



**GLOBAL
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AGAINST TRANSNATIONAL
ORGANIZED CRIME

TEN YEARS OF VIGILANTES

THE MEXICAN *AUTODEFENSAS*



Romain Le Cour Grandmaison

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Although they were relatively short-lived, the Michoacán *autodefensas* – literally translated as ‘self-defence’ groups – are a particularly fruitful case study for analyzing armed vigilantism and its connection with criminal groups in Mexico. Ten years ago, in February 2013, a couple hundred armed men gathered in the heart of the Tierra Caliente region, in the state of Michoacán, 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. After two years of mobilization, which brought in more than 15 000 armed men across 34 municipalities in Michoacán, these vigilante groups managed to dismantle the cartel.¹

The members of this mostly male rural movement sought to do what the government would not in the response to organized crime and racketeering, all while calling upon the government to support them with political and military resources. This is the paradox of the *autodefensas*: while they professed to belong to a long tradition of localism and self-help, taking justice into their own hands, they simultaneously fed a demand for more state presence and intervention, mainly by actively backing their uprising.² The groups succeeded. While violent clashes, assassinations and arrests unfolded over the course of two years, the federal government also launched an unprecedented process of negotiation between armed civilians and public authorities, and the *autodefensas* went from being illegally armed civilians to becoming partly ‘legalized’ and legitimated through the creation of a new local police force, the Fuerza Rural (rural force).

Yet, 10 years after the *autodefensas* arose to re-establish peace and security, Michoacán remains one of the most violent Mexican states. The region is not only one of the five most violent states in the country, it also experienced a 186.9 per cent rise in homicides between 2015 and 2021. In 2022, Michoacán ranked fourth in the country for intentional homicides, with a total of 2 423 or 51 homicides per 100 000 inhabitants.³

Michoacán is still home to dozens of criminal and armed groups. In recent years, it became the site of a particularly violent confrontation between one of the currently most powerful Mexican criminal organizations, the Jalisco New Generation Cartel (Cartel Jalisco Nueva Generación – CJNG), and a coalition of local criminal groups and former *autodefensa* groups, the Cárteles Unidos (United Cartels). The state remains a crucial zone 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, berry and avocado production.⁴



Graffiti of Jalisco New Generation Cartel, Michoacán, 2021. © *Romain Le Cour Grandmaison*

Over the past decade, the political economy of violence has not followed a linear trajectory. This report identifies four phases that have shaped the current situation in Michoacán. First, the creation and expansion of the autodefensas, their fight against the Templars and their eventual partial institutionalization as part of the Fuerza Rural, between 2013 and 2015. Second, a subsequent stage in which control was consolidated in the hands of those leaders who had accumulated resources and control over licit and illicit markets thanks to their involvement in the autodefensas between 2015 and 2018. Third, a period of violent break up of alliances among dominant criminal groups (pitting the United Cartels against the CJNG), which led to what locals now call 'the war', between 2019 and 2022.⁵ And, finally, the current period of apparent stability and underlying tensions in the rural part of the state, while urban violence has driven the Michoacán homicide rate up.

Michoacán serves as a case study to understand armed vigilantism, organized crime and political-criminal practices because of its decades-long history of state interventions, drug trafficking and production; the emergence of well-organized and powerful drug cartels; the presence of multiple types of community police and self-defence groups; political violence; a booming multibillion-dollar agricultural export economy and chronic violence. Reflecting on the past 10 years, this report will focus on the political nature of the autodefensa movement, aiming to form core policy questions and identify challenges: 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 that historically have been marked by the war on drugs? Should the Mexican government continue dialoguing and negotiating with these armed groups?

To answer these questions, the report examines the processes that led to a dialogue between armed civilian leaders and the Mexican federal government but also how the former have become crucial political bosses who control accesses to strategic resources, licit and illicit economic markets and the networks that connect citizens with public authorities. This report documents the emergence of a new set of power brokers who organize and use violence to dominate local governance, and analyzes how the government is able to co-opt, repress or institutionalize armed groups in contemporary Mexico. The report also shows that the federal government, by agreeing to communicate formally and

informally with these local strongmen – be they vigilante leaders, criminal bosses, party activists or business elites – ends up promoting coercion and violence as key tools of governance, thus limiting, or even preventing, unarmed, citizen-led political participation and representation.

This paper will first focus on the history and the modus operandi of the Michoacán autodefensas to show how their capacity to rise up, arm themselves and control territory is key to maintaining public order and an open dialogue with authorities. It then reflects on the joint regulation of violence by public and private actors, demonstrating how the government tends to promote dialogue with armed leaders, rather than with non-coercive interlocutors. Finally, it shows how the relationships between the government, criminal actors and armed civilian groups are shaped by continuous dialogue, tensions and conflicts. In this process, no single actor has total control, which produces a constant instability that poses enormous challenges to public security, violence prevention and reduction, and resilience.

Key findings

- The mobilization of the autodefensas between 2013 and 2015 – and the political economy of violence that has prevailed since then – shows that armed leaders have become political bosses who control access to strategic resources, licit and illicit economic markets and the networks that connect citizens and public authorities.
- In Michoacán, one of the most violent states in Mexico, the past 10 years offer a vivid example of the emergence of power brokers who use violence to dominate governance. They also reveal how the government has been able to co-opt, repress or institutionalize armed groups in contemporary Mexico.
- The successive governments of Enrique Peña Nieto and Andrés Manuel Lopez Obrador have not been able to provide a solid, formal and transparent framework for the negotiations they led with local strongmen in order to bring peace to the region. This leads to a lack of institutional sustainability, and indirectly fuels coercion and violence as key tools for governance, thus limiting, or even preventing, unarmed, citizen-led political participation and representation.
- The increase in the number of violent actors in Mexico, including drug trafficking groups and autodefensas, does not mean that the state has withdrawn; instead, it shows that negotiations between authorities, armed civilians and criminal groups vying to govern vast parts of the country have transformed.
- In many areas of Mexico, public order does not imply the absence of violence but rather a set of rules in place to govern its use by public and private actors, and to control access to power and authority.
- Authorities are open to working discreetly with local strongmen because they value their ability to regulate violence and maintain order at the local level – until they seize too much autonomy and break away from the conditions set by authorities. As soon as the government senses social instability, it can repress and replace these leaders with others more inclined to follow the rules.
- The government of President Peña Nieto, by organizing and promoting a dialogue with strongmen and armed leaders between 2013 and 2015, indirectly contributed to their recognition as legitimate interlocutors and allies. In doing so, it also implied that weapons and force can be used to seize or maintain power. ■

Methodology

The material presented in this report is based on research conducted between 2013 and 2018 in Michoacán, and follow-up documentation, as well as field visits, carried out between 2018 and 2022. The report also draws from over 70 semi-structured interviews and conversations with self-defence group members, drug cartel members, elected officials, civil society activists, government officials, journalists and ordinary citizens, among others. All interviews and fieldwork were conducted by the author. For security reasons, the names of the interviewees have been changed.



ARMED VIGILANTES AND SOCIAL ORDER: BUILDING A POLICY PERSPECTIVE

In the context of the Mexican war on drugs, many academics, experts and journalists have argued that the growth of criminal organizations and the emergence of armed civilian groups such as the autodefensas – sometimes referred to as vigilante groups – are symptoms of the weakening of the state. That is, these groups are understood as enemies of public authorities. This report, based on 10 years of fieldwork and research in the state of Michoacán, presents a different hypothesis. It argues that the increase of violent actors in Mexico, including drug trafficking groups and autodefensas, does not mean the state has withdrawn; instead, it illustrates that negotiations between public authorities, armed civilians and criminal groups vying to govern vast parts of the country have transformed.

