The Mérida Initiative and the Violence of Transnational Criminal Organizations in Mexico

Brianna Madison Canning
Bowdoin College

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The Mérida Initiative and the Violence of Transnational Criminal Organizations in Mexico

An Honors Paper for the Department of Government and Legal Studies

By Brianna Madison Canning
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Preface

At Bowdoin, I am a Government and Legal Studies and Latin American, Caribbean, and Latinx studies (LACLaS) double-major. My interest in these subjects stems from an experience I had as a freshman in high school, when I visited Cuba for ten days. Since then, I have been interested in learning about the history of Latin American countries, and specifically how the United States government has been involved in their politics. I have learned of countless examples where the United States explicitly or implicitly supports policies or leaders who enact discriminatory or violent practices that have serious repercussions for civilians, especially those who are already from marginalized communities. I am thinking specifically about Operation Condor, the School of Americas, and post-coup Honduras more recently.

When originally deciding on a topic for my honors thesis, I was interested in exploring how US foreign policy in Mexico, either direct or “indirect,” was responsible for the violence experienced by many people in the country. At first, I wanted to study people from Mexico who went through the School of Americas (now Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Operations) training programs, and whether or not these graduates are involved in the drug war in Mexico, which has grown to include much more violent tactics. However, over the first month of research, my project shifted to a more expansive approach, thinking about complex causality and what motivates transnational criminal organizations (often called cartels) to adapt such brutal practices that widely impact civilians. When I saw that the bilateral security agreement between the US and Mexico, the Mérida Initiative, was enacted in 2008, the same year that homicides dramatically increased in Mexico, I assumed that there was a causal relationship between them—Mérida was perhaps causing these deaths. It would not be surprising to learn that once the US became involved
in occurrences in another country, things escalated for the worst. There are many historical moments that point to this happening.

My focus on Mexico, specifically, stems from my experiences abroad in Mérida, Mexico during my junior year—yes, the city that is the namesake of the initiative studied here. Whereas Mérida is one of the safest places to be in Mexico, my friends and family were concerned about me studying abroad there. They did not know that it is a relatively safe city, and why would they? Often, people living in the US only hear a single narrative about Mexico: the country is full of drugs traffickers, violence, and corruption. However, my experiences abroad could not have been further from this stereotype. I do recognize that my experiences of Mexico were specifically curated by my study abroad program coordinators, as well as my host family and professors. I realize that living in a wealthier part of the city, and navigating spaces as an extranjera with white skin, made my reality much different than even some of my peers at the Universidad Autónoma de Yucatán. Even so, I do know that making sweeping generalizations about a vast and diverse country will always be inaccurate—the same way that we cannot say that every part of the United States has the same conditions. Chicago is not Los Angeles, and both are not Brunswick, Maine.

At the same time, I do know that much of Mexico is being challenged by the presence of transnational criminal organizations and their violent tactics, even if that was not the case while I was in Mérida. Despite the fact that my semester was cut short because of the COVID-19 pandemic, I had many conversations with locals in Mérida about the violence impacting other parts of the country. I recognize that many people fear for their lives every day, and have lost loved ones from organized crime related violence. Every news headline and homicide statistic represents a human life that is lost, and another family that is in mourning.
This is what motivates me to spend time researching this topic. How can we begin to study organized crime related violence without tokenizing or glorifying its existence, or getting stuck in the trap of moralizing those who participate? In order to enact policy change and protect more people from becoming victims of violence, we must study the root causes or the problem, and change all of the conditions that allow for it to persist at such extreme levels in much of Mexico and Latin America more broadly. For these reasons, this research moves beyond the superficial investigations of violence, in order to resist commodifying the experiences of victims, but also to do the work that must be done to protect the lives and human rights of all people. If we understand the root causes of organized crime related violence, and how it permeates into all aspects of public in private life in many places, we might be able to have more empathy for those who leave home because they fear for their safety or lack other alternatives.

Moreover, if we understand that the United States has played a role in fostering or permitting the existence of violence, perhaps our government and citizens will be more accepting and understanding of those who arrive at the southern border asking for protection. Violence in Mexico not only impacts people who live in Mexico; it also greatly impacts Central Americans who are forced to migrate because of conditions in their own countries (often also related to transnational organized crime). Vulnerable Central American migrants travel through Mexico on their way to the US, only to be subject to more physical and emotional violence from Mexican criminal organizations on their already arduous journey north. Discussing the impacts of transnational organized crime and violence in Central America is beyond the scope of this project. However, it must be known that efforts taken by the US and Mexico to fight the war on drugs has implications far beyond their borders. Furthermore, violence in Latin America is deeply rooted in
structural and colonial contexts. I am not able to fully address these topics in this thesis, but want to acknowledge them briefly here.

I also want to note that it was devastating and challenging to spend time reflecting on these themes over the past nine months. But, I feel as though the least I can do is devote time and space to learn about this complex problem, from the safety of my college dorm room in Maine. People are fighting on the front lines, daily, for accountability and remembrance for their loved ones, and they do not have the privilege of shutting off their laptop and baking cookies when it becomes too much to bear. I recognize my privilege, both as a student attending a private liberal arts college, but also as a white identifying student studying violence that, in reality, does not have to affect me personally. However, as a Government and LACLaS double major, I am passionate about studying injustice and ways that we can take action to protect human rights – even if action means listening and amplifying voices that have been silenced for too long, or putting aside my comfort to learn about how I can pressure my own government to do better, to be better.

I hope that this research can provide some clarity on what exactly is happening in Mexico, to help people make more informed claims about conditions beyond our southern border. Additionally, it is important to recognize that what is happening in Mexico is a direct result of its past and long history of conflict and competition with the United States. Mexico is not inherently violent and corrupt, and it is worth studying what drives these conditions in order to learn what role the United States has historically played in creating them.
Chapter 1: Introduction

Brutality and violence in Mexico regularly fill Mexican and US media reports. The homicide rate in Mexico in 2020 was among the highest it has ever been, despite the COVID-19 pandemic and its restrictions. Civilians are frequently kidnapped, tortured, and killed, and perpetrators of violence are often not punished or even caught.\(^1\) Violence in Mexico is seen as a national security issue for the United States, and the US Drug Enforcement Agency, in particular, approaches Mexican criminal networks as a major national security threat. As a result, the US has been working with Mexico for decades to combat the presence and power of organized crime groups throughout Mexico and the United States. One of the main vehicles for these policies is the Mérida Initiative (MI), a partnership signed by US President George W. Bush and Mexican President Felipe Calderón in October of 2007. The two nations have cooperated for decades to combat transnational organized crime. However, the Mérida Initiative is unique partly because it is a US assistance program initiated by the Mexican government, rather than one unilaterally imposed by the United States.\(^2\) As such the Mérida Initiative emphasized shared responsibility and cooperation and offered high aspirations that it would solve a multitude of deeply complex problems facing Mexico.

Through the Mérida Initiative, the US and Mexico tried to “combatir a la delincuencia organizada bajo el principio de responsabilidades compartidas. Estados Unidos aceptó asumir un rol más preponderante en la lucha que enfrentaba [México] al ser el principal consumidor de la droga traficada por México.”\(^3\) The US recognized that, as the major consumer of drugs trafficked

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1 Grant, “Mexico Crime.”
2 Vidal and Zoraida, “La cooperación bilateral México-Estados Unidos,” 47.
3 “combat organized crime under the principle of shared responsibilities. The US agreed to take a more prominent role in [Mexico]’s struggle as the main consumer of Mexico’s drugs.” My translation. Vidal and Zoraida, “La cooperación bilateral México-Estados Unidos,” 43.
through Mexico, they needed to assist Mexico in the “guerra contra al narcotráfico” as declared by Mexican President Felipe Calderón in December of 2006. Through the Mérida Initiative, the US promised to decrease the US consumer demand for drugs, while also combating the illicit flow of arms and chemicals to Mexico through the border. Additionally, the US trained and supported Mexican security forces, took efforts to secure the border, and provided financial compensation to Mexico. Since 2007, the United States has supplied more than 1.6 billion dollars to Mexico through the Mérida Initiative “con la finalidad de mejorar la efectividad de sus fuerzas de seguridad y sus tribunales contra los narcotraficantes.” The initiative was signed into law in the United States in 2008 through the “Mérida Initiative to Combat Illicit Narcotics and Reduce Organized Crime Authorization Act of 2008.” However, despite spending more than a billion dollars, and “years of Mexican and US strategy,” violence has continued to escalate in Mexico, leading many “to question the overall efficacy of the Mérida Initiative.”

In fact, not only has violence failed to subside under the Mérida Initiative, the increase in violence in Mexico corresponds with the creation of the initiative, spiking to extraordinary levels during the six-year term of Mexican President Felipe Calderón from 2006 to 2012 (See Figure 1). Over the course of Calderón’s term, there were over 120,000 homicides. From 2007 to 2008 specifically, the homicide rate doubled, the same period the Mérida Initiative was initiated. This

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4 Fernández Barbadillo, “6,000 muertos deja la guerra contra el narco en México en 2008.”
7 “to improve the effectiveness of its security forces and courts against drug traffickers.” My translation. Fernández Barbadillo, “6,000 muertos deja la guerra contra el narco en México en 2008.”
10 University of San Diego, “Data Center - Justice in Mexico.”
11 Milenio, “Homicides.”
project analyzes the relationship between the homicide rate in Mexico, the Mérida Initiative, and US and Mexican policy coordination. Did the Mérida Initiative affect organized crime related homicides? Did the Mérida Initiative foster security and cooperation in the region as it was intended? Did it fail to or, in fact, did it even propose or support policies that contributed to the increase in violence in Mexico?

While I initially hypothesized that the Mérida Initiative was responsible for the increasing homicide rate between 2007 and 2008 in Mexico, my research has illuminated that the MI did not come into effect until mid 2009 at the earliest due to slow bureaucratic processes and procedures. Additionally, the initiative comprises only a small percentage of resources used to fight the war on drugs in Mexico. Therefore, rising violence cannot be attributed solely to the Mérida Initiative and the policies it supported. However, the initiative did support actions taken by the Government of Mexico that exacerbated conflict within and between transnational criminal organizations (TCOs). Killing and arresting leaders of the organizations, interfering with their drug profits, and challenging their complex, historical, webs of corruption led to increasing levels of violence in Mexico starting in 2008, as transnational criminal organizations relied on the strategic use of violence to adapt and survive under increasing pressure. The Mérida Initiative, in tandem with a variety of complex domestic and international factors, is responsible for the increasing levels of violence in Mexico that increasingly targets civilians. As of May of 2021, the Mérida Initiative is thought to be coming to an end, but violence remains at extremely high levels in Mexico. This moment presents a unique opportunity to reflect on lessons from the Mérida Initiative to ensure that the United States and Mexican governments do not continue supporting policies and practices that lead to increasing levels of violence without permanently weakening transnational criminal organizations.
Methodology

My research relies on a variety of primary and secondary sources for data and analysis. Media reporting from Mexico is often not reliable due to pressures journalists face from the criminal organizations examined. Especially in the last few years, journalists reporting on organized crime related violence have been threatened, tortured, or murdered.\textsuperscript{12} Dawn Paley, in her book \textit{Drug War Capitalism}, cites Article 19, a press freedom organization, claiming that during Calderón’s term fifty journalists were killed and, “726 acts of aggression and 213 threats against journalists and media organizations were reported.”\textsuperscript{13} Therefore, even though there have been heroic attempts at reporting, there are intense interests to suppress that information by people who are willing to use violence to do so.\textsuperscript{14} Seelke and Finklea in a US Congressional Service Report point out that, “despite the creation of a federal protection mechanism to provide bodyguards and other protective measures to journalists at risk of threats from organized crime, Mexico ranked as the third most dangerous country for journalists in 2016,”\textsuperscript{15} and in 2019 it was the second-most dangerous country only after Syria.\textsuperscript{16} As a result, many journalists in the country “avoid coverage of crime and corruption in order to stay alive,” which limits the accuracy and availability of local information relating to violence in Mexico.\textsuperscript{17}

Without being able to rely on the Mexican media, this research largely comes from other sources. US government agencies such as the State Department and the Department of Defense, as well as independent agencies that provide information to the government—Congressional Research Service (CRS) and the Government Accountability Office (GAO)—and NGO sources

\begin{footnotes}
\item Committee to Protect Journalists, “Getting Away With Murder.”
\item Paley, \textit{Drug War Capitalism}, Ch. 1.
\item Freeman, \textit{No Option But North}, 52.
\item Beiser, “Number of Journalists Killed Falls Sharply as Reprisal Murders Hit Record Low.”
\item Committee to Protect Journalists, “Getting Away With Murder.”
\end{footnotes}
like the Council on Foreign Relations produced reports about organized crime in Mexico because of the threat they pose to US security. These primary source documents provide data on violence, policy, and drugs in Mexico. These sources are augmented by data from policy organizations; think tanks; non-profit organizations; academic journals; books; reporting in the form of news articles and podcasts; and interviews on organized crime, violence, and US foreign policy in Mexico.

This chapter serves as an introduction to the Mérida Initiative, and the violence of transnational criminal organizations in Mexico. It contains all of the data used in this research, explains relevant definitions and historical contexts, reviews the existing literature and the Mérida Initiative, and then outlines the plan of study for the second, third, and fourth chapters.

Data

Homicide data is used as a marker for violence in Mexico for a few reasons. First, the data is widely available, and has been measured historically by many organizations. Data from multiple sources allows for the ability to cross reference the homicide rates and trends, as displayed in Figure 1 for example. Second, homicide is a tactic that has been used widely by transnational criminal organizations in Mexico and beyond, as they strategically use violence to send messages to rival organizations, government officials, and civilians. Even so, the frequency at which homicide is used strategically has increased in recent years, as shown by the homicide data, posing important questions about why this is the case. Third, TCOs in recent years have started to publicly display the bodies of their victims in public spaces to ensure that their messages and strength are properly demonstrated to others. This occurrence, often grotesque and disturbing, leads to widespread discussion and reporting about the homicides in Mexico, making sources available for
this research. While homicides are not the only indication of trends in violence or the evolving violent operations of TCOs, it is a variable that is useful to study for the purposes of this research. One downside of using time-based homicide data, such as monthly or yearly statistics, is that the discovery of mass graves skews data.\textsuperscript{18} While the victims found in mass graves are all discovered at the same time, they were likely not all killed in the same time period. This can skew monthly homicide data, because the month the grave is unearthed is the month that claims those homicide cases, and sometimes the bodies are at a state of decomposition that does not allow the exact number of victims to be identified. In other cases, the Mexican Attorney General does not even count the victims found in mass graves in their homicide statistics.\textsuperscript{19} The use of mass graves is common practice in the Drug War, with one source estimating that 2,000 have been found in the country between 2006 and 2016.\textsuperscript{20} With this in mind, recognizing that the data about the monthly and yearly homicide rates is imperfect, it still used in this research for the reasons mentioned above.

Data about who is represented within homicide data—in terms of gender, age, and occupation—is harder to find because of a lack of proper investigation into the homicide cases in Mexico. When I use the term homicide, I am referring to the intentional killing of a person by another person, regardless of the victim’s involvement in organized crime, their gender or age, or their position as a police officer or military official involved in fighting the drug war (unless otherwise specified).

My project relies Mexican homicide data from a variety of sources: The Mexican Sistema Nacional de Seguridad Pública (SNSP), The Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía (INEGI), the World Bank, and Milenio and Reforma—two major national Newspapers in Mexico.

\textsuperscript{18} Pachico, “Juarez Murder Rate Reaches 5-Year Low.”
\textsuperscript{19} Pachico, “Juarez Murder Rate Reaches 5-Year Low.”
\textsuperscript{20} Guillén, Torres, and Turati, “2,000 Clandestine Graves.”
The SNSP reports the total number of homicides, as well as the number of intentional and accidental homicides in the country. INEGI reports on the number of intentional homicides in the country, while Milenio and Reforma focus on homicides related to organized crime specifically. The World Bank data from the UN Office on Drugs and Crime, depicts the rate of intentional homicides in the country per every 100,000 people. Despite having slightly different data in terms of the number of homicides that occurred annually in Mexico, all of the sources depict a sharp increase starting in 2008, decreasing slightly between 2012 and 2014, and then increasing through present day. The number for accidental homicides, as reported by SNSP, however, stays relatively constant over time, serving as a de facto control variable demonstrating that increasing numbers are unlikely an effect of changing data collection or reporting methods. Rather, the increase in homicides in 2008 must be a result of an increase in violence in the country.

Figure 1: Homicides in Mexico as Reported my INEGI, SNSP, Milenio, and Reforma (1990-2019)\(^{21}\)

Table 1: Homicides in Mexico as Reported my INEGI, SNSP, Milenio, Reforma, and the World Bank (1990-2019)\(^{22}\)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
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<th>SNSP Total</th>
<th>SNSP Intentional</th>
<th>SNSP Accidental</th>
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<th>Reforma</th>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As shown clearly in the figure above, the intentional homicide rate in Mexico throughout the last several decades has not been constant. In fact, the homicide rate in the early 1990s is similar to the rate of 2008. However, the number of homicides increased drastically for the first time between 2007 and 2008, and the violence seen in 2010, during the first peak of the Drug War, was unprecedented for the time. Since then, unfortunately, the homicide rate in Mexico has surpassed the 2010 levels, which only indicates that the tactics used during the first several years of the drug war have not permanently deterred transnational criminal organizations from operating in Mexico. However, studying the second wave of violence in Mexico, from 2015 through present day, is largely beyond the scope of this project. This research focuses on the violence starting in Mexico starting between 2007 and 2008, since that is the first time the homicide rate spikes dramatically.

In addition to homicide rates for the entire country, it is helpful to study specific locations to understand how the violence is distributed throughout Mexico. Table 2 lists the municipalities in Mexico that had the top ten homicide rates each year. We can use this data to compare the

23 UN Office on Drugs and Crime’s International Homicide Statistics database., “Intentional Homicides.”
presence of organized crime groups in the region at that time, understand what the Government of Mexico is doing to combat TCOs in certain regions and during key years of violence, as well as make inferences about Mérida Initiative policies implemented in the area. Data tracking the specific destination of Mérida resources is not available. However, we can use US government documents to make predictions about where resources were sent, and compare that to the data presented in Table 2.

The municipalities most often in the top ten are Ciudad Juárez, Acapulco, Tijuana, Culiacán, Ecatepec, and Chihuahua. These municipalities are also in the states that are ranked as having the most homicides: Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua; Acapulco, Guerrero; Tijuana, Baja California; Culiacán, Sinaloa; Ecatepec, Estado de México; and Chihuahua, Chihuahua.²⁴

²⁴ Milenio, “Homicides.”
### Table 2: Top Ten Municipalities by Total Number of Homicides (2007-2018)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>#</th>
<th>2007</th>
<th>2008</th>
<th>2009</th>
<th>2010</th>
<th>2011</th>
<th>2012</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Tijuana</td>
<td>Juárez</td>
<td>Juárez</td>
<td>Juárez</td>
<td>Juárez</td>
<td>Acapulco</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Juárez</td>
<td>Tijuana</td>
<td>Tijuana</td>
<td>Tijuana</td>
<td>Acapulco</td>
<td>Juárez</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Acapulco</td>
<td>Chihuahua</td>
<td>Culiacán</td>
<td>Chihuahua</td>
<td>Monterrey</td>
<td>Monterrey</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Iztapalapa</td>
<td>Culiacán</td>
<td>Chihuahua</td>
<td>Culiacán</td>
<td>Culiacán</td>
<td>Culiacán</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Ecatepec</td>
<td>Acapulco</td>
<td>Acapulco</td>
<td>Acapulco</td>
<td>Chihuahua</td>
<td>Torreón</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>G.A. Madero</td>
<td>Ecatepec</td>
<td>Ecatepec</td>
<td>Ecatepec</td>
<td>Ecatepec</td>
<td>Chihuahua</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Monterrey</td>
<td>Guadalajara</td>
<td>Gomez Palacio</td>
<td>Mazatlán</td>
<td>Tijuana</td>
<td>Tijuana</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Nezahualcóyotl</td>
<td>Iztapalapa</td>
<td>Durango</td>
<td>Monterrey</td>
<td>Ecatepec</td>
<td>Nuevo Laredo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Culiacán</td>
<td>Durango</td>
<td>Mexicali</td>
<td>Tepic</td>
<td>Mazatlán</td>
<td>Cuernavaca</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Guadalajara</td>
<td>G. A. Madero</td>
<td>Iztapalapa</td>
<td>Torreón</td>
<td>Guadalupe</td>
<td>Ecatepec</td>
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</table>

<table>
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<tr>
<th>#</th>
<th>2013</th>
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<th>2016</th>
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<th>2018</th>
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<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Acapulco</td>
<td>Acapulco</td>
<td>Acapulco</td>
<td>Acapulco</td>
<td>Tijuana</td>
<td>Tijuana</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Tijuana</td>
<td>Tijuana</td>
<td>Tijuana</td>
<td>Tijuana</td>
<td>Acapulco</td>
<td>Juárez</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Culiacán</td>
<td>Culiacán</td>
<td>Culiacán</td>
<td>Juárez</td>
<td>Juárez</td>
<td>Acapulco</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Juárez</td>
<td>Juárez</td>
<td>Ecatepec</td>
<td>Culiacán</td>
<td>Culiacán</td>
<td>Benito Juárez (Cancún)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Ecatepec</td>
<td>Ecatepec</td>
<td>Juárez</td>
<td>Ecatepec</td>
<td>Chihuahua</td>
<td>Culiacán</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Monterrey</td>
<td>Chihuahua</td>
<td>Chilpancingo</td>
<td>Chihuahua</td>
<td>León</td>
<td>Guadalajara</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Chihuahua</td>
<td>Morelia</td>
<td>Guadalajara</td>
<td>Chilpancingo</td>
<td>Ecatepec</td>
<td>Irapuato</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Torreon</td>
<td>León</td>
<td>Iztapalapa</td>
<td>Mazatlán</td>
<td>Los Cabos</td>
<td>León</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Zapopan</td>
<td>Chilpancingo</td>
<td>Zapopan</td>
<td>Iztapalapa</td>
<td>Guadalupe</td>
<td>Tlaquepaque</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Morelia</td>
<td>Iztapalapa</td>
<td>Nezahualcóyotl</td>
<td>Victoria Tam</td>
<td>Chilpancingo</td>
<td>Ecatepec</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Key Definitions and Historical Context**

Because of the evolving nature of organized criminal groups in Mexico, it is no longer accurate to refer to them simply as drug cartels. While drug trafficking is an important aspect of their operations, they have expanded their power and influence into other illicit spheres, such as extortion, torture, paramilitary activities, oil theft, and human trafficking. As such, this research

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does not use the term “cartel” to refer to these groups. Scholars have noted that “cartel” is a misleading term and often opt to use other phrases such as non-state armed groups, paramilitaries, and drug trafficking organizations. The US Congressional Research Service calls the groups “transnational criminal organizations” or TCOs, a practice I adopt here. The language used to describe these groups has changed over time, as necessary, in order to reflect their evolving operations throughout the region. Multiple factors and complex processes were at play to push these groups from drug traffickers to the criminal organizations we see today, including competition within and between TCOs, Mexican local and federal police and military efforts, and US foreign policy regarding drugs and security.

