



**International Relations Graduation Final Project**

**“The war against drugs in Mexico: Its evolution over the last 3 administrations (2006-2022)”**

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## **ABSTRACT**

The problem of drugs and narcotraffic properly originates from the 80s, Mexican criminal groups being nothing more than the transport that the Colombian cartels used to move their merchandise so it could reach the United States. Some time later, Mexico decided to enter into that same business, but it was not until after that it became a matter of greater importance when violence and insecurity reached unprecedented levels. Ever since, Mexico has been characterized as a country hit by drug trafficking; in various (if not all) parts of the country, violence is greatly caused by the organized crime that has been spread by the narco cartels, which since the year 2006 have been increasing and becoming more and more terrifying.

Actions have been attempted to be taken by the Mexican State's leaders and authorities, particularly since 2006, to combat or control this problem, however they have all been nothing but inefficient, they have even managed to aggravate the problem, if to this we add the fact that corruption by the means of narco funding has been present in the same institutions that claim to be fighting against those criminals it can be concluded that Mexico is a country dominated by the leaders of said illegal activities.

Currently, the situation is at the worst point it has ever been. The failure to counterattack the issue has allowed narco cartels to carry on their activities and their only target and focus is not only Mexico or drug trafficking anymore: They are expanding to different areas of the world and diversifying their portfolio to increase their profits. What started as an issue between neighbors (U.S and Mexico) could now be developing into a situation that will involve the whole international community and become more dangerous if further action isn't taken.

**Keywords:** War on drugs, drug trafficking, securitization, Mexico, transnational crime.

**Palabras clave:** Guerra contra las drogas, narcotráfico, securitización, México, delincuencia transnacional.

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## ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

Acronym	Spanish	English
FBN	Oficina Federal de Estupefacientes	The Federal Bureau of Narcotics
BNDD	Oficina de Estupefacientes y Drogas Peligrosas	Bureau of Narcotics and Dangerous Drug
DEA	Administración para el Control de Drogas	Drug Enforcement Administration
DFS	Dirección Federal de Seguridad	Security Federal Directorate
PRI	Partido Revolucionario Institucional	The Institutional Revolutionary Party
PAN	Partido Acción Nacional	National Action Party
PFP	Policía Federal Preventiva	Federal Preventive Police
PRD	Partido de la Revolución Democrática	Party of the Democratic Revolution
IM	Iniciativa Mérida	Mérida Initiative
PND	Plan Nacional de Desarrollo	National Development Plan
BLO	Organización Beltrán Leyva	Beltrán Leyva Organization
GAFE	Grupo Aeromóvil de Fuerzas Especiales	Special Forces Air Mobile Group
LFM	La Familia Michoacana	The Michoacán Family
CJNG	Cartel Jalisco Nueva Generación	Jalisco Cartel - New Generation
SNSP	Sistema Nacional de Seguridad Pública	National Public Security System
INEGI	Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía	National Institute of Statistics and Geography
SEMAR	Secretaría de Marina	Secretary of the Navy
NM	Nueva Metodología	New Methodology
AMLO	Andrés Manuel López Obrador	Andrés Manuel López Obrador
MORENA	Movimiento de Regeneración Nacional”	National Regeneration Movement

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## **1. INTRODUCTION**

The trafficking of drugs is an international organized crime that has managed to undermine state authority and has had an impact on the population as a whole. The notion of drug trafficking relates to the existence of a global, illicit market for the production, distribution, and sale of illicit drugs and substances. When states prohibit the production and trading of such commodities and services but there is still a sizable market for them with consumers prepared to pay a fair price, illegal marketplaces start to develop. Illegal trading of weapons, human trafficking, kidnapping, murder, money laundering, and corruption are just a few of the crimes that are intimately linked to drug trafficking. It is a form of organized criminality that infiltrates government institutions and establishes networks among the elite, middle, and lower sections in society.

Prior to the 1980s, drug trafficking in Mexico wasn't considered as a problem that endangered the safety of an entire country or as having a higher political priority.

While the "drug lords" make the most of existing power vacuums by filling these spaces with their own laws, the fabrication and subsequent commercialization of their product typically take place in weak states, nations that are underdeveloped with relatively little real presence.

In these countries, the population recognises a rapid means to survive by means of drug trafficking. The ability to penetrate the networks of power also increases in the face of a weak state, leading to the development of high levels of corruption that impede the battle against drug trafficking.

### **1.1. Research subject and justification**

The research subject is centered on the drug wars in Mexico, focusing on the strategies implemented by the last 3 Mexican presidents (including the current one) to address the issue and the resulting impact on national security, politics, and public administration. The topic is crucial for the academic field of International Relations, as drug trafficking is a global phenomenon that poses a significant threat to the security and stability of states.

This paper aims to analyze the different approaches taken by the government in Mexico in response to the issue. By examining the historical origins of drug trafficking and the cartels in Mexico, and the effectiveness of the strategies carried out throughout the last 3 administrations, this dissertation seeks to provide insights into the complexities of addressing drug trafficking, particularly in the context of Mexico's political and social environment.

Drug trafficking has been a persistent challenge for this country, with significant consequences on its national security. The problem has intensified over the years, resulting in increased violence, corruption, and instability in the country. Therefore, analyzing the strategies of the Mexican presidents in addressing the war on drugs is of vital importance, not only for understanding the problem but also for identifying effective solutions. Overall, this research subject is significant, relevant, and timely, as drug trafficking continues to be a significant threat in Mexico and globally given how it has been perpetuated due to the lack of attention by the global community making other parts of the globe more prone to be directly or indirectly involved in the issue.

## **1.2. Objectives**

The main objective of this dissertation is:

- To understand the management of the last 3 Mexican presidents on the war on drugs in the country as well as how has this war evolved over their respective six-year terms becoming a security issue.

The secondary objectives of the dissertation are:

- To present historical background regarding the origins of drug trafficking and some of the most important cartels in Mexico to have a better understanding of the issue.
- To understand why and how drug cartels became a threat to security and how they gained power over Mexico as well as within its institutions.
- To explain the securitization made by the 2 last presidents before President López Obrador through the war on drugs.

- To expose the situation and reality the country is living under the current president's mandate based on how he decided to deal with the problem.
- To propose a hypothetical viable solution other than the legalization of drugs.

### **1.3. Methodologies**

This dissertation makes use of a descriptive methodology based on qualitative and quantitative data. Having as primary sources Governmental data and reports from Mexico and the United States, NGOs and specialized data digital platforms and as secondary sources press publications, articles, and academic works in order to carry out a historical and comparative approach to examine organized crime and drug trafficking in Mexico, focusing on the strategies that were implemented by 3 different Presidents as well as on the results from each, additionally covering how the evolution of the cartels has progressed throughout such periods.

## **2. THEORETICAL-CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK**

The securitization theory will be used to analyze how the drug trafficking and the war on drugs have been framed and communicated by the three presidents, and how their policy decisions, strategies and responses have been shaped by the securitization process. Therefore, it is necessary to have a theoretical approach to the term security, its various meanings and, at the same time, to review the rules of security. In this way, it will be possible to understand how national security has been linked to public security in order to confront drug trafficking with the use of the Armed Forces.

Before, security was perceived under the idea that the main threats came from the outside, from States that would threaten the security of a nation. For this reason, traditionalist strategies were implemented, based on a military, territorial and state centric conception (González, 2007).

External security refers to the protection of the country's territorial, air and maritime space against other States, in order to preserve freedom, peace and national sovereignty. It consists in the maintenance of the State and the protection of national



interests at the international and transnational levels. Internal security, on the other hand, is related to preserving the established order (Eriksson & Rhinard, 2009). It focuses on sustaining, ensuring and preserving the security of the State, through political, social and economic actions that guarantee a favorable climate in the country, by combating the pressures and antagonisms that may arise, while at the same time fulfilling national objectives. For this reason, there lies confusion regarding the operational activities of the armed forces in the interior of the country, as they assume that these authorities are involved in public security tasks when in reality, they are claimed to be carrying out operations in the interior, within the framework of national security.

Buzan's expansion of the security studies resulted in more sectors, for this paper the main sectors will be not only the military but also the social and political ones. According to Buzan, the idea of security is not always an objective reality; rather, it is created through language "threats" constructions. "Speech acts" are the language constructions (Buzan, 1983) and they are the earliest steps in a securitization process. Following Buzan, Waever and De Wilde's theoretical analysis of the securitization process, once a statesman or other influential stakeholder considers something or someone to constitute a risk to national security, an array of resources must be committed to addressing the threat (Buzan et al., 1998).

The ruling class and statesmen alike must take into account what assets and activities this response will demand. When that securitization process is in progress, society in certain instances is conscious of the threat and supports the elites' and statesmen's' choices, but in other cases, society is either unaware of or under-informed of the threat because the elites and statesmen have chosen to keep such knowledge hidden from the public eye. Setting a sense of security for the State calls for both a comprehension of the public's view of the threat and an evaluation of the evidence backing this view. Security may be either objective (the threat being recognised as real) or subjective (the threat being barely perceived).

According to Waever, security is a "speech act" in which a problem is declared urgent and demands immediate response (Waever, 1995). This allows an agent to assert their authority to take substantial steps and to obtain the resources they need.

Before something is successfully securitized, however, there are a number of factors to take into account, including the political/historical context and the power structures that support the actor.

Thus, securitization becomes effective when a "threat" is accepted by society and elevated to a higher priority issue. In order to analyze the securitization process of drug trafficking it is important to understand what is being securitized, who it is a threat to, who securitizes it, how it becomes securitized and under what circumstances (Buzan et al., 1998). The threats and dangers Mexico is currently facing have made it necessary to reconfigure the conceptual meanings of both types of security, proposing a framework of intergovernmental cooperation and collaboration that encompasses the national and the public spheres, linked through the concept of homeland security.

Desecuritization, on the other hand, could be defined as the transfer of matters out of a state of emergency into the standard political bargaining process (Waever, 1995). This approach involves the decision to forgo relying on public inspection of the threat, and it entails moving matters away from the threat-defense cycle and into the general public arena rather than framing them as threats for which we have defenses. Waever notes that "the elite" criticizes the acts of statesmen who attempt to restore order by either confirming the existence of the threat, acting as though nothing ever occurred or as if the threat wasn't a top priority matter but even so, the presence of the threat would continue to change the situation and circumstances of the State.

### **3. RESEARCH DEVELOPMENT**

#### **3.1. Origins: Opium & China**

Mexico didn't start the illicit trading on its own, its roots actually stem from the traditional Chinese practice of using opium for medicinal purposes. This background helps to comprehend the level of institutionalization this activity had in Mexico but first it's necessary to review why and how China's opium consumption and production managed to move all the way across the globe to end up in Mexico:

The historical cultivation of poppy in China was used to create opium. While it was originally used only for medicinal reasons, opium eventually became sought after for

recreational purposes (Dikötter et al., 2006). This became an issue as opium was addictive and led to national and international laws being put in place to prohibit its trade. Although the narcotic was produced in China, most of it was imported from India, which was a British colony. As such, the British monopolized the opium trade. The "British East India Company" intended to do business in China, however the Qing emperor chose to forbid its importation because he was worried about the societal issues that its use would have brought about (Horowitz, 2020, 164-187). Not happy with the restrictions that the Chinese had imposed over the British, relations between China and Great Britain deteriorated. More incidents arose due to the British having a more aggressive approach which eventually led to the first Opium War, which China lost and for which it was forced to make war reparations payments to Britain totaling 21 million dollars (Horowitz, 2020, 164-187).