Fieldwork conducted in November 2022 in the municipalities where the autodefensas emerged 10 years ago sought to identify whether a line of influence could be traced between the autodefensas and the state's current political economy of violence. Juan (name changed), an activist who has been working in the region for almost two decades, described the current situation as follows:

Fragmentation is what the autodefensas left behind. They are not here any more, but we are left with fiefdoms, dozens of small groups run by local leaders that sometimes manage to get along, ... but then, they break up, and start turf wars and assassinations again. We live in a land of violence, a land of drug cartels and armed groups. But this is not a lawless land. [...] There is law in Michoacán, there is order. [...] We live under the law of the cartels, of the army, of the government.⁶

Juan's argument about order is crucial to understand Michoacán – and Mexico in general. Here, 'order' does not imply the absence of violence but rather the rules that govern its use by public and private actors, and control access to power and authority, particularly at the local level. As they initially claimed they would in 2013, the autodefensas did succeed in abolishing the control imposed by the Templars, notably by physically removing cartel members. This 'cleansing' was accompanied by the desire to impose a new social and moral order, a tendency that has been documented in other vigilante movements.⁷ Nevertheless, the autodefensas combined this zeal for seizing authority and taking action themselves with a call for the federal government to intervene as guarantor of the law. This is the obvious paradox of the armed movement – and a tension that accompanies most vigilante groups in Mexico and elsewhere, as outlaw citizen movements have committed to 'violating the law in order to enforce it'.⁸

Drug trafficking, criminal organizations and autodefensas in Michoacán

The state of Michoacán, especially the central Tierra Caliente and Sierra regions, has been a centre of the illicit drug trade since at least the 1940s, when marijuana and opium production dominated the area. In the 1980s and 1990s, Michoacán became a major route for South American cocaine bound for the United States. Not only did Tierra Caliente offer the appropriate climate for marijuana and poppy growing, the isolated 200-kilometre coast and

the deep-water port of Lázaro Cárdenas gave Michoacán advantages that would make it a hub for cocaine importation and transportation. During the same period, the ports – including the Manzanillo harbour, situated in the neighbouring state of Colima to the north – became the points of entry for the chemicals imported from China and India to produce methamphetamines, turning Michoacán into one of the world's top producers for the US market.

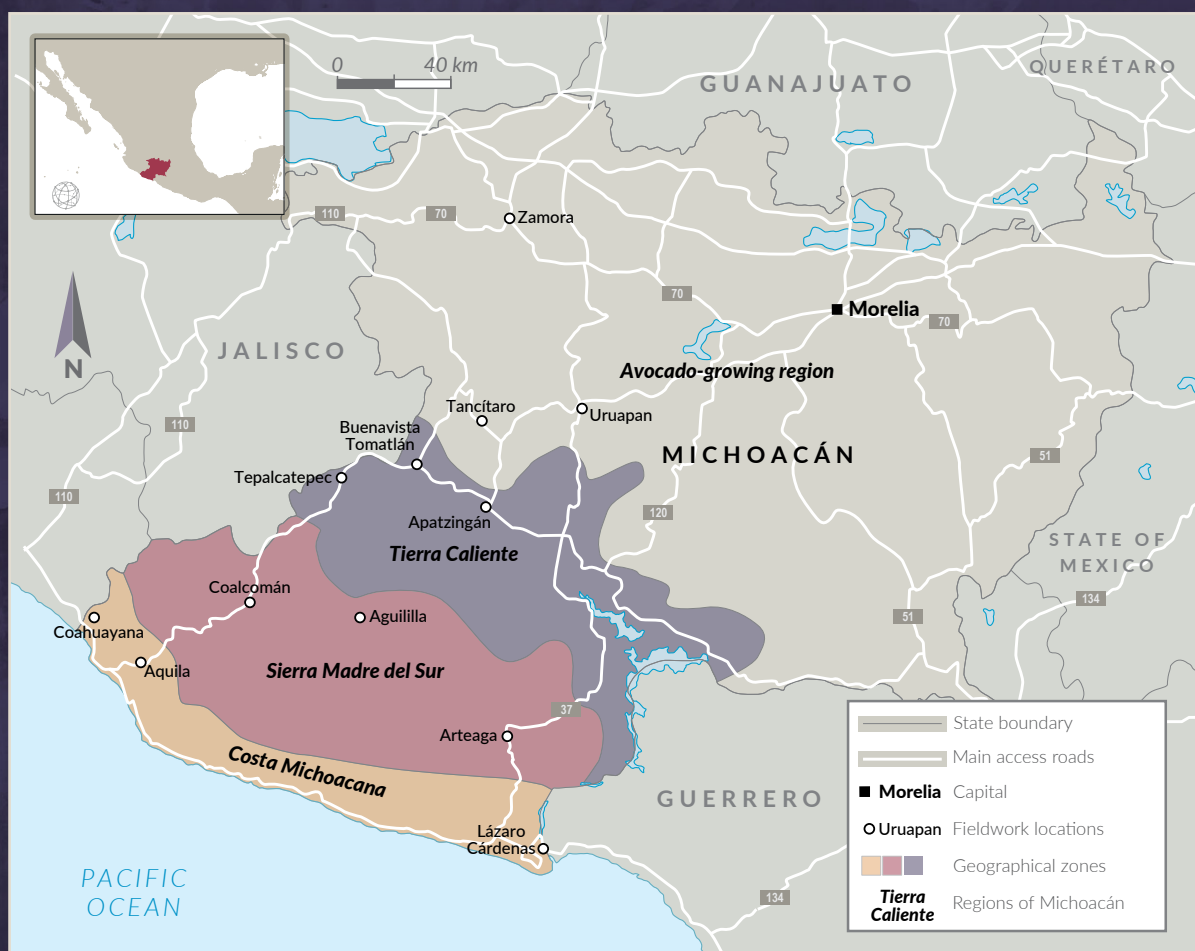


FIGURE 1 Regions of Michoacán.

The state has witnessed the development of a number of drug trafficking organizations since the 1970s. The first such group was the Valencia-Milenio Cartel, run by local criminal actors and connected to Colombian traffickers and the Juárez Cartel. The Gulf Cartel and their allies the Zetas ousted the Valencia-Milenio Cartel at the beginning of the 2000s and took control of Michoacán. The Zetas and the

Gulf Cartel were then replaced by their former allies from the Michoacán Family, which dominated the criminal scene in the region between 2006 and 2011. The Knights Templar, formed in March 2011 as a result of a split in the Michoacán Family, were dominant until the autodefensas overthrew the Templars during a conflict that lasted from February 2013 to August 2015.

After that conflict ended, multiple smaller groups emerged while a crucial new player came on the scene: the Cartel Jalisco Nueva Generación (Jalisco New Generation Cartel, CJNG). Now considered to be one of the most important drug cartels in the country, the CJNG was initially allied with a group of drug trafficking organizations in Michoacán, before breaking ties and starting what locals now call ‘the war’, lasting from 2019 to 2022. As of February 2023, the CJNG is in competition with local groups that have formed a loose alliance called Cárteles Unidos (United Cartels).

Michoacán – and Tierra Caliente, in particular – has been targeted by federal military operations almost continuously since the 1950s counterinsurgency and counter-narcotics operations. Since 2006 and the current phase of the ‘war on drugs’, it has been one of Mexico’s most militarized regions, averaging over 4 000 permanently stationed troops on the ground, from the army, the marines and the recently created Guardia Nacional (national guard).

At the peak of the autodefensas’ mobilization in 2014, the groups controlled 34 of the 112 state municipalities. Michoacán is still marked by the presence of dozens of small armed and criminal groups, sometimes controlling very small portions of territory. Some of these groups emerged from

past autodefensa factions and some from previously existing criminal groups that have changed names, and sometimes leaders, multiple times over the past 10 years.