While Mexican President Calderón officially declared the guerra contra al narcotráfico at the end of 2006, the war on drugs has existed for decades. US President Nixon first declared a war on drugs in 1971 in order to combat the flow of illicit material into the United States. However, Mexico did not play a major role in the US declared drug war until several years later.

On paper, the war on drugs serves to limit the consumption, transportation, and manufacturing of illicit drugs by creating harsher prison sentences to deter people from becoming involved with drug use or the drug trade in the first place. However, many people question the efficacy of prohibitionist policies, citing that it is not actually successful at reducing drug use, and instead, it actually reinforces racism and unequal treatment of marginalized communities in the United States, and creates other social problems. According to the Coyne and Hall with the Cato Institute, “Blacks and Hispanics…are much more likely than their white counterparts to be arrested for drug crimes and raided by police, even though the groups use and sell drugs at similar rates.”

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28 Pearl, “Ending the War on Drugs.”
29 American Civil Liberties Union, “Against Drug Prohibition.”
30 Coyne and Hall, “Four Decades and Counting.”
This is not surprising if we consider the historical context of the US war on drugs. As noted by the Drug Policy Alliance, during the 1960s, drugs in the US “became symbols of youthful rebellion, social upheaval, and political dissent.”\textsuperscript{31} As explained by top Nixon aide John Ehrlichman, the motivations behind declaring the war on drugs were driven by racism. Ehrlichman said, “The Nixon campaign in 1968, and the Nixon White House after that, had two enemies: the antiwar left and black people.”\textsuperscript{32} Nixon used drugs to justify the criminalization of certain communities, such as hippies and Black Americans, and leveraged political and racial divides.\textsuperscript{33} Unfortunately, these intentions still manifest in the way that the drug war plays out in the United States and abroad. This conversation about the domestic context of the drug war is widely beyond the scope of this project, but it is important to recognize that at its core, the war on drugs seeks to control communities, often in unequal ways based on race, social class, and other marginalized identities.

US President Carter (1977-1981) took the war on drugs a step further seeking to combat the flow of drugs entering the United States. Colombia was one of the “main transshipment [points] for illegal substances from Europe to the United States, and a stopover in the cocaine circuit linking Peruvian and Bolivian product to US consumer markets.”\textsuperscript{34} As a result, the United States focused on disrupting drug traffickers in Colombia, which propelled Mexican traffickers to compensate for decreasing Colombian supply.\textsuperscript{35} Then, as journalist Jose Miguel Alonso-Trabanco notes, when US President Regan (1981-1989) “closed the maritime flow of South American narcotics to Florida through the Caribbean Sea in the 80s, Mexico was positioned as the natural land bridge for

\textsuperscript{31} Drug Policy Alliance, “A Brief History of the Drug War.”
\textsuperscript{32} Drug Policy Alliance, “A Brief History of the Drug War.”
\textsuperscript{33} Drug Policy Alliance, “A Brief History of the Drug War.”
\textsuperscript{34} Britto, “A Trafficker’s Paradise,” 161.
\textsuperscript{35} Beittel, “Mexico: Organized Crime and Drug Trafficking Organizations.” 32.
Cansing

transnational drug-trafficking operations from South American production zones to North American consumer markets.”36 Still looking to supply drugs to the US market, Colombian traffickers looked to Mexicans to transport their product into the United States, using “las rutas y los servicios de los marijuaneros mexicanos.”37 Then, once the US took a harsher stance against Colombian cartels during the 90s and early 2000s under Plan Colombia, Mexican traffickers “llegaron a ocupar el vacío dejado por los carteles colombianos desmantelados.”38

As Ioan Grillo notes, “the historical importance of this [moment] cannot be overstated. Once billions of cocaine dollars poured into Mexico, its drug trafficking would become bigger and bloodier than anyone imagined. The Mexicans started off as paid couriers. But after they got a sniff, they would take the whole pie.”39 Mexico’s expansion into the global drug trafficking market set the stage for expanding violence and criminality. Today, heroin, methamphetamine, and fentanyl are now largely produced in Mexico, while cocaine is typically produced in Bolivia, Colombia, and Peru, and then transported through Mexico before arriving in the United States.40

As summarized by Alonso-Trabanco, “A few decades ago, Mexican criminal groups were mostly the junior partners of their Colombian associates, but the geo-economic readjustment of illicit drug flows altered this balance of power. As a result, in the new correlation of forces, South American criminal groups operate as suppliers for dominant Mexican cartels.”41

In response to these changing dynamics, the United States also began “putting more pressure on the Mexican government to target traffickers,” which broke down some old

36 Alonso-Trabanco, “Backgrounder.”
37 “the routes and services of Mexican marijuana traffickers.” My translation. Fernández Barbadillo, “6.000 muertos deja la guerra contra el narco en México en 2008.”
38 “came to occupy the void left by the dismantled Colombian cartels.” My translation. Fernández Barbadillo, “6.000 muertos deja la guerra contra el narco en México en 2008.”
39 Grillo, El Narco, Ch 4.
41 Alonso-Trabanco, “Backgrounder.”
arrangements between the TCOs and Mexican authorities.\(^{42}\) As a result, “violence became common among” TCOs, according to “Sinaloan historian Froylán Enciso, [as the traffickers used violent tactics as] a way of confronting the government.”\(^{43}\) This demonstrates the fact the US had been pressuring Mexico to fight the war on drugs in their country well before Calderón began taking actions in 2006, and before the Mérida Initiative was created. However, what the US often does not recognize, is that the emergence of violence and drug trafficking in Mexico is a direct result of actions they were taking to pressure traffickers in other parts of the globe, namely Colombia. These international pressures, in addition to the domestic factors in Mexico—such as poverty, corruption, and lack of alternative opportunities for employment—created the organizations and violent conditions we see in Mexico today.

The transnational criminal organizations that we see today in Mexico are different institutions than the organizations that emerged during the 80s; they have become more violent, and employ that violence in new and strategic ways leading to tragic human costs. Drug trafficking has also become deeply linked to human trafficking. Migrants from Central America, on their journey to the United States, as well as low-income, already disadvantaged populations within Mexico, have become a primary target of organized violence. People are kidnapped and extorted for money, sexually assaulted, tortured, disappeared, murdered and dismembered at the hands of these organized crime groups.\(^{44}\) The violence, which once mainly existed between members of transnational criminal organizations during competition disputes, or aimed at government officials trying to interfere with their power or profits, now also intentionally targets civilians. TCOs use violence strategically to demonstrate their strength to potential adversaries, showing that they

\(^{42}\) Loudis, “El Chapo.”
\(^{43}\) Loudis, “El Chapo.”
\(^{44}\) Paley, *Drug War Capitalism*, Ch. 4-6.
could be the next target of violence and brutality if they try to combat the TCO’s power, take over their territory, or control their resources.

As drug trafficking organizations emerged in Mexico during the last quarter of the twentieth century, they flourished as they bribed government officials and contributed to the deep corruption of the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI). Gang members often operated with impunity, making accommodations to the state as necessary, but also while accumulating power and autonomy. These processes persist today; bribery is used along with threats and public displays of violence to recruit allies or deter foes from taking action against TCOs and their operations.

In 2000, the election of Vicente Fox with the Partido Acción Nacional (PAN) caused “cartels [to ramp] up violence against the government specifically, in an effort to reestablish their hold on the state.” As Fernández Barbadillo describes:

Con la llegada del gobierno de Vicente Fox [en 2000], la política de tolerancia hacia el narco cambió, y se dieron arrestos de varios capos de la droga. Estos procedimientos provocaron una disminución relativa de la corrupción a nivel del gobierno federal, pero también incrementaron los niveles de violencia, al generar desequilibrios entre las bandas del narco.

Seeing this increase in violence among drug trafficking organizations in Mexico, as well as their efforts to continually target politicians in the country, President Felipe Calderón declared a war “contra al narcotráfico” in December of 2006. After feeling unsupported and overwhelmed in his fight against TCOs in Mexico, Calderón solicited the help of US President George W. Bush in combating the power, influence, and wealth of these organizations leading to the creation of the Mérida Initiative in October of 2007.

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45 Lee, Renwick, and Labrador, “Mexico’s Drug War.”
46 Paley, Drug War Capitalism, Ch. 1.
47 “With the arrival of the Vicente Fox government [in 2000], the policy of tolerance towards the narcos changed, and arrests of several drug lords took place. These procedures led to a relative decline in corruption at the federal government level, but also increased levels of violence, generating imbalances between the narco bands.” My translation. Fernández Barbadillo, “6,000 muertos deja la guerra contra el narco en México en 2008.”
48 Fernández Barbadillo, “6,000 muertos deja la guerra contra el narco en México en 2008.”
Bush and Calderón publicized a new focus for the US-Mexican security partnership. Initially, the Mérida Initiative had two branches: “Law enforcement and security assistance,” and “assistance to enhance the rule of law and strengthen civilian institutions.”49 In the former, as noted in Section 113 of the US Congressional Act, the activities permitted by the Mérida Initiative included providing equipment to Mexico for police and “law enforcement and security forces to eradicate illicit narcotics trafficking and reduce trafficking fueled violence, including along the United States-Mexico border.”50 Section 123 permitted activities such as efforts to reform the justice system and professionalize the police forces through training programs in order to “assist Mexico’s efforts to expand the rule of law and build the capacity, transparency, and trust in government institutions.”51 Something worth noting here is that the Mérida Initiative was never intended to produce large-scale reform in Mexico. Because the history of US-Mexico relations includes many examples of the US violating Mexico’s sovereignty, the countries created this initiative in a way that maintains the autonomy of Mexico. Therefore, the MI was meant to assist the Government of Mexico in the efforts that they had already been taking to combat TCOs and rising violence in the country. It formally recognized the problem as one of transnational nature, and committed the United States to providing resources to offset Mexico’s cost of fighting this war.

Even still, the MI is seen as a major breakthrough in the international relations of the two neighboring countries, and it is largely talked about in a manner that highlights its importance. However, as this research shows, it was largely unsuccessful at curbing rising violence in Mexico,

and it supported Mexican operations that exacerbated chaos and conflict within and between transnational criminal organizations that unfortunately has led to the loss of human lives. My research has illuminated that the Mérida Initiative never had the financial or resource capability to transform the environment in Mexico in a long-term, wide-scale capacity. I would argue that it should not have been designed for that purpose in order to protect the sovereignty of the Mexican state, and avoid yet another historical example of the messiness and violence that results from US direct intervention in Latin America. Therefore, the entire design of the Mérida Initiative feels misguided, because there is no way to simultaneously balance Mexican sovereignty with the US playing a significant role in the Mexican drug war. Still, it is worth studying the MI in order to understand how future policies of this sort should be structured in order to be effective at eliminating corruption and drug trafficking without producing more violence and chaos.

In 2011, US President Barack Obama and President Calderón updated the Mérida Initiative to categorize its efforts under four pillars that aimed to 1) disrupt organized criminal groups, 2) institutionalize the rule of law and protect human rights, 3) create a twenty-first century border, and 4) build resilient communities. Pillar one used “intelligence sharing and law enforcement operations” to combat the criminal groups; pillar two reformed the justice sector and “federal and state level police,” and provided training programs in gathering forensic evidence and human rights protection; pillar three aimed to “[improve] immigration enforcement in Mexico and security long Mexico’s southern borders” in addition to improving border technology and security at the US-Mexico border; and the fourth pillar attempted to “address root causes of violence” by reducing demand for drugs in Mexico and by providing education programs to citizens. These

52 “The Merida Initiative - U.S. Embassy & Consulates in Mexico.”
pillars clarified the goals of the initiative, and shifted more focus towards civilian facing interventions through efforts to build resilient communities.

Since 2007, the United States has allocated 1.6 billion dollars in Mérida aid, with hundreds of millions used specifically for training Mexican forces in counter-narcotics and other relevant techniques. Additionally, the US has provided Mexico with technology, such as “UH-1 helicopters and spare parts, ammunition, small arms, riot control equipment, radios and miscellaneous personal gear,” and other supplies to aid in the war against organized crime groups. The following two tables, obtained from a 2010 GAO report, detail the equipment and training that Mexico received, or was expecting to receive under the Mérida Initiative as of March 31, 2010. While there are more resources that have been allocated since 2010, these two tables provide a good summary for the range of equipment and training provided.

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53 Lee, Renwick, and Labrador. “Mexico’s Drug War.”
54 Paley, Drug War Capitalism, Ch. 5.
Table 3: Selected Equipment and Training Delivered to Mexico under the Mérida Initiative, as of March 31 2010.\(^5\)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mexico</th>
<th>Delivery date*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Equipment</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26 armored vehicles</td>
<td>May 2009</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>62 Plataforma Mexico computer servers</td>
<td>June 2009</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Training equipment</td>
<td>July &amp; December 2009</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 X-ray vans</td>
<td>August 2009</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OASISS servers and software</td>
<td>August 2009</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Biometric equipment</td>
<td>September 2009 &amp; January 2010</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Document verification software</td>
<td>September 2009</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ballistic tracing equipment (IBIS)</td>
<td>September 2009</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30 ion scanners</td>
<td>October 2009</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rescue communication equipment &amp; training</td>
<td>October &amp; November 2009</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal protective equipment</td>
<td>October &amp; November 2009</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Bell helicopters</td>
<td>December 2009</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 Mobile X-ray minivans</td>
<td>December 2009</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constanza software</td>
<td>February 2010</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>100 Polygraph units</td>
<td>March 2010</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13 armored Suburbans</td>
<td>April 2010</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Training</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>230 Officials attending arms trafficking conferences</td>
<td>April 2009 to October 2009</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>187 Mexican Ministry of Public Safety (SSP) officers trained in corrections instruction and classification</td>
<td>April 2009 to December 2009</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United Nation’s human rights project inaugurated</td>
<td>July 2009</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4,392 SSP investigators trained</td>
<td>July 2009 to January 2010</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USAID training for capacity building programs throughout Mexico for over 10,000 Mexican officials in the following areas:</td>
<td>August 2009 to March 2010</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Citizen participation councils</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Victim protection and restitution</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Judicial exchanges</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Trafficking in persons</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Human rights</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Pre-trial services and case resolution alternatives</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Continuing education for police, prosecutors and other officials</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Penal reform</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Over 200 Mexican prosecutors and investigators trained in trial advocacy, trafficking in persons, and extradition</td>
<td>September 2009 to March 2010</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28 canine trainers trained</td>
<td>October 2009 to April 2010</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>293 mid-level and senior-level SSP officers trained</td>
<td>October 2009 to November 2009</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>45 Mexican state officials trained in anti-kidnapping</td>
<td>November 2009 to January 2010</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Unfortunately, this is the most detailed data that is available about Mérida resources during the first few years of the initiative. The data does not explain where certain technology goes or where trainings take place. As a result, the research presented here is operating without complete data. Still, inferences can be made about where the resources were allocated based on levels of violence in certain locations, and based on the cities the Government of Mexico was already targeting through its efforts. Furthermore, the data here introduces the fact that the earliest date training started taking place for Mexican officials was in April of 2009, and the earliest delivery of technology to the country was in May of 2009, with the arrival of 26 armored vehicles. Aside from that, many resources were delivered over the next two years,

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or were not scheduled yet, as shown at the bottom of Table 4. Therefore, this shows that equipment was not delivered until after the initial spike in homicides in Mexico between 2007 and 2008.

Further research has established that the initiative had an extremely slow and tedious implementation timeline, and did not officially get underway until the spring of 2009, even though it was created in October of 2007. The United States Congress expressed concern about the slow delivery of Mérida assistance, which they recognized was a result of needing to establish relationships and lines of communications among dozens of US and Mexican government agencies.

In “Mexico at a Crossroads,” Former Ambassador to Mexico Carlos Pascual explained that “by 2009, Mexican government efforts and cooperation under Mérida started to take root.” Additionally, while some aspects of the initiative began in 2009, other programs were scheduled to begin throughout the rest of the year, and other phases “that fund military equipment have a longer procurement process” because equipment for things such as the Bell helicopters and surveillance aircraft have to be built and delivered to Mexico. In agreement, Beittel explains that, even though some Mérida programs were “scheduled to become operational starting in the spring through the end of 2009, others” will take longer.

Many US government documents emphasize that, while US cooperation through the Mérida Initiative is important and necessary in the fight against organized crime in Mexico, the efforts of the Mexican government far outweigh those of the United States. Since the start of 2007, Mexico has increased its “counter-narcotics budget and activities” drastically, making “Mérida Initiative funding…modest in comparison to what the Mexican government is throwing against”

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60 Beittel, “Mexico’s Drug-Related Violence,” 17.
transnational criminal organizations.\textsuperscript{61} Between 2006 and 2016, the Mexican government is estimated to have spent nearly 54 billion dollars in its fight against organized crime.\textsuperscript{62} Additionally, an unclassified US Department of State document notes that, “For every dollar the United States spends under Mérida, [the Mexican government] spends some $12-$13.”\textsuperscript{63}

The Government of Mexico started to combat TCOs prior to the establishment of the MI, and would have implemented the majority of the programs without US funding and support, but, as noted by another State Department document, US influence on Mexican policies is “critical to [the] long-term national security” of both countries.\textsuperscript{64} The US is providing key military and intelligence equipment, which is often difficult to acquire, to support the Mexican government’s efforts to fight TCOs.\textsuperscript{65} Additionally, under the Mérida Initiative the US is supposed to be taking actions to reduce the demand for drugs in the United States, and prevent the illegal arms trafficking into Mexico in order to address the bilateral necessity of combatting TCO operations. However, more research is needed to assess the results US national efforts.

As a result of learning and adapting throughout the implementation process, data is not widely available about Mérida Initiative funds and programs that were enacted during the first few years. I contacted the US Consulate in Ciudad Juárez and Tijuana, the case study locations for the next chapters, and they told me that the data that is available to the public is largely covered in Congressional Research Service Reports, which have already been used in this chapter where relevant. Unfortunately, the data I was searching for about the specific dates, times, and locations

\textsuperscript{61} American Embassy Mexico, American Embassy Mexico to All US Consulates in Mexico, “Jessica Lewis at Los Pinos,” 2.
\textsuperscript{62} Lakhani and Tirado, “Mexico’s War on Drugs.”
\textsuperscript{63} American Embassy México, American Embassy Mexico to svcSMARTHBTSPOP8, “The Mérida Initiative at 36 Months,” 4.
\textsuperscript{64} American Embassy Mexico, American Embassy Mexico to SMART Core, “Merida at 18 Months,” 4.
\textsuperscript{65} American Embassy Mexico, American Embassy Mexico to All US Consulates in Mexico, “Jessica Lewis at Los Pinos,” 2.
of MI funding and programs is not available to the public, and perhaps does not exist at all. This lack of data made answering my research question challenging. Without this data, I cannot make any claims about the impact of the MI with certainty. However, I can make inferences about its efficacy using what I know about the drivers of violence in Mexico and what the initiative was intended to do.