In response to this defeat, China removed import limits on opium, allowing for its unrestricted trade across the nation. Millions of citizens had become customers by the turn of the 20th century, which prompted government officials to suggest stronger regulations to stop the opium smuggling. When such efforts to address the issue proved ineffective, they sought the help of international organizations.

This resulted in a treaty that established rules to limit the commercialization of drugs, particularly in China, which was responsible for producing most of the world's opiates (Barop, 2015).

Implementation of the treaty in China reduced opium consumption but did not manage to eradicate it. Chinese citizens continued to smoke the drug in their country as drug smuggling continued: They migrated to the Americas from the Guangdong province of China, driven away from the Second Opium War. Thousands of Chinese came to northwestern Mexico in search of the "American Dream" (Schiavone Camacho, 2012). Between 1910 and 1930, those Chinese immigrants that came to Mexican soil started several businesses, many devoted themselves to agriculture. Together with other Chinese nationals who were hired to work in the Mexican railroad industry, they created the first "cartels" for the production and sale of opium (Schiavone Camacho, 2012). They had brought poppy seeds and had massive knowledge of how to grow poppies given their country's historical background of opium consumption and production.

One of the first pioneers in growing poppies and other opiates in Mexico was Lai Chang Wong alias José Amarillas, who came to the city of Culiacán in Sinaloa in 1911, he had been practicing naturopathic medicine for over a decade. In 1927 he opened a clinic and developed an opium-based panacea that made him one of the most popular medical practitioners (Fernández Velázquez, 2016, 126-127). He and other Chinese immigrants living in Mexico originally manufactured drugs to meet their own consumption, but propagated poppy production in the face of demand from pharmacists, becoming the wholesale distributors of opium. Given the new consumer market environment (middle and upper class intellectuals and artists), drug manufacturing managed to develop into a lucrative business.

Consuming four cigarette papers a day yielded a profit of 7 million pesos a year. This new lucrative business was the envy of local farmers and led to the emergence of the Anti-China Nationalist Party in the Baja California District and the Anti-China Commissions of Culiacán and Mazatlán (Schiavone Camacho, 2012). As a result of the campaign, drug cultivation fell into the hands of farmers and former miners from Badiraguato who found it profitable to devote themselves to the Asian-initiated business. That is why drug cultivation continued in Sinaloa even after the Chinese were casted out.

Between the late 80s and early 90s, the quantities of imported opium ranged from hundreds kilos to tons due to the increase in the sale of medicinal drugs (Astorga, 2016). The consumption of medicinal drugs in Mexico was legal during the Porfiriato period (1830-1915): Tincture of opium, related poppy derivatives like heroin and morphine, as well as illegal pharmaceuticals like cocaine and coca-wines could be obtained on a doctor's prescription list and could be basically obtained everywhere (Astorga, 1999) and even though it wasn't under the same conditions, this continued under the President Lázaro Cárdenas Administration (1934-1940): the possession of small quantities of drugs for personal use wasn't a criminal offense (Smith, 2018).

Up in the North, however, the United States of America needed enormous quantities of morphine and other medications to prepare its soldiers for fight during the Second World War, but even after the war was over, many became dependent on drugs

(DEA, n.d.). In an effort to curb the addiction of the returning soldiers, the American administration launched a vigorous campaign against opium cultivation after the Second World War. With more limits placed on these goods, demand and price increased, opening up a new market of potential for criminal organizations.

The U.S had 2 main government institutions involved in combating drug trafficking and drug abuse: the Federal Bureau of Narcotics (FBN) and the Bureau of Narcotics and Dangerous Drugs (BNDD) (DEA, n.d.), but there were overlaps and inefficiencies in the cases. Because of those reasons, the American government established a new law enforcement organization that could properly coordinate the drug enforcement activities, an organization which over time became politically as well as economically committed to the upkeep of prohibitionist drug laws: The Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA). Founded in 1973, the DEA was responsible for enforcing drug warfare laws, regulating controlled substances, and controlling the cultivation along with the circulation of the substances involved in illicit trafficking in the United States among other functions (DEA, 2022).

On the Mexican side, President Miguel Alemán Valdés (1946–1952) established the *Dirección Federal de Seguridad* (Security Federal Directorate) or DFS in Mexico in that same year as a police body with the authority to address drug-related concerns, the organization was made to spy on and keep an eye on social movements, individuals and organizations that could represent a threat to the country and to provide the President of the Republic with real-time updates on the political and social situation the country (Gobierno de México, 2022). The DFS's leaders, who were allegedly participating in or in charge of drug trafficking, had questionable backgrounds, according to allegations sent from the American Embassy in Mexico to the U.S. State Department in D.C (Astorga, 1999).

### **3.2. Félix Gallardo and product diversification**

Sinaloa became the epicenter of drug trafficking and narco-violence in the late 1960s because it was where the majority of Mexican gangs were founded. Pedro Avilés Pérez, “*el león de la sierra*” (the lion of the mountain) was the original drug lord of the first wave of significant marijuana traffickers, and when he passed away in 1978, his business was passed to Miguel Ángel Félix Gallardo (Hernández, 2010, 19-20).

Although most, if not all of the members, of the organization were originally from Sinaloa, the cartel was baptized as the Guadalajara group because that city was its center of operations and Felix's place of residence.

Felix became known as "*El Jefe de Jefes*" ("The Boss of Bosses") or "*El Padrino*" (The Godfather), he pushed his Cartel to prominence and gave it dominance over drug trafficking in states including Sinaloa, Chihuahua, Baja California, Jalisco, and Durango (Wilson Center, n.d.). He was able to get into the drug trade thanks to his political ties and other acquaintances (Félix built relationships with politicians, journalists and businessmen) and rose to prominence as one of Mexico's most important drug traffickers partly due to his connections and the protection that he got from some of them (Kellner & Pipitone, 2010). He was able to create a drug empire in Sinaloa with the aid of Ernesto, "*Don Neto*", Fonseca, and Rafael Caro Quintero, two of the industry's pioneers.

Caro Quintero revolutionized the world of marijuana when he managed to massively reproduce female plants, "*sin semilla*" (no seed). Ernesto encouraged his family members to get involved in the drug trade throughout the 1970s: he hired his nephew Amado Carrillo, who would later become one of the leaders himself, to also participate in the marijuana production (Hernández, 2010). In the 1980s, Carrillo would establish connections with Félix, who had begun to build a vast network of contacts that would operate between traffickers, among them Pablo Acosta, a well-known drug dealer who was familiar with the industry in addition to having a massive understanding regarding the organization of officials at customs and the border.

In the global setting, Pablo Escobar chose to establish the "Medellin Cartel" in 1976, a criminal organization devoted to the cocaine refining sector (*Pablo Escobar, "El Patrón" of the Medellín Cartel*, 2021). Due to their advantageous geographic location, Escobar required Mexican associates for his new business in order to import drugs into the United States. This international alliance managed to convert trafficking into a global operation. This deal was beneficial for the Mexican cartels as the Colombians paid large amounts to move their product.

Félix was among Escobar's initial partners in smuggling drugs across the border between the United States and Mexico. At some point, the Colombian cartels started to pay the Mexican ones with cocaine instead of cash for their services. (Keefe, 2012).

This shift, more than any other, enabled the Mexicans to quit acting as logistical intermediaries and start investing in manufacturing their own substances, allowing them to move into a more profitable sector, it also changed the power dynamics throughout the narcotics distribution network in the region. These already powerful organizations gradually acquired control of the cocaine trade, transitioning from serving as nothing more than carriers to the previous Colombian wholesalers. Such an increase in cocaine being brought into the country forced the American government to take further action (Penagos, 2010).

Mexican cartels were able to flourish because the country paid scant consideration to the drug issue and in 1975, the American and the Mexican government decided to work together to fight drugs by launching anti-drug operations that involved destroying narcotics plantations but the most important one started in 1977.

### **3.3. A security issue**

Before continuing with the operation, it is important to understand that Mexican drug trafficking had increased for three reasons:

1. As demand increased, cocaine was being exported in large quantities to the US (Drug Enforcement Administration, n.d.)
2. The Mexican government maintained a tolerance policy in favor of drug trafficking (Morris, 2012)
3. Both the law enforcement and judiciary systems in Mexico are weak, which combined with narco-corruption (meaning the participation of organizations or persons linked to guaranteeing protection, assisting or collaborating with drug trafficking, and endeavoring to support or fund such “terrorist” actions) allowed the cartels to infiltrate in the networks of power making the fight more difficult

Even though it was President Nixon who had first utilized the term “war on drugs”, that was merely meant as a health issue and it wasn’t until Ronald Reagan re-announced the war on drugs in February 1982 that he made clear that narcotics were “the greatest public enemy of the United States” and that they posed a risk to the national security of the country (Glass, 2010).

The idea of national security, which emerged during the Cold War, was traditionally understood to indicate the anticipation of a strike from an outside opponent. Other security theorists, like Buzan, disagree with this perspective, believing that the term also includes potential internal dangers on the social, political, economic, and environmental levels (Shaw, 2000). As a result, drug trafficking came to be seen as both an external threat to society and the judicial system and an interior menace as well: Drug trafficking was now a matter of governance that endangered the state's citizens, its national security, and its territorial authority.

Mexico, being the United States’ closest ally in the fight against drug trafficking, had to follow suit instead of considering it as a public security matter. Thus, although drug trafficking was already a major problem on the Mexican public agenda, by 1985 it had already become a national security problem (Chabat, 1994).

For Mexico, national security covered a different range of factors, including the state's activities to defend the nation against environmental hazards and territorial intrusions as well as to uphold its constitutional framework and enhance democratic institutions but all of them were expected to be threatened from the outside. When the northern neighboring country decided that it was time to tackle organized crime, Mexico would have a tougher battle than the U.S. considering how the governing bodies ignored the task of keeping surveillance over the border, and how narco-corruption started to become entrenched.

As it was previously stated, the U.S and Mexico launched various operations to combat drug trafficking but the most important anti-drug campaign in the American continent supported by the United States was the "Operation Condor," which was put into action in Mexico on January 16, 1977. Its goal was to destroy drug trafficking networks throughout the region, beginning in Mexico's "Golden Triangle" of Sinaloa,



Chihuahua, and Durango (Cedillo, 2021). 10,000 soldiers were dispatched by the governing bodies to the area to conduct operations in pursuit of drug dealers using the kingpin/decapitation strategy.

The DEA developed the kingpin/decapitation strategy in order to debilitate, dismantle, and eradicate drug trafficking organizations by focusing on the top leadership and managerial structures that supported crucial operations like manufacturing of the product, its logistics, the allocation, and the overall financial control (Giralt & Kotarska, 2022). The "decapitation" of cartel leaders is a tactic defined as the act of taking down the leader(s) or high-rank individuals of criminal/terrorist organizations; this can be either done by simply capturing them or by killing them. The reasoning behind the tactic is the idea that by getting rid of the leaders with the operational and logistical duties then the capacity of the organization to carry on with their operations will be negatively affected, making the criminal activities decrease.

