TEN YEARS OF VIGILANTES IN MEXICO

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**In February 2013, a couple hundred armed men gathered in the heart of the Tierra Caliente region in western Mexico. They called themselves *Autodefensas de Michoacán* (Self-Defence Forces of Michoacán) and asserted that they would combat and wipe out the Caballeros Templarios or ‘Templarios’ (the Knights Templar Cartel), a criminal organization that dominated most of the state.**

However, 10 years after the autodefensas arose to re-establish peace and security, Michoacán remains a crucial region for cocaine import and trafficking, methamphetamine production, and extensive extortion and protection rackets targeting local businesses as well as multibillion-dollar export agricultural industries such as lime, berries and avocado production. Michoacán has remained one of the five most violent states in Mexico, with a homicide rate of 51 per 100 000 inhabitants in 2022, and in 2021 became the state with the highest rate of internal forced displacement in the country, with a total of 13 515 displaced persons.

How has the landscape of violence in Michoacán evolved over the last decade? Why have vigilante groups multiplied? How closely tied are they to criminal groups and public authorities? What role do they play in regulating violence and governing regions historically marked by the war on drugs?

Reflecting on the past 10 years, our latest report, **Ten years of vigilantes: The Mexican *autodefensas*,** focuses on the political nature of the autodefensa movement, aiming to form core policy questions and identify challenges.

The report shows how the relationships between the government, criminal actors and armed civilian groups have created a context of instability, which poses enormous challenges to public security, and violence prevention and reduction at the local level. The report analyzes how the country’s successive governments, by maintaining informal and formal dialogue and support of local strongmen without consolidating strong institutions and capacities for violence reduction, have indirectly contributed to turning violent intermediaries into crucial allies for local governance. This has, in turn, encouraged a form of public security outsourcing and fed the power of strongmen who eventually compete for local interests and resources – licit and illicit – and seek to maintain their position as government proxies, feeding the cycle of violence and instability.

The high levels of conflict observed in Michoacán over the past 10 years show that authorities have yet to find strategies to reduce systemic violence and avoid fuelling the region’s territorial fragmentation, currently divided into dozens of fiefdoms over which local bosses exert social, political and economic control.

When authorities cannot offer transparent security and justice responses, they contribute to outsourcing state tasks to local strongmen. Although this decision might appear efficient in the short term – for example, if it contributes to a sudden drop in homicides in some territories – the consolidation of these informal leaders’ power de-legitimizes the state as the sole guarantor of order and security, and exempts the authorities from their obligations to citizens.

This has consequences for social and democratic life at the local and regional levels. Within the territories dominated by violent actors, it is increasingly challenging for the authorities, or any civil society initiative, to propose alternatives to these armed leaders, thus reducing political participation and representation, and promoting the use of arms as a key resource for governance. In these regions, engaging in politics unarmed becomes extremely dangerous or virtually impossible.

The report highlights three key findings:

* Despite the efficiency and legitimacy that some autodefensa groups may enjoy, public security cannot be left in private hands. The different levels of government must be responsible for violence prevention and reduction. The federal and state governments must continue their public-security initiatives, with a long-term institutional commitment. The government of Michoacán’s fund for strengthening peace (Fortapaz), aimed at supporting the state’s municipal police, is an example of good practice.
* By failing to institutionalize and sustain public-security strategies, authorities indirectly contribute to the consolidation of informal leaders, allowing these actors to provide parallel or alternative protection services, conflict resolution, and accesses to services and resources, as well as to impose their dominance through the control of licit and illicit markets, and over local political life.
* Informal agreements between public authorities and local leaders have serious political consequences, fuelling chronic instability and long cycles of violence. They also limit political spaces to other forms of citizen participation, as it becomes increasingly dangerous to do so (as illustrated by the assassinations of activists, journalists and public servants). Several civil society activists consulted in Michoacán stated that the current conditions of insecurity prevent them from participating in any public activity.

These dynamics require deep immersion within the country’s communities. Policy solutions will remain unattainable in the absence of careful, timely diagnoses of local situations and crises, and a strong commitment by municipal, state and federal authorities to transparency and accountability in the building of institutional responses to violence and insecurity.

The report **Ten years of vigilantes: The Mexican *autodefensas*** is available in English and Spanish.

If you are interested in covering this story or speaking with the author, Romain Le Cour Grandmaison, senior expert at the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, please contact us at latam@globalinitiative.net.

**About the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime**

The GI-TOC is a non-profit international organization comprising a network of over 600 independent global and regional experts. The GI-TOC seeks to open new lines of analysis to provide creative solutions to the challenges of organized crime, and to serve as an exchange and collaboration platform among governments, civil society, scholars, the private sector and other actors. Founded in 2013 and headquartered in Geneva, the GI-TOC has representation on every continent (more information [here](https://globalinitiative.net/our-story)).

**About GI-TOC Latin America**

The foundation for the GI-TOC’s work in Latin America began in 2017 with the launch of the #GIResilience Project in Mexico, a pilot initiative to document community responses to organized crime and boost local resilience to it. In 2018, our work expanded to Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Costa Rica and Panama to understand extortion, build local capacities against it, and work on innovative approaches to prevent and control it. The GI-TOC's work in Latin America aims to advance policies that counter organized crime and build community resilience through a human rights-based approach. Additionally, through the Resilience Fund, our organization has supported crime prevention projects and community resilience initiatives with grassroots organizations and community members.

Today, the GI-TOC’s presence in the region covers 11 countries: Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras, Haiti, Colombia, Venezuela, Ecuador, Peru, Bolivia, Brazil and Paraguay (more information [here](https://globalinitiative.net/initiatives/gitoc-latam/)).