



The Generals' Labyrinth: Crime and the Military in Mexico

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Table of Contents

Executive Summary.....	i
I. Introduction	1
II. López Obrador Doubles Down on the Military	3
A. “Hugs not Bullets”.....	3
B. Doubling Down on the Military	6
C. Patterns in Crime and Violence	9
III. The New Security Paradigm: How It Works in Practice	13
A. Live and Let Live.....	13
B. Ongoing Feuds	16
C. Fattening Up	17
IV. State-crime Entanglements.....	21
A. Military Corruption and Collusion	21
B. Uneven Ties.....	22
C. The Military as Criminal Accomplices.....	24
V. The Election Outlook.....	27
VI. Bases for a New Security Policy.....	29
A. Carving Back the Military’s Place	29
B. Meeting the Corruption Challenge	30
C. Prioritisation and Coordination	30
VII. Conclusion	33
APPENDICES	
A. Map of Mexico	34
B. About the International Crisis Group	35
C. Crisis Group Reports and Briefings on Latin America and the Caribbean since 2021....	36
D. Crisis Group Board of Trustees	38

Principal Findings

What's new? Mexicans elect a new president on 2 June after a campaign scarred by criminal violence. Official murder rates have fallen slightly under outgoing President Andres Manuel López Obrador, but his ambitions of pacifying the country have not been met and more troops are deployed to fight crime than ever before.

Why does it matter? Some areas suffer from fierce clashes despite military deployments while in other places commanders have forged an uneasy co-existence with crime groups. Feuds between criminal organisations show no sign of abating, fuelling violence, while evidence suggests that illegal outfits now have more social control, state allies and economic might.

What should be done? The new government should ratchet back the military's role in law enforcement to tasks requiring armed force, within limits defined by the constitution. Severing criminal links to the state, strengthening coordination between security bodies and concentrating resources in the most violent areas will be crucial for effective civilian-led law enforcement.

Executive Summary

Outgoing Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador has deployed troops on a scale never seen before to fight crime across the country, but this measure has barely loosened the grip of illegal outfits. In some ways, the government can call its policy a success. Violence, measured by reported murders, has dipped from the historic heights of a few years ago, an achievement supporters attribute to the president's incorruptible character. Polls suggest that his party's candidate, Claudia Sheinbaum, will romp to victory in the 2 June election. But in the states hardest hit by crime, the reasons behind lulls in fighting appear less flattering to federal authorities. Some security officers and criminal leaders suggest that a *modus vivendi* between military commanders and illegal outfits has enabled crime groups to profit and expand their hold on communities so long as overt violence is curtailed. Mexico's next president may be unable to withdraw troops from public security, but she should delineate limits to their role while endeavouring to sever state ties to crime and create the conditions for effective civilian law enforcement.

After campaigning in 2018 on a platform promising to pacify Mexico, end the "war on drugs" and return troops to the barracks, López Obrador seemingly underwent a radical conversion. Even before he took office, the president declared that he could not trust the country's various police forces to curb heavily armed criminal groups, opting instead to reinforce the role of the military – whose law enforcement capacities had been an article of faith for the previous two governments. López Obrador boosted troop deployment and created an entirely new security force under military leadership, the National Guard. In addition to expanding the military's role in ensuring public safety, he also handed the armed forces major roles in infrastructure, migration control, and seaport and airport management. According to the 2024 budget, 20 per cent of state spending is now being channelled through the armed forces.

Top government officials insist that the president's integrity – alongside the military's robust presence and a barrage of social programs – have served to dampen levels of armed conflict. On closer inspection, however, the areas most affected by warring criminal groups – including states such as Michoacán, Veracruz, Colima and Guerrero – have seen large military deployments but limited concrete crime-fighting. Security force insiders and criminal leaders note that a set of largely unspoken rules has been established, encouraging illegal groups to reduce and conceal the violence they perpetrate. In exchange, authorities have turned a blind eye to a degree of illegality, enabling these organisations to diversify their trafficking operations (including into newer illicit drugs such as fentanyl), expand their extortion rackets, branch out into legal business, and assume greater control of communities and local governments.

When these understandings fall apart, or when major criminal syndicates engage in frontal battle with one another, triggering humanitarian emergencies and drawing national media and political attention, the military are prone to take on a more interventionist and offensive role. But even then, they do not always focus on undermining criminal power, and they can be ambivalent toward illicit operations. When the Jalisco New Generation Cartel launched a major offensive in Michoacán, military

commanders are reported to have hatched deals with crime rings to fight the group, including a campaign to kill numerous members of the cartel. Elsewhere, military officers in cahoots with specific crime groups have allegedly abused their authority to shield their illegal partners.

The misuse of authority in Mexico is not unique to the military. But the sheer extent of the armed forces' security, political and budgetary powers, combined with the lack of any independent civilian oversight, reinforces the risks that members of the armed forces will engage in corruption and collusion. That said, a precipitous move to return soldiers to the barracks could destabilise areas plagued by crime groups locked in arms races and trigger political risks that neither of the main candidates seems willing to countenance. As the candidate for López Obrador's party, Sheinbaum has defended the strategy of the past six years, saying the military should remain at the heart of public security for as long as needed. Her main adversary, Xóchitl Gálvez, representing a coalition of opposition parties, has advocated for pulling troops back from some of their many duties. But she concedes a continuing role for troops in tackling the most violent criminal outfits, and she appears ready to reinforce the National Guard, albeit under civilian command.

Even if an abrupt change from military-led law enforcement is neither possible nor desirable, much more could be done over time to circumscribe soldiers' powers and ensure a greater role for civilian policing. Constitutional limits on military law enforcement should be fully respected. Senior government officials could also offer far clearer guidance as to what is expected from troops, ideally by restricting their involvement to force-based operations against groups that pose a deadly threat, as well as protecting vulnerable communities and essential infrastructure.

At the same time, the next government should move to strengthen civilian management of public security and ensure that the military collaborates with other state bodies. Both main candidates have identified flaws in the current Mexican security strategy, particularly the failure to coordinate layers of state power and an insufficient focus on the most conflict-ridden parts of the country. Both have also pointed to the need to better fight corruption, which underpins alarming levels of collusion between public officials and criminal outfits and a rising death toll among candidates in the election as illegal groups battle for state protection and impunity. A way to make progress on all three goals would be to sponsor inter-institutional task forces focused on bringing peace to Mexico's most violent hotspots.

Even before taking office, President López Obrador decided there was no alternative to soldiers policing the streets. But while the modest successes of his policies should not be dismissed, neither should their failings or the reality that sustainable security gains will require deeper reforms to improve security-sector governance, root out corruption and ensure that the parts of the country most plagued by insecurity receive the attention they deserve. By tackling these challenges, the next president can help position Mexico's civilian authorities to provide the clean, humane and effective security the country craves.

Mexico City/Bogotá/Brussels, 24 May 2024

The Generals' Labyrinth: Crime and the Military in Mexico

I. Introduction

On the campaign trail, President Andrés Manuel López Obrador vowed to make a clean break with his predecessors' security policies. Arguing that reliance on the military had destabilised the country, he pledged that *abrazos* (hugs) would replace *balazos* (gunshots). Soon after assuming office in 2018, however, the new president made a sharp U-turn.¹ Deeming the country's police forces unfit to lead in fighting violent organised crime due to their corruption and ineffectiveness, he argued that only the armed forces could take on that role.² Today, a total of 281,209 military are deployed on Mexican streets, more than at any time in the nation's recent history.³ Efforts to create cleaner and more functional civilian police forces are largely moribund.⁴ In addition to looking to the military to ensure public security, López Obrador has entrusted other formerly civilian responsibilities and budget allocations to the armed forces. As of 2023, around 100 agreements had reassigned state functions – including infrastructure building, public health, aviation and migration control – to the military's purview.⁵

The president says the military has met its responsibilities, including in safeguarding public security, but evidence for his claim is not so clear-cut. "There is no more conspiracy between crime and authorities", he declared in 2023. "We are doing well in security. There is peace and calm".⁶ The murder rate has indeed fallen under López Obrador – by 9.2 per cent between 2019 and 2022 – and supporters credit his government for reversing the trend of rising violence that followed former President Felipe Calderón's decision to ratchet up the "war on drugs" from December 2006 onward.⁷ But lethal violence remains close to the highest rate ever recorded, a milestone reached in 2019. Despite the modest recent decline, more than 30,000 homicides per year and a total of more than 185,000 killings overall have been officially recorded since López Obrador took office – more than under any previous admin-

¹ "Así era cuando AMLO prometía regresar a los militares a los cuarteles", *El Universal*, 6 September 2022.

² See "El Ejército es pilar del Estado mexicano: López Obrador", *La Jornada*, 19 February 2021; "Cambié de opinión': AMLO explica por qué no regresó a militares a los cuarteles", *Expansión*, 6 September 2022.

³ "Informe de Seguridad", Government of Mexico, 16 April 2024.

⁴ "Police reform and Security Strategies in Mexico in the Context of the War on Drugs and U.S. Support for These Efforts", Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA), July 2020; "El (des)equilibrio civil-militar en la seguridad", Universidad Iberoamericana, 13 September 2023.

⁵ "Inventario Nacional de lo Militarizado", México Unido Contra la Delincuencia, 2024.

⁶ "AMLO: 'Vamos bien en seguridad, hay paz y tranquilidad'", *Heraldo de México*, 22 March 2023.

⁷ See Luis Astorga, *¿Qué querían que hiciera? Inseguridad y delincuencia organizada en el gobierno de Felipe Calderón* (Mexico City, 2015). National Institute of Statistics and Geography (INEGI) data show that homicides increased from 2007 to 2011, dropped slightly during the first three years of President Enrique Peña Nieto's administration and then surged upward again from 2015.

istration.⁸ The president portrays the rate of violence as a result of his predecessors' mistakes, an explanation that seems to pass muster with voters: it has not dented his approval ratings. The candidate for the ruling MORENA party, former Mexico City Mayor Claudia Sheinbaum, appears well positioned to win the presidential election on 2 June.⁹

Other indicators also cast a shadow over López Obrador's achievements in reducing the murder rate. Rates of impunity for serious crimes have barely changed, reaching 95.7 per cent for murder nationwide.¹⁰ The government's strategy for fighting crime and targeting criminals is not always transparent, particularly when it comes to the military's place therein. López Obrador has proclaimed the need to no longer "fight fire with fire" – suggesting that the troops he has put onto the streets are intended for deterrent effect rather than to engage in persistent combat. Yet the military's role in certain regions, including some where large illegal organisations are engaged in running battles, does not seem far removed from that of his predecessor, Enrique Peña Nieto. The average monthly number of confrontations between the armed forces and illegal armed groups under López Obrador has dropped only slightly.¹¹

This report provides an assessment of how López Obrador's security strategy has worked in practice, particularly in the regions of Mexico with the highest rates of violent crime. It explores the extent to which the actions of security institutions, above all the military, have changed in his term, and how these shifts have affected criminal groups' behaviour toward one another, as well as toward state institutions and civilians. The report zooms in on two states – Michoacán and Veracruz – that have large military deployments, as well as entrenched illicit economies and armed conflicts. In these states, as well as in Colima state and Mexico City, Crisis Group conducted more than 80 interviews with military commanders, police officers, state officials of all levels, civil society activists, civilians, journalists and academics, in addition to criminal leaders, intermediaries and combatants. While a quarter of interviewees were women, all the members of criminal groups or security forces were men. The report also draws on Crisis Group's extensive body of work on the relationship between criminal groups and extreme violence in Mexico.¹²

⁸ For data, see "Defunciones por homicidios", INEGI, 2023; "Datos Abiertos de Incidencia Delictiva", Executive Secretariat of the National Public Security System, 2024.

⁹ "#AMLOTrackingPoll Aprobación de AMLO, 7 de diciembre", *El Economista*, 7 December 2023; "Sheinbaum mantiene el pulso en la campaña presidencial y dobla a Xóchitl Gálvez en preferencia de voto", *El País*, 4 December 2023.

¹⁰ "Hallazgos 2022", México Evalúa, October 2023.

¹¹ See "¿Existe una estrategia de "abrazos no balazos"?", Universidad Iberoamericana, 9 August 2022. For 2022 data, see "Los enfrentamientos de la SEDENA", Universidad Iberoamericana, 2023; and "Censo Nacional de Seguridad Pública Federal 2023", INEGI, 10 January 2024.

¹² See Crisis Group Latin America Reports N°99, *Mexico's Forgotten Mayors: The Role of Local Government in Fighting Crime*, 23 June 2023; N°83, *Virus-proof Violence: Crime and COVID-19 in Mexico and the Northern Triangle*, 13 November 2020; N°80, *Mexico's Everyday War: Guerrero and the Trials of Peace*, 4 May 2020; and N°69, *Building Peace in Mexico: Dilemmas Facing the López Obrador Government*, 11 October 2018.

