatruchas. The Maras Salvatruchas originated in Central America and is notoriously expanding its presence in Mexico. Ten years ago, it was a gang concentrated in the State of Chiapas, but today it has about 5,000 elements, organized in 200 cells (of 25 elements each) and it is present in the capital of the country and in another 23 states, with more than 50% of young Mexican citizens being part of it. The Maras in Mexico are decisively contributing to higher rates of criminality, have very strong links with drug webs, and many are trained in military and guerrilla tactics.\textsuperscript{28}

The high level of corruption inside the police and federal agencies is another big obstacle in this fight. The army cannot be confident about local security structures because many of them act in complicity with drug cartels, distorting intelligence information, and giving early warnings to the drug dealers. “There are municipal police forces that have collapsed, that function more as an aid to organized crime than as a protection for the public”.\textsuperscript{29} Several local police chiefs have resigned, and even a few policemen have started to ask for asylum in the United States.

Due to the huge amounts of money at their disposal, the cartels are able to influence authorities, politicians, businessmen and local political electoral processes, corrupt security officers, and even try to reach some kind of understanding and negotiations with high ranking military officials. They are able to bribe, intimidate and negotiate.

Military men from generals to foot soldiers say they are being offered some times hundreds of thousands of dollars to turn a blind eye. General Sergio Aponte, who co-heads the military operation in Baja California, told reporters, “These groups are coming to us to try to negotiate, to take us over to their side, trying to break us down”.\textsuperscript{30}

These attempts have been officially rejected by President Calderon, who gave an assurance that: “My government does not negotiate with criminals”.\textsuperscript{31}

Since the late 1990s, Mexico has convicted at least five army generals for taking drug money, including the man who was once its anti-drugs czar and led the war against the gangs but was later found to provide protection to the Juarez Cartel: General Jesús Gutiérrez Rebollo.\textsuperscript{32}


The cartels also have intelligence capabilities, striking directly against officials and politicians at propitious moments, as well as frightening, kidnapping or killing some of their family members. The message is that no one is safe, no matter how high his rank or how well protected is, if he works against cartel interests. There is great pressure on the officials and politicians involved because even the most incorruptible is going to be cautious in executing operations against the cartels, or at least get worried.

The occasional use of excessive military force against civilians, some established violations of human rights, together with the persistent risk of corruption of the army (considered to be one of the most prestigious institutions by Mexican public opinion), are arguments used to criticize the current strategy and support pulling the army out of anti-drug operations and handing responsibility back to the internal security structures. The main challenge is to modify and purge the police and security forces in order to plan a more efficient strategy against drug cartels and violence, and diminish the direct involvement of the army in those activities in the future.

According to various surveys, the army holds a high level of popular confidence. For example, a Consulta Mitofsky’s survey in February 2008 indicated the levels of citizens’ confidence in this way: 33

**High:** Universities (7.9%), Church (7.9%) Army (7.8%), Media (7.5%).

**Medium:** Banks (6.9%), Federal Electoral Institute (6.9%), Businessmen (6.8%), President (6.8%), Supreme Court of Justice (6.7%).

**Low:** Members of Congress (5.9%), Senators (5.9%), Trade Unions (5.9%), Police (5.8 %), Political Parties (5.5%).

This is not the first time that the army has directly participated in a declared war against drug cartels and organized crime. Previous experiences, such as Operation Secure Mexico, developed by Vicente Fox’s administration did not yield good results.

In February 2008, President Calderón declared that once civil and police structures get stronger, the need for military support will lessen. 34 This had to readings: first, a kind of recognition that the strategy must be changed and there is a need to pull back the army; second, the task of purging and strengthening civilian institutions and police structures is so hard that we will see the army in the streets for many more years.

Calderón’s government has removed almost 300 federal police commanders across the country, demoting dozens of career officers and putting in command new officials, most of whom have military backgrounds. But the administration “has yet to purge the force of thousands of career officers with roots in the old force, which was rife with corruption. Many of these officers

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have dubious loyalties and made money from graft, especially those assigned to highways, ports and airports, according to criminologists and police officials”.  

Another very serious factor is desertions from the Mexican army. According to the Under Secretary of Defense, Tomás Ángeles Dahuajare, during the 2007 a total of 17,758 soldiers, 119 officers, and 8 high ranking officers abandoned the army. During the last seven years the total figure of desertions is higher that 100,000. Some of these elements have been recruited by drug cartels.  