I have learned that the Mérida Initiative, once implemented, largely reinforces tactics that Mexican government was already using to combat organized crime and violence: providing anti-corruption and human rights training to reform the judicial sector and support police officers as Mexico was vetting police for ties to TCOs and hiring new officers (pillar 2); providing technology and intelligence capabilities to the federal government as they moved into cities such as Tijuana and Juárez attempting to dismantle TCOs by eliminating their leaders (pillar 1). However, the Mérida Initiative is not organized with sufficient resources to make a large, systemic impact on the root causes of organized crime operations and violence. Rather, it supports Mexican efforts that would have likely occurred without US support, and reinforces the use of tactics that cause changes on a local level, adding to the chaos among and between TCOs, which often results in increasing levels of violence. The next two chapters will examine these ideas in greater detail.

**Literature Review and Review of the Mérida Initiative**

There is no scholarly consensus regarding the causes for the violence in Mexico starting in 2008, and there is even less discussion of how the Mérida Initiative relates to the increasing homicide rate in Mexico. However, a few of the main arguments presented in the literature are explored below. Jose Miguel Alonso-Trobanco emphasizes that scholars, by focusing one factor or another as the cause of violence in Mexico, are not able to understand the complexities of this
problem.\textsuperscript{66} He says that when studying organized crime related violence “Monocausality is hardly useful; rather, a broader and deeper analytical viewpoint is needed to reveal the phenomenon’s high degree of complexity and how it has evolved in recent decades.”\textsuperscript{67} Therefore, he argues that we must research impunity and corruption, poverty and lack of economic stability, militarization, and the kingpin strategy to understand the bigger picture of violence in Mexico. In other words, there are complex domestic and international factors creating the conditions in Mexico. My research examines the Mérida Initiative policies in order to do consider how different factors may have worked together to affect the homicide rate in Mexico, which increased drastically starting in 2008. It is important to explore what factors led to the increase in violence in order to ensure that measures taken to reduce the power and presence of organized criminal groups is not creating more instability and violence while failing to weaken the organizations perpetuating this brutality and criminality.

Furthermore, María José Méndez argues that existing scholarship focuses on delegitimizing the actions of organized criminal organizations, which limits the ability to see them “within broader landscapes of income and wealth production.”\textsuperscript{68} By moving analysis away from the failures in the state to curb violence, and attempting to understand why the violence exists in the first place, my research can provide new insights into how to combat this. Ultimately, the organizations have recently been likened to “multinational corporations” because of their complex efforts to continue generating income.\textsuperscript{69} Historian Ferández Barbadillo argues that “Los traficantes comenzaron a ejercer la violencia que necesitaban para operar como negocio ilegal: ajustes de cuentas, mantenimiento de la disciplina dentro de la organización criminal, y ejecuciones contra

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item Alonso-Trabanco, “Backgrounder.”
\item Alonso-Trabanco, “Backgrounder.”
\item Méndez, “The Violence Work of Transnational Gangs in Central America,” 384.
\item Sheridan, “Losing Control.”
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
I hope to spend less time making moral judgements about the use of violence, and instead focus on why violence is used as a strategy in the first place.

One common factor discussed in relation to increasing violence in Mexico is the use of the kingpin strategy. The Government of Mexico has historically adapted the kingpin strategy, where the leaders of organizations are arrested or killed with the idea that “capturing and isolating top leaders of transnational criminal organizations...would weaken and disrupt on the whole operation.”

“The US Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) created the Kingpin Strategy in the 1990’s to target the leadership and funding of drug trafficking organizations. First used in Colombia to cripple the Cali and Medellín cartels (during Plan Colombia), it was embraced by Mexican President Felipe Calderón in 2006 and became a mainstay in Mexico’s war on organized crime.”

Efforts under the Mérida Initiative have supported this approach. President Calderón and the US Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) argue that the violence in Mexico is a direct result of Calderón’s pressure on the organizations starting in 2006 with the “kingpin strategy.” As noted by Gabrielle Acierno and Sarah Kinosian from Security Assistance Monitor, Barreda Vidal and Perla Zoraida note that between 2007 and 2011, Mexico successfully captured twenty-nine of these leaders. A US State Department document goes on to explain how, between 2010 and 2011 alone, “22 of the 37 most wanted crime figures in Mexico” were arrested or killed, which is a “direct result of cross-

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70 “Traffickers began to exercise the violence they needed to operate as an illegal business: Account adjustments, maintenance of discipline within the criminal organization, and executions against those narcos that invaded their territories or routes.” My Translation. Fernández Barbadillo, “6.000 muertos deja la guerra contra el narco en México en 2008.”

71 Vela, “EPN Captura a 93 Capos En 2 Años;”

72 The “success” of Plan Colombia was one of the motivating factors for the creation of the Mérida Initiative. Discussing the similarities and differences between the two Plans is beyond the scope of this research, but I wanted to acknowledge that connection here.


74 Vidal and Zoraida, “La cooperación bilateral México-Estados Unidos,” 53.
border cooperation” under the Mérida Initiative.\textsuperscript{75} Therefore the violence was “a sign of success...and signaled the cartels were getting weaker.”\textsuperscript{76} Pedro Fernández Barbadillo furthermore quotes Jorge Fernández Menéndez, agreeing that the violence is a positive sign, “La escalada de la violencia se genera porque las organizaciones criminales están, a pesar de que aún son fuertes, resquebrajándose.”\textsuperscript{77} Even though the groups can still fight back, they are feeling the pressure, which is what Mexico and the US are hoping for with the kingpin strategy.

However, the use of the kingpin strategy is widely thought to create more violence without permanently weakening TCOs in a meaningful way. As critiqued by June Beittel in a CRS report, “many analysts have viewed a continued reliance on the kingpin strategy, which they argue has not lowered violence in a sustainable way, as problematic.”\textsuperscript{78} The logic of the strategy emphasizes that, as TCOs experience inner conflict and splinter into smaller organizations, they will be easier to dismantle and less able to threaten the Mexican government and civilians.\textsuperscript{79} However, as noted by Beittel, the splintering of TCOs often caused “by violent succession struggles, [and] shifting alliances among the [groups, leads to] a proliferation of new gangs and small DTOs, and the replacement of existing leaders and criminal groups by even more violent ones.”\textsuperscript{80} Moreover, since TCOs find new leaders to take over the reins of an organization, the impacts of the kingpin strategy lead to more violent operations, without actually breaking down the groups.\textsuperscript{81} Ismael “El Mayo” Zambada, one of the leaders of the Sinaloa Cartel alongside El Chapo, explained “in a rare

\textsuperscript{75} American Embassy México, American Embassy Mexico to svcSMARTHTBTSPOP8, “The Merida Initiative at 36 Months,” 4.
\textsuperscript{76} Grillo, \textit{El Narco}, Ch 7.
\textsuperscript{77} “The escalation of violence is generated because criminal organizations are, although they are still strong, breaking down.” My Translation. Fernández Barbadillo, “6.000 muertos deja la guerra contra el narco en México en 2008.”
interview with Mexican news magazine El Proceso, the problem with the narcos isn’t going away: ‘As soon as capos are locked up, killed or extradited, their replacements are already around.’”

Furthermore, journalist Mary Beth Sheridan argues that the increasing violence shows that the kingpin strategy, in addition to other actions taken by the US and Mexico under the Mérida Initiative, have failed since violence has increased and persisted annually. Sheridan notes that “years of Mexican and US strategy — arresting drug kingpins, training Mexican police, overhauling the justice system — have failed to curb the violence.” In fact, the kingpin strategy increases violence because groups are left without leaders to help organize themselves, leading to increasing tensions within and between criminal organizations. Alonso-Trabanco adds that “beheading criminal organizations by arresting or ‘neutralizing’ their leaders triggers internal succession crises and power struggles…which can lead to a fragmentation of criminal networks which rapidly turns violent.” Sheridan quotes Eduardo Guerrero, the head of a Mexican security firm Lantia Consultores, arguing that this splintering leads to more challenges because newly formed groups do not “have the infrastructure necessary to dedicate themselves to the export of drugs,” so they find other ways to make money: “they kidnap, extort, steal fuel, sell contraband cigarettes and peddle methamphetamine to teenagers.” Therefore, the kingpin strategy, as argued by Sheridan and Guerrero, is a contributing factor to Mexican criminal organizations expanding into new, illicit markets, and bringing more violence into the country. Additionally, Clare Ribando Seelke argues that the tactic of “arresting (and extraditing) kingpins from each of the major drug trafficking organizations…fueled violence, as fractured drug trafficking organizations fought to

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82 Loudis, “El Chapo.”
83 Sheridan, “Losing Control.”
84 Sheridan, “Losing Control.”
85 Alonso-Trabanco, “Backgrounder.”
86 Sheridan, “Losing Control.”
Since the Mérida Initiative assists in the use of the kingpin strategy by providing training, technology, and intelligence capabilities to Mexican authorities, the initiative is partially responsible for the violence that results from the elimination of TCO leaders in Mexico.

While the dismantling of TCOs does not appear to be going as planned, it is argued that their expansion into new profit-making activities shows that “the US and Mexican drug enforcement measures are cutting into profits from drug trafficking.” While this may be the case, it is worth asking if the tactic of interfering with drug profits results in a net gain in the drug war. Or, as others suggest, does it just contribute to more violence without radically weakening the organizations that rely on the profits? The splintered organizations often expand into other forms of crime to make up for losses in profit, many of which include more violent tactics than simply drug trafficking—such as extortion for money, torture, or human trafficking. As argued by Méndez, many people seek these activities as a form of work, in order to provide for themselves and their families. If they cannot earn enough income from simply trafficking drugs, they have often found new ways to make money. A member of a gang in Honduras emphasizes they “survive from contract killings, extortions, drug sales and kidnappings.” Therefore, if you must work to survive, and are “excluded from other forms of waged work,” for reasons such as discrimination or lack of other economic opportunities in your community, “some look to violence work as a means to secure economic well-being.” Therefore, in order to understand why violence is increasing in Mexico, she emphasizes that we must study why people are forced to join transnational criminal organizations in the first place.

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This emphasis on generating profits also changed the nature of gang membership and increased violence between different criminal organizations fighting for the same territory and market. “Saúl, a former MS-13 member from El Salvador, described this transformation” to Méndez. He says:

I remember that the gang wasn’t violent, it was about protecting the neighbourhood, making sure that nobody stole from others you knew. I mean it’s not like we didn’t do bad things, but the gang was more about chasing away those who troubled the people we had grown up with.”⁹¹ However, over time, “violence was introduced into the gang, a new rhythm, it was about who had more and who had less .... We had always protected ourselves from B-18 so that they wouldn’t snatch away our territory. But the fighting was done with punches, sticks, rocks, whatever we could grab with our hands. It wasn’t la violencia [the violence] of grabbing a high-caliber gun and shooting someone. Now everything is controlled by fear, not respect. Whoever produces more fear has more control. Before, it was all about love for the gang. The gang is now a business. People buy their services. Now for some amount of money, people come and order them to steal, kill, rape, kidnap whomever. Before, if the gang had a problem with you, they killed you, not your whole family. Today, they wipe out the whole family."⁹²

Therefore, as TCO members are often relying on criminal work for their economic well-being, they also have to engage in violence to remain a part of the organization. As competitions between rival groups increased, organizations have had to strategically use violence in order to signal strength and deter rival organizations from attempting to take over their turf and the resources they control. Control of more resources means generating more profit, which is a necessary part of any business that has “employees” to pay. While Méndez’s work does not specifically focus on Mexican criminal organizations, the same principles apply. Interestingly, the Mérida Initiative does not attempt to address these economic factors driving membership in a necessary, wide scale, manner. It does not provide enough resources to provide sufficient jobs and resources to Mexican civilians. Without transforming the economic conditions in Mexico, there will always be people that look to transnational criminal organizations for work. Therefore, even if the US and Mexico

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⁹² Méndez, “The Violence Work of Transnational Gangs in Central America,” 381.
spends time and resources killing members of TCOs, there will always be new recruits waiting to climb the ranks and take their places, regardless of the risk.

Furthermore, some scholars, including author Dawn Paley, argue that the violence is a result of the increased presence of militarily trained forces around the country, in attempt to fight the drug war.\textsuperscript{93} When Calderón replaced President Fox in 2006, he turned to the military to restore order in the country, and protect government officials and police officers that had become the targets of gang members.\textsuperscript{94} Drug trafficking related violence had increased during Fox’s term as criminal organizations attempted to maintain the power and impunity they gained during the PRI rule. Over Calderón’s six years as president, he deployed “tens of thousands of military personnel to supplement and, in many cases, replace local police forces he viewed as corrupt.”\textsuperscript{95} With assistance from the United States, through the Mérida Initiative specifically, domestic police and military spending has increased in the Mexico, and forces have been sent all over the country to curb the increasing violence.\textsuperscript{96}

Interestingly, the areas with larger military presence often experienced more violence. Paley notes that at the same time as the “federal government’s military surge in the Juárez area...the Juárez Valley became one of the most dangerous places in the country, with mass displacements and locals forced to seek asylum in the United States.”\textsuperscript{97} Grillo agrees that the increased force used against cartels and their operations only exacerbated conflict and violence, leading to an increase in homicides that culminates in 2008. In short, Calderón’s deployment of military and police forces throughout Mexico might create a domestic “security dilemma,” a classic concept from

\textsuperscript{93} Paley, \textit{Drug War Capitalism}, Foreword.
\textsuperscript{94} Lee, Renwick, and Labrador, “Mexico’s Drug War.”
\textsuperscript{95} Lee, Renwick, and Labrador, “Mexico’s Drug War.”
\textsuperscript{96} Paley, \textit{Drug War Capitalism}, Ch 4.
\textsuperscript{97} Paley, \textit{Drug War Capitalism}, Ch 5.
international relations. States, when looking to improve their domestic security, often take actions that threaten the security of other states, leading them to also take efforts to increase their own security. This process then snowballs, leading both states to take even more action to improve their security, leaving both feeling less secure than they were before taking action. While the security dilemma typically refers to states, it can apply to domestic situations, dynamics during civil wars, and even non-state actors. Mexican military and police forces, present in communities to increase security, made criminal organizations feel threatened, which causes them to take more drastic efforts to maintain their power through ramping up violence to incite fear and making military forces less willing to take actions against them.

Additionally, military and police training programs have connections to more cycles of violence because soldiers and police officers are known to join forces with criminal organizations, therefore bringing their technical skills and insider knowledge with them. This has made TCOs increasingly strong militarily, which may lead to more conflict and violence. Paley argues that “police training actually increases the possibility that paramilitary groups will form [since] many of these groups are initially formed by deserters from state security forces.” Therefore, the Mérida Initiative is potentially providing resources and training indirectly (and directly in some cases) to the transnational criminal organizations it is supposed to be fighting.

Moreover, existing scholarship emphasizes the role of corruption in expanding violence in Mexico. Grillo argues that the violence is related to specifically government corruption. In Chapter 7 of El Narco he says, “Calderón...declared war on drug cartels with a rotten state apparatus, one that he could not fully control. Behind his push, police and soldiers hit gangsters

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98 Paley, Drug War Capitalism, Ch 5.
99 Paley, Drug War Capitalism, Ch 6.
100 Grillo, El Narco, Ch 7.
harder than ever before, but these enforcers were still susceptible to bribes. As a result, Calderón’s offensive just threw oil onto the fire.”

Therefore, government officials continued receiving bribes from criminal organizations, only increasing TCO impunity and corruption in Mexico.

In October of 2020, General Salvador Cienfuegos Zepeda, who served Mexican Defense Minister from 2012-2018 was arrested in the United States as requested by the Drug Enforcement Agency. With his arrest, he became “the first high-ranking military official to be taken into custody in the United States in connection with drug-related corruption in his country.” He was arrested and was supposed to “face drug and money-laundering charges.” However, the US charges were dropped November 18th as requested by Attorney General William Barr, after receiving a clear message from Mexico City: “If the United States did not rethink its pursuit of Salvador Cienfuegos Zepeda, Mexico would consider expelling American federal drug agents from the country, jeopardizing a decades-long partnership that has helped bring several top drug lords to justice.” Trying to avoid this, the US agreed to let Cienfuegos return to Mexico to face an investigation by Mexico’s Justice Department. In January of 2021, it was announced that the Mexican government is not bringing charges against him, highlighting the widespread corruption in Mexico’s government and justice system, further setting the precedent for total impunity in the country. The Cienfuegos case has increased the strain on security relations between the US and Mexico, and has further called into question the efficacy of the Mérida Initiative.

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101 Grillo, El Narco, Ch 7.
102 Ahmed, “Mexico’s Former Defense Minister Is Arrested in Los Angeles.”
103 Ahmed, “Mexico’s Former Defense Minister Is Arrested in Los Angeles.”
104 Ahmed, “Mexico’s Former Defense Minister Is Arrested in Los Angeles.”
105 Feuer and Kitroeff, “Mexico, Outraged at Arrest of Ex-Official, Threatened to Toss US Agents.”
106 Shortell, “DEA Investigators Fuming Over Dropped Case Against Mexican General.”
107 Lopez, “Mexico Exonerates Ex-Defense Chief.”
108 Evans et al., “U.S. Prosecutions Bring Mexico Corruption into Focus.”
Ten months earlier, former Secretary of Public Security in Mexico, Genaro García Luna was “indicted in New York on charges of taking bribes while in office to protect the Sinaloa drug Cartel, one of Mexico’s most powerful criminal mafias.”¹⁰⁹ García Luna as Secretary of Public Security, and helped President Calderón “create his strategy to battle their country’s” criminal organizations.¹¹⁰ These two arrests emphasize deep corruption in the Mexican government, which is especially shocking due to the fact that these high-ranking officials, tasked at helping Mexico fight its war on drugs and receiving Mérida resources to do so, were “in the service of the very cartels that continue to kill record numbers of Mexicans.”¹¹¹ With distrust in the Mexican government, and the state security forces, civilians do not have a way to protect themselves in the event that they have become a target of these criminal organizations. Gills Bataillon explains that many Mexicans “en caso de problemas, no llamar a la policía, para no tener un nuevo problema.”¹¹² The police is no longer a reliable institution to suppress violence and the state has failed to provide reliably safe ways for people to report organized crime related violence.

Furthermore, the presence of federal authorities in cities in Mexico has led to more reports of human rights violations against civilians. Beittel describes how the “Mexican military…was largely untrained in domestic policing,” which led to violence as they began taking actions to fight the drug war.¹¹³ She notes that, an investigation finds that “Mexican armed forces injured or killed some 3,900 individuals in their domestic operations between 2007 and 2014.”¹¹⁴ Even still, many people do not report their experiences with police and security forces, because they do not want to become a target in case they are operating with TCOs. According to Beittel, several estimates

¹⁰⁹ Ahmed, “Mexico’s Former Defense Minister Is Arrested in Los Angeles.”
¹¹⁰ Ahmed, “Mexico’s Former Defense Minister Is Arrested in Los Angeles.”
¹¹¹ Ahmed, “Mexico’s Former Defense Minister Is Arrested in Los Angeles.”
¹¹² “In case of problems, do not call the police, in order to not have a new problem.” My translation. Bataillon, “Narcotráfico y Corrupción.”
predict that less than 10% of “incidents of suspected police and security force torture are reported in Mexico…in large part because of a believe that nothing will be done” since impunity is so high in the country.\footnote{Beittel, “Mexico: Organized Crime and Drug Trafficking Organizations,” 32-33.} The Mérida Initiative has a human rights clause worked into the agreement, withholding a percentage of funds and resources until the Government of Mexico proves that they are using the resources to also enforce human rights protection and training opportunities. However, recognizing the extreme levels of impunity and corruption, which often leads to human rights violations, makes the amount of resources dedicated under Mérida to this cause highly insufficient. While it is a step in the right direction for the MI to require that attention is paid human rights, it is vastly insufficient at accomplishing any sort of meaningful reform in Mexico because it does not provide enough funding. Therefore, the Mérida Initiative still reinforced the militarization of cities in Mexico by providing funding and resources to Mexican authorities. Thus, the initiative played a role in the increasing number of human rights violations in Mexico, creating the conditions that it was designed to monitor and prevent.

The limited scope of Mérida funding, in relation to the vast amount of money being spent by the Government of Mexico, and the complex nature of the problems it is organized to address, makes it unlikely that the Mérida Initiative is solely responsible for the increasing levels of violence in Mexico beginning in 2008. Rather, the Mérida Initiative supports efforts that the Calderón administration was already taking. However, in doing so, the Initiative supported tactics that led to increasing levels of violence and brutality in the country, such as the use of the kingpin strategy and increased militarization in the city. As such, the United States is at least partly responsible for the human lives lost during the drug war.
Plan of Study

Moving forward, this paper studies violence in Mexico and the Mérida Initiative through a case study approach. This research studies homicides, violence, and transnational criminal organizations in Tijuana, Baja California and Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua Mexico. These two locations were chosen for three reasons. First, it is difficult to know exactly where the Mérida resources went, because, as critiqued by the United States Government Accountability Office, the US State Department, who has the “primary responsibility for coordinating the Mérida Initiative,” does not measure the impacts of the Mérida Initiative in different locations in Mexico. In 2010 the GAO noted that, “While State has developed some of the key elements of an implementation strategy for the Mérida Initiative, including a mission, strategic goals, and a resource plan, its strategic documents lack certain key elements that would facilitate accountability and management.” This makes it challenging to find out which cities in Mexico have received what kinds of MI funding, training, and equipment, and when and what the impact of that funding was. Second, more specifically, it is difficult to trace Mérida funds “because each of the three State bureaus managing Mérida funds has a different method for tracking. Each uses different budgeting terms as well as separate spreadsheets,” making it hard to determine where the MI money was distributed in Mexico, and following which timelines. Third, data in Mexico is not always accurate or available due to corruption and staffing limitations in key offices in Mexico. For these reasons, I selected two cities where it is most-likely that the United States and Mexico implemented Mérida Initiative projects, and where data and reporting are likely available.