II. López Obrador Doubles Down on the Military

After more than a decade of attempts to rein in violent criminal groups, López Obrador swept to electoral victory in 2018 with the promise of a fundamental overhaul of security policies. He pledged to root out corrupt complicities between crime and state officials while simultaneously addressing the socio-economic root causes of crime, rendering the “war on drugs” the military had spearheaded obsolete. López Obrador has nevertheless placed responsibility for public security more firmly in the hands of the armed forces than any of his predecessors. The president has dismissed critics calling the gap between his words and deeds an irreconcilable contradiction, arguing that under him the military no longer does the bidding of corrupt political leaders but rather protects the Mexican public. López Obrador has also justified the change in his stance by saying that insecurity and violence were simply too extreme for the country’s police forces to handle.¹³

A. “Hugs not Bullets”

López Obrador claims to reject past administrations’ approaches to organised crime. Weeks after taking power, he declared: “The war is over. We want peace”.¹⁴ López Obrador was alluding to the approach whereby his predecessors largely focused on killing or capturing criminal kingpins, usually with military support.¹⁵ While this approach had the effect of breaking up major criminal groups, it also destabilised the wider criminal environment, setting in motion surges of internecine violence between successor factions of larger organisations as well as moves by rival outfits to seize their turf. Illegal armed groups doubled in number between 2010 and 2020 to reach approximately 200, according to a Crisis Group estimate.¹⁶ Aside from sparring with one another in violent feuds, often involving fights for small territorial advances, many of these smaller outfits also tightened their grip on civilians and legal businesses in their areas of influence.¹⁷

With the narrow focus on neutralising criminal leaders came neglect of other factors that contribute to criminality. For the most part, security forces did not go after mid- and low-ranking operatives. The Mexican government also failed to address state corruption, judicial impunity or economic hardship in crime-affected areas. All these

¹³ “Viendo inseguridad cambié de opinión sobre necesidad de mantener al Ejército en las calles: AMLO”, *Forbes*, 6 September 2022.

¹⁴ ““Ya no hay guerra” contra el narco: la declaración de AMLO que desata polémica en México”, *BBC*, 1 February 2019.

¹⁵ See “De sicarios, escoltas y choferes a capos de la droga: los nuevos líderes de los cárteles en México”, *Infobae*, 21 January 2018.

¹⁶ See Jane Esberg, “More than Cartels: Counting Mexico’s Crime Rings”, *Crisis Group Commentary*, 8 May 2020.

¹⁷ See Crisis Group Latin America Report N°89, *Electoral Violence and Illicit Influence in Mexico’s Hot Land*, 2 June 2021. See also Jane Esberg, “Why Mexico’s Kingpin Strategy Failed: Targeting Leaders Led to More Criminal Groups and More Violence”, *Modern War Institute at West Point*, 6 September 2022; and Oscar Contreras Velasco, “Unintended Consequences of State Action: How the Kingpin Strategy Transformed the Structure of Violence in Mexico’s Organized Crime”, *Trends in Organized Crime* (2023).

issues helped foment the growth and diversification of illegal businesses, contributing to the persistence of violent crime.

The human toll has been enormous.¹⁸ More than 100,000 persons have disappeared since 1969.¹⁹ Homicides more than quadrupled from 2007 to 2018.²⁰ As of the end of 2022, there were 386,000 internally displaced persons in Mexico.²¹

Calling previous administrations' iron-fisted approach a "manifest failure", the present government's first public security secretary, Alfonso Durazo, said the huge death toll and billions of dollars spent on the "war on drugs" had brought Mexico no closer to "defeat[ing] the cartels", adding that there was no prospect of achieving this goal in the foreseeable future.²² The government's security doctrine, laid out in the National Peace and Security Plan in 2018, spelled out the president's mottos of "hugs not bullets" and no longer meeting "fire with fire".²³ The plan promised that "80 per cent" of security initiatives would be aimed at combating drivers of violent crime, while confrontations with criminal groups, counter-narcotics operations and high-level arrests would take a back seat.²⁴

The plan defined a number of alternative objectives for the security forces and judicial system. In the legal realm, the document proposed "eradicating" corruption by prosecuting white-collar crimes such as money laundering and promising to end the widespread practice of public officials taking kickbacks. Overhauling prohibitionist drug policies to reduce criminal groups' profit margins and harm to public health was on the agenda. So, too, was re-establishing state control over prisons and improving jail conditions. Strengthening social reinsertion programs was supposed to be a priority as well.²⁵

The document also contained a number of proposed initiatives to boost Mexicans' living conditions. These included "guaranteeing employment, education, health and wellbeing" through social and economic programs tailored to young people and rural residents to curb criminal recruitment. It called for ensuring "full respect" for human rights by "not allowing" state crimes, such as torture, extrajudicial killings and enforced disappearances, and sought the "moral and ethical regeneration of society". The overhaul of prohibitionist drug policies was to be complemented by peacebuilding and transitional justice initiatives. The government promised to disarm and de-

¹⁸ See Beatriz Magaloni et al., "Living in Fear: The Dynamics of Extortion in Mexico's Drug War", *Comparative Political Studies*, vol. 53, no.7 (2020); and Joel Salvador Herrera and César Martínez Álvarez, "Diversifying Violence: Mining, Export-Agriculture and Criminal Governance in Mexico", *World Development*, vol. 151 (March 2022).

¹⁹ "Acercamiento estadístico a la desaparición de personas en México: guerra sucia y guerra contra el narcotráfico", *Nexos*, 23 February 2023; "Registro Nacional de Personas Desaparecidas y No Localizadas", National Search Commission, 17 March 2024.

²⁰ INEGI put the total in 2007 at 8,867 and the one in 2018 at 36,685.

²¹ "Global Report on Internal Displacement 2023", Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, 2023.

²² "National guard, fighting corruption among key elements of new security plan", *Mexico Daily News*, 15 November 2018.

²³ "Plan Nacional de Paz y Seguridad 2018-2024", Government of Mexico, 2018.

²⁴ "Presentación Plan Nacional de Paz y Seguridad 2018-2024", video, Facebook Watch, 18 November 2018.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

mobilise criminal groups; reinsertion programs featuring amnesties for non-violent offenders were meant to ensure that these processes went smoothly.

In sum, on paper at least, the plan outlined a progressive, holistic approach to addressing insecurity. Its goals reflected the government's misgivings about the "war on drugs" and coercive law enforcement policies that many observers, including Crisis Group, have shared.²⁶ Yet, from the outset, critics have noted that details of the practical steps needed to meet López Obrador's stated goals were absent from the plan. Perhaps not surprisingly, the government has made little progress on many of its proposed reforms and abandoned some entirely.²⁷

The gap between the government's rhetoric and its policies is particularly striking when it comes to corruption. López Obrador has declared graft a thing of the past, saying "we no longer permit nepotism ... and much less corruption and impunity".²⁸ Reports by the Superior Auditor of the Federation nevertheless indicate that during his administration the percentage of state contracts signed without going to public tender is at its highest rate ever, while embezzlement of state funds allegedly remains commonplace.²⁹ Public perceptions of corruption in security institutions rose for all forces between 2021 and 2022.³⁰ Civil society bodies, meanwhile, have denounced what they call a campaign to dismantle checks and balances, including through the elimination of autonomous bodies designed to provide oversight of the public sector.³¹ López Obrador has also proposed to dissolve the country's elections watchdog, the National Electoral Institute.³²

²⁶ See, eg, Crisis Group Reports, *Mexico's Forgotten Mayors: The Role of Local Government in Fighting Crime*, op. cit.; and *Building Peace in Mexico: Dilemmas Facing the López Obrador Government*, op. cit.; as well as "Undeniable atrocities: confronting crimes against humanity in Mexico", Open Society Justice Initiative, 2016; Falko Ernst, "Time to End the Lethal Limbo of the U.S.-Mexican Drug Wars", Crisis Group Commentary, 7 October 2020; and "Militarized Mexico: A Lost War That Has Not Brought Peace", WOLA, 12 May 2021.

²⁷ See "AMLO's Security Policy: Creative Ideas, Tough Realities", Brookings, March 2019.

²⁸ "AMLO firma documento que prohíbe influyentismo y amiguismos en su gobierno", *El Economista*, 13 June 2019.

²⁹ "Por adjudicación directa, 78% de contratos federales", *El Economista*, 21 February 2022. "10 veces en las que AMLO dijo que acabaría con la corrupción y demostró lo contrario", Mexicanos contra la Corrupción y la Impunidad, 9 December 2022; "El desfalco en Segalmex ya superó los \$15 mil millones", Mexicanos contra la Corrupción y la Impunidad, 20 February 2023.

³⁰ See "Encuesta Nacional de Victimización y Percepción sobre Seguridad Pública 2023 (ENVIPE 2023)", INEGI, September 2023. Under López Obrador, Mexico's ranking in Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index has remained steady, with the country moving up from 130th (2019) to 126th (2023) of 180 countries. "Corruption Perceptions Index Mexico 2023", Transparency International, 2024.

³¹ López Obrador has repeatedly called these watchdogs costly "smokescreens" serving the interests of the "neoliberal power mafia". In February, he said he was looking to dissolve seven federal bodies, absorb their functions into the executive branch and redirect their budgets to bolster social programs. These bodies were the National Institute of Transparency, Information Access and Personal Data Protection, which processes freedom of information requests; the Federal Economic Competition Commission; the Federal Electricity Commission; the Federal Telecommunications Commission; the National Council for the Evaluation of Social Development Policy; the National Hydrocarbons Commission; and the National Institute for the Evaluation of Education. See "López Obrador va por la eliminación de siete órganos autónomos y entes reguladores", *El País*, 6 February 2024; "AMLO justifica desaparición de órganos autónomos: fueron creados como 'alcahuetes'", Proceso,

The government's failure to root out corruption is far from the only instance where López Obrador made grandiose promises that were never or barely put into practice. In the months before his government took office, senior figures had contemplated adopting transitional justice programs. Indeed, the incoming López Obrador administration held a number of public forums on the issue in conflict-affected areas. But amid uncertainty over which categories of offenders might benefit from judicial leniency – in addition to backlash from the public and opposition parties – these plans were abandoned.³³

Drug policy has similarly remained largely unchanged. While the president had promised an approach rooted in public health – including prevention of drug misuse, coupled with treatment and rehabilitation for individuals suffering from addiction – the government strategy has largely been reduced to a media campaign preaching against consumption. Majorities belonging to the president's MORENA party in Congress have failed to pass marijuana legalisation laws, despite the Supreme Court's demand that they do so.³⁴ While officials have floated the possibility of a licencing system for poppy growers to provide supplies for legal medicinal use instead of the illegal drug trade, the government has not introduced legislation to make the proposal a reality.³⁵

B. *Doubling Down on the Military*

Notwithstanding his promises to overhaul security policy, there is a similar continuity between López Obrador and his predecessors when it comes to his dependence on the armed forces. Indeed, the military has become a pillar of López Obrador's "Fourth Transformation", occupying a pre-eminent role both in public security and other areas of government.³⁶ The National Peace and Security Plan spelled out that many police forces were "controlled by organised crime and moved by self-interest and corruption", while also lacking "discipline, preparation and professionalism". Therefore, it argued, precipitously returning the armed forces to their barracks would be "disastrous".³⁷ At the same time, the plan acknowledged the limits of the military's

8 January 2021; and "AMLO busca el control total de las elecciones en México", *The Washington Post*, 11 April 2021.

³² "Desaparecer el INE y eliminar los plurinominales: López Obrador insiste en su reforma electoral", *El País*, 6 February 2024.

³³ Tania Galaviz-Armenta, "Foros escucha: fracaso y olvido de la justicia transicional en el gobierno de Andrés Manuel López Obrador (2018-2024)", *Revista DYCS Victoria*, vol. 5, no. 2 (2023).

³⁴ "Regular marihuana, tema que tendrá que esperar otro sexenio", *El Economista*, 30 July 2023.

³⁵ "Producción legal de opio para uso médico en México: opciones, realidades y desafíos", México Unido contra la Delincuencia, July 2020.

³⁶ López Obrador depicts the "Fourth Transformation" as an ethical regeneration of Mexican state and society, the third such "transformation" after Mexico's independence from Spain in 1821, the liberal state reforms of 1861 (La Reforma) and the 1910-1920 revolution.