Although the military offensive against drug cartels has had some positive results in terms of members detained, weapons confiscated and volumes of drugs detected, the impact is still considered to be limited. At the same time, the drug trafficking organizations’ capacity to recover is very high due to:

1- New leaders immediately take the seat of their previous chiefs.
2- There is a constant influx and smuggling of weapons from the US to Mexico that guarantee the replacement of lost armaments and the acquisition of new, advanced weapons. In the US there are 100,000 stores selling weapons. Of these, 12,000 are located on the US-Mexican border with a double the average of sales in comparison with the others. This is obviously linked to an intense flow of arms from the US to Mexico.
3- The total volume of drug trafficking is so high – at least 10 billion dollars annually – that the cartels can lose tons of merchandise without deeply affecting their economic.

According to John P. Walters, director of the US Office of National Drug Control Policy, marijuana is “the center of gravity” for Mexican drug cartels, because of the $13.8 billion that Americans contributed to Mexican drug traffickers in 2004-05, about 62 percent, or $8.6 billion, comes from marijuana consumption.

38 ‘México recibe 10 mil mdd al año de EU por el narco: PGR’, La Jornada (December 11, 2007), http://www.jornada.unam.mx/ultimas/2007/12/10/al-ano-unos-10-mmdd-salen-de-eu-a-mexico-producto-del-narco-medina-mora. There are other analysts that estimate that cartels make between 10 and 40 billion dollars every year.
39 These are the only figures available because this was the first time the agency conducted a market analysis. ‘Drug Czar Says US Use Fueling Mexico Violence’, The Dallas Morning News (February 22, 2008), at http://www.marijuana.com/drug-war-headline-news/93060-usa-drug-czar-says-us-use-fueling-mexico-violence.html.
This panorama is also complicated by the links that are argued to exist also between narco-
money and the church, which is a very delicate topic.

Although many representatives of the Catholic Church have insisted several times that “money
coming from drug-trafficking is a dirty money that cannot be purified through compassionate acts”
and that drug trafficking is a “serious sin”, there have arisen many suspicious about contacts since
the beginning of the nineties when cardinal Juan Jesús Posadas Ocampo was killed in the middle
of an armed fight between cartels.

In this sense, a declaration in April 2008 by the President of the Conference of Mexican
Bishops, Carlos Aguilar Retes, was a very controversial one. He recognized that there have been
contacts between narco-dealers and representatives of the Church, and proposed that a new law
must be passed to guarantee the protection of the identities of those drug-dealers that what to
change their lives, based on the Catholic practice of confession. But he also said that these drug-
traffickers: “Are very generous with the people of their communities and towns, sponsoring
electric light, communications, roads, and even building churches and chapels”.\footnote{41}

The reality of geography with a 3,326 km-long border between México and the United States is
also a key factor. Beside drug trafficking, an illegal trade of weapons, and the constant flow of
migrants (from Mexico, Central American countries, and others) as brought some violence linked
to drug trafficking organizations on to US territory. Murders and attacks against US border patrol
officers are becoming increasingly common along the border.\footnote{42}

It is impossible to think in terms of sealing the border or developing perfect controls there.
Through this border both countries carry out the greatest part of their trading bilateral activity,
valued at approximately 350 billion dollars.

Because of geography and this long border, Mexico is obviously one of the most attractive
routes for potential terrorists interested in reaching US territory. This explains, partially, the very
restrictive visa policy that the Mexican government has applied for many years to citizens coming
from Islamic countries.

The Mexican Islamic community is a small one and has no signs of political activism or threat
generation, so there is not so much worry about possible ‘contamination’ from other Islamic
extremist groups from abroad. But the possibilities of finding common ground between that kind
of Islamic inspired groups coming from abroad, and other local factors such as drug trafficking
organizations or the famous gang Maras Salvatruchas cannot be excluded. At a specific moment,
they could all become interested in acting violently against the Mexican state and they could work
in a coordinated manner.

In fact, one clear example of the ‘Islamic threat’ from abroad can be found in February 2007,
when an article entitled ‘Bin Laden and the Oil Weapon’, published in The Voice of Jihad, called

\begin{footnotes}
\footnote{40} Conferencia del Episcopado Mexicano.
\footnote{41} ‘Iglesia católica mexicana sacudida por presuntos aportes de narcotraficantes’, AFP (April 7, 2008), at
http://mx.news.yahoo.com/s/afp/m__xico_iglesia_narcotr__fico.
\footnote{42} ‘Cloned’ vehicles, that is vehicles displaying the logos of FedEx, Wal-Mart, DirecTV and the US Border
Patrol, are used by the drug cartels to smuggle drugs, human cargo and weapons across the border.
\end{footnotes}
on the Saudi branch of al-Qaeda to strike “oil interests that provide the Crusaders with oil”.  

Those interests, the article stated, could also include facilities in Venezuela, Canada and Mexico.