Because Ciudad Juárez and Tijuana are located on the border and are in close proximity to the US cities of El Paso, Texas and San Diego, California, the US has an interest in reporting about organized crime related violence as well as targeting drug trafficking operations in the area. The Mérida Initiative focuses on the border region specifically, and these cities are two of the largest cities on the border with two of the busiest ports of entry. Both of these cities had violence before 2007 and homicide rates that increased in 2008 and peaked in 2010 during the first wave of drug war violence (see Table 5 below). For these reasons, these cities are likely the target of MI resources, even if we do not have data that specifically says so. Additionally, since the United States has an interest in what occurs in border cities, there are US sources that I can rely on when Mexican data and information is lacking or unreliable.

Table 5: Homicides in Ciudad Juárez and Tijuana, Mexico by Year (2007-2018)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State</th>
<th>2007</th>
<th>2008</th>
<th>2009</th>
<th>2010</th>
<th>2011</th>
<th>2012</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ciudad Juárez</td>
<td>200</td>
<td>1620</td>
<td>2399</td>
<td>3746</td>
<td>1460</td>
<td>850</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tijuana</td>
<td>207</td>
<td>782</td>
<td>1094</td>
<td>1250</td>
<td>418</td>
<td>320</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State</th>
<th>2013</th>
<th>2014</th>
<th>2015</th>
<th>2016</th>
<th>2017</th>
<th>2018</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ciudad Juárez</td>
<td>453</td>
<td>389</td>
<td>269</td>
<td>470</td>
<td>642</td>
<td>1,004</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tijuana</td>
<td>492</td>
<td>462</td>
<td>612</td>
<td>871</td>
<td>1618</td>
<td>2246</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Furthermore, both GAO and the US Congressional Research Service (CRS) specifically address Ciudad Juárez and Tijuana when discussing violence and the Mérida Initiative. For example the first paragraph of the 2010 GAO report says that “Crime and violence in Mexico and

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120 More information about Ciudad Juárez and Tijuana will be explained in Chapters 2 and 3.
121 Milenio, “Homicides.”
Central America have continued to increase in recent years and pose a threat to the United States, particularly along the US-Mexico border. In March, three people connected to the US Consulate in Ciudad Juárez were killed by gunmen believed to be linked to a drug trafficking organization.”122 Furthermore, Seelke and Finklea at the United States Congressional Research Service note that community building programs, organized for the fourth pillar of the 2011 updated version of the Mérida Initiative, “have supported the development of local strategies to reduce crime and violence in certain localities in Ciudad Juárez, Monterrey, Nuevo León, and Tijuana, Baja California.123 The 2010 GAO report says that, “the March 2010 meeting highlighted plans to implement pilot programs in a coordinated manner in the Tijuana-San Diego and Ciudad Juárez-El Paso regions that will entail strengthening information exchange mechanisms and promote the social and economic development of these communities that have suffered the effects of violence.”124 Because both GAO and CRS highlight Ciudad Juárez and Tijuana when talking about the MI and violence in Mexico I assume here that US Mérida funds targeted those areas even if the US State Department data does not specify locations.

I recognize that using two most likely cases, rather than one most likely and one least likely case creates certain limitations and is not following best practices for case study research in political science. However, due to data limitations I chose two cities that were most likely to have data in order to engage in theory building as an initial probe. Further research will need to be done for generalizability across Mexico more broadly including into other locations.

Moving forward, Chapter Two examines actions taken by the Mexican and US governments to combat transnational criminal organizations in Ciudad Juárez. Then, it assesses

the impact of those operations, determining whether or not the efforts supported by the Mérida Initiative have contributed to the rising levels of violence in the city. Chapter Three studies the same themes in a second case study location: Tijuana, Baja California. Chapter Four presents my findings, and applies them to discussions around the future of the Mérida Initiative and US and Mexico bilateral security cooperation. As of May 2021 when this was written, transnational organized crime related violence in Mexico remains extremely high, despite COVID-19 pandemic restrictions. As such, the United States and Mexico still have an interest in combatting TCOs and their violent operations. However, the Mérida Initiative must closely evaluated to ensure that policies supported by the initiative are not causing more violence without permanently weakening TCOs in Mexico.
Chapter 2: Ciudad Juárez Case Study

This chapter seeks to determine which factors influenced the increasing homicide rate in Ciudad Juárez, starting in 2008. Over the course of the next several years, violence in the city escalated so drastically that Ciudad Juárez became known as “Murder City.” For this reason, among others, the Mérida Initiative did target Juárez, even if programs were not implemented until mid-2009, and even though specific data about MI resources expended in the area is not available. We see this focus on Juárez in a variety of US government documents, and know that the Government of Mexico focused on targeting organized crime in the area, demonstrating that it likely deployed US Mérida resources into the city once they were available. Therefore, this chapter researches which factors influenced the drastic spike in homicides starting in 2008, and how those factors were supported by Mérida Initiative funding and programs over the next several years.

This chapter finds that the violence occurring in Ciudad Juárez starting in 2008 is not a result of the Mérida Initiative because of its slow implementation timelines. Rather, violence in the city is a result of changing dynamics between and within the Sinaloa Cartel and Juárez Cartel, two powerful TCOs competing for control of the Juárez-El Paso drug trafficking corridor. After violence from this conflict increased in March of 2008, the Calderón administration responded by launching Operación Conjunto Chihuahua, sending members of the military to the city, beginning efforts to crack down on TCOs using violence in the area, as well as reform the corrupt police and

125 Ciudad Juárez has a history of violence against women. The city attracted international attention by feminist and human rights organizations in the early 1990s, illuminating the occurrence of feminicidios. These groups demanded that the state conduct proper investigations into the intentional murder of women because they were women. This topic is vast, and could easily be explored in a full thesis. For these reasons, it is largely beyond the scope of this case study to focus on feminicidios in Juárez. Nevertheless, it is important to recognize that the violence occurring in Ciudad Juárez starting in 2008 relies on the same networks of impunity and corruption that allowed perpetrators of violence against women in the 90s to act without facing repercussions.

local institutions that permitted the TCOs to exist in the first place. However, the increased militarization of Ciudad Juárez, supported by the Mérida Initiative after 2009, is partly responsible for the high homicide rates that led Juárez to be named "Murder City" by 2010. As the Sinaloa and Juárez Cartels battled each other and state forces to maintain and gain control of resources and territory in the city, they had to resort to the strategic use of violence to defend themselves and adapt to losses; their new, violent actions almost always had a larger impact on civilians. The decreasing homicide rate at the end of 2012 is a result of a temporary truce between the two TCOs, rather than the success of the Mexican and US governments, which is why the homicide rate increases again in 2016 after a period of relative calm.

Data

As demonstrated in Table 5 in Chapter 1, homicides in Ciudad Juárez increase by 800% between 2007 and 2008, and remain high until 2012 when they periodically decrease, before rising again in 2016 and increasing through present day. Table 6, below, similarly depicts the homicide rates in Ciudad Juárez between 2006 and 2019 according to two different sources, Milenio and the Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía. Both sources, despite having slightly different figures, also depict the immense increase in homicides between 2007 and 2008. This spike can be seen in Figure 3, a visual representation of the data from Table 6.
Table 6: Homicides in Ciudad Juárez by Year according to Milenio and INEGI (2006-2019)\textsuperscript{127}

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>2006</th>
<th>2007</th>
<th>2008</th>
<th>2009</th>
<th>2010</th>
<th>2011</th>
<th>2012</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Milenio</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>200</td>
<td>1620</td>
<td>2399</td>
<td>3746</td>
<td>1460</td>
<td>850</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INEGI</td>
<td>226</td>
<td>192</td>
<td>1528</td>
<td>2392</td>
<td>3766</td>
<td>2280</td>
<td>847</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Milenio</td>
<td>453</td>
<td>389</td>
<td>269</td>
<td>470</td>
<td>642</td>
<td>1,004</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INEGI</td>
<td>613</td>
<td>592</td>
<td>439</td>
<td>679</td>
<td>800</td>
<td>1439</td>
<td>1503</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 3: Homicides in Ciudad Juárez by Year According to Milenio and INEGI (2006-2019)\textsuperscript{128}

However, as seen in Table 7 below, there are certain months that see larger homicide rates than others. This suggests that care ought to be taken when explaining causes for increases in homicide rates because certain months might have different factors that impact levels of violence.

\textsuperscript{127} Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía, “Mortalidad.”; Milenio, “Homicides.”
\textsuperscript{128} Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía, “Mortalidad”; Milenio, “Homicides.”
Additionally, the monthly homicide data is helpful because it allows me to identify certain months to specifically research, looking at periods where the increase is significant from one month to the other, which makes the process of finding causal connections easier. March of 2008 is the first month that has a homicide rate that is significantly larger than the previous months, providing an initial focus date for my inquiry into causes driving increases in murder rates.

Additionally, after 2008 the number of months with triple digit homicide rates remains high, as demonstrated by yellow highlighting. Then, in 2012, the homicide levels decrease and level out for a few years. Figure 4 shows a visual representation of the data displayed in Table 7.

Table 7: Homicides in Ciudad Juárez, México by Month and Year (2006-2013)\textsuperscript{129}

\begin{tabular}{|c|c|c|c|c|c|c|c|c|}
\hline
\hline
Jan & 18 & 13 & 29 & 148 & 254 & 275 & 123 & 35 \\
\hline
Feb & 21 & 9 & 44 & 222 & 177 & 256 & 81 & 33 \\
\hline
Mar & 22 & 17 & 121 & 97 & 232 & 235 & 103 & 57 \\
\hline
Apr & 19 & 11 & 45 & 71 & 227 & 207 & 119 & 50 \\
\hline
May & 19 & 22 & 152 & 107 & 269 & 160 & 84 & 46 \\
\hline
Jun & 21 & 22 & 166 & 196 & 358 & 187 & 56 & 55 \\
\hline
Jul & 13 & 13 & 145 & 221 & 371 & 251 & 51 & 49 \\
\hline
Aug & 19 & 16 & 219 & 278 & 456 & 136 & 54 & 54 \\
\hline
Sept & 18 & 16 & 104 & 287 & 394 & 155 & 61 & 39 \\
\hline
Oct & 19 & 21 & 170 & 284 & 477 & 158 & 31 & 50 \\
\hline
Nov & 17 & 14 & 191 & 233 & 242 & 112 & 47 & 60 \\
\hline
Dec & 20 & 18 & 203 & 248 & 309 & 148 & 37 & 85 \\
\hline
\end{tabular}

\textsuperscript{129} Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía, “Mortalidad.” Yellow shading represents homicide rates that are greater than 100.
The data presented in Figure 4 and Table 7 demonstrate that it is worth investigating a few months in particular, to understand which factors impact the number of homicides in Juárez: March 2008 as the first month with an immense increase, August 2008 as the first month with a homicide rate greater than 200, and May through October of 2010—the peak of the drug war in Juárez. Then, what happens between October and November of 2010 to make the homicide rate decrease by nearly 200% (from 477 to 242 respectively)? Moreover, what takes place between March and May 2012 to establish a new trend in drug war violence: homicide rates lower than 100 for the first time in nearly three years?

There is not a clear consensus among scholars regarding which factors contributed to the high homicide rate in Ciudad Juárez starting in 2008, and there is even less scholarship that analyzes how different factors may have worked together to increase violence. However, several

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130 Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía, “Mortalidad.”
studies hypothesize that the violence in Ciudad Juárez is in large part a result of fighting between rival criminal organizations: specifically the Sinaloa Cartel and the Juárez Cartel.¹³¹ This case study tests the validity of these claims, investigating what may have caused the Sinaloa Cartel to challenge the Juárez Cartel in the first place, how this contest is linked to violence, and if actions taken under the Mérida Initiative fueled violence. I conclude by looking into the significance of my findings and the effectiveness of the Mérida Initiative as a whole.

Assessing the Impacts of the Mérida Initiative in Ciudad Juárez Given Limited Data

As established in Chapter 1, the implementation speeds of the Mérida Initiative were slower than anticipated due to bureaucratic and personnel challenges, making it unlikely that it impacted the organized crime related homicide rates between 2007 and 2008 in Mexico. US resources did not reach Mexico until mid-2009, at the earliest, according to tables 3 and 4 of Chapter 1. This indicates that the initial spike in violence, which occurred in Ciudad Juárez in March of 2008 was likely caused by factors other than the Mérida Initiative. This does not mean that the initiative did not have an impact on homicides and violence in Mexico in the following years, once aspects of the plan were officially implemented. Still, it is important to understand which local, national, and international factors caused violence in Ciudad Juárez. Understanding the root of the violence can inform policy-makers as they design binational cooperation programs like the Mérida Initiative to combat organized crime related violence in Mexico.

Even though data about the Mérida Initiative is lacking, there are still some ways to better understand how the Mérida Initiative may have impacted levels of violence in Juárez, assuming that MI funds and resources were flowing into the area starting mid-2009. The US State

¹³¹ InSight Crime, “Juárez Cartel.”; Langton, Gangland, Chapter 8.; Wilson Center, “Sinaloa OCG.”
Department has been criticized for their lack of transparency and follow-through around where and when resources are delivered to Mexico. This poses problems for a variety of reasons, namely because it makes it challenging to assess the effectiveness and impact of the Mérida Initiative, in order to determine further financial assistance from the United States is needed, if the goals of the initiative are being met, or if the initiative is contributing to the increasing levels of violence by not approaching the war on drugs from the proper angle. Knowing that I am operating without this key data, my claims cannot be made with certainty. Still, I can infer whether or not the MI would likely have been effective at decreasing levels of violence by applying what I know about what the initiative was intended to do, and what is leading to increasing violence in Juárez as the Government of Mexico combats the operations of transnational criminal organizations with the support of the MI.

**History of Violence and Drug Trafficking in Juárez: Pre-2008**

In order to understand the violence occurring within criminal networks in Ciudad Juárez, it is helpful to have historical information about the main TCOs that have operated in the area. According to InSight Crime, a think tank that provides investigation and analysis of organized crime, most of the drug organizations we see in Mexico today originated in the state of Sinaloa. What started as a “small group of farming families that lived in rural parts of the state,” over time, expanded their operations to cultivating marijuana and poppies for opium. Then, they began

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132 American University’s Center for Latin American and Latino Studies houses the Washington DC InSight Crime office, and there is another office in Medellin Colombia. Their website is considered one of “the largest and most comprehensive database on organized crime in the Americas.” According to the AU website, “InSight Crime is the leading source for investigation, reporting, analysis, and training targeted to meet the needs of academics, researchers, policymakers and analysts, journalists, NGOs, and law enforcement and government officials tackling the problems posed by organized crime and drug trafficking throughout the region.” See the following website for more information: https://www.american.edu/centers/latin-american-latino-studies/insight-crime.cfm

133 InSight Crime, “Sinaloa Cartel.”

transporting cocaine for Colombian traffickers when they looked from the Caribbean to Mexico to get drugs into the United States.\textsuperscript{135} It was then, during the 1970s and 1980s when, “[TCOs] established the patterns we see repeated today: moving bulk shipments of cocaine via airplane and boat to Central America and Mexico, then by land routes into the United States.”\textsuperscript{136} However, it was only after an undercover US Drug Enforcement Administration agent Enrique (Kiki) Camarena was murdered in 1985 that the “boldness of the Mexican traffickers became evident.”\textsuperscript{137}

What had become known as the Guadalajara Cartel, the families in Sinaloa that expanded into the drug trafficking business, now was being threatened by the Mexican government, which was forced to take action because of pressure from the United States after their DEA agent was killed.\textsuperscript{138} This pressure led the Guadalajara Cartel to divide up their acquired territories and leadership team: “The Arellano Félix brothers set up camp in Tijuana. The Carrillo Fuentes family moved to Juárez. El Chapo and his partner Héctor Luis Palma Salazar, remained in the Sinaloa area.”\textsuperscript{139} The Carrillo Fuentes Organization became known as the Juárez Cartel, and El Chapo’s organization is now known as the Sinaloa Cartel. These two organizations, once part of the same parent cartel, and allied until 2008 in what was referred to as “La Federación,” are now bitter rivals.\textsuperscript{140} In fact, Insight Crime describes that the “intense rivalry” has “helped turn Juárez into one of the most violent places in the world.”\textsuperscript{141} The Wilson Center, a think tank sponsored by US Congress to provide non-partisan information about global issues for policy-makers, notes that the

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{135} InSight Crime, “Sinaloa Cartel.”; Stratfor, “Mexican Cartels.”
\item \textsuperscript{136} InSight Crime, “Sinaloa Cartel.”
\item \textsuperscript{137} InSight Crime, “Sinaloa Cartel.”; Langton, Gangland, Chapter 4.; Wilson Center, “Juárez OCG.”
\item \textsuperscript{138} Langton, Gangland, Chapter 4.; Wilson Center, “Juárez OCG.”
\item \textsuperscript{139} InSight Crime, “Sinaloa Cartel.”
\item \textsuperscript{140} Wilson Center, “Juárez OCG”; Wilson Center, “Sinaloa OCG.”
\item \textsuperscript{141} InSight Crime, “Juárez Cartel.”
\end{itemize}
breakdown of La Federación “in 2008 [resulted] in renewed conflicts between the Sinaloa and Juárez organizations for control of the Juárez-El Paso corridor.”142

Both the Sinaloa Cartel and the Juárez Cartels have used violence to achieve their goals, but, whenever possible both organizations have historically preferred to use bribes over bullets. United States DEA Assistant Administrator, Rodney Benson, notes that, “The concept of ‘plata o plomo’ (bribes in silver or lead bullets) is well-documented in Mexican drug trafficker culture and refers to the choice public and police officials must make when first confronted by this powerful criminal element.”143 Both the Juárez and Sinaloa TCOs are known for having strong connections with political and economic elite, relying on the corruption within Mexican institutions to operate with impunity.144 Because of the system of impunity that existed in Mexico under the PRI government until 2000, and because many trafficking organizations had strategic alliances with each other as demonstrated by alliances such as La Federación, violence did not occur at the levels we see starting in 2008. Cooperation among TCOs was common, and government officials were often working with cartels and sharing profits, or at least being bribed to look the other way. The United States Council on Foreign Relations notes that, “In Mexico, cartels pay off judges, police, politicians, and other officials using their vast drug profits, which the US government estimates to be worth tens of billions of dollars per year.”145 Still, when violence was used instead of bribery, it historically targeted politicians, law enforcement, or members of rival TCOs, not civilians, and not to the extent we see in recent years.146

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142 Wilson Center, “Juárez OCG.”
144 InSight Crime, “Juárez Cartel”; InSight Crime, “Sinaloa Cartel.”
145 Lee, Renwick, and Labrador, “Mexico’s Drug War.”
However, the strategic use of violence became more common when the government of Mexico decided to try to put an end to the decades long established system of impunity and corruption. On December 10, 2006, newly elected Mexican President Felipe Calderón took a hard-lined approach against the operations of organized criminal groups and the systems of corruption that they depended on. His efforts had two parts. First, the Mexican army would be used in “the areas where the Mexican [transnational criminal organizations] had the strongest footholds.”\textsuperscript{147} Second, the government started taking efforts to cleanse the country’s police forces of corruption. Even though the Mexican military does not have a great human rights record, President Calderón thought it would be better to use soldiers until police reform was accomplished.\textsuperscript{148} Over the next few months, “the Mexican government deployed approximately 45,000 troops to the nation’s most violent cities and states. In other words, the Mexican military became the boots on the ground as a short-term strategy until the Federal Police could be recruited, trained, and deployed.”\textsuperscript{149}

When president Calderón started combating the drug trafficking organizations operating in Mexico, violence increased throughout the country. Specifically, the TCOs strategically directed violence towards military officials who were the people tasked with combating the TCOs, and against local police officers that were being forced to stop cooperating with the criminal organizations. Military and police officers were victims of violence because they were on the front lines engaging in raids and shoot-outs against TCOs, and also because the organizations were trying to break up the corrupt networks that the criminals depended on.

Ciudad Juárez and the state of Chihuahua were not on the top of the list of locations needing military forces in 2007 and, as a result, the Government of Mexico did not deploy large numbers

\textsuperscript{147} Ainslie, “Mexico’s Law Enforcement Challenge.”
\textsuperscript{148} Seelke, “Mexico and the 112th Congress,” 21.
\textsuperscript{149} Ainslie, “Mexico’s Law Enforcement Challenge.”
of troops into the area from the start of the drug war. Instead, troops were sent to the states of Michoacán, Baja California, and Tamaulipas which had already been experiencing some violence from TCO operations, and which were identified as areas where TCOs had strong foot-holds. However, this would change in 2008 once violence escalated in the in Juárez. As a result of this violence, the city became known as “Murder City,” and was a key location of the drug war.