³⁷ "Plan Nacional de Paz y Seguridad 2018-2024", op. cit., p. 16. Mexico's police bodies are classified by both function and jurisdiction. The police are divided into preventive (administrative) and ministerial (investigative) departments. Preventive police departments work at the federal, state and local levels of the state. They are responsible for patrolling, ensuring public order and preventing crime. Ministerial police, which are part of the federal attorney general's office and state attorney's offices but do not exist at the municipal level, are responsible for investigating crimes and car-

suitability for law enforcement, pointing to the armed forces' "unpreparedness to investigate [crimes]", and stating that parts of the anti-organised crime fight are "foreign" to their "preparation, attribution and mission".³⁸

Against this backdrop, it was the creation of the National Guard, a new national security force replacing the Federal Police, that turbocharged the military's role in public security.³⁹ Congress passed a constitutional reform in 2019 creating the Guard as a "civilian police force" under the federal government's command.⁴⁰ Since its inception, however, the force has been closely associated with the military. Its entire command structure and 86 per cent of its personnel are military officers. When it comes to carrying out operations, the dividing line between the Guard and the armed forces has also been thin, with both tending to act together.⁴¹ In 2022, a presidential decree formally handed full administrative and operational control of the Guard to the defence ministry (Secretaría de Defensa Nacional, SEDENA).⁴²

A series of legal provisions ostensibly setting limits to the role of the armed forces have done little to impede deepening military control of Mexico's public security. The armed forces have in practice been allowed to evade accountability rules that are binding on all public institutions.⁴³ Constitutionally, the armed forces are tasked with

rying out judicial warrants. The Federal Ministerial Police's jurisdiction encompasses federal crimes, including organised crime, while the state-level ministerial police are responsible for addressing "common crimes" such as homicide, extortion and kidnapping. In municipalities that do not have municipal police, as well as in others where local police functions have been delegated under security cooperation agreements, state police often assume the corresponding responsibilities. See Crisis Group Report, *Mexico's Forgotten Mayors: The Role of Local Government in Fighting Crime*, op. cit.; Daniel Sabet, "Police Reform in Mexico: Advances and Persistent Obstacles", Wilson Center, 22 December 2010; "Conoce más de la Guardia Nacional", Mexican Government, 4 October 2021; and "Modelo Nacional de Policía y Justicia Cívica", Mexican Government, 6 July 2020.

³⁸ "Plan Nacional de Paz y Seguridad 2018-2024", op. cit., p. 15.

³⁹ The Federal Police represented Mexico's principal national public security force for nine decades until its dissolution on 1 January 2020. Under former President Calderón's secretary of public security, Genaro García Luna, it spearheaded the government's operations to combat organised crime, in the process becoming associated with corruption and violations of human rights, including enforced disappearances and extrajudicial killings. In 2023, García Luna was found guilty in a U.S. court on organised crime and drug trafficking charges. See "Undeniable Atrocities: Confronting Crimes against Humanity in Mexico", Open Society Justice Initiative, June 2016; "Mexico's ex-public security chief convicted in US drug case", AP, 21 February 2023; and "Desapariciones forzadas, asesinatos y ejecuciones extrajudiciales: en México ocurre un crimen de lesa humanidad, cada seis días", *Animal Político*, 28 August 2023.

⁴⁰ "DECRETO por el que se expide la Ley de la Guardia Nacional", *Diario Oficial de la Federación*, 27 May 2019.

⁴¹ "¿Qué es la Guardia Nacional (en 2023)?", Universidad Iberoamericana, 18 April 2023.

⁴² "La Guardia Nacional 'será incorruptible', dice AMLO", *La Jornada*, 26 July 2021.

⁴³ The National Transparency Law and the National Law of the Use of Force oblige the military to provide autonomous oversight bodies such as the National Institute for Access to Public Information and Data Protection with basic information concerning its actions in public security, including on arrests and the use of force. In reality, it has frequently ignored such requests or supplied contradictory data. The federal state attorney's office, which is in charge of enforcing these legal stipulations, has largely refrained from taking action. "INAI revoca respuesta de la SEDENA que declaraba 'inexistencia' de informes sobre uso de la fuerza", Artículo 19, 10 April 2019; "Militarized Transformation: Human Rights and Democratic Controls in a Context of Increasing Militarization in Mexico", WOLA, September 2023.

national defence while public security sits exclusively with civil authorities. Starting with former President Calderón's administration, however, successive governments have employed increasing numbers of military officers in domestic law enforcement.⁴⁴ While the Supreme Court ruled that attempts by Calderón and his successor Enrique Peña Nieto to introduce a legal framework for the use of the military in policing were unconstitutional, López Obrador's 2019 reform allows for military support in public security, albeit under certain conditions.⁴⁵ In effect, the legal rules set out that the armed forces can only assume public security tasks if they do so upon the request of civilian authorities and under their command.⁴⁶ "You have to remember", said a navy commander, "that we aren't independent. Our role is that of support ... in joint operations".⁴⁷

Even so, as of April close to 300,000 National Guard, Army and Navy officers were deployed in crime-fighting duties on Mexican streets, surpassing for the first time the number of civilian police.⁴⁸ Top positions in state and municipal police forces have been filled with active or former military officers.⁴⁹ On the federal level, too, the National Guard has assumed an overtly military character despite its nominal civilian identity and a Supreme Court ruling that the force should be placed under civilian command by 1 January.⁵⁰ López Obrador has taken no steps to comply with the court's demand. Instead, in February he presented a proposal to reform the constitution so that the Guard could become a permanent part of the defence ministry.⁵¹ Who calls the shots when civilian and military forces operate together is, according to police and military officers interviewed by Crisis Group, a foregone conclusion.⁵²

López Obrador has also given a wide array of responsibilities to the armed forces. The National Guard has assumed power over border control, arresting 177,166 migrants in 2022 – a 432.5 per cent spike from 2021.⁵³ The military is in charge of infrastruc-

⁴⁴ Sergio Padilla and Carlos Pérez Ricart, "The Militarization of Public Security in Mexico: A Subnational Analysis from a State (Local) Police Perspective", *Alternatives: Local, Global, Political*, 1 June 2023.

⁴⁵ These conditions include a time limit (with a deadline established for the Guard to become a civilian force, which Mexico's Congress has extended to 2028); its "extraordinary" character, ie, it is restricted to responses in cases of concrete emergencies; and being "subordinated" and "complementary" to civilian bodies. See "La inconstitucionalidad del acuerdo de AMLO que militariza la seguridad ciudadana", *Mexicanos contra la Corrupción y la Impunidad*, 17 May 2020.

⁴⁶ State and municipal governments can delegate public security responsibilities under so-called security cooperation agreements. See Crisis Group Report, *Mexico's Forgotten Mayors: The Role of Local Government in Fighting Crime*, op. cit. See also "El Ejército en las calles hasta 2028: ¿qué implica la reforma aprobada?", *Expansión Política*, 5 October 2022.

⁴⁷ Crisis Group interview, Veracruz, March 2023.

⁴⁸ See "Informe de Seguridad", Government of Mexico, 16 April 2024; and "El (des)equilibrio civil-militar en la seguridad", Universidad Iberoamericana, 13 September 2023.

⁴⁹ "Militares ocupan cargos de alto nivel en seguridad pública", *Vanguardia*, 21 September 2022.

⁵⁰ "La Suprema Corte da siete meses al Gobierno para sacar a la Guardia Nacional de la Secretaría de la Defensa", *El País*, 20 April 2023.

⁵¹ "La reforma de la Guardia Nacional: control total para la Secretaría de la Defensa y facultades de investigación", *El País*, 6 February 2024.

⁵² Crisis Group interviews, Michoacán, Veracruz and Colima, 2022-2024.

⁵³ See "La Guardia Nacional, más que combatir delincuentes y grupos armados, controla migrantes y carreteras", *Proceso*, 17 November 2023.

ture projects such as the Maya Train, a nearly 1,610km railroad through the Yucatan Peninsula. The armed forces have also built new airports and run a state-owned airline, Mexicana. The net effect has been to convert the military into Mexico's largest construction firm.⁵⁴ Aspects of public health management have also been handed to the armed forces. Overall, over 100 agreements have been signed to reallocate to the military tasks that, historically, had been in civilian hands, channelling at least 4.5 billion Mexican pesos (\$257 million) in additional funds to military institutions.⁵⁵

The 2024 federal budget assigns the military a share of public spending 8.6 times greater than in 2018, reaching 20 per cent of state expenditure.⁵⁶ The military's *fideicomisos* – discretionary trusts with limited or no fiscal oversight – have grown by 1,700 per cent under the current government.⁵⁷

C. *Patterns in Crime and Violence*

López Obrador claims that giving the armed forces a leading role in combating crime – in conjunction with his government's efforts to address the drivers of criminality – has brought Mexico peace. He dismisses media reports of outbreaks of violence as blown out of proportion or altogether fabricated by foes in the media and opposition.⁵⁸ Official statistics point to a fall in homicides by 9.2 per cent from 2019 to 2022, from 36,661 to 33,287.

The depiction of a country at peace does not withstand close inspection, however. More than 185,000 murders have been registered so far under López Obrador, a new record for a single presidential term.⁵⁹ Killings remain heavily concentrated regionally, with 16 per cent of the 2022 total occurring in just five municipalities: Tijuana, Juárez, León, Celaya and Cajeme.⁶⁰ Of Mexico's 2,469 municipalities, only 80 had a homicide rate of at least 40 per 100,000 inhabitants.⁶¹ Meanwhile, the proportion of overall homicides estimated to be organised crime-related has trended upward.⁶²

⁵⁴ "El Ejército se convierte en la gran constructora de México", *Expansión*, 17 March 2021.

⁵⁵ "Inventario Nacional de lo Militarizado", Centro Nacional de Investigación y Docencia Económicas, 2022; "Quitán a civiles más de 4,500 millones de pesos y los canalizan a milicia", *El Economista*, 30 August 2023.

⁵⁶ See "Paquete Económico 2024", Secretary of Administration and Finance, 15 December 2023; "Fuerzas Armadas operarán 20% del presupuesto en 2024, 8.6 veces más que en 2018", *Animal Político*, 18 October 2023.

⁵⁷ "Aumenta presupuesto y opacidad en fideicomisos del Tren Maya: Diputados", *Aristegui Noticias*, 19 October 2023. *Fideicomisos* have in the past been used to misappropriate public funds, see "Fideicomisos en México. El arte de desaparecer dinero público", Fundar, 9 May 2018.

⁵⁸ "AMLO afirma que "hay paz y tranquilidad" en México, aunque no le guste a sus adversarios", *El Universal*, 6 July 2022.

⁵⁹ "Datos Abiertos de Incidencia Delictiva", op. cit. The relative decline following the historical homicide record set in 2019 notwithstanding, the yearly count has remained above 30,000, thus explaining the record number of violent deaths under López Obrador.

⁶⁰ See Mónica Daniela Osorio Reyes, "Atlas de Homicidios México 2022", México Unido contra la Delincuencia, December 2023.

⁶¹ See Crisis Group Report, *Mexico's Forgotten Mayors: The Role of Local Government in Fighting Crime*, op. cit.

⁶² See "Índice de paz México 2023", Institute for Economics and Peace, May 2023.

So-called atrocious crimes, including multiple homicides and extreme violence such as mutilations, rose by 19 per cent between 2021 and 2023.⁶³

It is in the regions where criminal outfits fight for dominance that the tallest peaks of violence are to be found.⁶⁴ Rates of violent crime are exceptionally high on a corridor running from the southern and central Pacific coast, through the central western part of the country – including the states of Guerrero, Michoacán, Colima, Jalisco, Guanajuato and Zacatecas – as well as in the vicinity of the U.S. border, in Baja California, Sonora and Tamaulipas. International drug trafficking – whether involving precursor chemicals, finished synthetic substances (crystal methamphetamine and fentanyl), cocaine or, to a far lesser extent, marijuana and heroin – continue to be a major source of criminal violence, largely because they fuel competition among rival outfits.⁶⁵

The unfettered feud playing out between Mexico's two largest criminal organisations, the Jalisco New Generation Cartel and the Sinaloa Cartel, accounted for an estimated 26 per cent of all organised crime-related murders in 2021.⁶⁶ In some of the most affected places, such as the U.S.-Mexico border city of Tijuana, homicides have spiked.⁶⁷ Other areas in which both groups have squared off for control of trafficking routes – such as Zacatecas and Sonora, both in northern Mexico – have experienced waves of homicides, disappearances and displacements.⁶⁸ New areas for competition have recently emerged. Consider Chiapas, Mexico's poorest state, which sits on the border with Guatemala. It has become a crucial territory for flows of illegal drugs and guns, not to mention migrants, who are increasingly a source of income for cartels. Indeed, charging individuals coming through Central America for passage and in some cases holding them for ransom has become a billion-dollar business.⁶⁹

While at least one of them now has a presence in nearly all of Mexico's states, these two groups make up only a fraction of the illegal armed outfits active in the country.⁷⁰ Nor are all regional conflicts equal in nature, with each one exhibiting its own specific characteristics. Transnational drug trafficking, as a source put it, is but the "tip of the mess".⁷¹ Backed by heavily armed units, many of these predominantly small and medium-sized groups – as well as local cells operating under the banner of larger groups – compete for control of both illegal rackets and extortion of legal businesses.⁷²

⁶³ "Atrocidades 2023", Causa en Común, October 2023.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Criminal insiders as well as authorities from the state of Colima, home to Mexico's largest container port, Manzanillo, and a key entry point for precursor substances from Asia, said income from synthetic drugs was financing violent criminal competition. Cocaine was also described as a major cash cow. Crisis Group interviews, Colima, Mexico City and Michoacán, 2021-2024.