By January 31, 1987 (when the operation ended) 224,252 drug farms were wiped out and 2,019 traffickers were apprehended. Drug production decreased from 85% in 1974 to 37% in 1980. In those same years, there was also a decrease in marijuana entering the U.S going from 90% to 5% (Chabat, 1994). Although the operation was successful in capturing a few drug lords and destroying coca, marijuana and poppy fields, the illicit trade in drugs was not completely eradicated.

The nation's drug market, the American narcotics demand, and the corrupt practices of the Mexican judicial authorities all remained ignored throughout this time. This only worsened when the DEA killed Pablo Escobar in 1993, since it led to the collapse of Colombian drug trafficking and opened the door for Mexican cartels to assume Escobar's role in the distribution of cocaine (Kellner & Pipitone, 2010). Due to the absence of official control at border crossings and the resulting susceptibility of administrative entities as a result of additional cases of corruption, organized crime developed into a more serious matter of national security.

### 3.4. Enrique Camarena

Before Operation Condor ended, "*El Búfalo*" (The Buffalo), a ranch where a massive marijuana plantation covered over 12 square km in the state of Chihuahua, was found by Mexican authorities towards the end of November 1984. The individual who owned it was claimed to be Rafael Caro Quintero (Hernández, 2010, 49). Enrique Camarena, a DEA agent, and Mexican pilot named Alfredo Zavala Avelar were abducted on February 7, 1985. Their bodies, bearing evidence of torture, were discovered around a month right after the kidnapping occurred in the state of Michoacán (Seper, 2010). According to the records, Camarena and Zavala were killed due to the harm they brought on traffickers: They knew too much and notified the authorities about their investigation concerning the "*El Búfalo*" plantation.

There was another operation, "Operation Godfather" which Camarena had been conducting, a mission intended to look into Felix's activities. "*Don Neto*", Caro Quintero, and Félix Gallardo were all charged in the Camarena case (Grant, 2012).

The Enrique Camarena case is important because it would not only reveal the level of corruption that existed between the government and the drug trafficking organizations, but by having as a consequence the arrest of the top drug lords, this event would lead to an imagined lack of control within the cartels.

The first important decapitation of a cartel took place after Camarena's body was discovered when Miguel Ángel Félix Gallardo, the leader of the most important criminal organization in Mexico, was arrested in 1989.

Even from jail, Félix came up with a system in which he divided the plazas to be controlled between groups so that there would be a proper organization and the business could continue to run as smoothly as possible.

But the division of the drug market established by Felix Gallardo was not respected, Business opportunities led to the fragmentation into three new main factions:

- The Sinaloa Cartel: Formed by Joaquín "El Chapo" Guzmán and Héctor Luis "El Güero" Palma Salazar. The Sinaloa Cartel quickly became one of the most

powerful drug trafficking organizations in Mexico, controlling major drug trafficking routes into the United States from the states of Sinaloa, Durango, and Chihuahua (InSight Crime, 2021).

- The Tijuana Cartel: Led by the Arellano Félix brothers - Benjamín, Ramón, Francisco Rafael, Francisco Javier and Eduardo (InSight Crime, 2018).
- The Juárez Cartel: Led by Amado Carrillo and Rafael Guajardo, a former DFS Commander. When Guajardo was killed, Amado also known as “El señor de los cielos” (the lord of the skies) took control. (InSight Crime, 2020).

With this, the cohesion that characterized the Guadalajara group disappeared. Amado rebuilt Félix's old network and even expanded it by establishing his own distribution networks in the northern neighbor. He passed away suddenly in 1997 while undergoing plastic surgery, leaving behind a well-organized cartel but with an empty leadership position. Vicente and Rodolfo, his brothers, took over and eventually established a strong leadership. They formed an alliance with the Beltrán Leyva brothers, Juan José Esparragoza Moreno, also known as "El Azul", a former officer of the Federal Judicial Police of Mexico, Ismael Zambada, also known "El Mayo" and El Chapo Guzmán (InSight Crime, 2020). However, this alliance, which the authorities referred to as the "Federation," would not last long.

### **3.5. Corruption**

The *Partido Revolucionario Institucional*, (The Institutional Revolutionary Party), PRI, was founded in 1929. The party emerged as a way to consolidate the gains of the revolution and provide stability and continuity to the country, it ruled Mexico as a single-party state for 71 years, the choice of a successor would ultimately be made by the president, who also functioned as the party's head (Khan & Garcia, 2021).

Since the very early days of the drug business, the most highly acknowledged drug traffickers in Mexico were associated in special official records in Mexico and the U.S.A. to top positioned elected officials, specially in the north (Smith, 2013, 125-165). More specifically, it was believed that the politicians in question were personally involved in the illicit trade and even in charge of it.

Due to the political roles that certain influential members of the PRI were holding at the time, drug trafficking was just another lucrative business that they could pursue, some governors were even in charge of the operations in their respective states (Astorga Almanza, 2003).

Other social agents belonging to power structures and located in strategic positions where business was thriving had the opportunity to make quick and easy profits (Morris, 2012). They could have a share of the proceedings but they couldn't have enough to become independent, and they had to split them with their bureaucratic superiors. That was the standard procedure to ensure impunity.

The murder of Camarena revealed a lot of information that American anti-drug operatives had been gathering over the years about Mexico, including the infiltration of drug traffickers into government institutions and the particular links between drug traffickers and DFS agents (Lerch, 2022). The Camarena case served as the ignition for a unique opportunity to demonstrate the degree of corruption among Mexican police officers and politicians.

Several agents and police officers who were charged with shielding Caro Quintero were imprisoned. Throughout the time that followed, there was to take place a significant restructure of the DFS and the Ministry of the Interior. Yet there were no modifications made to the local police department or prosecutor's office, thus the relationships with drug traffickers persisted.

### **3.5.1. The PRI & Corruption**

The PRI was able to remain in power for so many years due to a system of "Patronage", a system through which the criminal networks managed to expand to become more entrenched in the governmental system. The party's administration permitted and even covered some drug manufacture and distribution in specific areas of the nation, senior anti-narcotics police officers and political elites controlled the major drug trade (Watt & Zepeda, 2012, 8). No one was ever charged in a drug controversy implicating Mexican politicians.

The political institution's preservation was of utmost importance, and any disputes that might arise were resolved inside, primarily through the PRI. The patronage system of the PRI (them being the patron) worked in the following way: clients (the voters) were given protection, assistance in conflicts with rivals, and chances to advance politically or succeed financially. In exchange, the patron obtained loyalty, cash, or other services that could be useful to them (Smith, 2013, 139-143).

This type of corruption constituted a crucial component in the development of this modern political structure given how the PRI's clients also included the cartels. In order to conduct their respective operations across the nation, criminal organizations needed a distinctive license (Scott, 2000). Many of these licenses were given in exchange for monetary, political, or familial favors.

At all three levels of government (federal, state and municipal), a criminal could be contributing to a politician's electoral campaign; in return, the trafficker could carry on with his activities without having to worry about the extra burden of police involvement (Zovatto, 2003, 11-18). The drug dealers were also responsible for maintaining order in the locations in which they were functioning because if the deal involving government officials and them was violated, the traffickers in question would go to jail. The development of drug trafficking as a business managed to grow from within the power, which powerful politicians either managed, condoned, or simply oversaw.

For the purpose of keeping a peaceful coexistence, the drug traffickers allocated some of their profits: building of roads, local healthcare facilities, renovation of churches, as well as other communal amenities in the towns and villages in which their operations took place, something that somehow continues to this day. As a result, the criminals counted with the residents' "authorization", so to say, and were also provided other things such as discretion, admiration, protection and even authority.

The corruption was institutionalized in the post-revolutionary political structure of Mexico and was accepted by both the ruling class and the populace. The corruption scandals and the growing opposition were some of the causes of the slow

destabilization of the party. The PRI leaders only began to allow a democratization process when they started to fear the possibility of a popular revolt, due to the discontent of the people, which is why they started allowing opposition candidates to run for elections.

After 71 years of uninterrupted PRI victories, it was until the presidential election of 2000 when Vicente Fox won the presidential race that their regime was over (Sheridan, 2000). Fox was a candidate from the "*Partido Acción Nacional*" (National Action Party), PAN, a conservative, secular political party, of humanist ideology, akin to liberal ideas, Thomistic and Christian democratic ideas (PAN, 2018).

With his victory, the long-stated balance that had developed between state actors and organized crime was completely inverted, among some of the consequences was that officials lost their ability to preserve the same level of immunity for the traffickers: Fox managed to detain a number of cartel leaders, he made a slightly deeper use of the armed forces by sending *Policía Federal Preventiva* (Federal Preventive police), PFP, troops to the borders and the military operations, even if they remained as mostly eradication related, were also being stepped up (Fernández Menéndez, 2001). Despite that, the disarticulation of their operational, commercial, and financial structure was not accomplished.

The rivalry between the Tijuana Cartel and the Sinaloa Cartel caused extreme violence, including the murder of members of both organizations, as well as civilians. One of the most notable violent moments was the murder of Archbishop Juan Jesús Posada Ocampo who was caught in a crossfire between gunmen of El Chapo and the Arellano brothers, El Chapo was later handed over to the government, Ramón Arellano was killed by local police in 2002 and Benjamín Arellano was imprisoned that same year (InSight Crime, 2018).

The "decapitation" of both cartels caused further fragmentation in these criminal organizations. Adding to that, organized crime was now under less political influence than it had ever been, which meant that the chained tiger (the cartels) saw that little by little the keeper (the government) loosened the chain more and more: The cartels

saw this political opening as an opportunity to finally gain complete independence by ending their submission to the government (O'Neil, 2009).

It did not matter how many drugs were found, how many hectares of crops were destroyed, or how many drug lords were apprehended or executed because, although it temporarily weakened the traditional cartels, new ones soon appeared, this will be discussed more in depth in another section. The new cartels contested previous ones' territory and engaged in other, more violent, criminal activities like extortions and kidnapping. The battles for greater control over trafficking routes and plazas, as well as the deterioration of the nation's security structures, led to an outbreak of violence, particularly in the final years of the Fox governance (Shirk, 2010). The waves of violence brought on by cartels grew in response to still-ineffective measures and eventually took over as the greatest security issue in the nation. The subsequent president was to take on the least desirable political environment one could imagine.

### **3.6. Calderón**

Felipe Calderón, another PAN candidate, won the presidential elections on July 2, 2006. The results of the election led the general population in Mexico to consider that the newly installed president may have been elected through electoral fraud (Thompson, 2006).

Following the National Action Party's election triumph, Mexico began to go through an upheaval in politics. The electoral court system deemed the claims of fraud made by his primary rival, Andrés Manuel López Obrador, of the "*Partido de la Revolución Democrática*" (Party of the Democratic Revolution), PRD, who currently serves as the president, to be invalid. Calderón had barely any legitimacy the moment he first walked into the National Palace (Rodrigues & Labate, 2019).