2008: Escalation of Drug War Violence, Operación Conjunto Chihuahua

By the end of 2007, the United States and Mexico had already signed the Mérida Initiative, and the United States’ concern over violence in Mexico was growing. Scholar Ricardo Ainslie notes that, “In December of 2007, US federal intelligence officials notified the mayor of Ciudad Juárez, José Reyes Ferriz, that they had evidence that the Sinaloa Cartel was poised to launch a major effort to wrest control of the city (and its lucrative smuggling route into El Paso and points beyond in the United States) from the Juárez Cartel.” These intelligence predcitions were correct. In January 2008, the Sinaloa Cartel began officially targeting the police officers in Ciudad Juárez that were allied with the Juárez Cartel, in an attempt to weaken the networks that the Juárez Cartel relied on for its operations. As a result, “the number of drug-related homicides surged in the region,” with January registering close to thirty homicides for the first time in recent history (see Table 7).

The targeted killing of police officers was a strategy used by the TCOs, who were trying to use fear and violence to gain control of the police force, recognizing that they are a “strategic

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150 Alvarado, “Mexico Troops Head to New U.S. Border Drug War Zone.”
151 Ainslie, “Mexico’s Law Enforcement Challenge: The Case Study of Ciudad Juarez.”
152 Shirk, “A Tale of Two Mexican Border Cities,” 491.
153 Ainslie, “Mexico’s Law Enforcement Challenge.”
asset” necessary for drug trafficking in the area.\textsuperscript{156} At the end of January 2008, the Sinaloa Cartel left a poster at a “Monument to Fallen Police in Ciudad Juárez” with the “names of five Municipal Police officers who had been assassinated….below that list was a second list of seventeen names of current Juárez Municipal Police Officers” in an obvious, public, death threat against the officers.\textsuperscript{157} By the end of 2008, all of the officers on the list had resigned or were dead.\textsuperscript{158} In 2007, seven police officers were killed in Juárez. By 2008, 71 were killed, and in 2009 and 2010 there were 67 and 149 respectively.\textsuperscript{159} This trend demonstrates how TCOs, when trying to accomplish a goal, are willing to use violence strategically in order to signal their strength and willingness to use whatever tactics it takes to be the dominant organization in the area. In this case, the Sinaloa Cartel used the murder of police to signal to the Juárez Cartel that any actions they take to oppose Sinaloa’s takeover of the city would result in more homicides. Violence was used strategically to deter the Juárez Cartel from opposing Sinaloa efforts, and to deter the police force from continuing to cooperate with the Juárez Cartel.

Considering the police homicide numbers from 2007-2010, it becomes evident that the police forces are a new target of organized crime related violence in Ciudad Juárez starting in 2008. However, police homicides still only account for less than five percent of the total homicides between 2008 and 2010 in Ciudad Juárez.\textsuperscript{160} The question then, becomes, who are the other victims? Are they largely members of transnational criminal organizations, or are they innocent civilians that are caught in the crossfire? Unfortunately, more research is needed to fully answer this question. Data relating to who has been killed in organized crime related violence is widely

\textsuperscript{156} Ainslie, “Mexico’s Law Enforcement Challenge.”
\textsuperscript{157} Ainslie, “Mexico’s Law Enforcement Challenge.”
\textsuperscript{158} Ainslie, “Mexico’s Law Enforcement Challenge.”
\textsuperscript{159} Ainslie, “Mexico’s Law Enforcement Challenge.”
\textsuperscript{160} I calculated this rate by dividing the total number of police officers that died in Juárez between 2008 and 2010 by the total number of homicides between the same years.
unavailable or unreliable because of tactics used by TCOs to hide the identifies of their victims; they have been known to dress civilians in fake military or police uniforms, or to dismember, burn, or dissolve bodies in acid to destroy evidence.\(^{161}\) Adding to the complications, CRS estimates that by 2009 Mexico may have had a 98% impunity rate, meaning even if bodies and evidence were available, it is unlikely that there was a proper investigation—leaving many details unanswered about the deaths.\(^{162}\) Also, because of the often secretive nature of the drug trafficking business, it is not always possible to know with certainty who was working for a TCO and who was not, and if internal business deals gone wrong was a reason for the death.

Regardless, the Government of Mexico responded to increasing levels of violence in Ciudad Juárez, against police officers and other people in the community, when March’s homicide rates increased drastically. Homicides in January and February were 29 and 44 respectively, higher than any month in recent history, but that did not compare to the March rate of 121 homicides in thirty-one days (see Table 7). The arrival of nearly “2,500 Mexican army soldiers and federal police officers” started a new phase of the drug war, in a city that became the most violent in the Western Hemisphere over the next few years.\(^{163}\) A Reuters newspaper article dated March 27, 2008 notes that, “following a leap in drug murders in the rundown city of Ciudad Juárez, the government” planned to deploy 2,500 troops and federal police, “opening a new front in its war on drug gangs.”\(^{164}\) This officially launched “Operación Conjunto Chihuahua.” This suggests, then, that increased pressures on the criminal organizations by the military did not increase violence in Ciudad Juárez, at least initially. Rather, the deployment of military officials in the area came after

\(^{162}\) Seelke, “Mérida Initiative for Mexico and Central America.”
\(^{163}\) Ramsey, “Cable Suggests Mexican Army May Have Worked with Juarez Paramilitary Group.”
\(^{164}\) Ainslie, “Mexico’s Law Enforcement Challenge.”; Alvarado, “Mexico Troops Head to New US Border Drug War Zone.”
violence increased. However, over the next several years, violence in Juárez escalates to unprecedented levels, and the presence of federal officials added to the chaos, exacerbating local factors that were already increasing the homicide rate in the city.

Multiple sources describe how conflict between the Sinaloa Cartel and Juárez Cartel over control of the Juárez-El Paso drug trafficking corridor directly contributed to the increasing homicide rates in the city in 2008. As such, the goal of the federal troops was to end the bloodshed that was being caused by the rivaling Sinaloa and Juárez Cartels. They appeared to be successful at first, with homicides decreasing in April. However, the calm was only temporary as “the cartels fighting for the Juárez ‘plaza’ took measure of the army’s tactics.”\textsuperscript{165} Then, the violence resumed and increased throughout the rest of the year, and until 2012 when it decreased before increasing again in 2016.

This data demonstrates that efforts taken by the Government of Mexico, while intending to permanently weaken the TCOs in the area, were ultimately unsuccessful because the homicide rate increases again after several years of perceived calm. The TCOs were able to adapt their operations to become resistant to, or avoid federal pressure, such as moving to new locations in the city without a strong federal presence. The Mérida Initiative, while not implemented at this point of the drug war, does not account for the evolving nature of TCOs as they implement various survival strategies, which often use more violent tactics. Furthermore, it does not pay close attention to the competition within organizations, with the understanding that weakening one only creates a power vacuum that the other seeks to capitalize on. As summarized by Kelsey Freeman in her book, “Additionally, when one [TCO] falters, it only helps rival groups.”\textsuperscript{166}

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item Ramsey, “Cable Suggests Mexican Army May Have Worked with Juarez Paramilitary Group.”
\item Freeman, \textit{No Option But North}, 42.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
Becoming “Murder City:” The Repercussions of Operación Conjunto Chihuahua

The elimination of high-ranking leaders of TCOs through operations such as Operación Conjunto Chihuahua increases the likelihood of internal succession struggles that lead to splintering and encourage the organization to expand operations into other markets beyond drug trafficking to increase power and profit. Moreover, the elimination of a leader creates conflict between TCOs that have been allies in the past. The kingpin strategy is largely regarded as a major driver of increasing violence in Mexico’s drug war, and US support under the Mérida Initiative, by providing intelligence capabilities and other equipment to Mexican authorities, has reinforced the frequent use of the strategy. The kingpin strategy contributed to changing dynamics between TCOs operating in the Juárez area, leading to unprecedented levels of violence and Ciudad Juárez gaining the title of “Murder City” by 2010.167

The Sinaloa Cartel has historically been the strongest drug trafficking organization in Mexico, with strategic alliances with many other organizations that allowed them to maintain relative peace for many years.168 However, 2008 marked a major shift in alliances, with the Beltrán Leyva Organization (BLO) splitting from the Sinaloa Cartel, and forming an alliance with the Juárez Cartel and potentially the Zetas in other parts of the country.169 The Zetas are known for their brutality and violence, originally formed by deserters from the Mexican Military as part of the Gulf Cartel.170

InSight Crime claims that while BLO and the Zetas had historically been rivals, the Zeta’s recent split from the Gulf Cartel left them searching to form alliances with other organizations. Ultimately, “the Zetas’ control of the eastern seaboard would complement the BLO’s control of

167 Booth, “In Mexico’s Murder City, the War Appears Over.”
168 Wilson Center, “Juárez OCG”; Wilson Center, “Sinaloa OCG.”
169 Pascual, “Mexico at a Crossroads,” 8.
170 Dudley, “How the Beltran Leyva, Sinaloa Cartel Feud Bloodied Mexico.”
much of the western coastline.” The Sinaloa Cartel was not pleased with this alliance, and tensions finally culminated when leader of the BLO, Alfredo Beltrán Leyva, was arrested in January of 2008. The Washington Post goes as far as to claim that the arrest of kingpin Beltrán Leyva, the “ex-ally of ‘El Chapo’ Guzmán…set off Mexico’s drug war.” It is rumored that the arrest “resulted from a Sinaloa betrayal,” which completely severed ties between the Sinaloa Cartel and the Beltrán Leyva Organization. Since BLO began operating independently, it has “become one of the most powerful drug-trafficking organizations in Mexico, capable not only of smuggling narcotics and battling rivals but also demonstrating a willingness to order the assassination of high-ranking government officials.”

The BLO and Juárez Cartel alliance shifted the balance of power in Mexico, which prompted the Sinaloa Cartel to attempt to regain some of their influence and dominance by seeking to control the key drug smuggling corridor in Ciudad Juárez. The results of their attempts at consolidating power and territory led to the increase in violence during the first part of 2008, and throughout the next few years. In February 2009, after a year of escalating violence in Ciudad Juárez, the Sinaloa Cartel sought to increase their control the police force by “[threatening] to kill a policeman every 48 hours until the then Chief of Police, Roberto Orduña, resigned.” As a former army major, Orduña was placed in the position less than a year prior, and “had been spearheading the efforts to clean up the [corruption of the] Juárez Municipal Police,” angering the Sinaloa Cartel. Over the last year, the Sinaloa Cartel had been killing cops that they thought

171 Dudley, “How the Beltran Leyva, Sinaloa Cartel Feud Bloodied Mexico.”
173 Hsu, “Kingpin.”
174 Burton and Meiners, “Mexico and the War Against the Drug Cartels in 2008.”
175 Burton and Meiners, “Mexico and the War Against the Drug Cartels in 2008.”
176 Ainslie, “Mexico’s Law Enforcement Challenge.”; Reuters Staff, “Mexican Police Chief Quits after Officers Killed.”
177 Ainslie, “Mexico’s Law Enforcement Challenge.”
were working with the Juárez Cartel, or who were interfering with Sinaloa’s efforts to take over control of the Juárez turf.\textsuperscript{178} After they fulfilled their threat and killed two police officers in a week, Orduña resigned and addressed the Sinaloa Cartel by saying: “Don’t be mistaken, enemies of Mexico. The decision I am taking is an intelligent one of life over death.”\textsuperscript{179} After Orduña resigned, the Mexican army took over the Juárez Municipal Police force, and they began patrolling alongside police officers in the city.\textsuperscript{180} Then, “10,000 army and 2,000 Federal Police arrived to reinforce policing functions” in Juárez.\textsuperscript{181}

The Sinaloa Cartel was not the only group using violence to pressure police officers in Juárez to cooperate with their efforts. For example, when “the Federal Police arrested Jesús Armando Acosta Guerrero,” also known as “El 35,” who was a leader of La Línea (the Juárez Cartel’s local armed group), members of La Línea retaliated with violence.\textsuperscript{182} They set a trap for police officers by leaving a wounded man in the street next to a Ford Focus full of explosives.\textsuperscript{183} Then, when police responded to the call made by La Línea asking for help for the wounded man, they detonated the car bomb which killed four people, including two police officers.”\textsuperscript{184} This incident was the first time TCOs had used this strategy, one often associated with terrorist organizations, during the Mexican Drug War.\textsuperscript{185} The man that ordered the car bombing, José Antonio Acosta-Hernández, was ultimately arrested and “extradited to the United States from

\textsuperscript{178} Reuters Staff, “Mexican Police Chief Quits after Officers Killed.”
\textsuperscript{179} Reuters Staff, “Mexican Police Chief Quits after Officers Killed.”
\textsuperscript{180} Ainslie, “Mexico’s Law Enforcement Challenge.”
\textsuperscript{181} Ainslie, “Mexico’s Law Enforcement Challenge.”
\textsuperscript{182} Ainslie, “Mexico’s Law Enforcement Challenge.”; InSight Crime, “Juárez Cartel”; Reuters Staff, “Timeline.”; Wilson Center, “Juárez OCG.”
\textsuperscript{183} Ainslie, “Mexico’s Law Enforcement Challenge.”; Malkin, “Mexico.”
\textsuperscript{184} Ainslie, “Mexico’s Law Enforcement Challenge.”; Malkin, “Mexico.”
\textsuperscript{185} Ainslie, “Mexico’s Law Enforcement Challenge.”
Mexico on March 16, 2012.” Additionally, he was found guilty for the “triple homicide in Juárez of US Consulate employee Lesley Enriquez, her husband Art...Ceniceros, the husband of another US Consulate employee,” and he admitted to “directing or participating in more than 1,500 murders since 2008.” Ultimately, he was sentenced to a total of ten consecutive life terms, and twenty years in Federal Prison.

Since the start of the drug war in December of 2006, transnational criminal organizations have started using violence in new and strategic ways to coerce their opposition to back off; the use of a car bomb is only one example. Additionally, they have entered into new types of illicit activities. June Beittel, with the US Congressional Research Service, notes that transnational criminal organizations “and their violent enforcers have moved into other profitable criminal activities to supplement their income including kidnapping, human trafficking, extortion and a network of other illegal businesses” such as oil theft and even DVD pirating. In other words, Mexican efforts to combat TCOs and their operations, supplemented and supported by the Mérida Initiative starting in 2009, leads the organizations to change their strategies, often leading to the intentional use of violence and participation in illicit activities that increasingly have tragic human costs.

Beittel goes on to explain how “some argue that this diversification into alternative criminal activities may be a sign that US and Mexican drug enforcement measures are suppressing drug trafficking profits.” DEA Assistant Administrator, Rodney Benson explains that the price of

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186 Department of Justice - Office of Public Affairs, “Juarez Drug Cartel Leader Pleads Guilty.”
187 Department of Justice - Office of Public Affairs, “Juarez Drug Cartel Leader Pleads Guilty.”
188 Department of Justice - Office of Public Affairs, “Juarez Drug Cartel Leader Pleads Guilty.”
cocaine in the United States has been increasing since 2007, while drug purity has been decreasing. He says that:

From January 2007 through March 2011, the price per gram of cocaine increased 87.2 percent from $101.10 to $189.24, while the average purity decreased by 27 percent. These statistics paint a clear picture of restricted drug flow into the United States and decreased availability. While spikes – upward or downward – in price and purity have been observed in the past, these indicators typically normalize within a few months. Unlike in the past, we are now in the midst of a four-year period of escalating prices and decreasing purity. Investigative intelligence from around the country—including intercepted communications of the traffickers themselves, corroborates the fact that President Calderón’s efforts are making it more difficult for traffickers to supply the US market with illicit drugs. 191

However, if the drug profits are decreasing, TCOs simply resort to new profit-making methods, that are often more violent—such as extortion and human trafficking. As unfortunate as it is, many people who work for TCOs are doing so because they do not have other economic opportunities or ways to support themselves and their families. 192 Therefore, if drug profits are decreasing for a variety of reasons including interference by the US and Mexican governments, then TCOs have to find other ways to make money. The illicit activities outside of trafficking drugs are the ones that have the most intense impact on civilians, which is why the homicide rate increases as the Calderón administration, with assistance from the US, begins combatting TCOs. The Mérida Initiative supports the efforts the Mexican government has taken to disrupt the operations of transnational criminal organizations in Mexico, which has increased the frequency of violence, and the intensity at which it occurs. While intended to permanently weaken the TCOs, the combative efforts have proved insufficient at doing this because the groups adapt in order to survive under new pressures. As of 2021, many of the TCOs operating in the drug war are the same players that existed over the last few decades, despite facing years of extreme pressure.

192 Freeman, No Option But North, 36 & 150.
Beittel, in a May 2009 CRS report notes that “The surge in violence due to inter- and intra-cartel conflict over lucrative drug smuggling routes or ‘plazas’ has been matched by an increase in kidnapping for ransom (sometimes ending with the death of the victim) and a brisk business in other criminal enterprises.”\textsuperscript{193} Violence against civilians is strategically used by TCOs to persuade the Government of Mexico from continuing to battle the criminal organizations. Civilians who fear or experience violence, put pressure on their government to take actions to decrease violence. In this case, if the Mexican government stopped interfering with the corrupt networks that have allowed TCOs to operate with impunity and freedom for decades, the organizations would stop targeting civilians. Even with violence increasing in Mexico, however, the government has not been deterred from continuing their fight against drug trafficking organizations.

InSight Crime notes that, “the growth in extortion rates is, in part, a product of President Calderón’s approach to fighting the cartels, which has shaken up the dynamics of organized crime in Mexico.”\textsuperscript{194} A study completed by Scholars from Stanford University explains that “the number of cases of extortion reported to local public prosecutors’ offices went from 3,157 in 2006 to 5,127 in 2015. Many small shopkeepers and small businesses have been forced to close rather than pay protection money.”\textsuperscript{195} While this data is not specific to extortion in Ciudad Juárez, it demonstrates the trend throughout all of Mexico, and displays how the diversification of TCO activities correlates to the start and progression of the Drug War. Smaller splinter organizations, and TCOs looking to make up for losses in profit, have turned to the extortion of civilians and businesses to increase their profits and power. This is an unintended consequence of the drug war efforts taken

\textsuperscript{193} Beittel, “Mexico’s Drug-Related Violence,” 6.
\textsuperscript{194} Cullinan, “How Extortion Rates Vary Across Mexico.”
\textsuperscript{195} Magaloni et al., “Living in Fear,” 11.
by the Mexican government, supported by the Mérida Initiative, but nevertheless reflects the nature of the change that TCOs are implementing in order to survive.

Magaloni et. al. go on to note that many cases of extortion go unreported because of fear that reporting will make them even more of a target of organized crime related violence. They note that, “The National Survey of Victimization and Perception about Public Security (ENVIPE) shows that in 2015, for every 100,000 citizens [in Mexico], there were more than 8,600 extortions, which amounts to 7 million incidents. The majority of them related to telephonic extortion (6 million) and an additional 27 thousand related to DTOs’ fee for “protection” (cobro de piso),” where people are forced to pay the TCO in order to avoid becoming a target of their violence and threats.\(^{196}\) Additionally, kidnapping for money increased significantly in 2008 around Mexico, with more than 1,028 people being kidnapped according to Beittel’s CRS report.\(^{197}\) Forced disappearances and human trafficking have also increased since the start of the drug war: more than two hundred mass graves containing more than six hundred bodies have been found throughout the country.\(^{198}\)

Another theory for the expansion into other illicit markets is that with the splintering of TCOs into smaller organizations as a result of the Mexican’s government pressure, groups have to find other ways to earn a profit if they do not have access to drugs or control of trafficking routes. InSight Crime argues that as “Calderón’s administration has focused on taking out the leaders of major drug trafficking organizations – an approach known as the kingpin strategy, – …Mexico’s underworld [has fragmented], with many smaller groups in place of the old, hegemonic cartels. As these multiple factions fight for a share of [the] drug trafficking market, they are forced to move

\(^{196}\) Magaloni et al., “Living in Fear,” 11.  
\(^{197}\) Beittel, “Mexico’s Drug-Related Violence,” 11.  
\(^{198}\) Magaloni et al., “Living in Fear,” 12
into other criminal activities, like extortion, to fund themselves.”\textsuperscript{199} Again, these examples and data are not specific to Ciudad Juárez, but depict the trend throughout all of Mexico. This information can be used to recognize that the Mérida Initiative, while supporting Mexican efforts to combat organized crime networks in the country, is partly responsible for the increasing levels of violence in Mexico, and the evolving nature of TCOs as they splinter and find new ways to operate among pressures from the state.

Despite the public intentions for sending in members of the armed forces into Juárez to “restore calm in the city” and combat the operations of TCOs, the approach has received criticism.\textsuperscript{200} Many people suspect corruption, speculating that the military was actually cooperating with the Sinaloa Cartel to help them gain control over the Juárez-El Paso corridor. In May of 2010, National Public Radio released a story under the headline “Mexico's Drug War: A Rigged Fight?”\textsuperscript{201} They interviewed a former Juárez police commander who was working at the start of the conflict between the Sinaloa and Juárez Cartels. He asked to remain anonymous because he has received death threats in the past, and is currently seeking asylum in El Paso, Texas. He said that, “The intention of the army is to try and get rid of the Juárez Cartel, so that Chapo's Cartel is the strongest.”\textsuperscript{202} He claims that after the army arrived at the end of March 2008, violence dropped periodically for three weeks, and the police force felt hopeful. However, “during those three weeks, Chapo’s people contacted the army and figured out what they were doing and how much money they wanted. They started to pay them off, and the Sinaloans just kept working.”\textsuperscript{203} If this is true, then it has significant implications for the level of corruption in Mexico at the time.