⁶⁶ "Mexico", Uppsala University Conflict Data Program, 2023.

⁶⁷ "Tijuana registró dos mil 58 homicidios durante 2022", *La Jornada*, 4 January 2023.

⁶⁸ "Asesinatos, desapariciones y narco: la pesadilla criminal de Zacatecas", *El País*, 28 September 2023; "Tres frentes criminales detrás de violencia en Sonora, México", InsightCrime, 7 January 2022.

⁶⁹ See "Chiapas, territorio tomado", *El País*, 13 April 2024; "Smuggling migrants at the border now a billion-dollar business", *The New York Times*, 25 July 2022.

⁷⁰ See Esberg, "More than Cartels", op. cit.

⁷¹ Crisis Group interview, owner of private logistics firm, Colima, February 2024.

⁷² From 2015 through 2022, recorded drug retail crimes spiked by 148.7 per cent, whereas extortion targeting private business rose by 59.5 per cent. "Índice de Paz México 2023", Institute for Economics and Peace, May 2023. According to INEGI, extortion has the highest rate of under-reporting of

Predatory exploitation of agriculture and natural resources have also become prominent sources of criminal income and fighting in some states. The same is true of cargo theft.⁷³

In view of the extremely uneven distribution of violence across Mexico, the National Peace and Security Plan envisaged that troops would be concentrated in areas with the highest rates of homicide, extortion and kidnapping. But this standard has been applied inconsistently, with troop deployments matching rates of criminal violence in some states but not in others.⁷⁴

Military forces have also been used to address other burning issues. By early 2023, for example, nearly 19 per cent of National Guard officers were being assigned to migration control duties, predominantly along Mexico's southern and northern borders.⁷⁵

It is hard to tell what effect the military's involvement in policing has had on lethal violence. The federal government and the military assert the armed forces have managed to establish "order and security" in conflict-ridden areas.⁷⁶ But neither civilian nor military authorities have explained in concrete terms what soldiers are doing differently than under previous administrations or whether their actions follow any specific strategy or operational plans. Alongside uncertainty as to what military crime-fighting now involves, there are also questions as to whether its impact is always beneficial. Whereas in some areas increased deployment has coincided with a reported drop in homicides, in others violence has worsened even as more troops have been sent in.⁷⁷

There are also concerns about the veracity of official statistics.⁷⁸ Civil society observers, morgue workers and state officials spoke of murders being logged under other causes of death or going unrecorded, allegedly because of political pressure to reduce the recorded rate of lethal violence.⁷⁹ A morgue employee of a major city said:

any crime in Mexico, reaching 95 per cent of cases. See "Encuesta Nacional de Victimización y Percepción sobre Seguridad Pública 2023, op. cit.

⁷³ Cargo theft, which is concentrated in central Mexico, spiked by 46 per cent from 2021 to 2023, see "Robo a transporte de carga aumentó 46% en dos años; Edomex, Puebla y Veracruz las entidades con más casos", *Animal Político*, 22 February 2024. In spite of initial efforts by López Obrador to crack down on oil siphoning, cases during his first five years in office have risen 49 per cent as compared to the Peña Nieto administration, according to PEMEX, the state-owned oil company. See "Con AMLO sube 49% picaduras a ductos de Pemex", *El Economista*, 12 February 2024. Criminal, self-defence, security and private-sector sources in Colima and Michoacán have described mining of iron ore, some of which has been taken over directly by crime groups for shipment to Asia, evading national security-related limits on the export of minerals, as a major driver of conflict in the region. Crisis Group interviews, 2016-2024. See also Ximena Santaolalla, "State Crime, Extraction and Cartels: The Meaning of Mining in Guerrero, Mexico", *ReVista Harvard Review of Latin America*, 26 July 2023.

⁷⁴ See "¿El despliegue de la Guardia Nacional reduce la violencia homicida?", *Nexos*, 25 July 2023.

⁷⁵ Richard J. Kilroy, Jr., "Reassessing the Impact of Mexico's National Guard on Public Safety and U.S. Relations", Baker Institute, 13 April 2023.

⁷⁶ See López Obrador's daily press conference, video, YouTube, 22 March 2023.

⁷⁷ "¿El despliegue de la Guardia Nacional reduce la violencia homicida?", op. cit.

⁷⁸ Crisis Group correspondence, Ernesto López-Portillo, 28 July 2023. See also "Análisis de los registros de incidencia delictiva y posibles manipulaciones", *Causa en Común*, 30 April 2023.

⁷⁹ Crisis Group interviews, Mexico City, Michoacán and Veracruz, 2022-2023.

“When we received bodies of people who had clearly been gunned down or presented *coups de grace*, those were often qualified as accidental deaths”.⁸⁰ While homicides have officially begun to trend downward under the current government, disappearances – most likely resulting in victims’ deaths – have risen.⁸¹ As discussed in greater detail below, criminal operators and state officials told Crisis Group that hiding murder victims has become an increasingly popular way for crime groups to avoid a backlash from state authorities.⁸²

⁸⁰ Crisis Group interview, August 2023.

⁸¹ “En el sexenio de AMLO sí han bajado los homicidios, pero aumentaron las personas desaparecidas”, *Animal Político*, 28 July 2023.

⁸² Crisis Group interviews, Michoacán and Veracruz, February and March 2023.

III. The New Security Paradigm: How It Works in Practice

President López Obrador's readiness to impose a muscular approach to public security despite his initial promises belies a complex, varied reality at the grassroots. In parts of Mexico, authorities appear to be reaching understandings with criminal groups in the name of reducing violence; in others, the military is still engaged in clashes and violence has not abated. Whether in one or the other, criminal outfits are not losing ground but appear to be extending their business portfolios while consolidating both social and political power.

A. Live and Let Live

The government's slogan of no longer "fighting fire with fire" corresponds to an apparent reduction in direct military operations against criminal and armed groups, but it fails to capture fully the complicated reality of how the military has been used under the current administration. Dozens of sources from the armed forces, criminal groups, police, state officials and security experts concur that López Obrador's administration has demonstrated greater restraint in responding to criminal groups than its predecessors did. Indeed, in some cases the government told the military to stand down rather than confront illegal outfits. Days after López Obrador entered office in December 2018, a high-ranking navy officer said, his superior explicitly instructed him and his peers "to cease all operations at once" in one region.⁸³ Leaders of three competing Michoacán criminal outfits stated that military operations against them had eased and, in some areas, come to a complete halt. "Here", said a commander of the Knights Templar group of its rural stronghold in Michoacán, "we haven't seen them for a couple of years".⁸⁴

In areas where the military maintains a presence, a kind of *modus vivendi* has taken shape, where the armed forces refrain from intervening in criminal groups' affairs so long as certain informal rules are respected. Sources in illicit organisations say members of the armed forces – as well as envoys from the federal government, who were dispatched soon after López Obrador took office – both directly and tacitly explain the extent of violence they will tolerate. "[The government] can and wants to turn a blind eye", a member of the Knights Templar told Crisis Group. "There's a lot of ways to make money, for them and us to get fed, but you can't have that many deaths".⁸⁵ The leader of a competing criminal outfit said his formula for "being left alone" consisted in respecting certain limits: "We are all pigs, and this is a life of constant violence ... but you can't go beyond a certain limit. When you have a movement [armed group], you will make noise. But you can't make too much noise".⁸⁶

Military law enforcement in most of the country has largely consisted of patrolling the main thoroughfares of cities and towns and setting up checkpoints.⁸⁷ Crimi-

⁸³ Crisis Group interview, Veracruz, December 2022.

⁸⁴ Crisis Group interview, Michoacán, July 2022.

⁸⁵ Crisis Group interview, Michoacán, November 2021.

⁸⁶ Crisis Group interview, Michoacán, February 2023.

⁸⁷ Vanda Felbab-Brown, "Addressing Mexico's role in the US fentanyl epidemic", Brookings Institution, 19 July 2023.

nal leaders described these controls as easily avoidable, insisting that they had forged live-and-let-live arrangements under which security and criminal forces cohabit.⁸⁸ “The deal we have with them [the National Guard] is that we avoid bumping into each other so they don’t have to do anything”, one criminal group commander told Crisis Group.⁸⁹ The army and navy also carry out arrests, but all the cases in 2022 were *in flagrante* rather than part of a systematic effort to dismantle criminal groups’ middle and upper echelons.⁹⁰ The National Guard, for example, apprehended 177,166 migrants in 2022 but arrested only 2,814 alleged criminals, most of them on charges of theft and street-level drugs dealing.⁹¹ Overall, judicial impunity remains commonplace, reaching 96.3 per cent for all crimes nationwide in 2022 (up by 3.9 per cent from 2019).⁹²

The government appears reluctant to deploy troops in offensive operations. A sense of fatalism – tinged with what some government officials would describe as pragmatism – underpins this approach. As a federal deputy who is a member of a congressional armed forces oversight committee explained, certain areas where armed conflict is raging are perceived as “unfixable”. He described a widespread unwillingness by decision-makers “to assume the political costs for something that they see as a lost cause”.⁹³ Similarly, a former high-level federal security official said adopting a more active approach toward criminal groups and insecurity is seen as a political “liability, not an asset”.⁹⁴

According to various criminal leaders, the key to avoiding military operations is to refrain from overt displays of violence.⁹⁵ In practice, that appears to entail hiding corpses. As one criminal leader put it, “Those that have to go ... we need to make them disappear”.⁹⁶ Criminal groups appear to prefer hiding victims in clandestine

⁸⁸ Crisis Group interviews, Michoacán, 2021-2023.

⁸⁹ Crisis Group interview, Michoacán, February 2023. The criminal commander made these comments while parking his vehicle on a side street to avoid two National Guard patrol cars that had been announced over his group’s radio surveillance system.

⁹⁰ There are great discrepancies in numbers of arrests reported. The federal Secretary of Security and Citizen Protection only reported a total of 2,066 arrests by both army and navy in 2022. See “Militarized Transformation: Human Rights and Democratic Controls in a Context of Increasing Militarization in Mexico”, *op. cit.* Data concerning how many, if any, of these arrests have led to successful criminal prosecutions are not publicly available. A high-level security official said he was not aware of any. Crisis Group interview, Mexico City, February 2023.

⁹¹ See “La Guardia Nacional, más que combatir delincuentes y grupos armados, controla migrantes y carreteras”, *Proceso*, 17 November 2023.

⁹² “Hallazgos 2022”, *op. cit.*

⁹³ Crisis Group interview, Michoacán, July 2023.

⁹⁴ Crisis Group interview, Mexico City, February 2023.

⁹⁵ Especially during the first years of Mexico’s military campaign against organised crime, criminal violence was often highly performative, with murder victims frequently left in public places alongside written or printed messages containing threats and harangues. See Brian Phillips and Viridiana Ríos, “Narco-Messages: Competition and Public Communication by Criminal Groups”, *Latin American Politics and Society*, vol. 62, no. 1 (2020).

⁹⁶ Crisis Group interview, Michoacán, February 2023. The interviewee cited a case where he “had to deal with” three men from his area accused of sexual abuse of a minor, indicating that his group killed and buried them in a local avocado orchard.

graves in hinterlands with little or no state presence.⁹⁷ In Sinaloa, the rate of disappearances has surpassed that of homicides for the first time ever.⁹⁸ In Mexico City, the sharp official drop in homicides in recent years was accompanied by a surge of disappearances, leading some to question whether the state statistics were in fact accurate.⁹⁹ In addition to disposing of bodies, criminal groups are keen to limit documentation of violence: when Crisis Group conducted a field visit, one criminal commander was adamant that no pictures or video footage be taken of fighting or casualties as his underlings conducted an offensive against an enemy group.¹⁰⁰

The true scope of Mexico's disappearances remains an enigma and a matter of political controversy. The interior ministry's National Search Commission puts the total number of people who have disappeared and not been found dead or alive at 116,305.¹⁰¹ About 65 per cent of these cases have been registered since 2019.¹⁰² The number of unreported disappearances is also thought to be large: search collectives – namely, groups who attempt to locate missing loved ones – claim it could be as high as the official number.¹⁰³

In June 2023, López Obrador called for a census of the disappeared figures, prompting the then-head of the National Search Commission to resign; months later, she said she had stepped down because she feared the government would artificially depress the figures. The president denounced her comments and in December 2023 presented an alternative count of 12,377 “confirmed reports” of disappeared individuals.¹⁰⁴ If he had expected that members of the public would accept this figure as accurate, his hopes were dashed. Family members of the disappeared were chagrined to find their loved ones off the list, even as their whereabouts remain unknown. Meanwhile, the identities of thousands of others who have supposedly been found have not been made available for independent verification.¹⁰⁵

⁹⁷ Crisis Group observations, Michoacán, 2021-2023. Crisis Group interview, navy commander, Veracruz, December 2022.