This mobilized the Mexican national security structure, a higher level of alert was adopted, and many security measures and surveillance activities on strategic installations were reinforced.

Cooperation with the US

According to the Congressional Research Service’s Report for Congress, Mexico’s Drug Cartels, published in October 2007: “Mexico, a major drug producing and transit country, is the main foreign supplier of marijuana and a major supplier of methamphetamine to the United States. Although Mexico accounts for only a small share of worldwide heroin production, it supplies a large share of heroin consumed in the United States. An estimated 90% of cocaine entering the United States transits Mexico”.  

This data has very strong elements that show the enormous impact the Mexican factor has in the drug consumption statistics of the United States. There is no way of dealing with the narcotics problem in the US without considering the Mexican source as the main focus of any strategy. That is a fact. Part of the drug is produced locally but the enormous flows come from abroad. As Markus-Schultze-Kraft has said: "Mexico will continue to experience serious problems with drug trafficking as long as the drug flow from the Andean countries is not considerably reduced".

Although the National Addiction Survey of 2002 considered drug consumption in Mexico as a very low one, there is a growing consumption trend for marihuana, cocaine and methamphetamines detected during the last ten years, especially in large cities and in the northern territories near the US border.

However, on the other side of the coin, we find a very strong Mexican argument that considers the US to be mainly responsible for this situation due to the fact that it remains the world's biggest market for illicit drugs. It is also reasoned that there are legal imbalances between the two countries: while all kinds of drugs are strictly prohibited in all Mexican territory, some States in the US have decriminalized marijuana or have passed “medical cannabis laws”, despite the US government's position against the drug trade.

President Felipe Calderón and the Mexican ambassador in the US, Arturo Sarukhan, have declared that the US is not doing enough to lower US drug consumption or to help Mexico combat traffickers. More cooperation is needed. The US should increase its aid, deep intelligence

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exchanges, and make bigger efforts to stop the flow of weapons, laundered money and chemicals for the production of methamphetamines.\textsuperscript{48}

According to February 2008 editorial by \textit{The New York Times}: \textsuperscript{49}

Nothing can be achieved unless this country curbs its own demand for illegal narcotics (…). Washington announced a new $1.4 billion assistance package for Mexico and Central America to combat the drug trade. Then the White House unveiled its 2009 budget, which calls for a 1.5 percent cut in spending on domestic drug prevention and treatment programs (…) spending on prevention has fallen every year since 2002. Mexico and Central America certainly need help to better fight the drug gangs moving narcotics into the United States. But it is clearly not enough. Washington has funded coca eradication efforts in the Andes for years. It has given the Colombian government more than $5 billion since 2000. Thousands of police have died in Latin America fighting the traffickers. Yet all the blood, tears and cash have had virtually no impact on the amount of drugs in the United States. The federal government needs to do more to slow the flow of money and guns that finance and arm the cartels in Mexico and Central America. There is little hope of ever defeating the traffickers abroad if the government isn’t doing enough to reduce demand at home.

The United States must give a bigger support in this fight against drug violence. This is a very costly matter for Mexico, so the US must share the burden.

A partial answer to this Mexican claim is the new assistance package in favor of strengthening the regional cooperation, known as the Merida Initiative. This new security cooperation initiative between the US, Mexico and the countries of Central America has the main purpose of combating the threat of drug trafficking, transnational crime, and terrorism. But different sectors of Mexican society have expressed worries about the possible future presence of US military in Mexican territory and its negative impact on national sovereignty.

The Bush administration proposed to allocate 1,400 million dollars to provide:\textsuperscript{50}

- Non-intrusive inspection equipment, ion scanners, canine units for Mexican customs, for the new federal police and for the military to interdict trafficked drugs, arms, cash and persons.
- Technologies to improve and secure communications systems to support collecting information as well as ensuring that vital information is accessible for criminal law enforcement.


- Technical advice and training to strengthen the institutions of justice – vetting for the new police force, case management software to track investigations through the system to trial, new offices of citizen complaints and professional responsibility, and establishing witness protection programs.

- Helicopters and surveillance aircraft to support interdiction activities and rapid operational response of law enforcement agencies in Mexico.

- Includes equipment and assets to support counterpart security agencies inspecting and interdicting drugs, trafficked goods, people and other contraband as well as equipment, training and community action programs in Central American countries to implement anti-gang measures and expand the reach of these measures in the region.

While Bush administration requested $500 million in funding for 2008, the House approved $400 million and the Senate approved only $350 million. The Mérida Initiative – also known as Plan Mexico – will provide resources, equipment, and training to the Mexican government, police, and military. It will not give Mexico liquid funds. Besides reducing the Bush administration's request, the Senate and the House established some conditions: the US "would hold up a quarter of the money until the State Department ruled that Mexico was meeting certain human rights markers". Mexico must guarantee that its military and police forces are not involved in corruption or in violations of human rights, have to start legal and judiciary reforms, and must create a data bank that enables the US to scrutinize the police and the army, among others aspects included in the bill.