As it was previously seen, the policy of "tolerance" established in the 1990s during the mandate of the PRI had increased the corruption of the government apparatus, which led to the expansion of the illegal drug trafficking business. However, in 2006, this policy was unfeasible: The substantial presence of cartels in the country, the rise

in violence in Mexico, the weakened police and judicial systems as a result of corruption proceedings were some of the justifications attributed to the starting of said war (Gómez Encinas, 2011, 1-35).

It appeared, however, that his decision to take on organized crime was a populist attempt to distract people from the election-related controversy; as a result, to the public it seemed that this would serve as his means of gaining legitimacy. Nonetheless, the government claimed that the war against drugs had been launched for a different reason and that the decision was taken given that the issue had developed into a matter of national security (Gómez Encinas, 2011, 1-35). As was previously indicated, the Mexican cartels had established a system parallel to the State, with each cartel being led by a drug lord who was in charge of its region and populace.

The administration of Calderón made combating drug cartels its primary goal, and the militarization of the War on Drugs was his chosen tactic. In his inaugural speech as Executive Power his political and institutional positioning is exposed from the beginning, and it's evident that the security issue is anticipated and premeditated, not even once mentioned in his electoral campaign, since security is not only one of his priorities, but the main priority, followed by "overcoming extreme poverty and job creation".

The definition of those priorities wasn't his own, but rather he put them in the mouth of society by saying that those were the priorities that society itself had indicated. *"I know that restoring security will not be easy or fast, that it will take time, that it will cost a lot of money, and even and unfortunately, human lives."* (Felipe Calderón, 1st of December 2006, Presidential Message), here makes a major securitizing effort in this speech by preparing society for the war the state would wage.

In addition to that, he instructed the Attorney General of the Republic and the National Security Cabinet to present a security program to renew the mechanisms for the administration and administration of justice, as well as ordering the Secretaries of the Navy and Defense to redouble their efforts to guarantee national security above



any other interest, while at the same time presenting initiatives for a series of legal reforms for the administration of justice based mainly on the increase of penalties.

In this way, in his inaugural speech he evidences, or at least implies, that there is an absence of public security and legality, since the State does not have the necessary strength to guarantee social coexistence and basic security for the protection of citizens, for which he immediately resorts to the judicial and military institutions to put them into action according to his government plan guided by the idea of security.

Calderón believed that the army was the one institution that couldn't be broken by corruption from drug traffickers. He positioned the armed forces and the navy at the head of the federal government's initiatives in this regard. As a result of the militarization process, soldiers assumed command of intelligence work as well as other interventions (searches, raids, and roadblocks) (Rodrigues & Labate, 2019).

In the same year, a war was being waged between rival cartels, the levels of violence had increased and the existing scenario would primarily affect his home state: Michoacán which is why he made the decision to start the "*Operación Conjunta Michoacán*" (Joint Operation Michoacan) with a mobilization of more than 5,000 troops (Roldós, 2006) where tasks would consist of the complete elimination of unlawful crops, the setting up of checkpoints to prevent drug trafficking on roadways and secondary highways, the carrying out of inspections and requests for arrests, along with the searching and dismantling of drug sales points.

While he intended to eradicate the drug problem at its root, the development of this first initiative did not go as expected: The stated objectives for the operation in question were ambiguous, and there were no integrated efforts among the military and police, nor were there any regular assessments of how the missions were going. And for Calderon's idea of the less corrupt institution, he was eventually proven wrong since, as it will be mentioned, the Zetas Cartel, being an organization created by former military personnel who had received specialized training from the U.S., ended up becoming cooperators of drug cartels and eventually became one themselves.

Calderon's securitization strategy discourse on war on drugs was always supported by the U.S, this led to the "*Iniciativa Mérida*", (the Merida Initiative), IM being launched by the United States and Mexico as a cooperative effort to combat drug trafficking. The plan initially appeared as "*Plan Mexico*" but was later renamed as such. This strategy reinforced the fact that both nations accepted the burden of the problem of drug trafficking.

The IM supported the military and provided resources for the improvement of the technological infrastructure of security institutions. In other words, Calderón's U.S.-backed strategy had the same vision of the drug trafficking problem in Mexico and opted to fight it primarily with the military, concentrating on capturing drug lords and seizing drugs (Rodríguez Luna, 2010).

The Mexican Constitution establishes that the President of the Republic has the exclusive mandate to preserve National Security and to use the entire permanent Armed Forces, that is, the Army, the Navy and the Air Force for the internal security and external defense of the Federation. Article 7 of the National Security Law requires that the "*Plan Nacional de Desarrollo*" (National Development Plan), PND as it will be addressed for this paper and its Program, define the issues related to this matter. In a six-year projection, the PND is the document that outlines the Mexican Government top priorities, identifies the country's issues, and provides a list of potential solutions (Gobierno de México, 2019).

### **3.6.1. PND under Calderón**

Figure 1: PND Outline 2007-2012

<b>Estructura</b>	1.-Desarrollo Humano Sustentable
	2.-Estado de Derecho y Seguridad
	3.-Economía competitiva y generadora de empleos
	4. Igualdad de oportunidades.
	5. Sustentabilidad ambiental
	6. Democracia efectiva y política exterior responsable
<b>Visión</b>	<b><i>Un México hacia el año 2030 con una familia y patrimonio seguro, un país de leyes, economía competitiva, país con desarrollo sustentable y democrático.</i></b>
<b>Objetivos</b>	1. Garantizar la seguridad nacional, asegurar la viabilidad del Estado y de la democracia.
	2. Garantizar la vigencia plena del Estado de Derecho.
	3. Alcanzar un crecimiento sostenido acelerado.
	4. Tener una economía competitiva.
	5. Reducir la pobreza extrema.
	6. Reducir las brechas sociales, económicas y culturales.
	7. Garantizar los derechos de los ciudadanos.
	8. Asegurar la sustentabilidad ambiental.
	9. Consolidar un régimen democrático.
	10. Aprovechar los beneficios de un mundo globalizado.
<b>Estrategias</b>	1. Plantear una estrategia integral de política pública, para enfrentar los retos multinacionales del país. Además reducir la discrecionalidad de las autoridades administrativas y judiciales en la aplicación de las normas.
	2. Establecer un Desarrollo Humano Sustentable, logrando la transformación política del país. Combatiendo la corrupción a lo largo de todo el proceso de impartición de justicia.
	3. Fortalecimiento de la comunidad familiar, para fomentar la solidaridad. Sobre todo mejorar la regulación que protege los derechos de propiedad.
	4. Promover la modernización integral de México, para transformar la cultura ambiental de nuestra sociedad.
	5. Fomentar condiciones de competencia económica y libre concurrencia, así como combatir monopolios. Profundizar y facilitar los procesos de investigación científica, adopción e innovación tecnológica, para incrementar la productividad de la economía nacional.
	6. Converger y optimizar los programas y recursos, que incrementen las oportunidades de acceso a servicios en el medio rural y reduzcan la pobreza.
	7. Mejorar la productividad laboral, a través de la organización, capacitación y asistencia técnica.

Source: Developed by the Center for Public Finance Studies (CEFP) of the Chamber of Deputies with data from the PND 2007-2012.

President Felipe Calderón's PND 2007-2012 sets out the guidelines for national security and public safety policy outlined in the National Public Safety Program. The plan was divided into six guiding principles: Sustainable human development, rule of law and security, competitive and job-creating economy, equal opportunities, environmental sustainability, effective democracy and responsible foreign policy. The first objective was guaranteeing national security, ensuring the viability of the State and of democracy (Gobierno de México, n.d.). This was based on the fact that drug trafficking, being one of the manifestations of organized crime, challenged the State which meant that it had become a strong threat to national security.

Thus, the strength of the State was needed in order to recover spaces that had been won in previous years by drug traffickers and organized crime. To this end, the plan included strategies to eliminate drug plantations and intercept drug shipments by land, sea and air; modernization of the Armed Forces with intelligence equipment and implementation of intelligence systems in the police forces; to reduce drug dealing with permanent operations and to attack money laundering.

In that section of the National Development Plan, national security and public security both were to be in charge of combating drug trafficking and crimes caused by the cartels. While the target group of the war were the drug cartels (the direct cause of the problem) and the ultimate beneficiaries were the Mexican citizens, the war produced opposite results: The deployment of a military and police-centered fight against drug trafficking created an imbalance between both powers (civilian and military) because it hinders the normal evolution of the civilian structures of the State and gives power to the military that may weaken the Mexican democratic process in the future (Astorga Almanza, 2007).

The military are trained to raid and kill, they do not always hand over criminals to the competent authority, turning the execution of an operation against traffickers into an iron fist lesson for purposes of punishment and expeditious revenge, without the participation of the judicial apparatus, something practically "extra-legal".

The use of a militarized anti-drug strategy resulted in a constant violation of human rights by the army and dozens of innocent civilian deaths; these organizations lacked legal and civil rights education. As a result of the confusion and crossfire, numerous civilian casualties start to happen (Ordaz, 2009). Civilians were detained by army and federal forces who mistook them for criminals, leading to their disappearance.

The war on drugs raised serious concerns for civil society as a result of all these human rights breaches. Finally, due to the rivalry between the police and the military, the coordination between the two is more difficult and sometimes even non-existent. According to the American embassy in Mexico "these institutions are often in a zero-sum competition, where the success of one is seen as the failure of another" (Rodríguez Sánchez Lara, 2017).

Calderon's security strategies led to some of the important dynamics of fragmentation and cooperation observed in the structure of organizations. The "decapitation" of an organization (through the death or imprisonment of its leader), as it has been seen, can often lead to fragmentation within the group, or to external competition when other groups try to control the *plazas*, the territorial area over which the drug lord or a group holds a monopoly of drug production and trade activity (Cárdenas, 2003).

Part of El Chapo's allies were the Beltrán Leyva brothers (Marcos Arturo, Alfredo, Hector and Carlos). However, in 2008 the brothers split from him and his organization, as they suspected that he had provided information that led to the imprisonment of Alfredo. Soon the Beltran Leyvas declared war on the Sinaloa group, and used their links and connections to create a new group: "*La Organización Beltrán Leyva*" (the Beltran Leyva Organization) or BLO as it will be addressed for this paper. The BLO had its own splinter organizations since 2010, such as the "*Guerreros Unidos*" (United Warriors) and *Los Rojos* (The red ones).

Further up north was the oldest cartel, with which Félix had a business relationship for the smuggling routes and trafficking operations: the Gulf Cartel. This cartel had managed to create a wide-reaching delivery network across the United States, from Houston to Los Angeles (InSight Crime, 2023). Because of them, the Mexican State faces another challenge to its stability from drug traffickers: private armies. In addition to the fight against drugs, there is the fight against the armed forces at the service of drug traffickers.

Osiel Cardenas, leader of the Gulf Cartel, decided to make use of a group for his personal protection called Los Zetas. He recruited ex-military members of the "*Grupo Aeromóvil de Fuerzas Especiales*" (Special Forces Air Mobile Group), or GAFE. Other members who joined this "protection group" were former soldiers trained to exterminate enemies under hostile conditions and members of violent gangs across the country trained in military techniques, which means that they were more prepared to confront the State, becoming a serious national security problem.