When it comes to counting active autodefensas, it is important to distinguish between indigenous community police forces and non-indigenous self-defence vigilante groups. The former are still active in at least two key areas of Michoacán: on the Pacific Coast, in and around the community of Ostula, and on the Purépecha Plateau in the central part of the state, especially around the community of Cherán. The non-indigenous autodefensas, on the other hand, are harder to count. Officially, two groups are still active, on the Pacific Coast, in the municipality of Coahuayana, and at the heart of the avocado-growing region, in the municipality of Tancitaro. Both groups are partly financed by the local business community, involved in banana and avocado export, respectively. In the rest of the state, multiple groups are active under various names but tend not to publicly identify as autodefensas, in response to the government’s policies of co-opting and transforming autodefensas into legal entities. ■

CHRONOLOGY OF DRUG CARTELS AND AUTODEFENSAS IN MICHOACÁN



The conflict between the Knights Templar and the autodefensas

The autodefensa movement was a reaction to the control exerted by the Templars over the region's economic, political and social life. As a result of a schism within the Michoacán Family Cartel, the Templars seized power in 2011 and promised to protect the population from extortion, violence and invasion by 'outside' criminal groups. Yet the newly installed cartel built a racketeering system of unprecedented bureaucratic sophistication that touched nearly every social group and economic activity in the region and was complemented by income from drug importation, production and transportation. The Templars also enforced norms that controlled daily life in the region. This territorial and social control lay at the base of their ability to impose an alternative social order and governance model – and to become one of the most powerful criminal organizations in recent Mexican history.

Yet this strict control, combined with gruesome violence, provoked an unprecedented backlash: the creation of the autodefensas in the Tierra Caliente region on 24 February 2013. From the first mobilizations in Tepalcatepec, La Ruana and Buenavista Tomatlán to the successive uprisings that occurred until the spring of 2014, the autodefensas went from a few hundred members to around 15 000, forming the biggest armed civilian mobilization in Mexico since the Zapatista movement in 1994.

However, the groups were never a homogeneous regional force. Every new group that was created used the autodefensa name but was tied to its own municipality. Composed of between 200 and 1 000 members, each group was primarily responsible for its own territory as defined by administrative borders. This local focus was reflected in their uniforms: white or blue shirts printed with the name of the municipality they hailed from, beneath the words *Autodefensas de Michoacán*. The Michoacán autodefensas may be best described as a rural armed movement devoted to restoring security and order through vigilante justice and social cleansing. Yet, from the outset, these groups varied widely. While all their members came from a rural or semi-rural background, they ranged from small farmers and employees to businesspeople and local notables. They also included Templar members and independent drug traffickers who saw the autodefensas as an opportunity for social redemption and to recover criminal assets they had lost.

Vigilantes: Localism and crime regulation

The autodefensa uprising recalls practices of vigilantism that have been observed in many parts of the world, particularly in how they controlled their territory and the roads.⁹ As is the case in the rest of Mexico, Michoacán's towns are usually organized along the main roadways. It is therefore fairly quick and straightforward to establish control over the entries and exits of these urban centres – towns of around 10 000 to 15 000 inhabitants. Armed men would gather, set up roadblocks and checkpoints on the outskirts of the towns and would then implement identity checks to monitor cars, collect information and lock down administrative centres.

Yet the autodefensas did not just look to control territory; they also took on judicial and investigative roles so as to impose a new social order. This included seizing property from Templars, hunting down cartel members and physically punishing and sometimes killing them. The autodefensas show that vigilantes do not aim to eradicate crime. Instead, they may settle for trying to regulate it and limiting crime to more 'morally acceptable' forms.

This gives rise to a paradox: although the emergence of these self-defence groups was the result of accumulated discontent in response to violence and crime – a phenomenon that is common to many

vigilante movements across the world¹⁰ – their aim was not to eliminate organized crime and drug trafficking cartels per se, nor to confront the state, but to change the way both were acting. Taking justice into one's own hands is presented as a moral imperative: when the government is not doing its job to combat criminal groups, people must act and protect their communities.

The first source of legitimacy of the autodefensas was their localism. All their members proudly pledged that they were from the communities they were fighting for, reflecting a sense of belonging and a promise of efficiency. The cleaning up of society had to be done by locals, for moral reasons, because they would serve the community; for political reasons, because the state was seen as corrupt and allied with the cartels; and for logistical reasons, as only the locals know the terrain, the cartel members, how they operated and where they could be found.

This claim of 'being local' is meant to mark a fundamental distance from 'outsiders'. Delimiting the perimeter of action of the autodefensas through the installation of checkpoints served a similar purpose: to socially and territorially divide the interior from the exterior, what is safe from what is considered to be a threat. Some of these installations – concrete barricades, observation posts and even bunkers – have remained in place and are still in use today. Whenever the autodefensas identified a threat – from a criminal group or from government forces looking to disarm them, for example – it would only take a few minutes to mobilize the population, set up the checkpoints and, if necessary, close the roads to the villages. As a former member of the Buenavista Council of Autodefensas explained in September 2015:

If everyone knows each other and everything you do is known too, certain behaviours will be prevented. If I know your family, and vice versa, and you aren't protected by a cartel, you are going to think twice before messing around. Here, everyone keeps an eye on everyone else: for better or for worse. You know how the saying goes: '*Pueblo chico, infierno grande*' [Small village, big hell].¹¹



Autodefensas checkpoints in Michoacán, 2015. © Romain Le Cour Grandmaison

For the locals, especially between 2013 and 2015, the mandatory checkpoints were the physical manifestation of the mutual surveillance structure built by the autodefensas. These forms of social and territorial control seek to establish a new framework for the use of violence: to impose new rules for what can and cannot be done. The autodefensas' search for local recognition depended on the re-establishment of a moral order that, paradoxically, entailed the use of violence – including assassinations and expelling people along with their entire families – for the good of the community.

Narcos fighting narcos

Such moral codes, however, fail to highlight one major characteristic of the autodefensas: the involvement of drug traffickers looking to oust the Templars, even within autodefensa leadership. For the autodefensas, the presence of *narcos* was both an asset and a liability. While damaging the movement's public image, it allowed them to obtain skills and resources – such as high-calibre firearms and the ability to use them – and intel about the internal structure of the Templars.

Members of the autodefensas could take on multiple roles simultaneously, being, for example, a well-known drug trafficker and a respected autodefensa leader at the same time.¹² More controversial was the support of the then recently created CJNG. Multiple sources interviewed over the past 10 years have confirmed that, in 2013, Nemesio Oseguera Cervantes ('El Mencho') – who is currently the leader of the CJNG – was actively supporting the autodefensas in alliance with Juan José Farias ('El Abuelo'), in order to wipe out the Knights Templar. El Mencho, a Michoacán native, had been expelled from the state by the Templars years before, and his group saw an opportunity to regain a strategic foothold in the region.¹³

The autodefensa movement shows how drug traffickers may hunt down and replace other traffickers under the banner of a vigilante group, as Julio, an autodefensa member based in Apatzingán, explained:

Of course, there were *narcos* in the movement, but it did not have anything to do with the plans that were being made for the people. [...] The *narcos* could go on with their business, and fight with the state, but they needed to stop their racketeering. [Our bosses] told us we were there to get rid of the Templars by any means necessary.¹⁴

Whether someone was a *narco* or not was not an issue – even for the government collaborating with the autodefensas – so long as the *narcos* put an end to certain practices, especially extortion and violence against women and civilians in general. Although these objectives were hard to attain, the presence of the autodefensas, at least during the peak of their mobilization, did contribute to 'disciplining' criminal groups and dismantling the Templars' previous governance capabilities. Interviews with locals and public officials over the past 10 years show a deep level of pragmatism – or resignation – regarding the presence of drug cartels in Michoacán. In the words of a member of the current Michoacán state government: 'Drug trafficking will always be part of Michoacán, we have to work around it, but to think that we will make it disappear would be absurd and a waste of time.'¹⁵ In a sense, the region's strategic role in international drug trafficking and its effect on local politics and dynamics of violence seems to be accepted by all actors as a reality that must be managed rather than solved.

Controlling territory and building fiefdoms for power and brokerage

The autodefensas' capacity to restore order is directly related to their territorial presence and organization. Between 2013 and 2015, their leaders were able to consolidate their authority over small portions of territory – usually their local community, or, when possible, the entire municipality – becoming the sole leader in the eyes of the local population and the federal government. In return, by collaborating with these leaders, the federal government was able to increase its local legitimacy or, at least, guarantee itself a local presence through a proxy partner.