⁹⁸ See “Sin cuerpo no hay delito”, *Noroeste*, 24 January 2022; “¿Reducción de homicidios en CDMX? Depende de la alcaldía ...”, *México Evalúa*, 5 June 2022. “Desaparecer en Baja California”, *DDHH Elementa*, 12 October 2021.

⁹⁹ “La Ciudad de México no sabe de qué muere su gente”, *Nexos*, 28 November 2023.

¹⁰⁰ Crisis Group observations, Michoacán, July 2021.

¹⁰¹ “Registro Nacional de Personas Desaparecidas y No Localizadas”, National Search Commission, 9 May 2024.

¹⁰² “AMLO crea confusión sobre cifras de desaparecidos”, *Verificado*, 16 November 2023.

¹⁰³ “Ocultan la cifra de personas desaparecidas”, *Animal Político*, 17 May 2022. In 2022, 92.4 per cent of all crimes went unreported or did not lead to a case file being opened by authorities. See “Envipe 2023”, op. cit. The family of a disappeared crime group member told Crisis Group they had opted not to inform the authorities as they feared backlash. Crisis Group interviews, Michoacán, February 2023.

¹⁰⁴ “¿Qué hacer si un desaparecido aparece como localizado en el censo de AMLO?”, *La Cadera de Eva*, 16 February 2024.

¹⁰⁵ “Desaparecer dos veces: estos son 10 mil nombres que el censo borró de lista oficial de desaparecidos”, *Animal Político*, 13 March 2024.

B. Ongoing Feuds

While the armed forces have in many cases shifted toward a more passive law enforcement approach, they have maintained a prominent role in responding to intense criminal feuds. Data show that there have been fewer clashes between federal security forces and criminal groups than under past administrations, particularly when compared to the monthly average of 39.4 under Calderón (2006-2012). That said, the average under López Obrador – at least 31.6 (data is incomplete for 2022) – is not much lower than the figure for Peña Nieto's presidency from 2012 to 2018, which stood at 35.¹⁰⁶ Casualties among suspected criminals have followed a similar trajectory, falling from 561 per year under Calderón to 207 under Peña and 199 during López Obrador's first four years.¹⁰⁷

The federal government has made continued use of the armed forces to contain major outbreaks of fighting. Top government officials, including the president in his daily press conferences, tend to dismiss media reports about criminal fighting and attacks against civilians, arguing that they are overblown or fabricated by opponents.¹⁰⁸ But persistent media coverage of violence can spark the deployment of troops, often followed by claims that order has been re-established.¹⁰⁹ "It's a new cycle of administering the crisis rather than resolving it ... keeping the worst of it out of the media", a security expert said.¹¹⁰

Whether the military then engages criminal groups or not differs from region to region. Of the 756 confrontations reported by the defence ministry from 2020 through 2022, Tamaulipas (328) and Michoacán (103) accounted for over half. Despite high troop numbers, other violent states had far lower numbers: 45 in Zacatecas, 22 in Guerrero, eighteen in Guanajuato and thirteen in Baja California.¹¹¹

Even within the same states, military operations have oscillated between passive presence and active engagement. In Michoacán, in June 2023, National Guard and army officers were deployed to the rural hinterland of Apatzingán following a series of drone attacks on civilian dwellings and businesses amid criminal turf battles. Soon after, authorities declared that peace had been restored.¹¹² But combatants and civil-

¹⁰⁶ Nearly half the clashes under Peña Nieto took place during his first two years, before falling to a level equal to that under López Obrador. For data from 2006 to 2021, derived from freedom of information requests, see "¿Existe una estrategia de 'abrazos no balazos'?", Universidad Iberoamericana, 9 August 2022. For 2022 data, see "Los enfrentamientos de la SEDENA", Universidad Iberoamericana, 2023; and "Censo Nacional de Seguridad Pública Federal 2023", INEGI, 10 January 2024. The navy has not reported its number of clashes in 2022.

¹⁰⁷ "Un herido por cada cinco muertos, la letalidad en el gobierno de AMLO", *Expansión*, 28 February 2023. These figures should be treated with caution: leaked military documents show that the military has not been reporting all casualties. "Sedena Leaks: el Ejército miente sobre cifras de personas muertas y heridas en enfrentamientos", *Animal Político*, 12 October 2022.

¹⁰⁸ In the case of Chiapas, which has seen a recent uptick in criminal violence, see "Adversarios exageran la violencia registrada en el país, acusa AMLO", *El Universal*, 12 July 2023.

¹⁰⁹ "AMLO reconoce base social del crimen en Chiapas; despliega a la Guardia Nacional", *Expansión*, 25 September 2023; "Negación: el gobierno de AMLO frente a las críticas internacionales", *Nexos*, 20 April 2023.

¹¹⁰ Crisis Group telephone interview, Alberto Olvera, April 2023.

¹¹¹ See "Los enfrentamientos de la SEDENA", op. cit.

¹¹² "Llegan 400 soldados a Apatzingán; protegerán a desplazados", *La Jornada*, 20 June 2023.

ians commented that the military presence had merely prompted the timing of fighting to shift.¹¹³ “During the day, they [the soldiers] are out on the streets, but in the afternoon they withdraw. Then they [the criminal groups] fight”, said a resident.¹¹⁴ Elsewhere, criminal groups appear equally undeterred. A criminal leader pointed to Zamora, a city on the Michoacán-Jalisco border with high troop numbers and the world’s highest homicide rate in 2021, as an example of a fruitless military deployment. “Over there, you got the base, and right in front they keep on dumping bodies”.¹¹⁵

In contrast, the army adopted a distinctly more heavy-handed approach along the Michoacán border with Jalisco in 2021. At the time, the Jalisco Cartel was pursuing an armed advance that was displacing thousands of people, generating sustained domestic and international media coverage.¹¹⁶ According to a criminal leader, members of two other illegal groups, a high-ranking federal official, and local officials, soldiers and local criminals formed a de facto joint front against the Jalisco Cartel, coordinating their operations and even fighting alongside one another.¹¹⁷

Army special forces sent to the frontline were reportedly at first hesitant to take decisive action against the Jalisco Cartel out of fear of being accused of crimes against humanity, and thus violating the tenets of López Obrador’s new approach.¹¹⁸ But after receiving assurances from a local crime group that it would discard any dead bodies in clandestine graves, soldiers proceeded. Criminal leaders and combatants, as well as state officials, confirmed that army special forces killed scores of Jalisco Cartel combatants in and around Taixtán, in the municipality of Tepalcatepec, and in El Terrero, in the Buenavista municipality.¹¹⁹ The Jalisco Cartel was nonetheless far from vanquished, illustrating the fleeting gains generated by one-off coercive operations. Left to regroup, the Jalisco Cartel has reinvigorated its multi-front assault in Michoacán, including through attacks on soldiers.¹²⁰ “There’s always human refill”, said a criminal leader of the criminal groups’ ability to replenish their ranks.¹²¹

¹¹³ Crisis Group correspondence, June 2023.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ Crisis Group interview, Michoacán, July 2023.

¹¹⁶ See “Violence erupts as Mexico’s deadly gangs aim to cement power in largest ever elections”, *The Guardian*, 20 April 2021; “Los michoacanos que huyen de la violencia en Tierra Caliente, la otra migración de la que no se habla en México”, *Los Angeles Times*, 19 September 2021.

¹¹⁷ Crisis Group interviews, Michoacán, November 2021; February and July 2023.

¹¹⁸ “No hay desaparecidos ni hay masacres en mi gobierno, afirma AMLO”, *El Universal*, 11 August 2023.

¹¹⁹ A source confirmed that around 400 people were killed. These deaths have not been previously reported. Nor are they reflected in homicide or disappearance statistics. Crisis Group interview, Michoacán, July 2023.

¹²⁰ Crisis Group interviews and telephone interviews, criminal leaders and civilians, 2023. See also “Así es el ‘Grupo Operativo Lagarto’, el nuevo brazo armado del CJNG que patrulla Michoacán”, *Infobae*, 14 November 2023; “Reportan ataque del CJNG a base de la Guardia Nacional en Vista Hermosa, Michoacán”, *El Universal*, 9 November 2023.

¹²¹ Crisis Group interview, Michoacán, February 2023.

C. *Fattening Up*

Military-led law enforcement has in the past two decades been unable to make a lasting dent in criminal groups' capacity to operate or their impunity. As the strategy has shifted under López Obrador toward granting greater leeway to criminal groups in exchange for reductions in overt violence, these outfits have taken the opportunity to "fatten up", as one leader termed it.¹²² International drug production and trafficking remain important revenue sources. But, as noted earlier, Mexican criminal groups have broadened their portfolio of interests, often focusing on exploiting all possible licit and illicit sources of income in areas under their sway.¹²³ Blackmail or takeovers of originally legal businesses have become commonplace, with extortion rackets booming in recent years to reach their highest rates ever recorded in 2022.¹²⁴

Siphoning money from businesses involved in the legal production of goods has become a major source of growth for organised crime.¹²⁵ A criminal leader in Michoacán said of a competitor that "what makes him strong is that he's got the avocado", referring to his ability to charge roughly 80 orchard owners protection payments twice a year that amount, according to a Crisis Group estimate, to an annual total of at least 80 million pesos (circa \$4.43 million).¹²⁶ Extracting revenues from legal business is "less problematic ... because it doesn't put you on the radar of the authorities as much", another crime boss commented.¹²⁷

Criminal groups have also mounted a drive to seize command of legal markets in areas such as Michoacán and Guerrero. In some cases, they have wrested control of the supply of basic goods such as tortillas, rice, eggs and meat, as well as alcoholic beverages and soft drinks.¹²⁸ "The way it works", a criminal leader said, "is that I identify who the outside suppliers are. I send some of my boys to tell them that I don't want

¹²² Crisis Group interview, Michoacán, February 2023.

¹²³ According to some studies, drugs are no longer the main source of criminal income. See Herrera and Martínez-Álvarez, "Diversifying Violence", op. cit. Michoacán's criminal groups, for instance, have not been threatened by falling prices of marijuana and crystal methamphetamine, two of the state's traditional criminal staples. Whereas, according to local producers, a kilogram of crystal meth earned about 35,000 pesos (circa \$2,000) wholesale around 2010, it currently earns 6,000 pesos (circa \$330). Crisis Group interviews, Michoacán, February 2023. Similarly, in Guerrero, criminal groups have withstood the rise of the synthetic opioid fentanyl and its effects on demand for heroin by turning to extortion of mining operations. "El efecto mariposa del fentanilo: la agonía de los campesinos de la amapola en Guerrero", *El País*, 17 April 2023.

¹²⁴ "Cuatro años perdidos en materia de seguridad", Observatorio Nacional Ciudadano, 2023; "La tasa de extorsiones está en niveles récord en el sexenio de AMLO", *El Economista*, 26 August 2023. Since the start of the López Obrador government, extortion of private businesses has reportedly risen by 48 per cent. See "Aumenta 48% la extorsión a empresas durante el gobierno de AMLO, alerta Coparmex", *Forbes*, 13 June 2023.

¹²⁵ Crisis Group interviews, state security officials and worker's union representative, Colima, February 2024; state security and navy officers, Veracruz, July 2023. See also "State Crime, Extraction and Cartels", op. cit.

¹²⁶ In Michoacán, agriculture and mining have become two of the principal criminal cash cows. Crisis Group interviews, Michoacán, February and July 2023.

¹²⁷ Crisis Group interview, Michoacán, February 2023.

¹²⁸ Crisis Group interviews, businesspeople, state officials and criminal leaders, Michoacán, February and July 2023. See also "How Mexico's Cartel Jalisco Nueva Generación Rules", *Mexico Today*, 29 May 2022; and "Mexico's gangs are becoming criminal conglomerates", *The Economist*, 11 May 2023.

to see them here anymore. Then I find out what the source is and make a deal with them to only sell to me. Now I'm the only supplier".¹²⁹

Criminal groups have used their new and growing revenue streams to beef up their ranks and organisational strength, according to security officials and criminal leaders.¹³⁰ They have brought in fresh recruits and in certain cases hired foreign fighters, including former members of the now disbanded Colombian guerrilla Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC). Some of these come to head local battle groups and pass their military expertise on to fighters, including how to manufacture and tactically deploy improvised explosive devices and explosives-equipped drones.¹³¹ Other steps reportedly taken to strengthen criminal groups include partnering with other illegal outfits and sharing knowledge, as well as purchasing more guns and ammunitions, mainly from the U.S.¹³² Proceeds from illegal rackets also flow into properties and businesses, offering additional income and money laundering opportunities. In some cases, legal economies have become dependent on illicit financial investment.¹³³

Ill-gotten resources are also used to curry civilian support for criminal groups. While these organisations certainly deploy plenty of sticks – killing residents, perpetrating acts of sexual violence and imposing vigilante justice in regions they control – they also offer carrots. To portray themselves as more benevolent and responsive than the state or rival illegal groups, these groups distribute cash and food; build infrastructure such as sporting facilities; organise community events; and take on the role of arbiters in everyday citizen disputes.¹³⁴ These gestures can reduce the likelihood that civilians will share compromising information about a criminal group's

¹²⁹ Crisis Group interview, Michoacán, July 2023. Another local group controls cattle ranchers' access to feedlots and slaughterhouses – and thus to the national beef market. Crisis Group interviews, veterinarians, Michoacán, February 2023; "Cárteles en Guerrero van tras el control de negocios", *El Financiero*, 12 September 2023.