Los Zetas helped the Gulf Cartel expand its territory into Mexico's southern states. In addition, through the use of their military might, they diversified their activities to include extortion and kidnapping. After Cárdenas was imprisoned in 2003, Los Zetas fragmented from the Gulf Cartel, initiating a bloody war between the two groups, as well as turf wars against other groups (DEA, 2021). Los Zetas were more well-known for their skills in organized violence than they were in drug trafficking.

Contrary to other cartels, Los Zetas weren't as concerned with gaining the backing of the local communities in the regions where they operated. They were notorious for their violent methods and were linked to several massacres. Major factions have formed as a result of the internal disputes inside the cartel. The “*Cartel del Noreste*” (Northeast Cartel), which is an altered version of the historic core of Los Zetas, constitutes one of the most prominent factions that developed.

Another cartel born out of this fragmentation is “*La Familia Michoacana*” (The Michoacán Family), LFM. After originally supporting the Zetas, LFM separated from them in 2006 and vowed to defend Michoacán from drug traffickers, including the Zetas. LFM became well-known for its excessive violence, military strategies that had been molded by Los Zetas, and false religious justifications for their acts. Through the provision of social services to rural populations, they portrayed a populist image. LFM declared its dissolution and requested a cease-fire with the Mexican government in 2010 (DEA, 2021). Despite being disbanded, LFM cells continued to operate, especially in the states of Guerrero and Mexico.

Between 2006 and 2012, the major criminal gangs operating in Mexico were aggressively dismantled by the Calderón administration. This led to a fragmented underworld and swift changes in alliances on the ground as long-standing groups like the Sinaloa Cartel diminished and newer ones, like the “*Cartel Jalisco Nueva Generación*”, (Jalisco Cartel - New Generation) CJNG, were created. The CJNG, formerly known as the “*Los Mata Zetas*” (the Zeta Killers), initially surfaced to expel Los Zetas from Jalisco, in 2011 there was a public exhibition of the corpses of 35 suspected Los Zetas members. Up until the summer of 2013, the CJNG purportedly worked as an enforcement unit for the Sinaloa cartel (DEA, 2021).

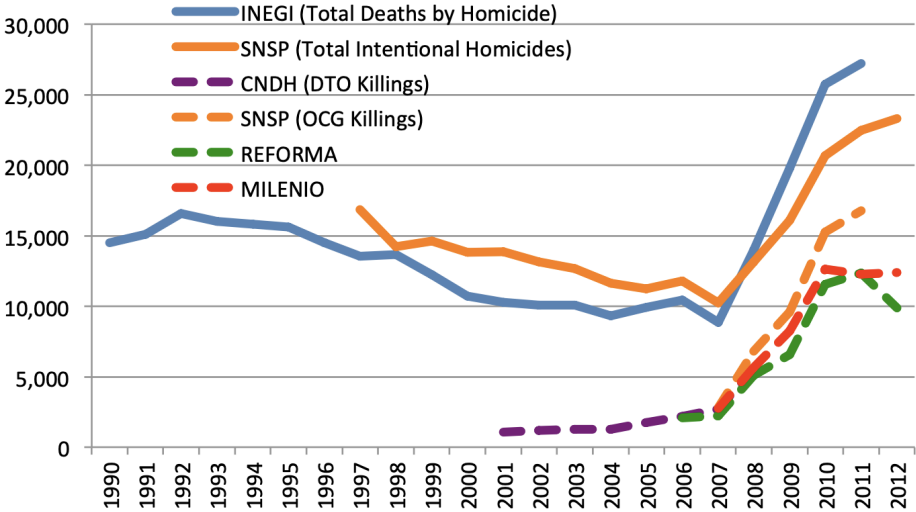
### **3.6.2. Results**

The Mexican government uses a variety of public security and intelligence institutions to gather statistics on drug-related violence. However, its data are not regularly recorded and are not publicly available to the public (Trans-Border Institute, 2010). Law enforcement-identified homicide cases are compiled and reported on by the *Sistema Nacional de Seguridad Pública* (National Public Security System), or SNSP.

Numerous media outlets and researchers have tried to independently get official data on homicides associated with drug trafficking and other kinds of organized crime. The most dependable, thorough, and continuous surveillance efforts have been conducted by Mexican media outlets that provide nationwide coverage. Among these, the “*Reforma*” newspaper in Mexico City has been the main repository of information on violence associated with drugs.

*Reforma* started collecting weekly data on homicides committed by organized crime at the federal level beginning in 2006, but ceased to do so in November 2012. From January to December 2012, “*Milenio*”, another newspaper, published monthly data on organized crime murders at the state level and released annualized data on such murders collected at a national scale from 2007 to 2012.

Figure 2: Comparison of All Homicide and Organized Crime Homicide Tallies, 1990-2012



Source: Developed by the Trans-Border Institute - Drug Violence in Mexico Data and Analysis Through 2012

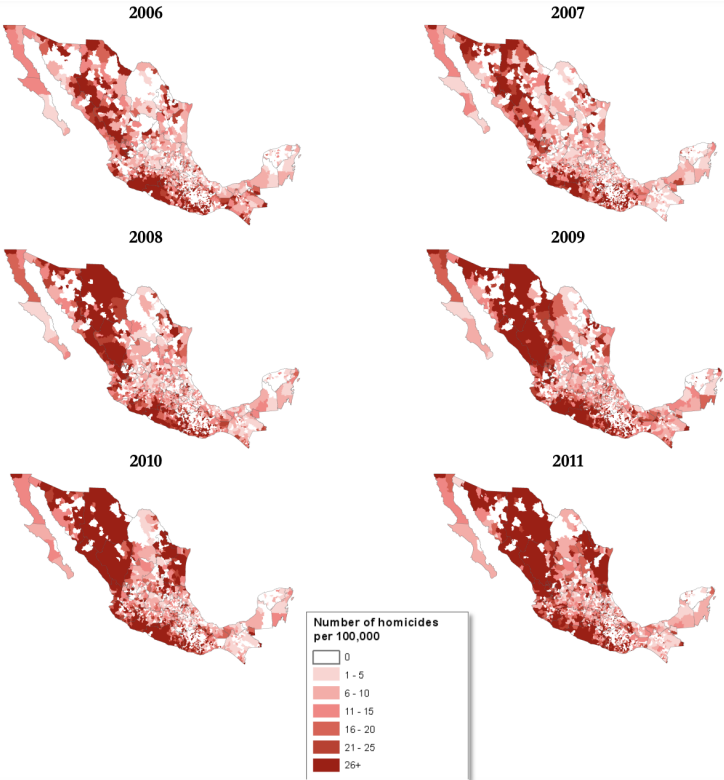
In any case we can see how since 2005, the amount of drug-related violence had dramatically increased, with the years 2008 and 2009 seeing the largest rises. Despite the huge efforts made by the Mexican and American governments to combat drug trafficking, such carnage still occurred. After Calderon’s initiative, the number of homicides documented by the “*Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía*”

(National Institute of Statistics and Geography), INEGI declined to 8,867 in his first year (2007) but eventually spiked up to 27,213 in 2011.

Another important result had to do with the location of the patterns of violence. About 1,800 localities had no recorded homicides at the start of the Calderón administration, but by 2011, that number had dropped to around 1,300. At the same time, the municipalities accounting for 25 or more homicides per year increased, first to 50 in 2007 and then to 240 by 2011 (Shirk, 2010).

The main areas affected by violence were in the northwest (in the states of Baja California, Sonora, Chihuahua, and Sinaloa) in addition to the southern Pacific coast (in the states of Michoacán and Guerrero) during the first years of Calderón's management. Over time, high homicide rates persisted in these regions while also expanding to northeastern Mexico and to the southeast.

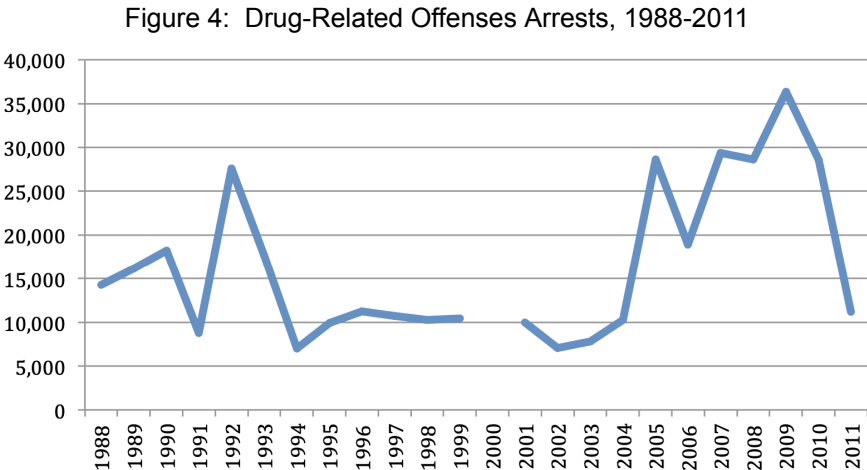
Figure 3: Municipal Level Maps of Deaths By Homicide, 2006-2011



Source: INEGI



As to how it particularly affected the cartels, more than three times as many drug arrests occurred during Calderón's term as did so at the beginning of the Fox administration, peaking at around 36,330 in 2009. When his term came to a conclusion, drug-related arrests sharply decreased, reaching about 11,100 in 2011 (Shirk, 2010). Nevertheless, the Calderón administration arrested a number of prominent drug trafficking and organized crime figures before leaving office:



Source: Developed by the Trans-Border Institute - Drug Violence in Mexico Data and Analysis Through 2012

In March, Erick (“El 85”) Valencia Salazar, the supposed leader of the CJNG and Otoniel, his second in charge (“Tony Montana”) Mendoza were captured. Five months later, 4 of the powerful Sinaloa Cartel members were arrested in Spain (Jesús Gutiérrez Guzmán, Rafael Humberto Celaya Valenzuela, Samuel Zazueta Valenzuela, and Jesús Gonzalo Palazuelos Soto).

In September, the Mexican Navy (*Secretaría de Marina*, SEMAR) captured both Mario (“M-1”) Cárdenas Guillén, supposed leader of the Gulf Cartel and finally, in July, Mexican authorities arrested Zetas lieutenant, Mauricio (“El Amarillo”) Guizar Cárdenas, the group’s regional leader in southeast Mexico.

As successful as the arrests might’ve been, they are the main reason drug trafficking networks have split apart, creating more violence overall, and being distributed more widely around the country as a result of the Mexican government's efforts to remove the leadership of the criminal organizations.

### **3.7. Enrique Peña Nieto**

The PRI, under the charismatic leadership of Enrique Peña Nieto, was able to persuade the Mexican electorate that during its twelve years of absence from the government, the party had altered its corrupt and authoritarian methods.

In contrast to the dishonesty and corruption that had been the PRI's signature for so many years, Peña Nieto effectively positioned himself as the head of a "new, reformed" PRI (Felbab-Brown, 2014).