By ensuring local security and tight control over their turfs, the self-defence leaders were able to present themselves to the authorities as trustworthy allies in the co-management of governance. The autodefensas' tactics for controlling territory enabled them to cooperate with the military, particularly to hunt down Templar members. First, by securing their municipalities, leaders earned legitimacy in the eyes of local inhabitants and the armed forces. Then, they offered federal forces much-needed skills and knowledge regarding the community and local terrain. This intel was the kind of know-how that federal forces – although massively deployed in the region – did not fully possess. Vigilante expertise proved to be one of the primary assets that ultimately enabled the autodefensas to earn the trust of the armed forces and federal authorities. During the first year of the movement, by sharing their intel, the autodefensas handed the government a crucial strategic advantage in a context of extreme violence and instability marked by constant battles with the Templars.

These patronage dynamics are connected to forms of territorial control that may seem contradictory: while fiefdoms might suggest isolation, the leaders controlling them are able to interact with public authorities, especially at the federal level. Similar to many other violent actors in Mexico – including drug traffickers – Michoacán's autodefensas fought to become indispensable partners and brokers that controlled the allocation of strategic resources (such as public funding, the implementation of public policies, electoral seats and jobs). By oscillating between applying pressure and pursuing collaboration, the self-defence groups consolidated their role as indispensable power brokers, while the federal government strengthened its political presence on a local level, found new allies and gathered intel about the local dynamics of violence, thereby increasing its capacity for local governance.

Armed leaders and the delegation of power

The leaders that emerged from the autodefensas assumed roles as power brokers that are common in rural Mexico. These were equivalent to those occupied by *caciques*, local informal authorities that the government has historically tolerated, supported and even permitted to use violence to assert their authority, as long as they have remained open to negotiation and dialogue with public authorities.

The role of the state within these dynamics is not passive, in part because these arrangements to delegate power are so long-standing and deeply entrenched. However, these alliances can be unstable and difficult to establish. They are marked by constant friction and conflict because local leaders generally want to obtain political backing while preserving their own autonomy. For years, autodefensa leaders have, for example, been able to maintain roadblocks, implement local surveillance, patrol and carry weapons, providing their bosses – the power brokers – with colossal local power.

More importantly, the experience, authority and power that these leaders accumulated between 2013 and 2015 is still central in the architecture of local security in Michoacán. Carlos, the leader of a group that includes armed civilians (former members of autodefensas) and police forces from the Tierra Caliente region, spoke about these capabilities in November 2022:

I have the ability to get my people out in the streets in a second. We just have to ring the church bells, or send a series of WhatsApp messages, and people come out right away. This is what changed with the autodefensas; now people have lost their fear of criminal groups and the government, and we are organized, we have the experience. [...] It's our territory, and we know it like the backs of our hands. It's very unlikely that you can enter our municipality without us knowing, and if we hear of some kind of a threat, we react and put our people in the streets, with weapons or without. The other groups know it, and the government knows it too, so they think twice before doing anything stupid.¹⁶

Carlos's observations reveal the crucial legacy of the autodefensas: a set of learned practices of quick mobilization, territorial occupation, armed patrolling and a collective sense of belonging and mutual help. This know-how is coupled with a more diffuse feeling Carlos describes as a common sense of strength and preparedness. He also shows that the ability to monitor the territory and mobilize masses of people in response to potential threats is still a crucial political resource in the hands of today's leaders. These leaders who coordinated the autodefensa uprising 10 years ago progressively have consolidated their power and authority by building on their local prestige and efficiency as well as their ability to negotiate with public authorities, especially at the state and federal levels. Their ability to call upon large numbers of people gives them significant political bargaining power. This can be useful for protecting their territory, but also for supporting – or opposing – a candidate or a political party during elections, for example. In that sense, all leaders, even those who control what may appear to be a small, insignificant territory, are also powerful local bosses who have solid and actionable political capital that they can extend to a third party. This makes these leaders perfectly positioned to be partners in governance. As Marcelo, a former member of an autodefensa and political activist from the Sierra Coast region, said:

What the leaders still provide is stability. And with the levels of violence that you see in Michoacán, this is key. The leaders control the population, but also make sure that the municipality remains calm. [...] And everybody wants this – the local people, of course, but also the businessmen ... and the authorities. [...] Everybody knows that the leaders have illicit interests and work with one criminal group or the other. [...] But as long as you bring stability and security, everybody is happy. [...] You might imagine it is the government's responsibility to do something about drug trafficking, ... but honestly no one cares about you trafficking drugs as long as you maintain stability.¹⁷

The issue of efficacy is the backbone of these power brokers' authority: the government is eager to work with this type of strongman because of their ability to regulate violence and maintain order at the local level. These dynamics allow us to better understand the importance of such intermediaries in maintaining channels of political brokerage – and clientelism – between the federal government and political actors on the ground. Self-defence groups in Mexico have become a platform that allows local strongmen – including drug traffickers, but also party activists and economic elites – to become the interface between local and national politics.¹⁸



THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT: JUDGE AND EXECUTIONER

The autodefensas offer a case study for understanding the processes that put informal armed leaders and criminal bosses in dialogue with public authorities. At the same time, we gain a better sense of the multiple connections between local citizens and government officials, including how these leaders gradually became firmly entrenched brokers capable of controlling accesses to strategic political resources, and licit and illicit markets. The federal government's initiative to negotiate with the autodefensas and multiple drug cartel bosses between 2013 and 2015 sheds light on how this process worked. The government's aim was to reorganize, demobilize and legalize these groups through a mix of formal and informal discussions and co-optation practices.

The first phase of the autodefensa movement, between February 2013 and January 2014, was marked by a federal military intervention that simultaneously supported and repressed the civilian groups, and during which the government was unwilling to publicly acknowledge its cooperation with armed civilians against the Templars. This changed during the course of the subsequent stage – from January 2014 to January 2015 – which was marked by the creation of the Federal Commission for Security and Integral Development in Michoacán, overseen by Commissioner Alfredo Castillo, a close ally of President Enrique Peña Nieto. During this period, the autodefensas, in cooperation with federal forces, made spectacular progress on the ground, seizing control of 22 additional municipalities and contributing to the dismantling of the Templars, which formed the backdrop for the legalization of the autodefensas.

During this process, the federal government, while being an active party to the conflict, also became the arbiter of the rules of violence and organized the armed groups. The federal government's direct intervention – without any sign of true coordination with state or municipal authorities – was a clear sign of mistrust of local authorities and signalled a top-down takeover. Commissioner Castillo then publicly announced his objective to open discussions with self-defence groups in order to demobilize and disarm them so they might operate legally. This move by the federal government to integrate armed civilian groups in a legal framework was unprecedented and has not been repeated since. In less than a year, armed civilians became members of a new public security force. They went from being illegal vigilantes to state-paid agents in charge of the security of their regions, under the banner of the Fuerza Rural.

Negotiating with armed groups: The case of the autodefensas

On 15 January 2014, after a series of talks with autodefensa leaders, Commissioner Castillo announced the signing of an agreement intended to initiate their disarmament and legalization. In line with the autodefensas' initial demands, the process would involve the creation of a public armed force. Hipolito Mora, one of the founders of the autodefensas, said in a media interview a few days after the creation of the commission: 'We got what we were looking for: to be taken into account and to be legalized as police.'¹⁹ According to the federal government, to be recognized, the self-defence forces had to present a formal list of their members, which would have to be vetted by the commission, officially to make sure that no former cartel member would remain armed and potentially work with the government. In addition, each autodefensa group would have to hand over and/or register – the specifics were not clear at this point in the process – their high-powered weapons, especially AK-47 and AR-15 assault rifles, to the army before 10 May 2014.

