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Drug Trafficking, Violence, and the State in Mexico

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Headlines and television commentaries about Mexico becoming a failed state as a result of drug-related violence have become a dime a dozen. Terms such as “criminal insurgency,” “narco-terrorism,” and narco-insurgency are all used to describe the widespread killings. *The Joint Operating Environment Report* of 2008 even suggested that Mexico, along with Pakistan, could suffer from a dramatic collapse of the state, with serious implications for U.S. national security. Former Drug Czar, General Barry McCaffrey, published an after action report on a visit to Mexico in December 2008 which concluded that “Mexico is not confronting dangerous criminality—it is fighting for survival against narco-terrorism.” The situation in Mexico is clearly serious, and there is no argument that drug-related violence increased steadily through 2006 and 2007 and more than doubled in 2008. Yet, inflammatory language and hyperbolic rhetoric do nothing to clarify the issues. To describe Mexico as becoming a failed state is deeply insulting to a country in which national sovereignty and national pride remain powerful impulses. Even the common description of Mexican drug trafficking organizations as cartels is a misnomer; they control neither price nor production levels—the requisite criteria for a cartel. Moreover, too few commentaries focus on the reasons for this increase in violence or what it really means to the stability of the Mexican state. While some of the rhetoric has had an impact in Washington, compelling the new administration to treat Mexico as a high priority, it has also generated much more heat than light.

This does not deny the horrific nature of the violence: torture and decapitations have become common, barrels of acid have been used to dispose of bodies, executions have been posted—albeit only briefly—on YouTube, and drug trafficking organizations are able to outgun the police and provide a challenge even to the Mexican Army. Yet it is important to understand why the violence has increased, who the main victims are, and how it can best be combated. The common portrayal of a country out of control and a state likely to be forced into submission is not compelling.

Mexico’s involvement in the drug business is long-standing, and Mexican organizations are active in the cannabis and methamphetamine trade as well as in the cocaine business. The role of Mexico was transformed during the late 1980s and 1990s, however, as U.S. interdiction efforts made it far more difficult for Colombian drug trafficking

organizations to transport cocaine successfully through the Caribbean. As a result, the Colombian groups started to go through Mexico, often making payments in cocaine to the Mexican trafficking organizations that assisted them. Inevitably, the Mexicans went into business for themselves and have gradually replaced the Colombians as the dominant force in cocaine trafficking throughout the United States—a development facilitated by both legal and illegal immigration of Mexicans into the United States. In effect, the trafficking organizations and networks took advantage of what in other ways can be understood as a location curse in which Mexico is the natural transshipment point for drugs coming from Colombia to the United States.

The violence in Mexico has grown as the Mexican government moved from acquiescence and even tacit support for the drug trade under the PRI to confrontation with the traffickers by the PAN Presidents, Fox and Calderon. Consequently, Mexico is suffering from what might be described as transitional violence: comfortable and collusive relationships between organized crime and the state have broken down, and alternative relationships have not been institutionalized. The attacks by trafficking organizations on police chiefs, officials, and soldiers can be understood as an attempt to pressure the state to move away from confrontation and to give the trafficking organizations space in which to operate. This does not constitute an insurgency; and the violence—although it has spilled over and killed innocent civilians—has, with one exception, not deliberately targeted civilians. When grenades were thrown into a crowd in Morelia on Independence Day (September 15, 2008), this sparked widespread condemnation. Although culpability is not entirely clear, in the aftermath, some of the drug trafficking organizations publicly announced that they were not responsible for the attack and offered rewards for the capture of those who were. How much of this was simply trying to shift the blame for the attacks in which eight people were killed and many more injured remains uncertain. The public reaction, however, was one of shock and outrage. Recognizing this, trafficking organizations, many of which are embedded in local communities, might be inclined to avoid such indiscriminate attacks in the future.