¹³⁰ Crisis Group interviews, Michoacán, Mexico City and Veracruz, February, March and July 2023.

¹³¹ The influx of foreign fighters is not new to Michoacán or other parts of the country. See "Deadly Mexican cartel rises as new threat", *The Wall Street Journal*, 13 May 2015. But members of three different illegal armed groups said more foreigners have come recently, bringing about changes such as more frequent use of IEDs. Crisis Group interviews, Michoacán, February and July 2023. See also "Mexican Cartel Strategic Note No. 34: Anti-Vehicle Mine Targeting SEDENA Convoy between Tepalcatepec and Aguililla, Michoacán", *Small Wars Journal*, 16 February 2022. Criminal and other sources close to them stated that IEDs were easy to manufacture and the metal tubes and explosives needed to produce them were readily available from hardware stores and mining industry suppliers, respectively. Crisis Group interviews, Michoacán, July 2023; by telephone, October 2023. A naval intelligence source also noted the demobilisation of the FARC as an influence, with more "criminal talent" becoming available. Crisis Group interview, Veracruz, December 2022. See also "Carlos' y los sicarios centroamericanos reclutados por Cárteles Unidos para combatir al CJNG", *Infobae*, 14 September 2022.

¹³² Crisis Group interviews, criminal leaders, Michoacán, 2021-2023.

¹³³ Examples include tourism, construction and real estate in Jalisco and Colima, where, according to current and past state officials as well as members of the private sector, the Jalisco New Generation Cartel has used its local presence to funnel money into the legal economy. Crisis Group interviews, Mexico City and Colima, July 2023 and February 2024. See also "From spas to banks, Mexico economy rides on drugs", Reuters, 22 January 2010.

¹³⁴ See, eg, Crisis Group Report, *Virus-proof Violence: Crime and COVID-19 in Mexico and the Northern Triangle*, op. cit.

activities and members. They can even encourage residents to act as human shields to thwart state security operations. Illegal groups that have managed to gain public support on occasion trade in blocks of votes for candidates for political office, enabling them to gain greater access to state institutions and, by extension, impunity from prosecution.¹³⁵ “Here in Mexico”, said a long-time crime group member, “you have to win over the people to keep turf”.¹³⁶

¹³⁵ Crisis Group interviews, criminal leaders, Michoacán and Guerrero, 2012-2023. See also Crisis Group Report, *Electoral Violence and Illicit Influence in Mexico's Hot Land*, op. cit.

¹³⁶ Crisis Group interview, Michoacán, November 2021.

IV. State-crime Entanglements

Recent military efforts to dampen Mexico's criminal violence vary from one region to the next, generating a number of unintended effects. At the same time, corruption and collusion affect all security forces and continue to hamper law enforcement.

A. *Military Corruption and Collusion*

López Obrador has claimed that the armed forces – rather than the police – are the optimal force to tackle insecurity because the government selects the top brass and they are beyond reproach. Its involvement, the government argues, has rendered military crimes a thing of the past.¹³⁷ Allegations of crimes, abuses and human rights violations perpetrated by troops continue to surface, however. When they do, senior government officials tend to rally to the military's defence, shielding it from independent inquiries and legal consequences. Witness how Mexican authorities pressured the U.S. into sending home former Secretary of Defence Salvador Cienfuegos, after his arrest in 2020 in Los Angeles on organised crime and drugs trafficking charges. (Washington relented after the Mexican government threatened to paralyse bilateral security cooperation unless the general was handed over.) Once in Mexico, Cienfuegos was briefly placed under house arrest, and shortly thereafter declared innocent.¹³⁸

Similarly, the Interdisciplinary Group of Independent Experts – a body established by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights to look into the 2014 disappearance of 43 trainee teachers in Guerrero state and the complicity of security forces in the crime – shut down its investigation in 2023. The expert group said the armed forces and the government had obstructed its efforts.¹³⁹ Members of a truth commission tasked with investigating the country's "dirty war" from 1965 to 1990 – during which the army carried out enforced disappearances and extrajudicial executions of regime opponents – levelled similar allegations of government interference.¹⁴⁰

López Obrador has portrayed the military as Mexicans' "guardian angels".¹⁴¹ But serious alleged wrongdoing by servicemembers has been recorded in documents compiled by the military's own intelligence units and later leaked to the public. These describe how officers have allegedly sold protection and guns to criminal groups involved in drug trafficking, oil siphoning and preying on migrants (for more on this subject, see Section IV.C).¹⁴² Such documents also show that the army employed spy

¹³⁷ "A mí, fuerzas armadas me obedecen: López Obrador", *La Jornada*, 13 October 2023.

¹³⁸ "The Cienfuegos affair: Inside the case that upended the drug war in Mexico", *The New York Times*, 12 December 2022.

¹³⁹ "El GIEI se despidе del 'caso Ayotzinapa' apuntando nuevamente al Ejército", *El País*, 25 July 2023.

¹⁴⁰ "La Comisión de la Verdad para la Guerra Sucia denuncia la falta de colaboración del Centro Nacional de Inteligencia", *El País*, 15 August 2023.

¹⁴¹ "AMLO: Mexicanos tienen como ángel de la guarda a las Fuerzas Armadas para que puedan vivir con paz", *El Universal*, 20 November 2023.

¹⁴² "#SedenaLeaks revela corrupción militar: venden armas del Ejército a criminales", *Mexicanos contra la Corrupción y la Impunidad*, 8 October 2022; "Sedena Leaks: revelan nexos de autoridades con el narco, corrupción en aduanas y vigilancia al EZLN", *Animal Político*, 8 October 2022.

software against state officials and human rights defenders investigating military involvement in human rights violations such as extrajudicial killings.¹⁴³

Cases such as these are not new, and they are certainly not limited to the current administration. But military officers and federal security officials acknowledge a risk that the armed forces' expanded role in public security and other areas brings temptations to engage in illegal behaviour.¹⁴⁴ Established social practices within military institutions may predispose troops toward money-making opportunities. It starts early, when recruits learn they are responsible for covering basic necessities – and will need to pay bribes to ensure they are treated fairly. “In the army, it starts from day one when recruits enter military college”, a military commander explained. “You have to pay for everything. Clean towels, soap, your vacation time to be respected, to get out from under arrests [*arrestos* are a disciplinary measure preventing soldiers from leaving military premises]”. Recruits are thus socialised into a *sistema de cuotas* (quota system) – an intra-institutional, pyramid-like system in which each echelon has to generate income, sometimes by striking deals with criminal groups, and pass money up the chain.¹⁴⁵

B. *Uneven Ties*

State corruption and arrangements between public officials and criminal groups do not necessarily breed violence. For much of the 20th century, Mexico was governed by a single, authoritarian party, the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI). The party's internal cohesion allowed it to exercise a high degree of informal control over criminal groups and local strongmen, who fed money into the national political system in exchange for the freedom to operate criminal rackets. Compared to today, this approach sustained lower levels of violence and greater stability.¹⁴⁶ A paradoxical effect of Mexico's democratisation since the 1980s – and the end of single-party rule at the presidential level in 2000 – has been the breakdown of the state's power to exert informal control of criminal groups.¹⁴⁷

¹⁴³ See “Estructura secreta del Ejército espío con Pegasus a Raymundo Ramos, con pleno conocimiento del Secretario de la Defensa”, Artículo 19, 7 March 2023; “How Mexico became the biggest user of the world's most notorious spy tool”, *The New York Times*, 18 April 2023.

¹⁴⁴ Crisis Group interviews, Michoacán, Veracruz, and Mexico City, 2021-2023. See also “La estrategia es la opacidad: Gobierno de AMLO incumple su promesa de transparencia”, *Animal Político*, 18 October 2023; “The Political Implications of Mexico's New Militarism”, Center for Strategic and International Studies, 5 September 2023.

¹⁴⁵ Crisis Group interview, December 2022. Superiors routinely use arrests, alongside transfers and denial of vacation, to force personnel into compliance with illegal demands. A number of officials noted that pyramid-shaped corruption systems are a regular feature of Mexican security institutions. Crisis Group interviews, military commander; former high-level federal security official; human rights ombudsman federal police; police officers; federal police officer; chief of police, Mexico City, Michoacán, Veracruz, Guerrero and Colima, 2018-2024.

¹⁴⁶ See Wil G. Pansters, “Drug Trafficking, the Informal Order and Caciques: Reflections on the Crime Governance Nexus in Mexico”, *Global Crime*, vol. 19, nos. 3-4 (2018); and Viridiana Rios, “How Government Coordination Controlled Organized Crime: The Case of Mexico's Cocaine Markets”, *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, vol. 59, no. 8 (2015).

¹⁴⁷ See, eg, Crisis Group Report, *Mexico's Forgotten Mayors: The Role of Local Government in Fighting Crime*, op. cit.; and Crisis Group Latin America N°61, *Veracruz: Fixing Mexico's State of Terror*, 28 February 2017.

As a result, criminal groups' ability to co-opt or capture state institutions has risen.¹⁴⁸ Over the course of years of interviews with Crisis Group, criminal leaders have described how they have gained footholds in institutions – with the aim of obtaining impunity, acquiring additional revenues or using state forces to their benefit. These relations are generally seen as *sine que non* for survival and for outperforming criminal competitors. In many cases public officials are obliging partners. As a criminal leader from Michoacán observed of agents from the federal prosecutor's office and other security bodies who arrive in the area: "As soon as they get here, they're looking [to engage]. The old one leaves the new one the [communication] line: 'That guy will call you up, strike a deal with him'. We chat and that's that. And if not, I'll send someone to go knock on their door and tell them that I worked in this or that way with the guy before and I want that to continue working that way. Very rarely they tell you no. They don't want to die for something that isn't working. They won't risk their lives for a *quincena* [a bimonthly salary]"¹⁴⁹

Military involvement in law enforcement, as noted above in Section II.B, depends primarily on requests from and agreements with civilian officials, including at the local or state level. This practice gives criminal interests with access to state officials the ability to activate, withhold or undermine military operations against certain targets. "You have people who have the governor's ear and tell him who the good guys are and who the bad guys are", said the second-in-command of a Michoacán criminal outfit. "Then they send operations this or that way"¹⁵⁰ Furthermore, abundant intelligence on criminal group structures and activities is often not acted upon, as informal networks seek instead to protect specific illegal groups and individuals.¹⁵¹ Military commanders noted that it was extremely risky to share intelligence during joint operations with other institutions, including other branches of the armed forces, given the risk they could be compromised. As a result, they routinely refrained from doing so.¹⁵²

The complexity of ties between criminal groups and state officials in Mexico makes the job of countering illicit influence even more trying. Fragmentation within the Mexican state, alongside fierce competition among a multitude of illegal armed groups, have given rise to a volatile set of collusive arrangements. Divisions in these illicit networks can run between or even within state security institutions, with some parts collaborating with one criminal counterpart while others link up to a rival.¹⁵³ Under such circumstances, no single illicit network can impose its designs on others definitively, driving the cycle of conflict.¹⁵⁴ A top state official in Veracruz stated that two networks combining criminal operatives and public officials work from within the

¹⁴⁸ See Guillermo Trejo and Sandra Ley, *Votes, Drugs and Violence: The Political Logic of Criminal Wars in Mexico* (Cambridge, 2020).

¹⁴⁹ Crisis Group interview, Michoacán, February 2023.

¹⁵⁰ Crisis Group interview, Michoacán, February 2023.

¹⁵¹ Crisis Group interviews, military officers, former state police operational chief and municipal authorities, Veracruz, December 2022 and March 2023.

¹⁵² Crisis Group interviews, Veracruz, March 2023; Colima, February 2024.

¹⁵³ Crisis Group interviews, police, criminal leaders, military, state and federal security officials, Michoacán, Veracruz and Mexico City, 2021-2023.