These agreements, which were not accepted and ratified by all autodefensa leaders in January 2014, allowed the federal government to strategically separate the groups into two categories. The leaders willing to accept the conditions of negotiation and demobilization would be able to sit at the authorities' table, while those who rejected them were progressively expelled from the talks. This immediately created a distinction between the so-called government-aligned self-defence groups and those who were considered enemies, a fracture that would deepen throughout the negotiation process.²⁰

Legalizing armed vigilantes and protecting political stability

After months of conflicts and negotiations, the creation of the Fuerza Rural was celebrated during a public ceremony led by the commissioner on the grounds of the Tepalcatepec Rancher's Association, at the site where the autodefensas had emerged 15 months prior. On that day, 'aligned' leaders and over 400 members of the newly formed force received uniforms, weapons and vehicles, along with the promise of a salary. Estanislao Beltrán, one of the original autodefensa leaders, was wearing a Fuerza Rural uniform and holding an assault rifle provided by the authorities, when he exclaimed in front of TV cameras: 'Now, everything we do will be legal! We are the government now!' Then, Commissioner Castillo gave a speech that both validated the autodefensas' strategy and sent a clear signal of the government's ability to co-opt armed groups and ultimately support them as long as they followed certain rules.²¹

Julio, an autodefensa member who was present at the ceremony, had a different perspective on these developments:

They [the government] brought us in to sign up. They took down our names, addresses, all that. They said that once we were members of the Fuerza Rural, we would receive pay cheques and weapons. But really, they gave us uniforms, a few weapons, and that was it. [...] The money we were paid still came from local bosses ... And it turns out the government was pretty smart in the end. [...] They made good use of the enrolment registers, because they had our names, our addresses, everything, and with that they knew everything about you and could track you down.²²

The enrolment procedure reinforced the presence of the state and consolidated the government's control over the population through these registers of armed men. The accords signed on 10 May 2014 stipulated that no unregistered civilians would be authorized to carry high-calibre firearms, enabling the – discretionary – arrest of anyone who continued to use such weapons. While aligned groups – registered or not – seemed free to continue using illicit weapons, non-aligned groups were quickly repressed. Six days after the ceremony, José Manuel Mireles, one of the most charismatic autodefensa leaders, who rejected the accords, organized a new autodefensa brigade on the Pacific Coast of Michoacán. He told the press that his men were planning to launch an assault to reclaim the state's capital, Morelia. The army was immediately sent in to arrest Mireles for possession of unregistered weapons. He would spend more than three years in prison, without a trial, before ultimately being freed.

During these negotiations and co-optation of the self-defence groups, the federal government was able to reassert its institutional role as an arbiter capable of imposing rules regarding the use of violence. The negotiation process showed that not all violent actors had been completely outlawed: the federal government sanctioned some, granted immunity to others, established new categories of allies and enemies, and integrated certain leaders and armed groups while eliminating those it considered particularly threatening to the new order – all as part of a strategy to oust the Knights Templar.

The federal government consolidated its local authority and operations through these negotiations, while the autodefensa leaders gained public recognition as legitimate, and indispensable, brokers. On the ground, the autodefensas' territorialization endeavours and organization of their municipalities were turning the areas controlled by each faction into fortresses in which the leaders sought to maximize their charismatic and strategic advantages. The enrolment procedure of the Fuerza Rural reflected these personalized dynamics of power accumulation: autodefensa leaders were allowed to establish their lists of candidates for those positions, which included the promise of a salary, a firearms licence and an authorization to patrol territory. At the end of 2014, interviewees in the municipalities controlled by autodefensas decried these leaders for listing only those in their personal cliques. They were building up private armies – recognized by public authorities – and therefore excluding anyone who was not a personal friend or ally. The negotiations between the federal government and the self-defence forces is a paradigmatic example of the joint construction of security and governance in Mexico.



AUTODEFENSAS AS A BRAND FOR POWER?

The negotiation process set a precedent that had decisive implications over the years. In many ways, it shaped how criminal and armed groups have developed in Michoacán and, to an extent, in neighbouring states. The government of President Peña Nieto, by organizing and promoting a dialogue with strongmen and armed leaders, indirectly contributed to their legitimation as interlocutors and allies. Eventually, the current federal administration, despite proclaiming to have moved in a different direction than its predecessors, has partially followed the same path of informal negotiations with criminal and armed groups. By doing so, the government of Andrés Manuel López Obrador does not prevent the use of force to access or maintain power, especially for those using the autodefensa label.

Appropriation of labels

The autodefensa movement in Michoacán is part of a long historical trajectory of citizen security mobilizations in Mexico. It has particularly strong ties with community police forces and the state recognition of the rights of indigenous groups. This phenomenon has been particularly pronounced in the neighbouring state of Guerrero – south of Michoacán – beginning in the 1990s, reaching its peak around 2010 and spreading to at least 15 other states in Mexico. Ten years later, some studies have counted as many as 106 armed citizen groups present in 17 Mexican states.²³

These community police forces have the largest number of members in Guerrero and Michoacán – about 20 000 in each state at the peak of the mobilizations. Both states have been at the centre of debates over the legal status of this type of group and how they are designated – as ‘community police’ or ‘community patrols’ (*rondas comunitarias*). Both terms refer to security bodies that are legally recognized by the Mexican Constitution, which acknowledge ‘the indigenous peoples’ right to self-determination and, consequently, the right to autonomy’ in order ‘to apply their own legal systems to regulate and solve their internal conflicts’.²⁴ Community police forces are responsible for local security and their actions are – at least in theory – protected by the legal capacity of indigenous communities to create systems to protect their territory, their people and their resources.²⁵

These community defence groups, which enjoy varying degrees of success and ability to mobilize, share a key characteristic: their members belong to an indigenous community. However, when the

autodefensas were created, the difference was immediately apparent: they did not belong to indigenous communities. Some leaders did not hesitate to allude to indigenous mobilizations as an inspiration, but indigenous communities have not endorsed these ties to the autodefensa movement or supported their uprisings.

During the entire autodefensa movement – and, in some cases, still today – leaders from Michoacán used terms such as ‘community police’ and ‘autodefensa’ interchangeably. Yet, the difference is not merely semantic. It reflects their desire to appropriate a label that is supported by a legal framework and tied to a known lexical and symbolic field. The autodefensas, and drug cartels, have used this tactic of self-labelling to increase their legitimacy in the eyes of the community, the state and the national government. Despite their manipulation of these labels, ‘autodefensas’ lack the institutionalized legitimacy of indigenous organizations, but they have had some success in using these labels to circumvent the law.

These dynamics can also be observed in the neighbouring state of Guerrero. In 2020, during a violent conflict between two criminal organizations in the north-western part of the state, one of them created a vigilante group in addition to the hitmen who were employed as cartel ‘soldiers’ on a daily basis. This self-defence group fulfilled a very specific objective, which the local cartel boss, Ezequiel, explained in the following terms:

Our autodefensa is supported by the law. What we do is the following: First, you organize a community assembly, rally the locals and tell them you want to organize a community police force. To do so, you need to appoint leaders and coordinators, and you need the assembly to vote for the creation of the community police. Then, when everybody agrees, you have them sign a register with which you announce the creation of the community police. [...] When you are at war with another group, you have your sicarios [hitmen] do the heavy work. [...] But the problem is that these guys are seen as criminals ... Whereas with the autodefensa, once it is registered, you can have [the hitmen] in the streets. You can set up a checkpoint on the road, let the guys do identity checks ... And if the army stops you, you present the register signed by the general assembly, which ensures that the autodefensa has community backing.²⁶

The dynamic that Ezequiel describes is crucial for understanding how armed groups manipulate existing regulations and use them to their own benefit. These groups take advantage of the possibilities offered by the recognition of community police forces, to the detriment of the local population and legitimate indigenous community groups. In broader policy terms, Ezequiel's testimony shows the ability of drug cartels to use labels to expand their local control while respecting certain norms set by the authorities. Although in Guerrero, especially at the local level, everybody seemed aware of the true nature of the autodefensa group that Ezequiel was running, the interactions between armed forces, the state government and the criminal groups were integrated into a scheme that allowed public officials to either turn a blind eye to the cartel's operations, or to informally – and unofficially – support their expansion.

Most community members interpret the authorities' position as further proof of corruption and collusion with drug cartels, thus heightening the mistrust and animosity that citizens feel towards the state.²⁷ This situation also illustrates the grey zone where political-criminal interactions take place and the ability of both parties to find a common ground to impose order, even if this implies delegating sovereignty to a drug cartel.

Layers of multiple, shared sovereignties

Since 2013, the use of the 'autodefensa' label has allowed local leaders to deploy armed men and control territory while avoiding strained relations with authorities, particularly the army. What best defines the Michoacán landscape of criminal and armed groups, as in many Mexican states, are layers of sovereignty exercised by multiple armed groups that vary in size from around 20 members to more than 2 000 or 3 000 troops. It is common to find, in a single municipality, numerous private and public actors coexisting and all claiming to provide the best security service.