Apart from the violence designed to inhibit the Calderon administration from further efforts to interfere with the business, most of the killings are related either to competition among the major trafficking organizations or to rivalries at the retail level. Control of the retail outlets to the indigenous consumer markets, which have emerged in Mexico during the last several years, has become a source of contention locally. The major clashes between larger organizations have centered on the control of strategic warehouses for major stockpiles and shipments of cocaine in cities such as Tijuana, Nuevo Laredo, and Ciudad Juarez. The proximity of these cities to major interstate highways (or drug transportation corridors) in the United States has intensified the struggle for control.

Another factor which feeds into the violence is the ready availability both of powerful weapons and those who know how to use them. The main source of weapons is the United States and in particular the frequent gun shows which take place close to the U.S.-Mexico border—although some weapons are also smuggled into Mexico from

Central America. The Zetas, former Mexican Army Special Forces, are the most prominent specialists in violence, but other drug trafficking organizations also have many in their ranks with military experience (including some defectors) or with a law enforcement background. At the same time, competing drug trafficking organizations have become locked into a rising spiral of violence fed by machismo and by a desire for revenge rather than simply by business competition. Many of the drug trafficking organizations have a central core of family members and the killing of relatives gives the violence an emotional quality that generates enmities and a desire for retribution which can span years or even decades.

This is not intended to downplay the violence or minimize the challenge posed to the Calderon government. The increase in the number of drug-related killings from 2006 to 2008 makes it impossible to be sanguine. In 2006, Mexico had an estimated 2,221 drug-related killings. This increased to 2,561 in 2007. In 2008, it more than doubled to somewhere between 5,620 (the figure most Mexican newspapers used at the end of 2008) and 6,756, the estimate made by the *Zeta* newspaper in Tijuana. Even accepting that part of the 2008 increase might have resulted from better reporting and analysis by the Mexican government, the increase is staggering. Part of it, however, represented a new fragmentation among the trafficking organizations—with the Beltran-Leyva organization defecting from Chapo Guzman, and the competing factions in the remnants of the Arellano Felix Organization engaged in an internecine succession struggle (with Guzman reportedly also involved) for control of their remaining routes and markets. Moreover, when these figures are broken down, as they were by *Zeta*, clearly much of it was concentrated in three Mexican states: Chihuahua (2,266), Sinaloa (1,152), and Baja California (1,019). Together these three states account for almost 66 percent of the total. This suggests that the notion of a nationwide epidemic of drug violence is somewhat inaccurate. The violence is concentrated where the trafficking organizations are competing for dominance—and at least some of the spillover elsewhere is likely to be imitative violence. Moreover, the number of policemen and soldiers killed is somewhere between 5 and 10 percent of the total, so the extent of the challenge to the Mexican state might be smaller than is often portrayed. While this fits with the assessment that trafficking organizations are protecting their operating space from government pressure, it does not amount to a “criminal insurgency” or “a state fighting for survival against narco-terrorism.”

At the same time, assassinations such as that in May 2008 of Edgar Millan, the Acting Chief of the Federal Police, reveal very clearly that there is a lack of respect for the forces of law and order at the national level as well as in certain states and municipalities. Nevertheless, it is important to understand the nature of the violence: it is about control and protection of the illegal drug business more than it is a direct frontal assault on the Mexican state. It is more akin to the clashes between the Medellin and Cali drug trafficking organizations in Colombia during the 1990s and the wars among the Jamaican posses in the United States during the same period than it is to insurgency or terrorism. And Mexico—which has a vibrant middle-class; a surprisingly robust economy; and a president willing to confront the drug trafficking organizations, root

out drug-related corruption, and reform key institutions and agencies such as the police and judiciary – is a long way from becoming a failed state. Mexico is a functioning and resilient state. It is nothing like Nigeria – which has long teetered on the brink of collapse but not toppled over – let alone Somalia. The problems in Mexico are extremely serious, but we do nothing to help by trotting out over-simplistic and inaccurate characterizations rather than attempting a serious diagnosis of the challenges Mexico faces.

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