¹⁵⁴ Esberg, "More than Cartels", op. cit.

state apparatus and are often at loggerheads.¹⁵⁵ Another example can be found in the hold of rival criminal groups over different pieces of the Michoacán state police, as well as municipal police forces.¹⁵⁶

As a result, in violence-affected areas of Mexico in particular, parts of the state are pitted against one another in the service of competing criminal interests. This high-stakes contest often means public officials, political candidates and police officers are unable to satisfy the irreconcilable criminal demands imposed upon them, leaving them vulnerable to attack.¹⁵⁷ A criminal leader said he expected the local police and other officials to remain “neutral” as regards his group’s rivalry with another outfit, and was ready to kill officers who did not observe his dictates. “They [the police] are their [the enemy group’s] armed wing”, he explained, so attacking them was a way to strike at the rival criminal group.¹⁵⁸ To date, 2,344 police have been killed nationwide during López Obrador’s presidential term.¹⁵⁹ So far during the current electoral cycle, 32 people running for office have been killed – more than in any other recent election (there were 30 in 2020-2021 and 24 in 2017-2018).¹⁶⁰

C. *The Military as Criminal Accomplices*

Various Mexican governments have branded civilian police as acutely vulnerable to criminal infiltration – and thus the weakest link in the country’s security forces.¹⁶¹ López Obrador himself has adopted this position. One of his primary justifications for putting the military at the heart of law enforcement is that the country’s police forces are too rotten to salvage.¹⁶²

Part of the armed forces, however, have allegedly also been directly involved in criminal activities or complicit with criminal groups in ways that both violate the law and undermine official security policies. Examples of soldiers drawing income from drug trafficking and other criminal activities have been well documented over the

¹⁵⁵ Official as well as military intelligence sources, police, state and municipal officials, academics, and journalists in Veracruz said one of the networks included the Jalisco New Generation Cartel and the other the Sinaloa Cartel. Crisis Group interviews, Veracruz, March 2023.

¹⁵⁶ Crisis Group interviews, former and current state and municipal police, criminal leaders and combatants, Michoacán, 2021-2023. In the run-up to an illegal armed group’s offensive against an enemy group in 2021, discussed earlier, Crisis Group witnessed a meeting in which the group’s commander informed the local state police commander of the division of tasks.

¹⁵⁷ Municipal and state police forces’ vulnerability stems from low wages, which heightens their temptation by corruption, as well as weak employment protection, lack of equipment, and limited coordination with and physical protection from higher-level state institutions such as the armed forces. Crisis Group telephone interview, former head of police of Morelia (Michoacán), 2 August 2023. For an overview, see “La Policía en México Muchas Reformas, Pocos Avances”, WOLA, May 2014. See also Crisis Group Report, *Mexico’s Forgotten Mayors: The Role of Local Government in Fighting Crime*, op. cit.

¹⁵⁸ Crisis Group interview, Michoacán, July 2023. See also “Crimen ha cobrado la vida de 5 policías de Apatzingán, Michoacán, en 2023: Mandos, acusados de vínculos con la delincuencia”, *Informa Oriente*, 21 November 2023.

¹⁵⁹ “Registro de Policías Asesinados”, *Causa en Común*, 9 May 2024.

¹⁶⁰ “Votar entre balas”, *Data Cívica*, 13 May 2024; “México se encamina hacia su elección más violenta: 30 aspirantes asesinados, 77 amenazados y 11 secuestros”, *El País*, 24 April 2024.

¹⁶¹ “Policías: el eslabón más débil del combate a la delincuencia organizada”, *Pie de Página*, 9 June 2019.

¹⁶² “Riesgo de que acabe como la extinta Policía Federal, alertó AMLO”, *La Jornada*, 19 April 2023.

past few decades.¹⁶³ It is difficult to pin down whether malfeasance has become more widespread, given the opaque nature of the armed forces and the absence of independent judicial oversight.¹⁶⁴ But anecdotally at least, military and criminal sources describe illicit connections between the two sides as commonplace.¹⁶⁵

In some cases, criminal groups have sought to extend their mantle of protection by striking deals with rogue military officers. A time-tested practice among criminal groups consists of co-opting individual soldiers to extract information about military operations in their areas. “It’s really not that complicated”, a criminal leader in Michoacán noted. “You send someone to the bars they frequent, get them chatting, buy them a bottle, get their contact and you take it from there”. He stated that no local group had “a general on the payroll ... but what each of us has is one or the other *chismosito* [informant], some lieutenant or colonel”.¹⁶⁶ Two naval officers interviewed by Crisis Group pointed to cases in which they had been made aware of criminal complicity on the part of superiors either in their force or in other wings of the military. The result in these and other instances, they said, was that specific criminal groups had received some degree of protection.¹⁶⁷

López Obrador’s move to place the military at the centre of the security apparatus cast doubt on the viability of some of these arrangements, but not for long. A white-collar broker working with a variety of clients involved in trafficking illegal substances through Mexican seaports said he had been worried that opportunities might fade away after the new president took office. His concern stemmed from the dissolution of the Federal Police, with whom he had been “in paradise”.¹⁶⁸ “Now you have to negotiate everything with the military, and they can be real hard-asses”, he said. But “at the end of the day”, he added, “there’ve always been *generales patriotas* [patriotic army generals] and *generales bisneros* [business-minded generals], and the trick is finding out who you can work with”.¹⁶⁹ Another white-collar operator involved in oil siphoning spoke of a learning curve on the part of National Guardsmen that had stopped some of his group’s shipments. “They were new on the job and had to be

¹⁶³ See Carlos Flores Pérez, *El estado en crisis: crimen organizado y política: desafíos para la consolidación democrática* (Mexico City, 2009).

¹⁶⁴ Cases in leaked military documents include the sale of arms to criminal groups from the country’s principal military base in Mexico City, as well as bases in the State of Mexico and Guerrero, and criminal-military collusion at a number of crossings along the Mexico-U.S. border. See “#Sedena Leaks revela corrupción militar”, op. cit.; “Sedena Leaks: revelan nexos de autoridades con el narco, corrupción en aduanas y vigilancia al EZLN”, *Animal Político*, 8 October 2022; and “Denuncian empresarios corrupción de militares en aduanas”, *Reforma*, 8 October 2022.

¹⁶⁵ Crisis Group interviews, Michoacán, Guerrero, Veracruz, Mexico City, State of Mexico and Colima, 2011-2024.

¹⁶⁶ Crisis Group interview, Michoacán, February 2023. According to a federal security source, “Just like the [criminal] leaders have their [street] lookouts, they’ve got them inside the military”. Crisis Group interview, Michoacán, July 2023.

¹⁶⁷ Crisis Group interviews, December 2022 and July 2023.

¹⁶⁸ On corruption within the Federal Police, see, eg, “La pirámide: así se desviaron 40 millones de dólares del presupuesto de la Policía Federal en los últimos seis meses del Gobierno de Peña Nieto”, *El País*, 7 December 2020.

¹⁶⁹ Crisis Group interview, Mexico City, December 2022.

shown how things work. ... I had to call their superiors ... but since then everything's flowed normally", he said.¹⁷⁰

¹⁷⁰ Crisis Group interview, Mexico City, June 2022.

V. The Election Outlook

Both frontrunners in the polls – Claudia Sheinbaum of MORENA, to whom recent polls currently give an average 22 per cent lead, and Xóchitl Gálvez from the united opposition front – have outlined security plans ahead of the 2 June election.¹⁷¹ They draw certain distinctions: Sheinbaum promises broad continuity in security policies, while Gálvez speaks of ending the current government's avowed “hugs, not bullets” strategy. Both contenders, however, strike similar notes when they identify the policy shortcomings that have stalled improvements in public security.

Having served as Mexico City mayor until stepping down in 2023 to run for high office, Sheinbaum has vowed to preserve the outgoing government's legacy. Praising its reported successes in reducing violence, she plans to double down on social programs for vulnerable populations that are often drawn into crime, while continuing to rely on “the armed forces in public security tasks as long as is necessary”.¹⁷² She has also, however, expressed a wish to take López Obrador's “Fourth Transformation” to a “next level”.¹⁷³ In this respect, the National Guard would remain part of the defence ministry but be equipped with greater investigative and intelligence powers. New information-sharing protocols, as well as “cooperation mechanisms” making it mandatory for all security forces to present their procurement plans as a means of increasing transparency in their spending, are intended to tighten coordination between different institutions and layers of government.

Sheinbaum has also pledged to establish Comprehensive Plans to Combat Organised Crime, combining federal forces, federal and state prosecutors, and state police in joint law enforcement operations. These would carry out information gathering in areas where criminal armed groups operate. In cooperation with the U.S., they would strive to curb the cross-border flow of arms and illicit funds as well as interrupt supply chains of synthetic drugs.¹⁷⁴ Sheinbaum's probable top security official, the former Mexico City security secretary Omar García Harfuch, has said this campaign would be concentrated in the ten states that cumulatively account for 41 per cent of total homicides in Mexico.¹⁷⁵ The focus on intelligence and investigations, inter-institutional coordination and geographic concentration of resources is reminiscent of the approach that officials say has cut homicides in Mexico City during Sheinbaum's term as mayor.¹⁷⁶

¹⁷¹ Gálvez, a member of the National Action Party (PAN), is running for the Strength and Heart for Mexico coalition composed of PAN, PRI and the Party of the Democratic Revolution, as well as a number of small regional parties. MORENA is the senior partner in the incumbent bloc that also includes the Labor Party and the Green Ecologist Party of Mexico. For polling data, see “Elección presidencial 2024”, *Oraculus*, 14 May 2024.

¹⁷² “Fuerzas armadas seguirán en las calles hasta que sea necesario: Sheinbaum”, *La Jornada*, 3 March 2024.

¹⁷³ See Sheinbaum's security team's “Presentación Plan de Seguridad”, video, YouTube, 4 March 2024; and “100 pasos para la transformación”, Claudia Sheinbaum/MORENA, March 2024.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁵ See “Presentación Plan de Seguridad”, *op. cit.*

¹⁷⁶ Crisis Group interviews, Mexico City, May 2023 and January 2024. Official data show that homicides in Mexico City were cut in half under Sheinbaum, to a rate of eight per 100,000. Critics point

For her part, Gálvez has vowed tougher security measures, saying she would “apply the force of the state” and construct a maximum-security prison for “dangerous criminals” and organised crime bosses. At the same time, and in contrast to her adversary, Gálvez has pledged to demilitarise public security and double the number of municipal and state police officers deployed in violent areas. She has argued that the armed forces should abandon the broad range of responsibilities that they have taken up under López Obrador and return to their original mission of national defence. She also holds, however, that the military’s tasks include “combating the most violent criminal organisations”. While Sheinbaum looks to cooperate with the U.S. so long as it does not mean “bowing our heads”, Gálvez promises a return to closer ties. She has said she would create a binational agency to combat the flow of synthetic drugs and weapons.¹⁷⁷

In other respects, the two security plans are remarkably similar. Gálvez is seeking to distance herself from the “war on drugs” spearheaded by former President Calderón from the National Action Party, to which she also belongs. She would leave the National Guard in place and double its head count to 300,000. Its personnel will for the foreseeable future consist largely of military officers, but these are to operate under civilian command and a “civilian vision”.¹⁷⁸ “It doesn’t make sense to waste another six years on building another institution”, an adviser of hers said.¹⁷⁹ Furthermore, in line with her electoral rival, she stresses the need for social programs, but with an explicit focus on disarmament and problematic drug use. She has also argued for greater concentration of law enforcement efforts in the most unsafe regions, with an emphasis on fighting extortion; cooperation between federal, state and local government under a “national security accord”; and stronger intelligence gathering and criminal investigations.

In summary, neither leading candidate proposes an abrupt end to military involvement in public security, though both are pledging adjustments to the status quo. Sheinbaum has remained vague as to her readiness to rein in the armed forces’ power, promising an eventual conversation about military-civilian relationships but refraining from giving specific goals or dates. Despite her stance on demilitarisation, Gálvez also plans to continue employing troops in operations against organised crime.¹⁸⁰ This preference for continuity can be understood partly as aversion to risk: a precipitous withdrawal of the military could destabilise already volatile parts of the country, particularly should the armed forces’ formal role in deterring crime or their informal alignments with certain illegal outfits come to a sudden halt. The military’s political and budgetary clout might also render any attempt to scale down its powers a risky venture for a new government.¹⁸¹

to a simultaneous uptick in disappearances, among other possible distortions. See “Is Mexico City’s plummeting murder rate too good to be true?”, *The Guardian*, 21 November 2023.

¹⁷⁷ “Propuestas”, Xóchitl Gálvez, 4 March 2024.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*; “Discurso en Fresnillo, Zacatecas”, Xóchitl Gálvez, 1 March 2024; and “Megacárcel y duplicar elementos de la GN: el modelo de seguridad que propone Xóchitl Gálvez”, *Animal Político*, 2 March 2024.

¹⁷⁹ Crisis Group interview, Mexico City, January 2024.

¹⁸⁰ Crisis Group interview, Gálvez campaign adviser, Mexico City, January 2024.

¹⁸¹ A high-level security official close to the Sheinbaum campaign told Crisis Group that the general feeling among civilian officials had become that overtly confronting or criticising the military was “unwise”. Crisis Group interview, Mexico City, May 2023.