The substantial amount of killings and disappearances associated with the militarized policies of the Calderón government fueled widespread calls for change, which was taken into account by Peña Nieto's successful presidential campaign in 2012. He centered his presidential candidature on being receptive to the processes of neoliberal globalization and adjustments in security strategy. From the outset, he sought to distance himself from the image of his predecessor on security issues.

The main argument of his government's security program was the connection between socio-economic development and the reduction of criminal violence, so that employment, education and cultural programs, along with anti-corruption measures, would complement repressive policies in order to contain the high rates of homicides, extortion and kidnappings.

Nevertheless, Peña Nieto endorsed two crucial security reforms: a revision of the general legislation of victims as well as a reform for a single command police. A provision for victims' harm reparation was included in the first. The second had to do with how the police were organized at each level of government.

Previously, because each police department operated independently with respect to others, it was more difficult to coordinate a plan to combat drug trafficking. However, because of this change, the state police was now to have complete control over the municipal police, becoming a single state force.

**3.7.1. PND under Peña Nieto**

Figure 5: PND 2013-2018



Source: Performance Evaluation Unit, SHCP

Enrique Peña Nieto's National Development Plan establishes five guiding principles: Mexico in peace, inclusive, with quality education, prosperous and with global responsibility (Gobierno de México, 2013).

The first axis establishes strategies and lines of action with defined objectives to promote and strengthen democratic governance; guarantee national security; improve public safety conditions; guarantee an effective, expeditious, impartial and transparent criminal justice system; guarantee respect for and protection of human rights and the eradication of discrimination; and safeguard the population, their property and their environment in the event of a natural or human disaster.

According to the PND, a comprehensive National Security policy "must address all those factors that may violate the human element of the State". Therefore, it expands the concept of national security to the protection of human rights, allowing tranquility and security through "the fight against all manifestations of violence and high impact crime", acquiring a multidimensional character (Gobierno de México, 2013).

A diagnosis was presented in which the consequences of the previous government's strategy to combat organized crime head-on were exposed, pointing out the power vacuum generated within the criminal groups, due to the decapitation of the leaders, which caused violent fights throughout the territory and greater violence, reflected in an increase in crimes.

Despite this small accurate diagnosis of the situation, priority is given to the armed forces in their role of maintaining external security, but primarily internal, whose role is predominant due to the violence generated by organized crime. However, on this occasion, a legal framework that provides certainty in the actions of the army while ensuring respect for human rights was insisted upon.

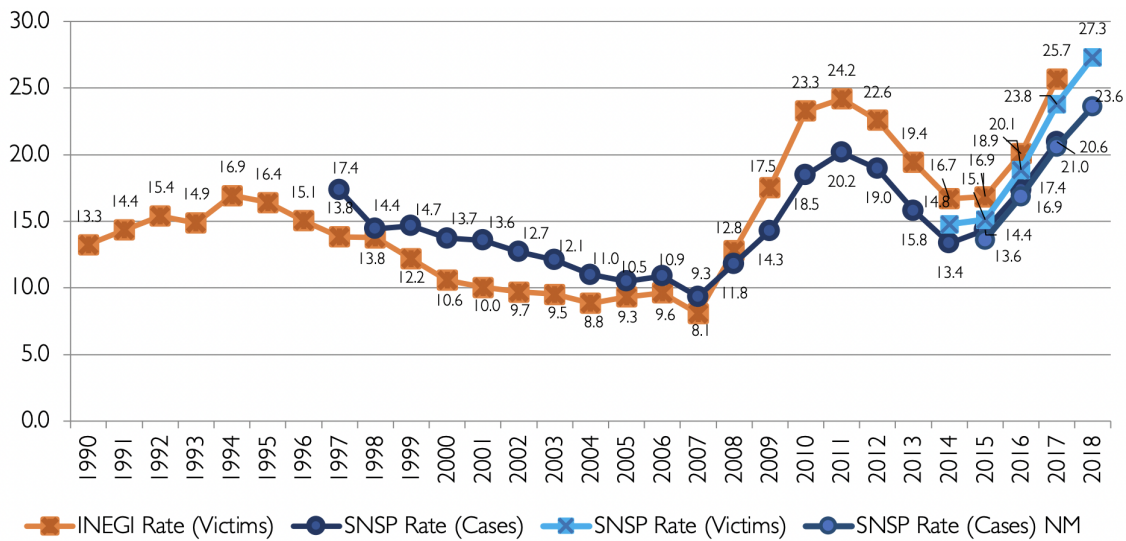
Likewise, it seeks to promote, together with the Federal Public Administration and the Armed Forces, an intelligence doctrine that unifies the intelligence procedures of the National Security agencies of the Mexican State. In this way, there was to be cooperation between the police forces and the army. With that last statement, it is evident that President Peña Nieto followed more or less the same policy as his predecessor (Guajardo, 2016).

For some authors, Peña Nieto basically continued the militarization of the IM, but with changes in image, deciding not to show the imprisoned drug lords in collective press interviews (Heinle et al., 2016). Regardless, the tactic of attacking the heads of the main drug trafficking organizations continued to be the main goal.

### **3.7.2. Results**

The INEGI began using a new methodology (NM) in 2015 which included more sources of information, such as forensic investigations and crime scene analysis, to identify homicide victims. In 2013, the SNSP also started using a NM that included all homicide (Calderón et al., 2019) cases reported by law enforcement agencies, regardless of the number of victims.

Figure 6: Homicide Rate, Based on INEGI and SNSP DATA 1990-2018



Source: Developed by the Trans-Border Institute - Drug Violence in Mexico Data and Analysis Through 2018

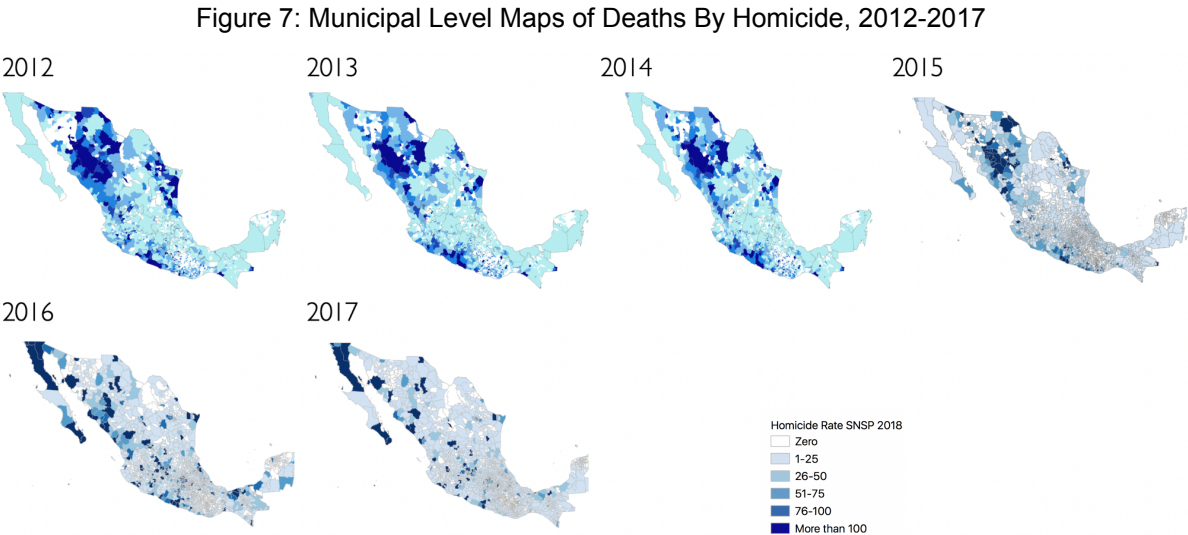
It can be appreciated how homicide levels in Mexico experienced a decline in 2012 continuing through 2013 and 2014 but then started to rise a year later, an increase which, according to most of the sources, continued through 2016 all the way to 2018. The amount of homicide investigations in 2018 reported by SNSP exceeded that of 2010 by 39%. Its updated methodology indicated that Mexico’s national homicide rate reached an unprecedented 27.3 homicide victims per 100,000 inhabitants in 2018. Undoubtedly, there was an important increase in Mexico’s homicide rate.

The SNSP's preliminary 2018 data indicates that there were approximately over 150,000 homicides during Peña Nieto's six years in power, which works out to at least 68 killings every day or about three per hour. Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, Mexico has recorded more than 332,000 murders; this statistic does not include the significant amount of compelled abductions and unreported killings.

Similar to this, a number of governmental and private organizations claimed that extortion and kidnapping significantly increased in Mexico in 2013. The Stop Kidnapping Association, a Mexican NGO, claimed that the number of kidnappings increased by 56% in the first half of 2014, from 1,130 to 1,776, compared to the same time in 2013 (Arellano, 2022).

The most recent statistics from INEGI available at the time indicated that there had been a sustained uptick in the geographical distribution of violence in Mexico that had exceeded levels achieved in prior years. The amount of municipalities with 0 homicides decreased to only 30% whilst the amount of municipalities with more than 100 homicides increased to 69 in 2017, a new record since 2015.

The geographical spread of violence is depicted in the maps below. These maps also reveal that killings have been regionally clustered in the main drug trafficking areas in the northwest, including the six border states with Mexico and the states of Sinaloa, Nayarit, Michoacán, and Guerrero along the Pacific. Since 2014, violence resurged to previously unheard-of levels, particularly in regions along Mexico's Pacific Coast that have significant drug trafficking (Calderón et al., 2019).



Source: INEGI, Maps generated by Theresa Firestine and Octavio Rodríguez Ferreira

El Chapo was detained in the beginning of 2016. Guzmán had already been detained in 2001, but he managed to flee from custody. Besides that, the cartel experienced 21 captures and three members killed. Among those neutralized were leaders, financial operators and heads of hitmen (Dittmar, 2018). After El Chapo's subsequent arrest in 2014 it can be assumed that a sizable amount of Mexico's spikes in violence in 2015 and 2016 may have been caused by disputes between and within competing drug trafficking organizations.

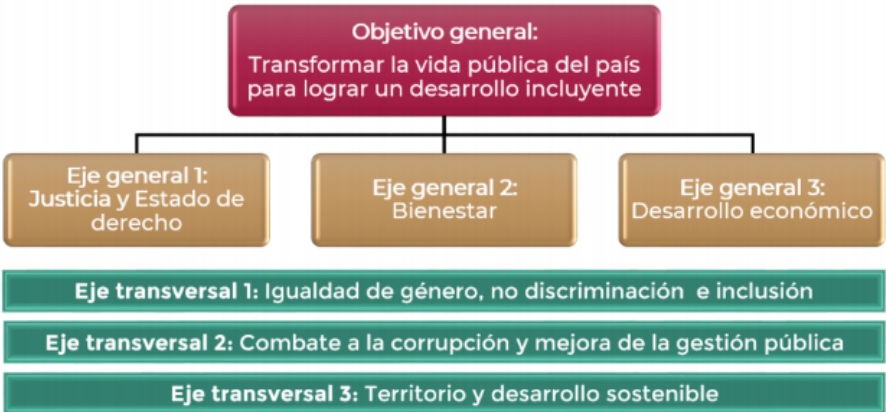
Although this was the most important capture during his term, other cartels were also affected during Peña Nieto's term in office: Los Zetas lost 33 members: 28 captured and five killed. Among the most important captures are the brothers Miguel Ángel, the top leader of Los Zetas, arrested in 2013, and his brother Alejandro Omar Treviño, arrested in 2015 (Dittmar, 2018).