These layers include: the legal local authorities, with an elected mayor leading the local government, a secretary for municipal public security and a municipal police chief if the police force is still active; members of the state police; and, since Michoacán is one of the most violent states, permanently deployed federal armed forces including the Guardia Nacional, the army and the navy. This is in addition to the informal authorities: in dozens of municipalities, an informal boss – who may be a former autodefensa leader, a criminal actor and/or a member of the economic elite – represents a parallel, overlapping authority. This person may directly control dozens – or, in few cases, hundreds – of men whose legal status varies, even within the same group. Some men might have no legal recognition and yet are able to carry arms and patrol the municipality. They might wear old public uniforms or military-type gear bought in surplus or at specialized tactical-gear shops. Their weapons come from the black market. A second group of men may have been formerly integrated into a public security force after the legalization of the autodefensas in 2014. They may have formed part of the Fuerza Rural for a few months or years and therefore received a salary and equipment, including weaponry.

When the Fuerza Rural disbanded in 2015, some men lost their official status and reverted to being unregistered armed civilians. Most indicate that when they left, they took their government-supplied equipment, uniforms and weaponry with them. After their time with the Fuerza Rural, some may have joined a municipal police force or the newly created state Michoacán Police, which has now become the Guardia Civil. These mostly informal processes usually depend on leaders' capacity to negotiate or impose their will on multiple public authorities. In some cases, a leader may have been able to arrange for some of his men to become salaried police, even if they answer almost exclusively to him. In the end, most Michoacán municipalities in the Sierra, Tierra Caliente and coastal regions are home to a patchwork of armed security forces.

These men's loyalty is mainly to their leader, even if their salaries come from elsewhere. Some of them may also receive money that informally or illegally derives from public budgets, especially when their boss has been able to arrange for them to join the local police force. Their salary might also originate directly from illicit activities that may include drug trafficking or extortion. In this case, the criminal organization responsible for their salaries can use these men as a reserve force. While their day-to-day activities are devoted to providing security for their own municipalities, they may be called to carry out specific tasks by the criminal group, for example when conflicts arise that require back-up. This has been the case during the war between the CJNG and the United Cartels, between 2019 and 2022. The United Cartels, working as a loose coalition of armed actors, has relied heavily on a reserve of armed men that can be called upon when needed. These reserves leave their own municipality, travel to conflict zones, provide back-up and then return home, acting more as armed militias than vigilante groups.

The war, a legacy of the autodefensas

As of 2023, dozens of informal bosses operate in Michoacán, distributed among at least one third of the state's municipalities, organized in territories that vary in size and strategic nature. The result is a complex array of informal loyalties, severe instability and competition. Observing the Michoacán criminal landscape is akin to looking through a kaleidoscope of constantly shifting alliances and territorial control.

In the Tierra Caliente, Sierra and coastal regions, except in the areas where the CJNG has taken over in recent years, most of the leaders that currently run armed groups – be they totally informal or partially integrated into a public security force – were already leading groups between 2013 and 2015. In the areas that are controlled by the CJNG, former autodefensa leaders may have been expelled from the municipalities or have had to step down and adopt a low profile as there are new bosses in town.

Michoacán now hosts dozens of multi-scale conflicts. However, at the centre of the criminal control and conflictual dynamics lie two groups that reflect oppositions and alliances dating back to the autodefensas and the 2013 fight against the Templars, and that were at least partially shaped by the state's role in promoting certain armed groups to the detriment of others. On one side stands what could be described as the 'Tepalcatepec group' (based in that municipality), which brings together former autodefensas and fully operational *sicarios* under the authority of one of the most powerful bosses in Michoacán, Juan José Farias ('El Abuelo'). In 2013, El Abuelo was behind the creation of the autodefensas in Tierra Caliente, offering leadership, political patronage and financing. Crucially, the CJNG also contributed funds to take down their common enemy at the time, the Templars.

Between 2013 and 2018, El Abuelo and Nemesio Oseguera Cervantes ('El Mencho'), leader of the CJNG, allegedly maintained a strong alliance, but it progressively deteriorated until a definitive rupture around 2019, allegedly over the ambitions of El Mencho's organization to establish direct control over vast portions of Michoacán. The clashes between the groups escalated into multiple, protracted, violent conflicts all over Michoacán, during which a number of leaders were able to form a renewed coalition of armed groups – the United Cartels – largely based on allegiances forged during the autodefensa movement. For the past three years, life in Michoacán has followed the rhythm of the war between the CJNG and the United Cartels.



United Cartels checkpoint in Tierra Caliente, 2021.

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Clashes over the years have left hundreds dead. During the conflict, new tactics have appeared that shed light on the territorial dynamics of violence and political-criminal ties in Michoacán, with the war leading to very strict territorial divides that separated the two groups into well-defined fiefdoms. In some cases, the groups dug trenches on the roads that connect the centre of Michoacán with the mountains and the coast to reinforce their territorial borders and close any communication.

The groups also installed checkpoints and fighting outposts on the roads and hillside. For almost a year, it was difficult for people and goods to cross the groups' lines, such as years before, during the autodefensa movement. The towns of Aguililla and Coalcomán, both located in the Sierra, for example, were not able to receive basic consumer goods or even medicine from the centre of Michoacán. The inhabitants were forced to drive hours to the neighbouring state of Colima to shop for groceries, as Patricio, a resident of Coalcomán recalls:

It already happened to us during the conflict between the autodefensas and the Templars back in 2013. We had to go to Colima to buy anything, to get cash or to go to the doctor. But now I think people are even angrier, because we were completely isolated, and the government did nothing to help. [...] The blockades lasted for something like seven months – can you imagine? We are supposed to be part of Michoacán. We are supposed to be normal citizens, but we can't even move and travel freely, and we have to go to another state to buy stuff, just because we live in the middle of this never-ending conflict between drug cartels.²⁸

Fieldwork conducted in April 2021 near the roadblocks and fighting outposts controlled by the United Cartels confirmed they were able to occupy the areas and impose blockades. Their men monitored the checkpoints almost 24 hours a day, in a vivid continuation of autodefensa tactics. They controlled vehicles and merchandise that passed through and checked everyone's identity, while openly carrying heavy firearms. Public authorities were not absent from these territorial configurations of violence, however. The Guardia Nacional and the army had their own checkpoints along the same roads, sometimes just a few kilometres away from the armed groups' bases. They were not only aware that the roads were torn apart and citizens were unable to move freely, but were observing and seemingly tacitly sanctioning the groups' division of the territory. The men working at the checkpoints confirmed that the government forces were not an issue, as 'everything was dealt with' so they could 'work' freely, a situation that lasted for at least half a year.²⁹ This organized violence and the division of power over the same road illustrate the 'overlapping sovereignties' that define Michoacán and the coexistence of armed groups, drug cartels and public forces within the same territories.

Starting in July 2021, the federal government organized peace and security round tables in Aguililla, a municipality that had been occupied by the CJNG and separated from the rest of Michoacán by criminal checkpoints and roadblocks for months. The negotiation tables included representatives of the church, the Ministry of the Interior, the Ministry of National Defence and the Ministry of Security and Citizen Protection. These dialogues were part of a broader agenda that President López Obrador has presented as a 'pacification effort'. Run by the federal Ministry of Security and Citizen Protection, the programme aimed to open channels of negotiation in order to reduce violence, reopen the roads that connect the municipality with the rest of the state, and provide economic and social support to the population.

Although the talks led to the reopening of the roads, the retreat of armed CJNG personnel, the removal of massive checkpoints and the deployment of public security forces, the negotiations left many residents angry.

Authorities are largely unresponsive when it comes to questions about the 'peace' process. This uncertainty must urgently be addressed by a transparent evaluation of the federal government's negotiation process, especially because the same process is currently underway in other Michoacán municipalities, such as Coalcomán, where violence and instability are on the rise.