These preconditioning factors were strongly criticized by various sectors of Mexican public opinion and by the Mexican government when Jose Luis Santiago Vasconcelos, Deputy Attorney General for International Affairs, said that it seems “a step backwards with respect to a previous phase of our relations with the United States on the matter of illicit drug traffic control that comprised the unilateral certification. It is up to the Mexican State to accept or reject the funding and to define the circumstances". He added that money the United States government proposed to support Mexico might be better spent bolstering that country’s Customs’ Service and Border Patrol in order to prevent arms trafficking from entering Mexico, due to the fact that 97 per cent of the arsenal used by organized groups in Mexico is coming from the north.

Interior Secretary, Juan Camilo Mouriño, said that conditions and unilateral evaluations by the US were "counterproductive and profoundly contrary to the object and spirit" of the initiative and, in their current version, are “unacceptable for our country.”


This US conditioning of the aid had a very disappointing effect on the Mexican perception of the US projected compromise. Mexico is involved in a fierce fight against drug trafficking organizations, with a high cost in human beings and economic resources, so US involvement should be more decisive and speedy. In any case, a yearly support of 350 or 500 million dollars would represent a very limited part of the Mexican security expenditure. Mexico is assigning a budget of almost 8 billion dollars for public security,\textsuperscript{55} so the possible support would only represent between 4 and 6%.

Carlos Rico, Mexico’s Under-secretary of Foreign Affairs, has also emphasized that all negotiations with the US will exclude the presence of the US military on Mexican territory. This is different from the case of agreements signed with US Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) officials that enable offices and dozens of agents to work in Mexico. Rico has insisted that instead of talking about hundreds of million dollars in possible US assistance for the Mexican anti-drug effort, it is much better to promote wider and enhanced bilateral cooperation. This more effective cooperation must include, for example, a higher level of US action inside its own jurisdiction, and developing north-south operatives in order to avoid weapons fluxes towards Mexico, as Mexico develops south-north operatives in order to intercept drug flows.\textsuperscript{56}

\textbf{Multi-dimensional Strategy}

After identifying various sources of violence in Mexico and classifying some acts as ‘limited terror’, ‘economic terrorism’ and ‘narco-terrorism’, we can suggest, that in order to combat violence and terrorism, Mexico has to develop a more efficient multi-dimensional strategy that should take into consideration:

1- The urgent need of diminishing the huge socioeconomic unbalances that exist in the Mexican society. This extreme polarization between rich sectors and poor people, and the unfair and unequal access to basic guarantees and opportunities must be transformed.

2- Fight corruption, improve the efficiency of the internal security structures, and develop better intelligence work in order to penetrate, strike, punish and destroy the strong webs of the organized crime. It is also an imperative to improve the efficiency of the judiciary system, deeply affected by corruption, contradictory laws and practices.

3- A better intelligence work is also needed in order to follow the dynamics of armed groups, and neutralize other violent actions in the future. But it is even more important to open channels of communication and dialogue with those groups in order to make them renounce armed action and incorporate them into the political life of the country, in a progressive process of confidence building measures.


\textsuperscript{56} Carlos Rico’s comments during the international seminar \textit{Nuevas orientaciones en las políticas para controlar drogas y criminalidad}, sponsored by El Colegio de México (April 28-29, 2008).
4- The war against the drug trafficking organizations should not be fight with the army in the streets of different states of the country, nor expose the main structure of the Mexican state to the corrupting power of these drug cartels. It is a war that needs better security and police institutions freed of the strong corruption that they have suffered, and a long term strategy based on intelligence work, penetration and neutralization. It is impossible to think in terms of eliminating the drug trafficking and consumption phenomena, but it is possible to keep it under a tighter control avoiding freedom of action and terrorizing strategies.

5- It is important to continue the extremely difficult debate on decriminalizing the possession of small amounts of drugs in order to explore the possible diminishing impact it could have on violence, prices and drug trafficking organizations’ financial flows. The only way of effectively fighting drug habits is by means of a permanent and strong health and education campaign.

6- The combat against drug trafficking organizations must also include a difficult strategy to weaken the strong links that the cartels have with some political structures, and deep intelligence work to detect and interfere with the financial webs, investments activities, façade enterprises and money laundering mechanisms at their disposal.

7- Cooperation and coordination at a regional level is a must, based on a mutual interest in reducing and eliminating these common threats. Participation, support and compromise from the US must be a central element of this strategy.