**3.8. Andrés Manuel López Obrador**

The 58th president of Mexico, Andrés Manuel López Obrador, took office on December 1st, 2018. López Obrador, also widely known as AMLO, succeeded in running a left campaign for the “*Movimiento de Regeneración Nacional*” (National Regeneration Movement), MORENA, with the slogan "Together we will make history." Having one of the largest electoral margins in Mexican electoral history, he received more than 50% of the vote. AMLO declared that his administration would abandon militarized efforts to capture the leaders of cartels in instead focusing on enhancing regional security cohesion and lowering the number of homicides (Calderón et al., 2019).

**3.8.1. PND under Andrés Manuel López Obrador**

Figure 8: PND 2019-2024



Source: Gobierno de México

The current administration emphasized that its strategy differs from previous ones in its intention to address the causes of violence and insecurity through an ambitious set of social programs, having as its main objective to transform the public life of the

country in order to achieve inclusive development having the following as its main axes: justice and the rule of law, welfare and economic development.

This contrasts with the policy of openly confronting organized crime adopted during Calderón's term (2006-2012), and with the emphasis on arresting kingpins, leaders of organized crime groups and priority targets of violence that prevailed during Peña's term (2012-2018). AMLO went even further and declared the war on drugs to be over, arguing that the government's main function is no longer the strategy of operatives to arrest drug lords and that they have not been arrested because that is no longer its main function (Najar, 2019).

*Abrazos, No Balazos* (Hugs, Not Bullets) was one of AMLO's campaign catchphrases, which sought to contrast the harshness of Calderón's approach with his security programme (O'Neil, 2019). Through the bargaining process, AMLO's government opted to move from a securitized situation to a desecuritized issue, making the government's response to drug trafficking organizations also desecuritized.

There has been a clear transition from securitization, drug trafficking, and cartels being a matter of public policy requiring the distribution of assets or some other form of collaborative governance to a politicized matter in which the government fails to address with the issue as it ceases to be a matter for public debate and decision, an action made by him rather than by either the audience or the elites of politics who engage in the public discussion around the issue.

However, López Obrador's actions have deviated from his declared security plan: Despite a 2018 judgment by the Mexican Supreme Court finding continuous military participation in domestic affairs violates the Constitution, President López Obrador supported constitutional revisions to allow constant military presence in public security for a period of five years in his inaugural year in office. In order to purportedly fight crime, he obtained authorization from Congress to establish a new National Guard made up of former members of the military, federal police, and fresh recruits.



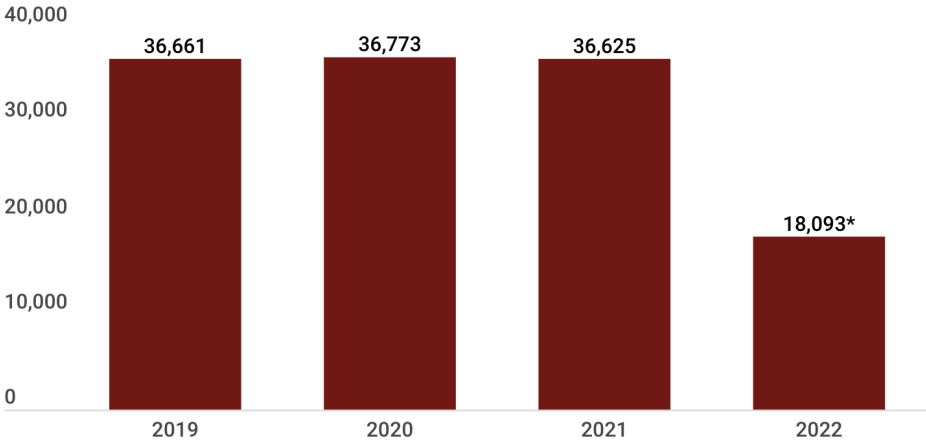
Many members of the human rights movement, who had urged Mexico's Congress to alter López Obrador's proposal in order to try and assure the National Guard would be under civilian leadership, were disturbed by the establishment of the National Guard and the continuation of the army's active domestic involvement.

In July of that same year, he informed reporters that he wished to completely disband the Army into the National Guard and declare that Mexico is a pacifist nation that doesn't require a military (Reuters, 2019). Although AMLO has presented his plan as revolutionary, some analysts claim that his actions represent a continuation of the decapitation strategy through a rearrangement of existing security institutions basically repeating the strategies of his predecessors which already proved to be ineffective.

López Obrador claimed that during his first three years in government he explored innovative anti drug strategies, like legalizing some substances like cannabis, and focused on oil theft by going after cartels that have a reputation for it. However, some analysts contend that the administration has not released an in-depth or efficient security plan to at least try and tackle the cartels (Reuters, 2018).

### 3.8.2. Results

Figure 9: Homicides during AMLO's first 4 years



Source: INEGI

From 2019 to November 2022, a total of 137,603 murders have been accounted for, this represents 13.14% more than the total number of homicides accounted for in the entire government of Felipe Calderón, when 121,613 of these crimes occurred, on average, the current government records more than 2,300 homicides per month, while under Peña the figure was 1,779 and under Calderón 1,269 (Pérez, 2022). Numerous violent incidents happened throughout 2021 and the beginning of 2022, particularly on the coast of Quintana Roo, which is a popular tourist destination.

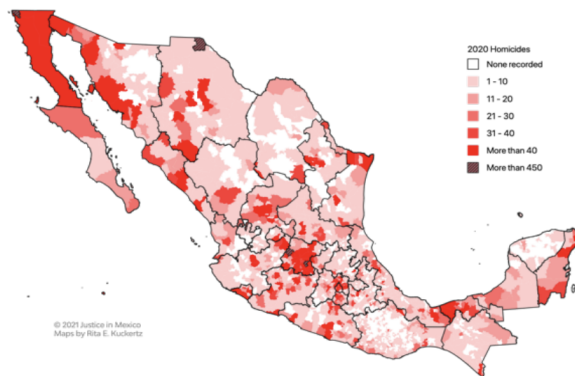
In only three and a half years of AMLO's administration, the number of homicides recorded during Felipe Calderón's administration, the period when the war against drug trafficking was declared, has already been surpassed. The government of President Andrés Manuel López Obrador is shaping up to be the most violent.

The president regularly downplays the fact that homicide rates are at an all-time high, and has even maintained his popularity. In his regular morning briefings, "La mañanera" AMLO frequently criticizes the media, particularly probes that are critical of his administration. In these early morning briefings, he has a history of branding reporters as adversaries who want to discredit him and his anti-corruption initiatives (Phillips, 2022). Following the brutal assassinations of eleven journalists at the beginning of 2022, López Obrador's continuing onslaught on the media aroused worry around the world.

One of the reporters was a crime scene photographer who had been murdered by a drug cartel, according to an inquiry that was mentioned in media reports. The Inter-American Press Association called on President López Obrador to stop his verbal assaults against journalists in February 2022 after a string of journalist killings since the start of the year (Lakhani, 2022).

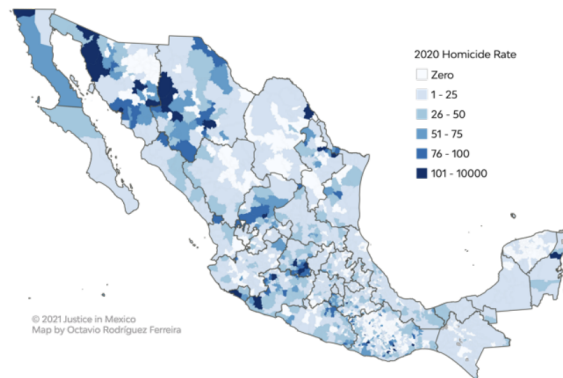
Homicide violence was significantly less concentrated in 2020 than it had been between 2010 and 2012. But since the spike in violence in 2013, the concentration of homicides has progressively increased, indicating that some of the nation's major hotspots require more attention.

Figure 10: Map of the Number of Intentional Homicide Cases by State and Municipality in 2020



Source: SNSP

Figure 11: Map of Intentional Homicide Cases (Rate Per 100K) by State and Municipality



Source: SNSP

In 2020, the nation's top 10 most violent municipalities were home to roughly a third of all intentional homicides, which took place in just five other municipalities. This is a dramatic contrast to 2007, when homicide rates in Mexico reached an all-time low of 1,598 cases, with the top five municipalities accounting for less than 10% of the nation's 10,253 cases (Justice in Mexico, 2021).

In addition, it should be noted that qualitatively, violence is now more complex and severe than before, the reasons may be explained with the observations that were done previously analyzing the results of the PNDs:

- Increased involvement of cartel related crime: In the last three years, there has been a significant increase of the cartel's crime in lethal violence. In 2018, of the total registered homicides, 45.8% were linked to such activities. This proportion reached 65.6% in 2019 and 77.3% in 2020. Federal authorities

themselves estimate that 75% of homicides committed in the country are linked to cartel criminal activities (Domínguez, 2020).

- Expansion and consolidation of areas controlled by cartels: In a significant proportion of the national territory, powerful criminal organizations co-rule the legally established authorities or have taken governance away from them. The U.S. Northern Command estimates that approximately 30%-35% of the national territory is controlled by organized crime cartels (“Organized Crime Controls 35% of Mexico” Glen VanHerk, Head of the U.S. Northern Command,” 2021).

Although several factors have made possible the expansion and consolidation of these zones in recent years, one of the most perverse incentives during AMLO’s mandate has been the official position that federal security and law enforcement agencies will not carry out systematic actions to arrest drug cartel leaders or to dismantle these criminal organizations (López, 2019).

As it was previously stated, in some of these areas and their peripheries, the cartels often distribute goods and services with the purpose of establishing a relatively harmonious relationship with the local communities and, if possible, making them true sanctuaries of placid comfort. But in the vast majority of the areas under their control, with irremediable impunity, they carry out a wide range of predatory actions against the local economy and the property and physical integrity of those who live there.

Among the most foreseeable consequences derived from the expansion and consolidation of the areas controlled by cartels is the correlative increase of their presence in the political-electoral sphere, since taking over positions of popular representation is one of the best ways to formalize and consolidate this territorial control: There are states and municipalities where violence and insecurity are at a different level of complexity and severity than the rest of the country, due to the breadth and depth that the presence of organized crime has reached in the political-electoral sphere.