\textsuperscript{199} Cullinan, “How Extortion Rates Vary Across Mexico.”
\textsuperscript{200} American Consulate Ciudad Juarez, American Consulate Ciudad Juarez to Secretary of State Washington DC, “Visit of Merida Initiative Staff del to Juarez,” 2.
\textsuperscript{201} Burnett and Peñaloza, “Mexico’s Drug War.”
\textsuperscript{202} Burnett and Peñaloza, “Mexico’s Drug War.”
\textsuperscript{203} Burnett and Peñaloza, “Mexico’s Drug War.”
of the start of the drug war. Calderón was using the military instead of municipal police forces to avoid corruption, but it appears as though members of the military did not have a clean record either. Additionally, “Manuel Espino, former congressmen from Juárez and former head of the National Action Party, the president’s party,” explains how violence has gotten worse since the arrival of the army and the federal police to the city.\textsuperscript{204} He says how quickly El Chapo was able to take over some Juárez turf “makes [them] believe there’s a complicity with the federal government.”\textsuperscript{205}

Furthermore, Howard Campbell, a cultural anthropologist “and an expert on Mexican drug trafficking” says that “it doesn’t seem possible for” the Sinaloa Cartel to win the “battle over the Juárez Cartel…without some sort of backing from the Mexican military.”\textsuperscript{206} This is because, drugs moving into Juárez and the United States, have to pass through military-controlled territory. And so the military is either absolutely inept, or they’re corrupted by the Chapo Guzmán Cartel. There’s really no other explanation.”\textsuperscript{207} Additionally, InSight crime explains that a January 2009 US State Department cable leaked by WikiLeaks “indicates that the US Consulate in Juárez suspected the Mexican military of being no less corrupt than the city’s police force.”\textsuperscript{208} The cable also claims that “the military in Juárez, despite being deployed to crack down on the drug trade, rarely faced the cartels head on, and may have even encouraged violent gunfights between the city’s rival trafficking organizations.”\textsuperscript{209} Furthermore, during sworn testimony in a US Federal Court in El Paso, Texas, “convicted former Juárez police captain, Manuel Fierro-Méndez, who went on to work for the Sinaloans…testified that he regularly provided intelligence on La Línea to an army

\textsuperscript{204} Burnett and Peñaloza, “Mexico’s Drug War.”
\textsuperscript{205} Burnett and Peñaloza, “Mexico’s Drug War.”
\textsuperscript{206} Burnett and Peñaloza, “Mexico’s Drug War.”
\textsuperscript{207} Burnett and Peñaloza, “Mexico’s Drug War.”
\textsuperscript{208} Ramsey, “Cable Suggests Mexican Army May Have Worked with Juarez Paramilitary Group.”
\textsuperscript{209} Ramsey, “Cable Suggests Mexican Army May Have Worked with Juarez Paramilitary Group.”
captain, after which the military would go arrest people and seize weapons and vehicles.”

While these sources point to the fact that the Mexican military favored the Sinaloa Cartel during their deployment in Ciudad Juárez, the Calderón administration denies cooperating with or favoring either TCO.

If the federal authorities in Juárez were collaborating with TCOs, this poses challenges for the Government of Mexico and the US, who used the Mérida Initiative to support military presence in the city while police reform was taking place. If the military was collaborating with TCOs, then the Mérida Initiative was providing intelligence capabilities, insider information, and weapons to the wrong team, just complicating the violence in Juárez. Furthermore, Calderón’s justified his use of the military because of his efforts to vet police officers that were highly corrupt, but it appears as though his military was not any better, falling prey to the bribes from TCOs in the city just like their police colleagues. This problem was, perhaps, inevitable. The amount of reform needed to fully vet Mexican institutions—local or otherwise—while preventing new hires from establishing connections with TCOs is a mountainous task. While the Mérida Initiative supported this goal, it never was established to provide enough training, resources, or equipment to completely break corrupt ties between authorities and TCOs. It was only a matter of time before the Mérida resources fell into the wrong hands, jeopardizing the entire efforts to reform the system. Furthermore, so long as the economic opportunity of working with TCOs is appealing to people, they will continue to collaborate with them for their own financial benefit. The Mérida Initiative does not sufficiently address this.

Whether the Mexican military was cooperating with the Sinaloa Cartel or not, there is no denying that their efforts did lead to an increase in human rights abuses in Juárez. The Mexican

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210 Burnett and Peñaloza, “Mexico’s Drug War.”
211 Burnett and Peñaloza, “Mexico’s Drug War.”
military has historically been known for human rights abuses, which made many organizations, such as Amnesty International, nervous about what such large numbers of police in the city would mean for the rights of people living there. Then, their worries materialized when number of complaints received by the Comisión Nacional de los Derechos Humanos (CNDH) during the first half of 2008 was 199.212 In Mexico more broadly, the CNDH noted that “complaints of human rights abuses by the Mexican military increased from 182 in 2006 to 1,230 in 2008.”213 The most common complaints were for “torture, arbitrary arrest, unlawful entry, illegal searches, cruel or degrading treatment, robbery, illegal detention, threats, forced disappearance, intimidation, damage to private property and violations against liberty and due process rights.”214 Thus, during a time where the Mexican military was tasked with restoring safety and security, and decreasing violence experienced by civilians, it appears as though their actions were doing the opposite. This does not necessarily mean that the military was working specifically with either TCO involved in the war in Juárez, even though there are sources that claim that is the case. The most important fact is that increased militarization seems to lead to more confusion and violence among civilians.

It is possible that the military thought civilians were members of TCOs and therefore they were trying to investigate and arrest them. However, this does not dismiss the fact that their investigations and treatment of people, regardless of their criminal status, is heinous. It is clear that members of the armed forces in Mexico have not received proper human rights training, and operate without fear of being punished for committing human rights abuses. On the one hand, it demonstrates the need for the reform that is meant to take place under the Mérida Initiative, but it

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CNDH, or The National Commission of Human Rights is accredited by the United Nations and located in Mexico City.
also displays how massive the reform needs to be. The Mérida Initiative, ultimately, does not have resources to do this on the wide-scale levels needed to fully address the complexities of the problems within various Mexican institutions.

**Decreasing Violence in Ciudad Juárez: A Temporary End to the Conflict Between the Sinaloa and Juárez Cartels**

The Homicide rate in Ciudad Juárez began decreasing at the end of 2010, as demonstrated in Table 7 and Figure 4. Between October and November, the homicide rate drops from nearly 500 to approximately 250, which poses the question: what took place between these months that led to the momentary decrease in violence? Unfortunately, I was unable to find any data, information, or even news articles attempting to explain this drastic decrease in the homicide rate in Juárez. More research will be needed to understand what was happening between these two months. 2010 was the bloodiest year in Ciudad Juárez, and October 2010 was the month with the highest homicide rate of the whole war. The non-profit news agency Democracy Now! states that in October of 2010, “more [people] were killed [than] in each of the entire years from 2003 through 2007.”215 This fact makes the November homicide data even more puzzling. The lack of information about a radical change in the levels of violence during this month leads me to believe that the data is an anomaly, and that it was by-chance that numbers decreased momentarily, rather than a result of a major event in the drug war such as the elimination of a kingpin, the success of one TCO overtaking the resources of another, or efforts by the Government of Mexico taken with assistance from the Mérida Initiative. And even still, a homicide rate of nearly 250 in a single month is not something

215 Democracy Now!, “October Deadliest Month in Ciudad Juárez.”
worth celebrating. Yes, the November rate is an improvement from October, but it still represents a significant amount of death.

Unfortunately, violence increases again in Juárez over the next several months, but it never reaches levels as high as October 2010. March 2012 marks the first time in 33 months that the homicide rate in the city is not larger than 100. Then, May of 2012 establishes lower levels of violence as a trend in the city, at least for the next few years in Juárez. As shown in Table 7, there are no monthly homicide rates that reach triple digits through the end of 2013.

The reason the levels of violence decrease in the country is not entirely clear, but it is not likely that the Mérida Initiative played a significant role, because the US and Mexican governments did not change their drug war strategies. Rather, the decrease in violence is likely the result of shifting dynamics within and between TCOs, resulting in less visible and intense conflict. The Mexican government attributes the relative peace in the city to their efforts over the past several years to reform the police force, combat the operations of the TCOs, Calderón’s socioeconomic policy of *Todos Somos Juárez*, and the use of the military in the city to supplement both of those goals. However, the other hypothesis, which maintains the trend from the past several years of drug war violence, is that the war between the Sinaloa and Juárez Cartels came to an end after nearly four years of intense competition over the Juárez turf. While it is unclear what led to the end of their competition, at least for the time being, rumors predict that the Sinaloa Cartel emerged victorious. Andrea Simmons, an FBI spokeswoman in El Paso, confirmed that the majority of drug loads arriving from Juárez now belong to Guzmán” and the Sinaloa Cartel.

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218 Caldwell and Stevenson, “AP Exclusive.”
As shown in Table 7 at the start of this chapter, after May 2012 the homicide rate falls significantly, with zero months having more than 100 homicides for the next several years. Therefore, the homicide data suggests that there has been a significant change in what is happening on the ground in Juárez. Previous trends in drug war violence lead me to agree that the end of the battle between the Sinaloa and Juárez Cartels for control over the drug trafficking routes into the United States is responsible for the restored peace in the city, not efforts taken by the US and Mexican governments supported by the Mérida Initiative.

Violence remains low between 2012 and 2016, when homicides and violence begin increasing again. Initial research shows that a new TCO, the Cartel Jalisco Nueva Generación (CJNG) is battling the Juárez and Sinaloa Cartels for control of the Juárez trafficking corridor, leading to a new increase in violence in the city. This demonstrates the importance of reevaluating the Mérida Initiative and approaches to interfering with TCOs to ensure that efforts taken during this second wave of violence do not continue exacerbating conflict and chaos. Chapter 4 will spend more time discussing this point.

Conclusion

The violence in Ciudad Juárez from March of 2008 until May 2012 is the result of competition between the Juárez and Sinaloa Cartels for control over the prized Juárez turf, a key transit point along the US-Mexican border. The Mérida Initiative likely supported Mexican government practices that led to the increase of conflict and therefore violence in the Juárez area. For example, by providing access to intelligence infrastructure, the Government of Mexico has an easier time apprehending the leaders of transnational criminal organizations. This results in intra-

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and inter-TCO related conflict, which often leads to the strategic use of violence, the expansion into other illicit businesses that have a greater impact on civilians, and ultimately new factors of competition that make the drug war harder to fight successfully. Furthermore, the Mérida Initiative provided military technology to the federal forces stationed in places throughout the country, likely including those in Juárez. However, it is possible that military forces were also sometimes working with TCOs in the city, making efforts to rid institutions of their ties to criminal networks, such as the local police forces, practically useless. The initiative assisted Mexico by providing limited human rights training to the military, and in beginning to vet organizations that have long fostered impunity and corruption among TCOs, However, the Mérida Initiative ultimately did not provide enough resources to execute reform and trainings in the large-scale capacity needed to address the depth and breadth of corruption in Mexico. This information, while incomplete because of the lack of specific data about the Mérida Initiative, is useful to consider to inform policies that may be implemented in the coming years as the Mérida Initiative is phased out. We can understand which factors interact to drive violence in Ciudad Juárez, and in Mexico as a whole, to inform decisions about how to address the newest wave of organized crime related violence in Mexico.
Chapter 3: Tijuana Case Study

Chapter Three presents a case study into transnational organized crime related violence in Tijuana, Baja California. Similar to Juárez, the violence experienced in Tijuana since the start of the drug war is a result of changing dynamics between the Sinaloa Cartel and the TCO local to Tijuana, the Arellano Félix Organization (AFO), also known as the Tijuana Cartel. The conflict between these two organizations was exacerbated by pressures from the Mexican military stationed in the area as part of Operación Baja California/Tijuana, the Tijuana version of Operación Conjunto Chihuahua discussed in Chapter 2. However, unlike Juárez, the military was deployed to Tijuana before the homicide rate increased drastically in 2008, as it was one of the first places to receive federal attention after Calderón declared his guerra contra al narcotráfico. Even so, the presence of the military in the city led to an increase in human rights abuses and confusion as federales were suspected of cooperating with TCOs. As a result, after 2009 the Mérida Initiative was likely delivering intelligence capabilities and resources to officials who were cooperating with TCOs and benefiting from the corruption and impunity they were supposed to dismantle.

Similar to Juárez, pressures against the Sinaloa Cartel and AFO pushed them to use violence in new and strategic ways, and to expand operations into businesses that often had a harmful impact on civilians. Violence in Tijuana subsided relatively quickly compared to other parts of Mexico, which led many in the Mexican government to idolize it as an example of their successful drug war policies. However, violence returned to the city in 2015, and the second wave of drug war violence was more intense, with the homicide rates surpassing those from 2008 to 2010. The following Chapter explains these findings with more detail.
Data

On trend with Ciudad Juárez and much of Mexico, the border city of Tijuana also experiences a spike in homicides starting in 2008. Between 2007 and 2008, homicide rates in the city increase by more than 300%. While still significant, the violence in Tijuana is not as extreme as that of Juárez, despite the fact that it has a slightly larger population.\textsuperscript{220} By 2010, the peak of the drug war violence in Ciudad Juárez, the homicide rate was nearly 4,000. As Table 8 below shows, Tijuana’s homicide rate did not reach levels that extreme. Still, 2010 is the height of the first wave of violence, with the number of homicides increasing to around 1,250 that year. Then, as demonstrated in Table 8 and Figure 5, the violence subsides rather quickly by 2011. This decrease is faster than Ciudad Juárez, which did not return to that low of a homicide rate until around 2013.\textsuperscript{221} Mexican government authorities were quick to point to this relatively quick decrease in violence, highlighting Tijuana “not only as an important success story, but also as a law enforcement model for other Mexican cities.”\textsuperscript{222} In fact, Julian Leyzaola, who was “appointed chief of the municipal police” in Tijuana in December of 2008, was credited with restoring the peace in Tijuana.\textsuperscript{223} Then, he was sent to Ciudad Juárez in 2011 to attempt to “save” that city as well. Using Tijuana as an example did not last long. As shown in Table 8 and Figure 5 below, high levels of violence returned to the city by 2015 and exceeded previous rates and records.

\textsuperscript{220} In 2008 Tijuana has a population of approximately 1.7 million people, while Ciudad Juárez had approximately 1.3 million inhabitants. As of 2021, Tijuana is predicted to have 2.1 million people, and Juárez is estimated to have 1.5 million. World Population Review, “Ciudad Juarez Population 2021; World Population Review, “Tijuana Population 2021.”
\textsuperscript{221} See Table 6 in Chapter 2.
\textsuperscript{222} Felbab-Brown, Calderón’s Caldron, 1.
\textsuperscript{223} Felbab-Brown, Calderón’s Caldron, 2.
Table 8: Homicides in Tijuana by Year according to Milenio and INEGI (2006-2019)

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<th>Source</th>
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Figure 5: Homicides in Tijuana by Year according to Milenio and INEGI (2006-2019)

Table 9 represents the monthly homicide data in Tijuana according to INEGI. The first month with a substantial increase of violence is October of 2008, seven months later than the start of immense violence in Ciudad Juárez, as discussed in Chapter Two. This data for Ciudad Juárez, shown in Table 5, demonstrates that the violence there is more extreme in terms both the number

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of homicides and also the duration. Between 2008 and 2012, 46 months in Juárez have triple digit homicide rates, compared to ten in Tijuana (shown with yellow shading).

The second wave of violence in Tijuana is also different than what we saw in Juárez. Between 2017 and 2019, Juárez experienced approximately 3,740 total homicides, with 17 months having rates higher than 100. On the other hand, Tijuana experienced approximately 6,150 total homicides, with 35 of the 36 months between January 2017 and December 2019 having homicide rates higher than 100. The second wave of violence is larger than the first, which did not occur in Juárez.

\[\text{See Table 7 and Table 9.}\]
Table 9: Homicides in Tijuana, Mexico by Month and Year (2006-2019)\textsuperscript{227}

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Month/Year</th>
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\textsuperscript{227}Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía, “Mortalidad.” Yellow shading represents homicide rates that are greater than 100.
As shown in Table 9 and Figure 6 above, there are a few months where the homicide rate in Tijuana is more extreme than the general increase taking place between 2008 and 2011—specifically October, November, and December of 2008; December 2009; and January 2010. This data allows my research to focus on what exactly is happening before, during, and after these key months in order to determine which factors might be contributing to the drastic increase in homicides.

With all of this data in mind, Chapter 3 will determine which factors have impacted the homicide rates in Tijuana, starting in the mid 1980s to understand the history of the region. What contributed to the violence that starts in October 2008, and the relatively quick decline of homicides in 2011 compared to Ciudad Juárez and Mexico as a whole? How, if at all, is the Mérida Initiative related to the levels of violence in Tijuana?

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228 Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía, “Mortalidad.”
Assessing the Impacts of the Mérida Initiative in Tijuana Given Limited Data

As established in the previous two chapters, the implementation speeds of the Mérida Initiative were slow because of bureaucratic and personnel challenges in the United States and Mexico, and resources were not allocated until mid-2009 at the earliest. Furthermore, the specific data about the distribution location of Mérida funds and resources is lacking, which makes it challenging to assess the impacts of certain Mérida efforts. Still, I attempt to make claims about how the Mérida Initiative may have impacted organized crime related violence after mid-2009, operating on the assumption that the MI targets Tijuana as indicated by US State Department documents. It is important to apply the lessons from impact of the Mérida Initiative and the policies it supported in Mexico in Tijuana. Organized crime related violence is still a major problem that requires transnational cooperation, in Tijuana and the rest of Mexico, and care must be taken when deciding which policies to pursue so as to not exacerbate violence without permanently weakening transnational criminal organizations.

History of Violence and Drug Trafficking in Tijuana: Pre-2008

The history of violence and drug trafficking in Tijuana is very similar to that of Juárez. As argued by Political Scientist David Shirk, director of the Justice in Mexico Policy Research Initiative that is funded by the Mérida Initiative, many of the dynamics identified in “Juárez and Tijuana “illustrate that there are important commonalities between the two” locations. Both cities are historically, physically, and economically tied to the United States by their proximities

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229 Hunt, “The United States Is Sticking to What Doesn’t Work in the Mexican Drug War.” According to Edward Hunt in the source listed here, Justice in Mexico receives funding from the Mérida Initiative. This is important to recognize, because sources coming from the organization might be biased to affirm the success of the Initiative. Care has been taken to cross reference information cited by Justice in Mexico and David Shirk.

230 Shirk, “A Tale of Two Mexican Border Cities,” 482.
to the border and the U.S. cities of San Diego and El Paso. The Tijuana San Ysidro Port of Entry is the busiest crossing between the U.S. and Mexico, which also makes it a key location for the movement of illicit items—namely drugs and guns—between countries. Tijuana, like Juárez, is a key drug trafficking turf.

After the Guadalajara Cartel from the state of Sinaloa split amidst pressures from the United States after the murder of U.S. DEA Agent Enrique “Kiki” Camarena in 1985, Tijuana’s turf was given to the Arellano Félix brothers. The Arellano Félix family—“Seven brothers born between 1949 and 1969 (along with four sisters, two of whom, Alicia and Enedina, were also involved with the business), divided up their responsibilities based on each [sibling’s] skill set” to control their plaza. They would form what became known as the Tijuana Cartel, or Arellano Félix Organization, and become one of the most prominent transnational criminal organizations in Mexico over the coming years. They “cultivated ties to law enforcement and government officials—allegedly doling out $1 million a week in bribes”—to create their network of impunity in the city.