PRODUCING POLICY ANALYSIS FOR VIOLENCE REDUCTION

Who is the Mexican government talking to and what are the parameters of those discussions? How to identify who is leading the autodefensas and other armed groups? How to differentiate between 'legitimate' self-defence groups and organized criminal groups? Is it dialogue or negotiation? What is the government offering these groups and what do they give in exchange? These are crucial questions for the future of public security policies in Mexico. If civil society organizations wish to have a stronger impact on how criminal dynamics evolve in the country, it is essential that policy analysis and recommendations are based on a clear understanding of the social dynamics of violence in Mexico. This requires gaining first-hand knowledge of the communities that are suffering the most; recognizing the immense disparities between regions, municipalities and affected communities; and analyzing these events with nuance, context and historical perspective.

The historical context for the case of Michoacán is that, between 2013 and 2015, Peña Nieto's government negotiated agreements with self-defence groups in the same areas that saw violent confrontations between 2019 and 2022. Peña Nieto's and López Obrador's administrations have been talking to armed leaders, who are still running things in most of the region. But these dynamics are more nuanced than the question of whether the government is talking to the 'good guys' or the 'bad guys'.

As shown in this report, violence in Mexico is not necessarily an obstacle to political arrangements – it can be a resource. But its employment responds to fluctuating formal and informal criteria, which condemn certain violent practices while supporting others. Violent groups can remain in power as long as they do not radically alter the existing political order. When they do, public-private alliances of violent actors usually repress and replace them. Michoacán is something of a laboratory where we can observe and analyze these practices to understand the situation in other regions in Mexico.

Furthermore, these practices straddle the public-private divide. Private armed groups take on public security tasks. Therefore, being able to regulate and use violence is fundamental to control territory and licit and illicit markets, and also to access social mobility and political power.

Lastly, for authorities to tolerate the use of violence by criminal groups, it must follow rules that are not contained in any law. When the federal government decides who is legitimate and can form part of negotiations, the decision is not based on legal criteria. All of these groups are illegal by nature:

they carry weapons that can only be used by the armed forces, have committed crimes and most are involved in other illicit activities. As a result, pragmatic categories appear to surpass strictly legal ones to allow for day-to-day governance. The government does not determine whether potential interlocutors and allies are legal or illegal – they simply consider them friends or enemies.

This pragmatic approach has several political and policymaking consequences. First, it evolves constantly: yesterday's friend is today's enemy, and so on. Second, these fluctuating alliances do not weaken the federal government; instead they allow it to act as both judge and executioner. The law does not disappear but becomes a highly flexible space for building new relationships and alliances, while sanctioning others. It is applied according to criteria that only the authorities and a few privileged interlocutors are aware of and can anticipate. The law therefore remains a powerful political tool precisely because its application is unpredictable to most.

For a violent organization in Mexico to initiate a dialogue with the government, it must present guarantees of being instrumental in the co-organization and control of violence at the local level. That is, it must have sufficient authority to become an ally in state and/or federal security. In recent years, one of the best ways to achieve this has been under the 'self-defence' label, although it has come to be virtually meaningless having been co-opted by so many violent groups.

Public security strategies in Michoacán

During fieldwork in November 2022, mayors, civil society activists and armed leaders all commented on two important, parallel state policies regarding public security. The first of these is the Peace Strengthening Fund (Fondo para el Fortalecimiento de la Paz, or Fortapaz) launched in 2021 by the Michoacán government. This initiative aims to support the training, certification and equipping of municipal police officers in the state, in coordination with local authorities and support from the federal government. After presenting their candidacy for the funding, 13 municipalities were selected in 2022 and received state financing on top of which they had to commit 30 per cent of their own security budget. For 2023, the Michoacán government announced the extension of the funding and a new round of open candidacies for additional municipalities. In the words of local interviewees, the funding offers crucial opportunities for the institutional building of municipal solutions for public security and violence prevention, although it presents key challenges in terms of coordination, in political terms – with the state and federal government – and from a security strategy point of view.³⁰

The second initiative, approved by the Congress of Michoacán in July 2022, aims to bring the community guards and auxiliary police under the auspices of a national public-security system law. This reflects a desire to extend the framework that served to legalize indigenous community policing, so that community guards can carry uniforms, badges and weapons, and do public safety work. As this report has highlighted, several communities have been carrying out security actions in their own territories without the legal backing to do so.

Several leaders viewed providing legal recognition for some of their men as a way to protect those who were armed and patrolling without institutional backing.³¹ It would also allow them to secure extra funding for their group and to expand their ability to maintain power and authority within their territory. Yet, according to the same sources, for the state authorities to approve the institutionalization process, the groups would be required to avoid calling themselves 'autodefensas' and to refrain from any kind of propaganda in the media or communications in the public sphere.³²

Both initiatives show that authorities can implement public security strategies at the municipal level and negotiate with non-state armed groups. In doing so, they can bring these armed men under the umbrella of state authority even if their actions are not covered by indigenous customary law. The state government then exercises more authority and political control over them. Moreover, these initiatives show that, in Mexico, security remains built on public-private, licit-illicit forms of regulating violence through collaboration and delegation between private actors and state institutions. The risk in terms of governance and policymaking is that these practices feed the perpetual blurring of the categories of legitimate and illegitimate, licit and illicit, and formal and informal authority. An armed leader may simultaneously be a drug trafficker, the local boss, a political leader, a police officer, a mayor, a town-council member or a businessperson.

While long-term projects such as Fortapaz are being implemented, it is crucial for the state government to remain open to internal and external oversight, and to make sure that informal, opaque negotiations with armed leaders do not jeopardize the institutional work being done by elected officials. From a policy analysis perspective, it is crucial to pay more attention to the constant shifts in alliances and hierarchies that shape local governance in Mexico and to produce timely diagnoses that support the accountability and the implementation of long-term institutional responses and initiatives.



CONCLUSION: WHAT POLITICAL SPACE IS LEFT FOR UNARMED ACTORS IN MEXICO?

This report has shown how policymaking and governance in key territories of the Mexican war on drugs rely heavily on a combination of formal and informal arrangements between public authorities and armed or criminal groups. It has analyzed how the federal government, by maintaining informal and formal support of armed leaders in Michoacán – be they self-defence vigilantes or drug cartel members – has 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 and seek to maintain their position as government proxies. The 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 territorial fragmentation of the region, currently divided into dozens of fiefdoms over which local bosses exert immense social, political and economic control.

Policy analysis may miss the mark when viewing the power of these non-state leaders in opposition to public authority, rather than alongside to it. Dozens of armed actors enjoy sovereign leadership within the same regions, leading to collaboration and competition. In this scenario, the use of violence is not about overthrowing the political system but rather about manoeuvring within the political game played with public authorities. De facto rulers thus emerge in collaboration with, in spite of and in opposition to the state.

These relationships and configurations of power have multiple policy consequences, mainly because these rulers are not stable. Instead, they are constantly threatened by other actors, including public authorities and state forces, thus sustaining long cycles of violence and intractable conflict. When authorities act as regulators of violence, rather than building transparent security and justice responses, they contribute to outsourcing state tasks to local bosses. Although this decision might appear efficient in the short term – for example, if it contributes to a sudden drop in homicides – the consolidation of these informal leaders' power de-legitimizes the state as the sole guarantor of order and security.

Government officials' support not only allows the bosses and their groups to act with impunity, but it also makes them particularly attractive at the local level as they have access to multiple resources – including budgets, favours, electoral seats and protection. A security strategy that tolerates or supports

local armed groups – be they autodefensas or criminal groups – rather than diminishing violence, might actually increase violent competition among multiple groups looking to position themselves as disciples of the state.

The state's opacity then provides significant discretionary power to violent local bosses. It is an incentive for them to do anything to secure their power and for other bosses to compete for protected status. Eventually, these fiefdoms make it challenging for the authorities, or any civil society initiative, to propose alternatives to these charismatic armed leaders. In short, the state ends up promoting violent bosses, as well as the use of violence and coercion, as the most respected and efficient tools to achieve and maintain power at the local level.