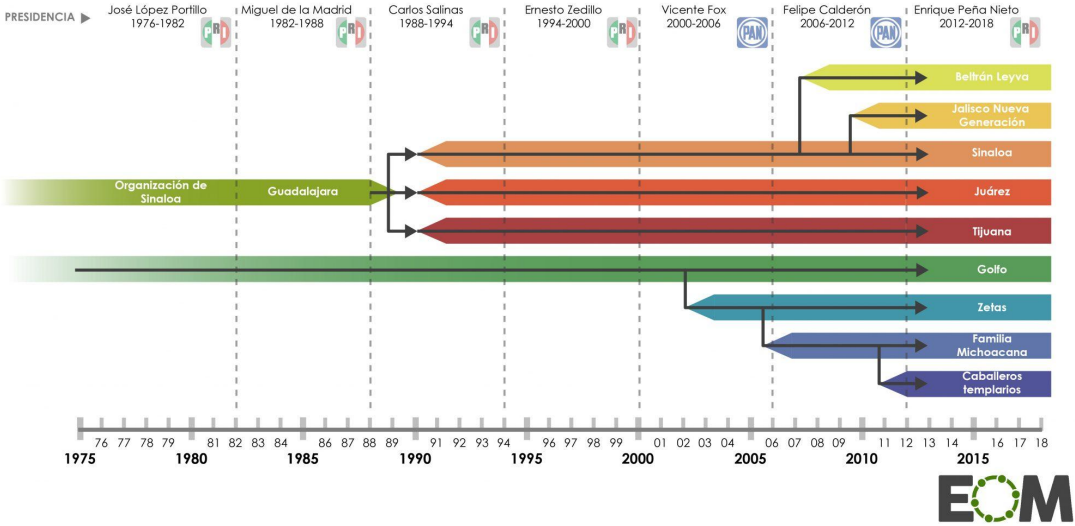
The federal elections of June 2021 were unprecedented in the process of consolidating democracy (García, 2021). The most violent in the contemporary history of the country. In states such as Sinaloa, Michoacán and Morelos, cartels openly operated to impose certain candidates and favor the political parties that nominated them. This federal election showed that in Mexico there are areas or territories that can be placed in a different category in terms of security, a category where organic links between candidates, political parties and cartels are exhibited.

### 3.9. The Evolution of the Cartels

As it was previously mentioned, the government's strategy of going after the heads of the cartels was based on the assumption that without them, the cartels would cease to function. But in reality, as Fox's, Calderon's and Peña's administration demonstrated, it wasn't like that. When a leader is captured, the group can either find a new leader or fragment into a new group, but there is little chance of the group disappearing, as long as the market for illegal goods is attractive.

In the end, security policies end up either encouraging fragmentation, increasing the number of organizations competing in the market, or promoting alliances between criminal groups to survive both turf wars and police actions. Figure 12 below shows which groups were created from the capturing of leaders or from the competition that led to such results.

Figure 12: Mexican drug trafficking cartels, chronology of criminal organizations



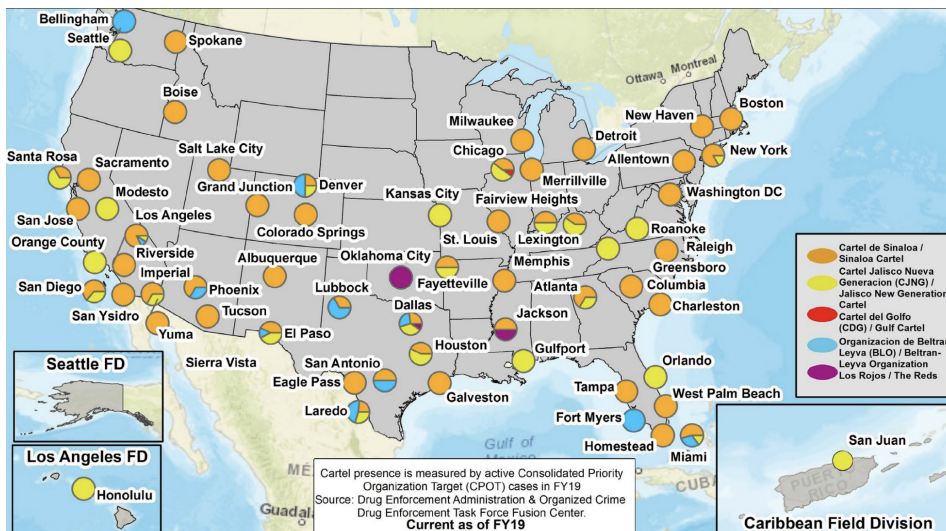
Because conflict between and among cartels is encouraged through leader capture, the level of violence changes. To secure their survival even in the absence of their leader, cartels have developed over time in order to grow more resilient and adaptable. Cartels are currently active in a wide range of domains and to conceal their unlawful income and launder the proceeds, many have been messing with legal sectors (such as through extortion rackets) (Green, 2022).

Numerous cartels in their territory demand extortion payments from industries in the agricultural, mineral extraction, marine, and timber sectors in exchange for protection from rival groups. Their fluctuating situation sheds light on how adaptable all Mexican criminal organizations are as they deal with fresh obstacles from rivalry and shifting drug market conditions.

The proliferation of new criminal organizations, from small local gangs to cartels with global reach, has made Mexico's crime problem broader and, undoubtedly, made it harder to control or eliminate violence. The major cartels operating in Mexico today are the Tijuana, Sinaloa, Juárez and Gulf cartels along with the BLO, Los Zetas, *La Familia Michoacana*, *Los rojos*, and the CJNG, the same cartels the DEA considers to have the greatest drug trafficking impact on the U.S. (DEA, 2021). The demand for illegal narcotics in the United States is greater than that of any other country in the world, and since Mexico and the U.S. share a border, this relationship is pretty much unbreakable.

By forming economic partnerships with other groups, such as independent drug trafficking organizations, and cooperating with international criminal groups, U.S.-based street/prison gangs, and Asian money laundering organizations, the cartels are also able to increase their power (DEA, 2021).

Figure 13: U.S-Areas of Influence of Major Mexican Transnational Criminal Organizations by Individual Cartel



Source: DEA

The main smuggling routes over the Southwest Border also remain under the control of Mexican cartels, who continue to have a significant influence over drug trafficking in the United States. The cartels control the drug trade that affects the American market, and the majority of them use a polydrug market strategy that gives their operations the greatest flexibility and resilience.

Two of the biggest cartels, the Sinaloa Cartel and the CJNG, are still quite powerful especially when compared with the others:

The Sinaloa Cartel dominates drug trafficking mostly along the Pacific Coast and close to the country's southern and northern borders. It has substantial influence in 15 of Mexico's 32 states. With activities on five continents, the Sinaloa Cartel has the largest global reach and is in charge of all aspects of drug manufacturing and distribution in the Americas. By maintaining distribution centers in numerous cities, it exports and distributes large quantities of substances such as fentanyl, heroin, methamphetamine and others in the United States (DEA's Strategic Intelligence Section, n.d.).

The CJNG constitutes one of the most rapidly expanding cartels, with a sizable presence in 23 of the 32 Mexican states. The majority of its territory and expansion has happened in central Mexico and in key places along the Mexican-U.S. border.

The CJNG was recognized by the Mexican authorities as one of the most lethal cartels in the nation, and the U.S Department of the Treasury agreed, referring to the organization as one of the most prolific and violent drug trafficking organizations

worldwide (U.S Department of The Treasury, 2016). The CJNG's eagerness to engage in violent clashes with rival cartels and state forces is indicative of the organization's swift growth of its drug trafficking operations.

The CJNG reportedly has activities in the Americas, Asia, and Europe, with its extensive global network, the cartel is allegedly in charge of supplying cocaine and methamphetamine (Pérez, 2016). The DEA views the CJNG as Mexico's most well-armed criminal organization and a top U.S. danger.

#### **4. CONCLUSIONS**

The aim of successive Mexican governments has been to downgrade the scope and nature of cartel activities from danger to national security to a law-and-order issue. The militaristic security approach used by the two previous Mexican presidents was clearly maintained by President López Obrador. Throughout the duration of his term, he gave his approval for the Mexican armed forces to continue serving in domestic law enforcement. The cartels however have not been much weakened by any of AMLO's, armed or not, approaches to fight them.

Criminal impunity that has persisted for years, systemic corruption, and a sustained demand for illegal substances from drug users in the United States and Europe are structural issues that Mexico must contend with in order to maintain security and stability.

The way in which the securitization of drug trafficking in Mexico has been carried out demonstrates how the coming together of the economic dynamics, legal systems and political interests ended up creating a huge escalation of violence rather than being an effective way to prevent the issue of drug manufacturing and commercialization. The strategy from the last 3 administrations has harmed the society instead.

The examination of the war on drugs in Mexico and the actions implemented by the three recent presidents has provided valuable insights into the complexities and challenges surrounding this multifaceted challenge. Throughout this study, a comprehensive historical context was presented, shedding light on the origins of drug trafficking exploring how it all started with the opium from China and the emergence



of significant cartels in Mexico, providing a solid foundation for understanding the issue.

The study also delved into the reasons behind the transformation of drug cartels into a security threat as well as their growth and entrenchment into Mexican institutions during a 70 year centralized and hierarchical ruling, revealing why such mechanisms tolerated and even shielded said illicit activities in the regions of the country eventually managing to gain more and more power.

The securitization process as well as the efforts and strategies undertaken by the previous presidents, specially by Felipe Calderón and Enrique Peña Nieto were thoroughly analyzed, highlighting their methods in combating the drug trafficking cartels, examining the approaches and the different results (from the arrest of the drug lords or main leaders all the way to how the consequences unfolded on the nation). By doing so, we have gained a deeper understanding of the successes, limitations, and implications of these efforts in combating drug trafficking and its associated violence.

Lastly a detailed examination of the current president's approach and its impact on the country's reality was provided, offering insights into the policies implemented under his mandate. This dissertation successfully achieved almost all of its objectives. Nonetheless, proposing a hypothetical viable solution other than drug legalization—remains elusive. Despite the efforts of the administrations, the war on drugs in Mexico persists, and the underlying issues of violence, corruption, and societal harm continue to pose significant challenges.

The actions taken by the three last presidents have shown varying degrees of “effectiveness” and have had mixed results. While some policies have resulted in short-term notable achievements, such as the capture of high-profile cartel leaders and temporary reductions in violence in certain regions, the overarching impact on drug trafficking and the overall security situation in Mexico remains limited.

The securitization strategies employed by previous administrations have demonstrated shortcomings in addressing the root causes of the issue and creating sustainable, long-term solutions.

While the rest of the objectives largely accomplished, the failure to propose a hypothetical viable solution highlights the complexity and long-standing nature the Presidents in Mexico have had to deal with: the problems of the drug trafficking cartels, which still are the greatest criminal drug threat to the U.S and most likely will become the nightmare of many other countries unless they move towards future policy considerations to adopt a comprehensive and multidimensional approach that addresses not only the supply side but also the underlying socioeconomic factors contributing to drug trafficking. Strengthening institutions, promoting transparency and accountability, investing in social development programs, and fostering international cooperation, all vital elements for a more effective and sustainable strategy.

The worldwide market's overall drug demand, drug trafficking, output, and price have not been significantly decreased by the international drug control system. The issue of the rising worldwide medication demand cannot be overlooked because it has not only persisted but also evolved. Nations must establish universal legal standards in order to combat crime in response to this irresponsible application of globalization.

States must provide fresh options for regional and international coordination. One of the biggest obstacles in the battle against transnational organized crime in the context of globalization is bilateral coordination to harmonize some elements of national laws.

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