The split of the Guadalajara Cartel allocated the rest of the state of Baja California and the state of Sonora were given to El Chapo Guzmán and his partner Héctor Luis Palma Salazar, who organized the Sinaloa Cartel. Thus, the Sinaloa Cartel and the Tijuana Cartel were once allied under the same drug trafficking organization. However, today, their conflict is thought to be one of the main driving forces behind violence in the Tijuana area. Starting in the early 1990s, their

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232 The origins of the Guadalajara Cartel are discussed in greater detail in Chapter 2.
234 Langton, Gangland, Chapter 4.
alliance fully broke down, turning the Tijuana region into “a violent territory, containing 40% of all the crimes in the country” by the end of the decade.\(^\text{238}\)

The Tijuana and Sinaloa Cartels have been fierce rivals for years. Langland describes how “The Sinaloans turned to Tijuana to expand their territories, often resorting to gunfights” and other forms of violence.\(^\text{239}\) But the AFO was “more than willing to defend what was theirs” using violence and brutality in ways that most TCOs had not adopted yet.\(^\text{240}\) In 1992, “a dealer affiliated with the Sinaloans… traveled through [AFO] territory [and then] received a package containing his wife's head packed in dry ice.”\(^\text{241}\) In this moment, Langton notes, “it looked to many as though the two [organizations] were on the verge of all-out war.”\(^\text{242}\) Through a series of tense meetings, the AFO finally agreed to let the Sinaloa Cartel move through their territory, in exchange for a portion of their revenues.\(^\text{243}\) But then, the Sinaloa Cartel, seeking revenge for the death of their dealer’s wife, attacked a disco in Puerto Vallarta where the Arellano Félix brothers were visiting, killing 19 people.\(^\text{244}\) The brothers survived, and retaliated by attempting to kill El Chapo Guzmán himself. In May 1993, the Arellano Félix brothers sent gunmen to intercept El Chapo at the Guadalajara airport, striking and killing Mexican Cardinal Posadas Ocampo instead, as he rode in a vehicle similar to El Chapo’s.\(^\text{245}\) This is one of the most well-known examples of the collateral civilian damage of organized crime related violence in Mexico: a country with strong Catholic roots as a result of colonization. People were outraged by the death of a Cardinal. The Sinaloa Cartel was no doubt planning an attack of equal, if not higher, caliber against the AFO after the

\(^{238}\) Bezares Buenrostro, “Governing the Mexican Drug War,” 199-200.
\(^{239}\) Langton, *Gangland*, Chapter 4.
\(^{240}\) Langton, *Gangland*, Chapter 4.
\(^{241}\) Langton, *Gangland*, Chapter 4.
\(^{242}\) Langton, *Gangland*, Chapter 4.
\(^{243}\) Langton, *Gangland*, Chapter 4.
\(^{244}\) Langton, *Gangland*, Chapter 4.
near death of their leader. However, El Chapo and Héctor Luis Palma Salazar were “arrested by Mexican authorities in 1993,” weakening the Sinaloa Cartel temporarily.\textsuperscript{246}

This is a perfect example of how eliminating the leaders of TCOs, through what became known as the kingpin strategy, simply shifts the power dynamic towards another organization, and causes power struggles within the “headless” organizations. Without Sinaloa’s opposition, the AFO was able to grow to “unprecedented heights.”\textsuperscript{247} They established alliances with other trafficking organizations in Mexico, and “[dominated] the [drug] trade “from north to south.”\textsuperscript{248} Vanda Felbab-Brown, a Fellow in the Latin America Initiative and the 21\textsuperscript{st} Century Defense Initiative at the Brookings Institute, and expert on organized crime, describes how the “disruptions in leadership, with the so-called narcojuniors (sons and lieutenants of the older capos) replacing the captured leaders, destabilizes not only the individual DTOs, but also the balance of power among the Mexican” TCOs.\textsuperscript{249} Furthermore, Langton quotes Professor Luis Astorga, who researches drug trafficking at the Institute of Social Research of the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM) arguing that cutting “off the heads of an organization” is ineffective because “the business carries on…There are always people from within or outside the [TCO] that are waiting to take over.”\textsuperscript{250} In fact, it is these changing power dynamics that are usually “driving Mexico’s violence” according to Felbab-Brown.\textsuperscript{251}

Therefore, this strategy caused violence in the 1990s, and is still being used today, at a time where violence in Mexico is reaching unprecedented levels. This leads me to agree with Felbab-Brown, concluding that the kingpin strategy does not permanently weaken TCOs to the point that

\textsuperscript{246} PBS, “Drug Cartels.”
\textsuperscript{247} InSight Crime, “Tijuana Cartel.”
\textsuperscript{248} InSight Crime, “Tijuana Cartel.”
\textsuperscript{249} Felbab-Brown, \textit{Calderón’s Caldron}, 37 & 47.
\textsuperscript{250} Langton, \textit{Gangland}, Chapter 5.
\textsuperscript{251} Felbab-Brown, \textit{Calderón’s Caldron}, 37.
they cease to exist, as intended. Rather, the strategy causes the TCOs to adapt, and changes the dynamics between and within groups as leaders are replaced, often resulting in more violence during the process. The Mérida Initiative, through its support of the Government of Mexico’s efforts with the kingpin strategy, is indirectly contributing to rising levels of violence in Mexico.

Kingpin El Chapo was only temporarily eliminated, though, because he “escaped prison in 2001,” initiating a new round of violence between the Sinaloa and Tijuana Cartels.\textsuperscript{252} Ramón Félix ordered the assignation of a Sinaloa Cartel leader, Ismael Zambada “El Mayo” García, but he was killed instead. The story goes that Ramón Arellano Félix was in Mazatlán, a city in Sinaloa, to assassinate El Mayo.\textsuperscript{253} But then, he failed to stop at a police checkpoint, resulting in a car chase and shootout that killed him and a police officer.\textsuperscript{254} In “the subsequent shootout, Ramón, his associate and another police officer died.”\textsuperscript{255} At the time, Ramón was number two on the United States FBI’s Most Wanted List, only after Osama bin Laden, “on the basis that he had killed or ordered the murders of more than 300 people.”\textsuperscript{256} Osama bin laden was the mastermind behind the 9/11 terrorist attacks in the United States, which demonstrates the atrocities that Ramón must have committed to find himself second on the list. A \textit{Guardian} article describes how Román was the “world’s most powerful drugs baron,” known for his brutal tactics—like dissolving bodies in acid.\textsuperscript{257}

Then, a month later, Mexican authorities delivered another blow to the Tijuana Cartel when they arrested another leader, Benjamin Arellano Félix.\textsuperscript{258} Severely weakened without key

\begin{footnotes}
\item[252] InSight Crime, “Tijuana Cartel.”; Loudis, “El Chapo.”
\item[253] Langton, \textit{Gangland}, Chapter 5.
\item[254] Langton, \textit{Gangland}, Chapter 5.; Thompson, “World’s Biggest Drug Baron Killed in Mexico.”
\item[255] Langton, \textit{Gangland}, Chapter 5.
\item[256] Langton, \textit{Gangland}, Chapter 5.
\item[257] Thompson, “World’s Biggest Drug Baron Killed in Mexico.”
\item[258] Bezares Buenrostro, “Governing the Mexican Drug War,” 200-201.
\end{footnotes}
leadership, the Tijuana Cartel’s power declined rapidly.\textsuperscript{259} This weakness opened opportunities for
the Sinaloa Cartel to gain more prominence in the area, leading to more violence as the AFO was
not willing to give up their fight.\textsuperscript{260} The Mexican President at the time, Vicente Fox, ignored
increasing violence in the city, even as “local NGOs and businesses” in Tijuana requested federal
assistance in response to an “upsurge of abductions in the city.”\textsuperscript{261} When President Calderón took
office at the end of 2006, he responded to these calls for assistance.

\section*{Operación Baja California/Tijuana}

On January 2, 2007, President Calderón announced Operación Baja California/Tijuana, and sent approximately 3,000 soldiers and \textit{federales} to the state the next day, most of them stationed in the city of Tijuana.\textsuperscript{262} The operation was announced as “crime rates [in the city had] increased exponentially” and had the intention of eliminating criminals and their networks of impunity, and recovering public spaces and tranquility.\textsuperscript{263} They confiscated “all weapons from police officers and assumed all law-enforcement activities.”\textsuperscript{264} However, as seen in Ciudad Juárez, the deployment of federal authorities in Tijuana did not lead to decreasing levels of organized crime related violence or corruption. If anything, it added to the confusion and chaos as members of the military were accused of human rights violations such as torture.\textsuperscript{265}

Hector Eduardo Bezares Buenrostro, a PhD candidate in 2018 at the School of Geography, Politics, and Sociology at Newcastle University describes how the federales and police officers

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\item \textsuperscript{259} Beittel, “Mexico: Organized Crime and Drug Trafficking Organizations,” 18.
\item \textsuperscript{260} Lira et al., “The Resurgence of Violent Crime in Tijuana,” 4.
\item \textsuperscript{261} Bezares Buenrostro, “Governing the Mexican Drug War,” 200-201.
\item \textsuperscript{262} Bezares Buenrostro, “Governing the Mexican Drug War,” 195.; LADB Staff, “President Felipe Calderon Launches Ambitious Campaign Against Drug Cartels,” 1.; Langton, \textit{Gangland}, Chapter 7.
\item \textsuperscript{263} Bezares Buenrostro, “Governing the Mexican Drug War,” 214.
\item \textsuperscript{264} LADB Staff, “President Felipe Calderon Launches Ambitious Campaign Against Drug Cartels,” 1.
\item \textsuperscript{265} Bezares Buenrostro, “Governing the Mexican Drug War,” 215.
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“deceived, abused, extorted, tortured, and occasionally killed with impunity,” making the violence in Tijuana more complicated.\textsuperscript{266} Citizens in Tijuana did not have anyone to turn to for protection or justice. The military, placed in the city until the police forces could be vetted for corruption and connections to organized crime, were contributing to the violence. Often, the military thought they were arresting and abusing members of organized crime groups, torturing them to get more information about their operations or other people in their networks; but there was no way to know for certain if anyone was a member of a TCO. Sometimes civilians were caught on accident. As a result, the number of human rights abuses reported in the city increased with the arrival of the military, similar to what happened in Ciudad Juárez.\textsuperscript{267}

As a result of these practices, the federal presence in the city meant that civilians were more likely to be directly impacted by the increasing levels of violence. An interview completed by Bezares Buenrostro during his field work, and then translated for his dissertation, describes these ideas. When he asked a woman whose son had disappeared “what happened in Tijuana?,” she responded:

You’re not going to understand it ever. We ask the same question and there’s no answer, because it is difficult to understand that the police who are there to help and protect you don’t do it. When I went to file a report immediately a police’s pickup was put in front of my house to intimidate me. Who do you ask for help if they are the ones who are doing all of this? I speak from experience because one of the judiciales (the ministerial federal police) in charge of my son’s case was taken to Mexico City because he had decapitated his partner and a few civilians... and they are the ones supposedly who are looking after us? At some point if you were at some place and a police patrol got there, it was better to leave and avoid the possibility of a shooting. The peace of the city faded away, there wasn’t any way to discern who was who.\textsuperscript{268}

While the Mérida Initiative was not in place during this time, this incident demonstrates how much work was needed to dismantle corruption within Mexican institutions, a stated goal of

\textsuperscript{266} Bezares Buenrostro, “Governing the Mexican Drug War,” 196.  
\textsuperscript{267} Human Rights Watch, “Mexico Events of 2009.”  
\textsuperscript{268} Bezares Buenrostro, “Governing the Mexican Drug War,” 207.
the initiative. There were not enough resources allocated under the MI to fully vet every police officer and federal soldier for connections to organized crime, and there was no way to ensure that new people hired to replace those who were fired, did not accept a bribe once in their positions. As a result, the Mérida Initiative likely ended up delivering more resources and weapons to the military accused of the same corruption they were there to dismantle. While the MI is not solely responsible for this, because it aimed to support the efforts that Calderón’s administration was already taking to purge networks of impunity, it is partly responsible for the confusion and violence in Tijuana that resulted from federal military actions. At the time of the incident described above, the MI is not established in Tijuana, but the lesson still remains and must be applied. The military remained stationed in Tijuana for several years, and the same stories are present even after the initiative was implemented.

Operation Tijuana has been widely criticized because of its inability to curb violence, if not also for contributing to escalating conflict in the city. According to the Latin American Data Base in an article accessed through the University of New Mexico Digital Repository, Calderón had no choice to act against organized crime in Tijuana, both “to send a signal to organized crime” and also prove that his debated presidential nomination was not in vain, and that “he [could] establish the authority many Mexicans believe he didn’t gain legitimately, and use it to govern in an effective way.” This relates to Thomas Schelling’s concept of the indirect use of force, in which the message sent by an act is more important than the act itself. A classic example of this is the US decision to drop nuclear weapons on Hiroshima and Nagasaki during World War II. Even though the bombs were destructive and had tragic human costs, they were meant to send a message

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269 LADB Staff, “President Felipe Calderon Launches Ambitious Campaign Against Drug Cartels,” 1.
270 Schelling. *Arms and Influence*, 1-34.
to “the survivors in Tokyo.” The US was using violence, and the credible threat that more was to come, to coerce leaders in Japan to surrender. In the case of Mexico, Calderón’s decision to combat organized crime through Operation Tijuana served as a message to TCOs, that he was willing to do something, instead of allowing them to operate with the impunity they were used to. Unfortunately for Mexicans, his actions have contributed to more violence.

Unfortunately, TCOs also use violence as an indirect use of force, sending messages to adversaries that the next victim could be them if they try to interfere with their operations. This is the logic behind the display of bodies in public spaces. It is not enough to demonstrate a TCO’s strength through a rising death toll; the message is much more effective if your enemy can see the brutality you use to kill someone. June Beittel adds that “violence is used to intimidate government officials, and the general public.” The threat of the violence that is to come if you cross a TCO is sometimes enough to deter authorities from interfering with their business. The idea is that intimidated civilians and “an intimidated government can deflect effective law enforcement initiatives, [which] allows [TCOs] to operate largely undisturbed.” Then, when someone does try to combat the operations of a TCO, they have to follow through with their word, invoking brutality and violence, often publicly, to demonstrate that their threat was serious and maintain credibility. All of this contributes to the increasing levels of violence in Tijuana and throughout most of Mexico during the drug war.

Additionally, pressuring transnational criminal organizations simply pushes them into new areas where they will receive less opposition. Demonstrating this, Jorge Oliva Posada, a crime and security specialist at the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, criticized President Calderón

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for announcing his plan for Operation Tijuana before actually deploying the military to the city.\textsuperscript{274} This warning gave members of transnational criminal organizations time to prepare, “to pack their bags and flee,” and take their violence and operations elsewhere.\textsuperscript{275} This reinforces the idea that most efforts to combat organized criminal groups simply forces them to adapt to new conditions: be it operating in a new location, under new leadership, or in a new illicit business that allows them to make up for a loss in drug profits. Unfortunately, it is often their survival strategies that result in more violence that widely impacts civilians.

Along these lines, the Mérida Initiative supports actions that push TCOs into new locations, where they use violence in new ways, and expand into diverse business ventures to make up for a loss in profits. Therefore, unless you are addressing root causes of why people are easily recruited by TCOs on a wide scale level, and effectively rooting out all corruption within federal and local institutions, TCOs are always going to enjoy impunity. They are complex organizations that are resilient, and they are not afraid to use violence to get their way. The Mérida Initiative, while addressing community building opportunities through Pillar 4, does not do enough to address the root causes of violence. Setting up a community program here or there in a city just requires that TCOs go to a neighboring community to recruit new members. Moreover, stationing the military in one part of the city encourages TCOs move into a new location, which may cause them to invade the turf of another organization. At the time Operation Tijuana is implemented, the Mérida Initiative is not even established, but the lesson still remains.

Additionally, similar to what happened in Ciudad Juárez, the criminal groups in Tijuana were not afraid to fight back against the federales that were interfering with their operations. For example, in April of 2007 the army captured and injured AFO leader El Teo, who was taken to the

\textsuperscript{274} LADB Staff, “President Felipe Calderon Launches Ambitious Campaign Against Drug Cartels,” 3.
\textsuperscript{275} LADB Staff, “President Felipe Calderon Launches Ambitious Campaign Against Drug Cartels,” 3.
hospital for treatment. Members of the AFO stormed the hospital, took hostages, and initiated a three-hour long fight in attempt to rescue their leader. Eventually they gave up and fled the scene without El Teo, driving by state police vehicles that let them pass freely. El Teo would later be released from the hospital, returning to the AFO as a key leader of their operations in Tijuana.

Over the course of the next few months, it became clear to Calderón that combating organized crime in Mexico demanded resources that he could not quickly provide, and required bilateral cooperation from the United States, as the main destination for drugs originating in and passing through Mexico. President Calderón “criticized the Bush government for its lack of financial support in anti-drug efforts, [saying] ‘The United States is jointly responsible for what is happening to us…We cannot confront this problem alone.’” In June of 2007, the U.S. State Department “warned Americans to exercise extreme caution when visiting Mexico,” which led to Attorney General Eduardo Medina Mora criticizing the United States for not realizing that the existence of transnational criminal organizations is not just a “Mexican problem,” and that the “Americans had done nothing effective to reduce demand for illegal drugs.” These accusations, are perhaps what led to conversations about the Mérida Initiative, which was organized later that year. This reinforces the idea that the Mérida Initiative was established to reinforce tactics that Mexican President Calderón was already using, and that Mexico had been using for decades to combat TCOs. As a result, the initiative is at least partly responsible for the escalating violence that resulted from combatting transnational criminal organizations in Tijuana, and the rest of Mexico.

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276 Langton, Gangland, Chapter 7.
277 Langton, Gangland, Chapter 7.
278 LADB Staff, “President Felipe Calderon Launches Ambitious Campaign Against Drug Cartels,” 6.
279 Langton, Gangland, Chapter 7.
While the Mexican military was focusing on eliminating leaders of the AFO, the Sinaloa Cartel moved, once again, into the area—attempting to gain control of the Tijuana plaza. By the end of 2007, people began questioning whether the army’s presence in cities was helpful. “Murders and kidnappings were down slightly, but police corruption was still rampant,” and TCOs began recruiting a new group of people—minors—because they were less likely to “arouse suspicion and would, by constitutional law, not face stiff prison terms if caught.” This serves as another example of how TCOs simply change their tactics in response to local or national pressure, often creating a new class of victims in the process. Violence would escalate more in Tijuana over the next year, as Mexico and the United States reaffirmed their bilateral commitment to combating transnational criminal organizations in Mexico, and the Calderón administration continued his fight in the city under Operation Tijuana.

2008: Escalation of Drug War Violence, Internal Conflict Within the Tijuana Cartel

By 2008, violence around Mexico was increasing dramatically, as Calderón’s administration was taking action to combat the impunity network and operations of transnational criminal organizations. Tijuana, specifically, “became one of the most violent cities in Mexico.” Competition between the Sinaloa and Tijuana Cartels is thought to be the driving force behind the increasing homicide rate in the city. David Shirk describes how the arrests of AFO leaders “significantly weakened the [organization] and left the operations in the hands of Eduardo, the last of the founding brothers of the AFO, and his sister Enedina Arellano Félix.” With so many changes in leadership, members within the Tijuana Cartel began competing for power. This

280 Langton, Gangland, Chapter 7.
283 Shirk, “A Tale of Two Mexican Border Cities,” 496.
culminated in the violent split of the organization into two warring factions, after Eduardo was arrested in October of 2008 in a “a three-hour long gun battle erupted involving more than 100 police and federal soldiers.”\(^{284}\) After Eduardo’s arrest, the Tijuana Cartel split into two factions; one under nephew Luis Fernando Sánchez Arellano, or “El Ingeniero,” and the other under Teodoro García Simental, also known as “El Teo” or “Tres Letras.”\(^{285}\)

According to Table 9, October experienced nearly 140 homicides, an increase in nearly 300% since September, which also depicts the first time the homicide rate is greater than 100 in Tijuana since the start of the drug war. Vanda Felbab-Brown attributes the “dramatic wave of violence in Tijuana [that] began in 2008” to the fracturing of the AFO into two groups.\(^{286}\) A U.S. Congressional Research Service Report also describes how their “conflict for dominance led to extensive violence in the Tijuana area.”\(^{287}\) Additionally, the groups turned to “extortion…local drug distribution in Tijuana, human smuggling, and even [control of] the city’s prostitution enterprises” in order to make up for profit losses resulting from the splitting of resources between two organizations, on top of continued efforts by the Mexican government to combat TCO operations.\(^{288}\) Furthermore, El Ingeniero allied with the Beltrán Leyva Organization (formerly allied with the Sinaloa Cartel as discussed in Chapter 2) and “signed a nonaggression pact with the Zetas,” while “El Teo made a counter-alliance with the Sinaloa DTO.”\(^{289}\)

These complex and changing dynamics reinforce ideas discussed in Chapter 2. First, eliminating leaders of TCOs creates power struggles and instability within the organizations as

\(^{286}\) Felbab-Brown, *Calderón’s Caldron*, 2.
people fight to take their places. This leads to the splintering of TCOs into smaller groups that form strategic alliances with other organizations—that have the ability to break down and cause more violence in the future. Furthermore, competing TCOs capitalize on the weaknesses of leaderless TCOs to gain access to new territories and resources. Additionally, the splintering of transnational criminal organizations forces some groups to expand their business into other illicit areas to make up for money they are not making elsewhere. In this case, unfortunately, for many people in Mexico, violence work is just that, work. With a lack of other economic opportunities, many people join TCOs to support themselves and their families. This is especially true for people who are lower in the TCO hierarchy.

Ultimately, the Mérida Initiative was never designed to provide sufficient resources to accomplish all of its stated goals. Rather, it provided limited financial support to the Government of Mexico, which was already spending billions fighting the drug war. Still, through this limited financial and technical assistance, the MI supported strategies that contributed to rising violence in Mexico, such as the use of the kingpin strategy, and through supplying potentially corrupt and untrained military forces with weapons and intelligence capabilities. It does not address major factors that are vital to the ways in which TCOs operate throughout Mexico in response to external pressure. As such, the initiative does not consider how to combat changing dynamics between and within TCOs, or prepare for how to respond when organizations branch into new industries or locations to survive amidst government pressure. The initiative seems to operate under the assumption that the pressure TCOs experience will be immense enough to permanently debilitate the organization. This is far from the truth, as they have historically adapted to changing environments using a variety of survival strategies. By not considering these things, the Mérida Initiative supports Mexican practice that add to existing confusion and chaos, often with human
costs and increasing levels of violence and brutality. Furthermore, the Mérida Initiative does not adequately address the root economic conditions that drive people to seek employment from TCOs in the first place.