VI. Bases for a New Security Policy

Both the leading presidential candidates have plans pointing to serious shortcomings in security policy that have plagued crime-fighting in Mexico. The campaigns have been clear in identifying some of the chief failures in law enforcement, whether corruption and criminal collusion, a lack of coordination between institutions and levels of government, or the failure to concentrate resources on the regions where they are most needed. Their approaches suggest that security policy could undergo important adjustments in the coming years. But making headway will require a clear assessment of how the institutions in charge of policing Mexico, including the military, should be shaped into forces able to curb criminal power and growth.

A. *Carving Back the Military's Place*

Regardless of which leading candidate wins, for the time being, dependence on the armed forces and their soldiers in public security will in all likelihood remain intact, even though – as security officials repeatedly stress – the military is not a police force.¹⁸² They lack the appropriate training in policing, which is a major reason the military has a poor track record bringing criminal groups to justice or dismantling illegal outfits.¹⁸³ That said, soldiers are well equipped to provide the armed force needed to shield other civilian institutions and state officials from criminal aggression.

Over time, military responsibilities in Mexican public security should be boiled down to tasks that befit its core competence. When prosecutors request their support, members of the armed forces could aid in the arrests of armed and dangerous individuals. They could curb the territorial advances of belligerent groups such as the Jalisco Cartel and shield vulnerable populations caught in the crossfire or under threat of displacement and forced recruitment – while protecting civilian state institutions and critical infrastructure.

Civilian leadership and oversight will be vital to ensuring that the military can act effectively. State officials can take various approaches to fostering compliance with official directives by military commanders. A new administration will have the opportunity to reshuffle the top brass and to promote commanders supportive of restricting tasks to a core mandate suited to the military's strengths.¹⁸⁴ The government should provide commanders with clearly formulated expectations concerning their role on the ground, in contrast to the *laissez faire* approach generally adopted by civilian officials.

¹⁸² Crisis Group interviews, Veracruz and Mexico City, 2017-2023.

¹⁸³ The training National Guardsmen receive continues to be predominantly of a military nature and is imparted by the army. It does not focus on building cases that could support prosecutors. See “¿Qué es la Guardia Nacional (en 2023)?”, Universidad Ibero-Americana, 18 April 2023.

¹⁸⁴ Military personnel, experts and criminal sources such as white-collar brokers consistently describe the composition of the armed forces as highly complex, with different networks showing differing degrees of willingness to adhere to law and civilian command. Crisis Group interviews, Mexico City, Michoacán, Colima and Guerrero, 2011-2024.

B. *Meeting the Corruption Challenge*

Reducing corruption and collusion within the armed forces will be essential but far from easy. Wholesale exposure of the military to the civilian justice system would most probably incense senior officers. The new government, moreover, would almost certainly consider doing so politically perilous. A more modest and feasible strategy would be to hold units active within high-crime regions to a higher standard. Sheinbaum, for example, has proposed that Mexico's Superior Auditor of the Federation could be strengthened so as to supervise the accounts and procurement of all the country's institutions, civilian and military. More robust application of existing legal standards requiring public, including military, officials to make sworn declarations of their assets, could raise the costs of conniving with criminal groups.

A recently created bicameral, multi-partisan commission for oversight of the armed forces in Mexico's Congress could also be part of any effort to step up independent monitoring.¹⁸⁵ For it to succeed, the commission would require a strong mandate that includes civil society participation and the ability to subpoena military officers and internal documents. It would also need the authority to work closely with internal affairs inspectorates in each wing of the armed forces. Despite their statutory powers, these inspectorates lack transparency. To offer better protection to low-ranking officers seeking to withstand superiors' illegal demands, these inspectorates need to include more independent civilian officials.

Additionally, at the same time as they bear down on military corruption, the new government should strive to upgrade existing civilian security and judicial bodies, including police forces and prosecution services. These have proven incapable of tackling impunity, not least because of officials on the take.¹⁸⁶ As noted above, sweeping reform processes have tended to be slow and their results disappointing. One possible approach would be to use the experience gained in regional task forces as a step toward building elite units within existing institutions. The most capable officials should be handpicked for these elite enclaves following a rigid vetting process under congressional and civil society oversight.

C. *Prioritisation and Coordination*

The results of past military exercises in weakening criminal groups such as the Zetas, the Knights Templar and, under López Obrador, the Jalisco Cartel have in general been too ephemeral to deem the efforts successful. After operations against these groups end, the same outfits or their splinters have bounced back. Part of the reason is the military's strategy of narrowly targeting the most visible rungs of criminal networks, including top criminal leadership – the so-called kingpins.¹⁸⁷ Middle managers in these illegal groups tended to replace their former bosses and continued to act

¹⁸⁵ Following a backlash due to the use of spy software by SEDENA against human rights defenders in 2020, the commission was created in 2022 by Mexico's legislature to increase oversight of the military's participation in public security. See "Comisión Bicameral que evaluará uso de las Fuerzas Armadas se atora en el Senado", *Expansión*, 14 March 2023.

¹⁸⁶ Crisis Group interviews, federal and state attorneys' offices agents, federal and state security officials, criminal leaders, Michoacán, Veracruz, Guerrero, Mexico City and Colima, 2017-2024.

¹⁸⁷ See Esberg, "More than Cartels", *op. cit.*

violently, sometimes even more intensively than their predecessors. Meanwhile, white-collar intermediaries and rogue state officials have largely gone scot-free even when they make up the backbone of illegal economies by providing crucial logistical services, including transport of illicit goods domestically and overseas.¹⁸⁸

Breaking the pattern of conducting fleeting and counter-productive operations against criminal networks will require fundamental changes to the way law enforcement is carried out in Mexico's most violent areas. Authorities should target the most violent groups, employing tactical force and targeted arrests as required, in order to convey to all criminal outfits the sorts of behaviour that will bring a firm state response. In so doing, officials can communicate tacitly but clearly their red lines to criminal groups without having to engage in direct negotiations with any of them. At the same time, prosecutors should cast a wider net than they have typically done to date, focusing their investigations on the hubs of state-criminal networks: corrupt officials working with criminal groups, white-collar brokers, illicit campaign financiers, arms traffickers and financial operators. Denying criminal leaders access to fresh recruits is also vital, and it will require sustained investment in prevention and demobilisation.¹⁸⁹

At the same time, the incoming government needs to make tough decisions as to where to concentrate these efforts and against which criminal groups. Both main presidential candidates have embraced the goal of focusing state resources on the most dangerous regions. In each of these areas, authorities should be ready to identify the criminal groups responsible for the worst bloodshed and for inflicting the greatest harm on communities and legal businesses through rackets such as extortion. Information about these groups is abundant within the National Intelligence Centre and other bodies in federal and state-level security institutions, but it needs to be filtered, corroborated and systematised so that authorities can map territories under criminal influence. Since transnational licit and illicit supply chains involving Mexican criminal groups cause grave harm domestically and abroad, foreign authorities – especially in the U.S., Canada and the European Union – should collaborate in strengthening information sharing and joint law enforcement.¹⁹⁰

Ideally, inter-institutional task forces could serve as vessels to concentrate efforts and resources on high-crime regions and also improve the chronic flaws in coordination between different state bodies and levels of government.¹⁹¹ Among the person-

¹⁸⁸ Crisis Group interviews, criminal brokers and leaders, Mexico City, Michoacán and Guerrero, 2018-2024.

¹⁸⁹ As previously highlighted by Crisis Group, a good starting point for demobilisation would entail reforming private rehabilitation centres. These often serve as a revolving door for young crime group members. To break this cycle, state social and health services, private-sector firms and civil society should work hand in hand to attend to these populations and offer opportunities for law-abiding employment when they leave. For more, see Crisis Group Latin America Report N°103, *Partners in Crime: The Rise of Women in Mexico's Illegal Groups*, 28 November 2023.

¹⁹⁰ As noted above, both campaigns have signalled their willingness to forge closer international cooperation, as have representatives of these international partners in conversations with Crisis Group. Crisis Group interviews, Mexico City, 2018-2024.

¹⁹¹ Task forces would mirror security cooperation agreements among local, state and federal governments that have in some cases produced beneficial results. See Crisis Group Report, *Mexico's Forgotten Mayors: The Role of Local Government in Fighting Crime*, op. cit.

nel that should be included in such task forces are representatives from the navy or army, the National Guard, state and municipal police, federal and state prosecutors' offices, and institutions of all levels implementing social programs. These could be seconded to work under the leadership of task forces appointed by the federal government's secretary of public security, with the aim of weakening criminal networks, protecting vulnerable populations and fostering crime prevention and demobilisation.

VII. Conclusion

López Obrador took office with high ambitions of pacifying Mexico and ending previous governments' reliance on a heavy-handed approach to crime. Echoing the reservations of other Latin American governments about the domestic effects and humanitarian harm caused by counter-narcotics crackdowns, the new president advocated a less violent approach that is better attuned to the socio-economic conditions driving criminal recruitment. But the new strategy has been applied inconsistently and to limited effect. Civilian law enforcement continues to play second fiddle to the deployment of military forces operating without any oversight of note. Clashes between these forces and major criminal groups remain frequent in certain areas; in places where they have declined there is growing evidence of an uneasy co-existence between security bodies and illegal outfits, as well as collusion between officials and operatives from the two sides.

The next Mexican president, due to be elected in June and to take office in October, will have to choose how much of López Obrador's legacy to preserve. Abrupt moves to return troops to their barracks are both unlikely and potentially dangerous. Criminal groups have, after all, infiltrated all levels of Mexican government and they are armed to the teeth. Still, incoming senior federal officials could pay far more attention to demarcating military responsibilities in crime-fighting within the bounds of the constitution, while ensuring that the acts and omissions of troops are properly monitored. The new authorities should also learn from the failure of previous grand reforms that have often run aground and concentrate instead on creating fertile conditions for effective law enforcement. Above all, they will need to sever links and deter collusion between criminal groups and certain state officials, reinforce cooperation between strands and layers of the Mexican state, and focus resources and personnel in areas where they are needed most.

Rates of deadly violence have tapered off under López Obrador, but criminal groups have deepened their sway over local economies, communities and state officials. As it stands, Mexico's violence is becoming more insidious and harder to resolve by the day. The next government will have its work cut out to curb the bloodshed and those who live off it. The best place to start would be a frank admission that the state needs cleaning up.

Mexico City/Bogotá/Brussels, 24 May 2024

Appendix A: Map of Mexico



Appendix B: About the International Crisis Group

The International Crisis Group (Crisis Group) is an independent, non-profit, non-governmental organisation, with some 120 staff members on five continents, working through field-based analysis and high-level advocacy to prevent and resolve deadly conflict.

Crisis Group's approach is grounded in field research. Teams of political analysts are located within or close by countries or regions at risk of outbreak, escalation or recurrence of violent conflict. Based on information and assessments from the field, it produces analytical reports containing practical recommendations targeted at key international, regional and national decision-takers. Crisis Group also publishes *CrisisWatch*, a monthly early-warning bulletin, providing a succinct regular update on the state of play in up to 80 situations of conflict or potential conflict around the world.

Crisis Group's reports are distributed widely by email and made available simultaneously on its website, www.crisisgroup.org. Crisis Group works closely with governments and those who influence them, including the media, to highlight its crisis analyses and to generate support for its policy prescriptions.

The Crisis Group Board of Trustees – which includes prominent figures from the fields of politics, diplomacy, business and the media – is directly involved in helping to bring the reports and recommendations to the attention of senior policymakers around the world. Crisis Group is co-chaired by President & CEO of the Fiore Group and Founder of the Radcliffe Foundation, Frank Giustra, as well as by former Foreign Minister of Argentina and Chef de Cabinet to the United Nations Secretary-General, Susana Malcorra.

Comfort Ero was appointed Crisis Group's President & CEO in December 2021. She first joined Crisis Group as West Africa Project Director in 2001 and later rose to become Africa Program Director in 2011 and then Interim Vice President. In between her two tenures at Crisis Group, she worked for the International Centre for Transitional Justice and the Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General in Liberia.

Crisis Group's international headquarters is in Brussels, and the organisation has offices in seven other locations: Bogotá, Dakar, Istanbul, Nairobi, London, New York, and Washington, DC. It has presences in the following locations: Abuja, Addis Ababa, Bahrain, Baku, Bangkok, Beirut, Caracas, Gaza City, Guatemala City, Jerusalem, Johannesburg, Juba, Kabul, Kyiv, Manila, Mexico City, Moscow, Seoul, Tbilisi, Toronto, Tripoli, Tunis, and Yangon.

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May 2024

Appendix C: Reports and Briefings on Latin America and the Caribbean since 2021

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Haiti's Last Resort: Gangs and the Prospect of Foreign Intervention, Latin America and Caribbean Briefing N°48, 14 December 2022 (also available in Spanish and French).

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Mexico's Forgotten Mayors: The Role of Local Government in Fighting Crime, Latin America Report N°99, 23 June 2023 (also available in Spanish).

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Partners in Crime: The Rise of Women in Mexico's Illegal Groups, Latin America Report N°103, 28 November 2023 (also available in Spanish).

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