The political space left for other forms of social participation and mobilization, especially unarmed initiatives, becomes virtually non-existent, sometimes leading to the exclusion of ordinary citizens or civil society groups. Several political actors and civil society activists consulted in Michoacán stated that current conditions of insecurity prevent them from participating in any public activity. Doing otherwise would put their lives at risk because of the mafia-type connections that exist between political figures, criminal bosses and local elites.

In this context, the political hopes generated by self-defence groups 10 years ago might seem to be a distant memory and, for some, to have been wasted. As many of those interviewed feared, the groups have merged into large criminal groups or local armed factions that assume governance roles. As this report has shown, most former autodefensa leaders or affiliates are currently active under new group names: there is now a plethora of drug trafficking groups, armed groups and vigilante cells.

If community members know that armed leaders are tolerated or backed by the state, it becomes even riskier to engage in any political activity. Not only do armed leaders have no one preventing them from using violence – for example, against journalists, activists or political opponents – but they might even become the armed proxy of government officials, public armed forces or local ruling elites, while state support provides them with almost absolute protection to do so. In these regions, engaging in politics therefore become extremely dangerous, or impossible. These dynamics, however, cannot be examined from Mexico City but require deep immersion within local communities. By extension, 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.

Recommendations

It is crucial for the federal and state governments to advance institutional efforts to ensure public security in order to offer credible alternatives to strongmen and violent intermediaries. Otherwise, local armed leaders will consolidate their power; provide protection, conflict resolution and access to resources; and impose control through licit and illicit markets, extortion and coercion. To avoid a situation in which armed actors, both public and private, end up being the main implementors of order, the following policy actions are recommended:

- Donors and civil society organizations must invest resources in producing local, timely diagnoses to further improve our understanding of complex dynamics of violence and governance.

- The state government should pursue efforts to institutionalize public security strategies and be open to internal and external evaluations of such initiatives in order to minimize the misuse of public funding and the risk of furthering the authority of local bosses.
- The federal government, in direct coordination with the Michoacán state government and key municipalities, should design and implement a strategy to demobilize unregistered armed autodefensas and to focus on violence prevention and reduction related to drug cartel activities.
- Both federal and state governments must guarantee that informal armed security providers will be replaced by public forces, particularly police officers. They should design a plan to ensure that former members of autodefensas who wish to join an official security force undergo a thorough and transparent selection process to prevent the use of public resources by criminal actors who benefit from weak institutions to consolidate their personal associations.
- If the federal government wishes to begin peace dialogues with local criminal and armed actors, it should do so in a long-term, transparent, institutional process open to both external monitoring and local citizen participation. This process should be accompanied by a disarmament campaign targeting criminal groups, unregistered armed autodefensas and ordinary citizens who own firearms.
- Authorities at the municipal, state and federal levels, in conjunction with civil society actors, must support citizen security initiatives that seek to create political spaces for unarmed actors and to build resilience at the community level.

Notes

- 1 Mexico is a federal republic composed of 32 federated states. Governments are organized at the municipal, state and federal levels.
- 2 For more discussion on the 'paradox of vigilantism', see 'Outlaw vigilantes', the special issue of *Politix*, 115, 3, coordinated by Gilles Favarel-Garrigues and Laurent Gayer, <https://www.cairn-int.info/journal-politix-2016-3.htm>.
- 3 According to official statistics provided by Mexico's Secretariat of Public Safety. See <https://www.gob.mx/sesnsp/acciones-y-programas/datos-abiertos-de-incidencia-delictiva?state=published>.
- 4 Salvador Maldonado, *Los márgenes del Estado mexicano. Territorios ilegales, desarrollo y violencia en Michoacán, Zamora*, Colegio de Michoacán, 2010; Eduardo Moncada, *Resisting Extortion: Victims, Criminals, and States in Latin America*, Cambridge University Press, 2022; Vanda Felbab-Brown, 'Criminal violence, politics, and state capture in Michoacán', Brookings, 24 September 2021, <https://www.brookings.edu/opinions/criminal-violence-politics-and-state-capture-in-michoacan/>.
- 5 Falko Ernst, 'On the front lines of the hot land: Mexico's incessant conflict', International Crisis Group, 2022, <https://facesofconflict.crisisgroup.org/on-the-front-lines-of-the-hot-land-mexicos-incessant-conflict/>.
- 6 Interview with Juan in Apatzingán, Michoacán, November 2022.
- 7 Lars Buur, 'Reordering society: Vigilantism and expressions of sovereignty in Port Elizabeth's Townships', *Development and Change*, 34, 4, 736.
- 8 Gilles Favarel-Garrigues and Laurent Gayer, 'Violer la loi pour maintenir l'ordre. Le vigilantisme en débat', *Politix*, 3, 115, 7–33.
- 9 In particular, see David Pratten and Atrayee Sen, eds., *Global Vigilantes*. London: Hurst, 2007.
- 10 Lars Buur, 'Democracy and its discontents: Vigilantism, sovereignty and human rights in South Africa', *Review of African Political Economy*, 35, 118, 571–584.
- 11 Interview with former member of the Buenavista Council of Autodefensas in Buenavista Tomatlán, Michoacán, September 2015.
- 12 On the same topic, see Marc-André Lagrange and Thierry Vircoulon, 'Criminals or vigilantes? The Kuluna gangs of the Democratic Republic of Congo', *GI-TOC*, May 2021, <https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/kuluna-gangs-democratic-republic-congo/>.
- 13 *El Universal*, 'El Abuelo', *de autodefensa a operador del CJNG*, 30 May 2018, <https://www.eluniversal.com.mx/nacion/seguridad/el-abuelo-de-autodefensa-operador-del-cjng>; Leticia Pineda, 'A pesar de algunos nexos con cárteles, el Gobierno mexicano legaliza las autodefensas', *El Faro*, 2 February 2014, <https://elfaro.net/es/201401/internacionales/14637/A-pegar-de-algunos-nexos-con-c%C3%A1rteles-el-Gobierno-mexicano-legaliza-las-autodefensas.htm>.
- 14 Interview with Julio, member of the autodefensas in Apatzingán, Michoacán, October 2017.
- 15 Interview with a member of the Michoacán government, November 2022.
- 16 Interview with Carlos in Tierra Caliente, November 2022.
- 17 Interview with Marcelo in the Sierra Costa, November 2022.
- 18 David Pratten, 'The politics of protection: Perspectives on vigilantism in Nigeria', *Journal of the International African Institute*, 78, 1, 1–15.
- 19 *Se logró lo que buscábamos*, *Reforma*, 28 January 2014.
- 20 For more details about the entire negotiation process, see Romain Le Cour Grandmaison, 'Cartels, autodefensas, and the state in Michoacán, Mexico', *European Review of Latin American and Caribbean Studies / Revista Europea de Estudios Latinoamericanos y del Caribe*, 112, 137–158, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48658263>.
- 21 *Ahora somos gobierno*, *Reforma*, 10 May 2014.
- 22 Interview with Julio in Apatzingán, Michoacán, October 2017.
- 23 See, for example, Antonio Fuentes Diaz and Daniele Fini, eds., *Defender al pueblo. Autodefensas y Policías Comunitarias en México*. Puebla: Ediciones del Lirio, 2018. A 2013 study mentions the existence of self-defence groups in 68 municipalities, spread out across 13 states. See Asfura-Heim and Ralph Espach, 'The rise of Mexico's self-defence forces:

Vigilante justice south of the border, *Foreign Affairs*, 92, 4, 143–150.

- 24 See Mexico's Constitution, available at https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Mexico_2015.pdf?lang=en.
- 25 They are also protected by the 1989 Convention of the International Labor Organization with regards to the indigenous and tribal peoples. See Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention, 1989 (No. 169), https://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:12100:0::NO::P12100_ILO_CODE:C169.
- 26 Interview with Ezequiel in Sierra de Guerrero, October 2020.
- 27 Interviews and discussions with community members in Sierra de Guerrero, October 2020.
- 28 Interview with Patricio in Coalcomán, Michoacán, November 2022.
- 29 Interviews conducted at the checkpoint with armed men, March 2021.
- 30 Interviews with public officials in Apatzingán and Buenavista, November 2022.
- 31 Interviews with leaders in Tierra Caliente, November 2022.
- 32 Ibid.



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