**Decreasing Violence in Tijuana: Arrest of El Teo and Truce with the Sinaloa Cartel**

In January of 2010, during the peak of drug war violence in Tijuana, El Teo was arrested. After this, it appears as though El Ingeniero consolidated power over the Arellano Félix Organization, and established a truce-like agreement with the Sinaloa Cartel—giving Sinaloa main control over the key Tijuana turf. This truce, also known as a *pax mafiosa*, “ensured a period of peace among” the TCOs for the time being. As a result, violence decreased in the city. The homicide data presented in the tables in this chapter confirm this. In December 2009 and January 2010, the homicide rate in Tijuana was 234 and 218 respectively. In February, the homicide rate started its downward trajectory towards pre-drug war levels, with February experiencing 116 homicides. Over the course of 2010 and until 2015, the homicide rate in Tijuana remained steady or decreased, representing that the feud between the factions of the AFO, and the Sinaloa Cartel, were likely responsible for the high levels of violence in the city. Therefore, while Mexican government officials claimed that the decrease of violence in Tijuana was a result of their efforts combatting TCOs using military force, the data presented in this chapter demonstrates that it is more complicated than that. In fact, it is likely that military intervention in Tijuana led to the arrest of key TCO leaders, which initiated power struggles within and between organizations, leading to

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the increase in violence in the city as organizations sought to capitalize on other groups’ weaknesses, and control a finite number of resources to maximize profits.

Unfortunately, the Mexican Government sees the reduction of violence as a sign that their pressure against organized crime is working, and that they should continue using the same tactics to combat TCOs. However, Vanda Felbab-Brown warns that:

The big danger that the violence reduction is the result of victory by one criminal group rather than of greater effectiveness of law enforcement institutions is that such “narcopeace” is ultimately vulnerable to changes in balances of power in the criminal market. Should another group operating in Tijuana increase its strength relative to the Sinaloa DTO, whether through its own growth or as a result of law enforcement actions against the Sinaloa Cartel, Tijuana’s narcopeace could unravel. It is not clear that Tijuana’s law enforcement institutions would have the deterrent capacity to keep a renewed power contestation from once again visibly and bloodily spilling out on the city’s streets.293

In other words, if key leaders of the Sinaloa Cartel are eliminated, perhaps through support from Mérida Initiative resources or funding, the Tijuana Cartel could capitalize on Sinaloa’s temporary weakness by trying to regain control of their turf. Scholarship on this is relatively clear. However, the Government of Mexico continues to do what they have always done to combat TCOs, making the re-emergence of violence inevitable, by challenging the delicate balance of TCOs operating in Mexico.

This is exactly what appears to have happened in Tijuana since 2015. Many people attribute the recent rise in violence in the city as a result of the weakened Tijuana Cartel attempting to crawl back into its home territory, challenging the dominant Sinaloa Cartel.294 Furthermore, it is suspected that another TCO, the Cartel Jalisco Nueva Generación (CJNC) is moving into the city.295 Following the arrest of Drug Lord El Chapo Guzmán in 2016, the Sinaloa Cartel has been

293 Felbab-Brown, Calderón’s Caldron, 4
perceived as a weaker link, and the CJNC is thought to be collaborating with the Tijuana Cartel to move into the key trafficking territory of Tijuana that has been controlled by the Sinaloa Cartel in recent years.\textsuperscript{296} However, like we saw in the first wave of violence, these confrontations and changing dynamics often lead to more violence. The narcopeace in Tijuana has been disturbed in recent years, with the homicide rates between 2017 and 2019 surpassing violence experienced during the first wave of drug war violence, perfectly matching the analysis September 2011 analysis of Felbab-Brown.

\section*{Conclusion}

Unfortunately, the Government of Mexico’s premature declaration of victory against TCOs operating in Tijuana in 2011 does not accurately reflect the nature of the conflict and violence. Homicides have since increased to unprecedented levels again, because of their continued use of the same strategies that have contributed to violence over the last several decades. Even though the Mérida Initiative is fully in effect by the start of the second wave of violence, the homicide rate in Tijuana is greater than it was during the start of the drug war. Tijuana, and Mexico in general, still struggles to combat impunity and corruption; the main TCOs that have historically existed are still players in this complex situation, and new ones have emerged as a result of intra and inter TCO conflict. In many locations, the military still operates in places where the local police used to have jurisdiction, which still threatens the human rights of civilians.\textsuperscript{297} Therefore, the Mérida Initiative has not restored calm in Mexico because the homicide rate in the country is reaching new heights. In fact, the MI supported Mexican efforts in Tijuana that only exacerbated the conflict between the Sinaloa and Tijuana Cartels. The restoration of peace in the city is a result

\textsuperscript{296} Bezares Buenrostro, “Governing the Mexican Drug War,” 234.; InSight Crime, “Tijuana Cartel.”
\textsuperscript{297} Isacson and Brewer, “Mexico: The Meaning of the Cienfuegos Case.”
of changing dynamics between the two organizations, not a Mexican government success story. Moreover, the arrest of TCO leaders over the next several years propels the Sinaloa and Tijuana Cartels to engage in another round of fighting that proved to be more violent than the first. The Cartel Jalisco Nueva Generación, then, moves into the region hoping to gain control over resources and turf while the Sinaloa Cartel and AFO are distracted and fighting each other.

This investigation proves that, like in Juárez, immense increases in the number of homicides in Tijuana are a result of a variety of complex factors that interact with each other. These factors include: the increasing number and extremity of battles within and between TCOs as their operations evolve under new leadership and in the face of new pressures; their move into new territories and begin challenging other organizations for resources and power; and the presence of military forces that are not properly trained to protect human rights abuses or interact with civilians, who may have their own ties to TCOs.

However, one of the most important drivers of violence was local competition between TCOs for control over plazas and its resources. In both Tijuana and Ciudad Juárez, the Sinaloa Cartel attempted to capitalize on existing conflict and weakness to gain enemy territory, leading to more violence. As succinctly noted by David Shirk, “In both cases, violence was sparked by the dynamics of competition between criminal organizations vying for control of lucrative smuggling routes along the border, production zones, and consumer markets in the United States... The pattern of conflict among these organizations is often unpredictable, since they are influenced by [context specific] factors [such] as leadership changes (and arrests), personal rivalries, and bad business deals.”298 As a result, all of the factors that led to the elimination of key leaders of TCOs, in Juárez and Tijuana, are also responsible for the violence experienced in Mexico. Shirk adds that “In both

298 Shirk, “A Tale of Two Mexican Border Cities,” 489.
cities, violence erupted because of an attempt by the Sinaloa Cartel to take over these territories…strategic entry points to the US drug market.”\textsuperscript{299}

Already controlling the rest of the state of Baja California, gaining control of Tijuana would mean that the Sinaloa Cartel would dominate much of the western part of Mexico. Power struggles between the rivaling TCOs (El Ingeniero vs. El Teo vs. Sinaloa Cartel) increased violence and homicides in Tijuana, as they all used violence against their rivals, and sometimes civilians, to demonstrate their strength and deter the other organization from challenging their control of resources and the key trafficking routes into Southern California and beyond.

Chapter Four applies what I have learned about combatting the operations of transnational criminal organizations to provide recommendations for the future of the Mérida Initiative and other bilateral security cooperation between the US and Mexico.

\textsuperscript{299} Shirk, “A Tale of Two Mexican Border Cities,” 490.
Chapter 4: Conclusion

Mi hija no es un número. Rubí tiene nombre, rostro y apellido. Mi hija es una niña linda, una niña llena de amor, con sueños e ilusiones. Yo extraño a esta niña como no tienen ni idea. Nosotros, su familia, la extraña y recordamos cada día de lo que ella hacía. Tiene una familia que la ama y que la seguirá amando por siempre.300

— Araceli Salcedo Jímenez, Anyone’s Child México

This quote comes from a woman named Araceli, a mother and advocate who shared her Testimony with Anyone’s Child: Families for Safer Drug Control, an international organization that connects people whose families have been impacted by drug laws and advocates for the legalization of drugs as a way to eliminate the root causes of drug related violence.301 Araceli’s daughter, Fernanda Rubí was kidnapped from a club in September of 2012 in Veracruz, Mexico when she was twenty one years old. Her testimony reminds us of the human cost of this violence, a perspective we cannot lose when relying on statistics and data as I have in earlier chapters.

The research question in this thesis is significant because each homicide tally represents a human life lost, and another family that is mourning. This is why it is important for policies like the Mérida Initiative to be crafted with care and intentionality, with respect for the needs and wants of Mexicans and the Mexican government, and monitored to assess impacts to ensure that they are not furthering harm or violence. As criticized by the US Government Accountability Office, the Mérida Initiative was not monitored closely by the US State Department, meaning that much of

300 “But my daughter is more than a statistic. She has a name, she has a face. She is a beautiful girl and so full of love, with huge dreams and aspirations. I miss Rubi like you can’t imagine. Her family miss her so much. We remember her every single day; we love her and we will keep loving her forever.” Translation from https://anyoneschild.org/araceli/. Salcedo Jimenez, “Araceli (México).”
301 I encourage you to spend time exploring this resource, and engaging with their interactive documentary based on Mexican drug war violence. https://anyoneschild.org/
the data that is needed to assess the effectiveness of components of the initiative is not available.\textsuperscript{302} As a result, the United States Congress has had to support a multi-billion dollar initiative without proper data or documentation, which unfortunately, led to the support of Mexican government actions that contributed to the increasing levels of violence in Mexico since the start of the guerra contra al narcotráfico.

The Mérida Initiative did not provide enough money to the Mexican government to effectively fight organized crime groups and their operations, especially in comparison to the money and resources the Mexican government was already planning to use to fight the drug war. However, the Mérida Initiative appears to have supported Mexican actions that exacerbated conflict between and within transnational criminal organizations, which contributed to the increasing levels of violence in the country as TCPS competed for status and territory. To start, the MI provided intelligence and military capabilities to Mexican forces that were used to arrest or kill leaders of TCOs. This tactic, also known as the kingpin strategy, while intended to permanently weaken TCOs, leads to more violence as the resilient organizations adapt to new pressures, often expanding their business into new explicit markets to make up for lost profits, and employing more strategic violence to posture strength and control to rival forces. Additionally, the Mérida Initiative allowed US and Mexican authorities to seize more drugs, which caused TCOs to turn to other profit-making methods, such as human trafficking and extortion, that are more violent and have larger impacts on civilians. Without addressing the root causes of why people in TCOs rely on drug trafficking to make money, efforts to interfere with their profit will be unsuccessful at deterring TCOs from their operations. Finally, the Mérida Initiative supported the increased militarization of parts of Mexico by providing funding and resources to the military and local

\textsuperscript{302} United States Government Accountability Office, “Mérida Initiative.”
authorities, which has led to increasing human rights abuses and confusion. As military forces inevitably formed and maintained ties with criminal organizations in the area, civilians did not know who they could trust. Local and federal forces were often involved in the torturing and assault of civilians, masking their actions as efforts to catch the criminals working for the TCOs. Therefore, future policies must also address root causes of why authorities accept bribes from and form relationships with TCOs in the first place, in order to be successful at rooting out corruption. Of course while it is hard to say with confidence what specific policies should do to address violence in Mexico, it is clear that the Mérida Initiative was widely insufficient at doing what it was intended to do: “Combat illicit narcotics and reduce organized crime,” providing us some guidance on what not to do. The following conclusion explores some details about why this is so, and what alternative options to the Mérida Initiative might look like, with respect to the needs and goals of the Mexican government.

The End of the Mérida Initiative: What Comes Next?

In recent years, many members of the Mexican government have been vocal about putting an end to the Mérida Initiative. Current Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO) campaigned on the promise to reduce violence in the country. He said he would put the kingpin strategy to rest after his predecessors have failed to reduce violence with that tactic. He even “coined the phrase ‘abrazos no balazos’ (hugs not bullets) to describe his approach toward improving security in Mexico.” Yet, he is still fighting transnational criminal organizations with militarization. In 2019, he started deploying his newly created National Guard to regions around

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304 AMLO’s term began on December 1, 2018. Sandin and McCormick, “‘Abrazos No Balazos.’”
305 Sandin and McCormick, “‘Abrazos No Balazos.’”
Mexico experiencing high homicide rates.\textsuperscript{306} Vanda Felbab-Brown explains that the National Guard is often justified as an alternative to continued use of “the Mexican military for domestic law enforcement. However, [AMLO] has created a new structure combining military forces and Federal Police forces” to build the National Guard, where many of the leaders are from the military.\textsuperscript{307} Therefore, the creation of the National Guard does not adequately address the problems of continued reliance on the Mexican military to fight the drug war on a local level. Furthermore, as Felbab-Brown argues, “the continual disruptions of and change to institutional reform often divert energies from painstakingly difficult but necessary reform from existing federal, state, and particularly local police forces.”\textsuperscript{308} Creating a National Guard comprised of former police officers and members of the military does not address the corruption and violent roots partly responsible for the violent conditions in the country. This example demonstrates the difficulty of fighting the war on drugs in Mexico. During AMLO’s presidential campaign, many felt hopeful that he would change tactics in the Drug War, and make significant process in decreasing levels of violence in the country. However, homicide rates continue to rise in Mexico, with 2020 being one of the most violent years in history.\textsuperscript{309} Furthermore, AMLO is using largely the same strategies as his predecessors, a product of bureaucratic inertia and institutionalized corruption. As a result, combating organized crime related violence remains an important task for the Mexican government, and the United States has a continued interest in the matter because of the transnational nature of the problem.

\textsuperscript{306} Felbab-Brown, “AMLO’s Security Policy,” 2.
\textsuperscript{307} Felbab-Brown, “AMLO’s Security Policy,” 2.
\textsuperscript{308} Felbab-Brown, “AMLO’s Security Policy,” 18.
\textsuperscript{309} The Associated Press, “Mexico’s Homicide Rate Stayed High in 2020 Despite Pandemic.”
However, the Mérida Initiative seems to be coming to an end as Mexican officials have recently openly criticized the MI, and have even gone far enough to say that it is over.\textsuperscript{310} Then head of the Office of the Secretary of Foreign Affairs (SRE), Fabián Medina, explained the need to end the Mérida Initiative in an article published on November 28, 2020 by a Mexican news organization called \textit{El Universal}. In the article, he said that “Ya no habrá Iniciativa Mérida, estamos finalizando lo que traía ese mecanismo. La buena vecindad tiene que partir del respeto mutuo y de la cooperación, para resolver problemas comunes.”\textsuperscript{311} In other words, Medina claims the initiative is ending, and that cooperation between the US and Mexico must come from a place of respect and cooperation. Furthermore, he goes on to say that the MI does not currently address the needs of Mexico, and instead caters to US interests.

La cooperación entre Estados Unidos y México se planteará con base en las necesidades de nuestro gobierno para atender los problemas que atañen a nuestro país, y a cambio de nada. Anteriormente Washington ordenaba y México acataba; planteaba su cooperación en términos de lo que a ellos les convenía, y en términos de lo que ellos querían darnos: computadoras, binomios caninos, helicópteros, esas no son las necesidades de México.\textsuperscript{312}

Therefore, any future cooperation between the United States and México must be more bilateral, rather than prioritizing the convenience and goals of the United States. Even though the initiative was created in 2007 in recognition of common US-Mexican problems, over time Mérida has shifted to align with the goals of the United States, without regard for the needs of Mexico.

In another article, Mexican Secretary of Foreign Affairs, Marcelo Ebrard, says that “Por lo que hace a Estados Unidos, su congreso, nosotros respetamos su ámbito de competencia, pero en

\textsuperscript{310} García, “Se Acabó La Iniciativa Mérida.”
\textsuperscript{311} “There will no longer be the Mérida Initiative, we are finalizing what that mechanism had. Good neighborliness has to start from mutual respect and cooperation, to solve common problems.” My translation. García, “Se Acabó La Iniciativa Mérida.”
\textsuperscript{312} “Cooperation between the United States and Mexico will be based on the needs of our government to address the problems that affect our country, and in exchange for nothing. Previously, Washington ordered and Mexico complied; they raised their cooperation in terms of what was convenient for them, and in terms of what they wanted to give us: computers, canine pairs, helicopters, these are not Mexico's needs.” My Translation. García, “Se Acabó La Iniciativa Mérida.”
el caso de México no compartimos ese punto de vista y no le hemos solicitado a Estados Unidos ningún helicóptero, armas o ese tipo de cosas.” In essence, resources sent to Mexico from the United States through the Mérida Initiative have not been helpful, at least from the perspective of the AMLO administration. Mexican officials did not ask for these resources. Furthermore, Ebrard notes that “la instrucción presidencial es no aplicar esos recursos,” since the initiative is no longer “un acuerdo bilateral ni un tratado firmado entre México y Estados Unidos” due to its lack of concern for the México’s needs.

This indicates that key policy makers in the Mexican government consider the Mérida Initiative ineffective at doing what it was intended to do when it was created in 2007. Rather, the MI shifted over time to prioritize the needs and desires of policy makers in the US, rather than providing assistance that the Government of Mexico sought after: namely money for development and employment opportunities. Therefore, any bilateral policies that replace the Mérida Initiative must be better about deferring to the needs and goals of the Mexican government. However, it is also important to note that these Mexican officials also have an interest in shifting blame to the United States for the failure of the Mérida Initiative. Bilateral focus on drug war violence does make sense, and Mexico should attempt to advocate for their needs and negotiate with the United States as the Mérida Initiative concludes, and a new era of cooperation begins.

Moreover, the Mexican government has asked that future assistance from the US occurs on their own terms, and “y a cambio de nada,” or in exchange for nothing. This is complicated because the United States will not support programs and policies that do not benefit the US.

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313 “As regards the United States, its Congress, we respect its sphere of competence, but in the case of Mexico we do not share that point of view and we have not asked the United States for any helicopter, weapons or that kind of thing.” My Translation. Domínguez, “Iniciativa Mérida ya quedó sin efecto.”
314 “the presidential instruction is not to apply those resources,” … “a bilateral agreement nor a treaty signed between Mexico and the United States.” My Translation. Domínguez, “Iniciativa Mérida ya quedó sin efecto.”
315 Domínguez, “Iniciativa Mérida ya quedó sin efecto.”
316 García, “Se Acabó La Iniciativa Mérida.”
However, long term stability in Mexico is a US interest, and there can be more deference to Mexico’s ideas for combating the transnational nature of TCO violence, especially since US initiatives have repeatedly failed.

Perhaps one option is for the US to focus more on addressing the demand for drugs on a domestic level. However, this is challenging because it is difficult to reduce drug demand without forcing people to go to new lengths to access drugs. Advocates of drug legalization argue that the only option for addressing the root causes of TCO related violence is to legalize drugs. However, the evidence gathered in this thesis indicates that the prevalence of transnational criminal organizations and their violent tactics in Mexico goes beyond drug trafficking. As we have seen over the past several years under the Mérida Initiative, interfering with the profits of transnational criminal organizations does not permanently weaken these organizations. Instead, TCOs adapt and expand their operations into new profit generating businesses in order to make up for financial losses. It is possible that legalizing drugs will force transnational criminal organizations to rely even more heavily on human trafficking, extortion, and new and more extreme civilian facing violent tactics. Unless efforts are taken to also address the economic reasons that people become members of transnational criminal organizations, and corruption in the Mexican state is adequately addressed, violence likely to persist in Mexico.

As a result, US cooperation with Mexico, and unilateral Mexican actions, should focus on creating economic opportunities for Mexican citizens. In theory, if people have the option to choose between joining a TCO, or working a well-paying job with good working conditions, they are less inclined towards TCOs. Creating a new bilateral security cooperation to replace the Mérida Initiative.

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317 There are expansive studies on drug supply and demand in economics. Miron, “Commentary: Legalize Drugs to Stop Violence.”
Initiative, therefore, is perhaps not about immediately addressing the security facet of the problem. Rather, addressing the economic aspect of organized crime related violence now will have an impact on security in the future. This observation also illustrates how economics and security, as well as domestic and international politics, are deeply intertwined.

Unfortunately, if we have learned one thing from the Mérida Initiative it is that creating bilateral policies between the US and Mexico takes time. It is likely that the impacts of new economic and development policies would not be felt for several years. Therefore, we must still take action now address the violent conditions in Mexico at the present moment, because each day of inaction represents more human lives dramatically impacted by physical and emotional violence. Even so, action must be taken intentionally, and with critical thought around the tactics used. We cannot afford to try the same practices that we know have not lowered levels of violence in the past. Doing the same thing over and over again will produce similar results. The ending of the Mérida Initiative presents an opportunity to rethink the strategies used to fight the war on drugs, and to take actions that do a better job of addressing the domestic and international root causes of organized crime related violence in Mexico.
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