ABRAZOS NO BALAZOS?

THE MEXICAN STATE-CARTEL NEXUS

Edited by Joshua Treviño

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Executive Summary

In the decades since the 1971 inauguration of President Richard Nixon's "War on Drugs," successive Mexican presidencies have—until recently—sought to cast themselves as partners of the United States in the fight against criminal cartels and trafficking. Mexican officials have used high-profile arrests as evidence of their fight against organized crime (Smith, 2014). Yet, despite these efforts—often sincere, sometimes not—the intersection between Mexican state power at every level and Mexican criminal organizations broadened and deepened. The formal state's oscillation between (secret) support and (overt) repression across decades introduced a profound ambiguity into the cooperative relationship with the United States.

From 2006 to 2012, Felipe Calderón's presidency marks the inflection point at which the tension between the Mexican state's desire to defeat its own criminal elements (likely sincere in Calderón's case) and the complicity of that same state with those same elements (marked by, for example, his secretary of public security, convicted in a U.S. court for alleged cooperation with the Sinaloa Cartel) became increasingly untenable (Feuer & Schweber, 2023). Calderón militarized law enforcement, took the fight to a new level of intensity and violence, and inadvertently plunged the country into its present era of quasi-militarized violence. Calderón's desire to win the fight against the Mexican cartels was stymied by a combination of cartel resistance, a lack of resources and willingness of prominent elements of the Mexican state to cooperate with those cartels.

Enrique Peña Nieto's 2012 to 2018 administration was marked by a noticeable decline in meaningful cooperation with U.S. law enforcement to curb cartel activity. (For example, Peña Nieto discontinued U.S.–Mexico cooperation in vetting senior personnel for corruption.) Peña Nieto wanted to turn the Mexicans toward economic transformation through a suite of structural reforms. He treated crime and violence as essentially a public-relations problem and turned a blind eye to human-rights abuses purportedly committed by his army (Feuer, 2019a; Goldman, 2018).

The current presidency of Andrés Manuel López Obrador (commonly known as AMLO), who was elected in 2018, has seen Mexican-state cooperation with the United States against criminal cartels descend to a new low. The optics of his abrazos no balazos campaign—"hugs not bullets"—offers a sense of passivity toward security threats rather than a serious plan. His administration's insouciance in combating cartel activity is coupled with a curtailing of U.S.–Mexico law-enforcement liaison—for example, in effectively hampering several decades of Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) operations in Mexico. The unwillingness to work with the United States is paired with gestures of Mexican presidential sympathy toward particular criminal cartels and a chronic unwillingness to confront or even rhetorically condemn their activities. The AMLO administration, more than any of its predecessors, has labored to foster a distinct

Key Points

- The Mexican drug trade has seen an increase in both activity and violence used by Mexican drug cartels over the past 50 years.

- The Mexican government has a mixed history of dealing with the cartels, alternating between nonchalance, inefficiency, or even more recently, collusion.

- Although the United States has invested money and manpower to help the Mexican government fight the cartels and eliminate the drug trade, the cooperation has largely depended on the inclination of the administration in power.

- Numerous reports and evidence of corruption at all levels of the Mexican government, including bribes received by high-ranking officials, point to collusion.

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impression of persistent Mexican state-cartel collusion—sanctioned at the highest level of that state. Officially, López Obrador denies any suggestion of cartel collusion, calling such claims "vulgar" (Hernández, 2022).

This paper examines the extent to which the Mexican state may be complicit in cartel activities and operations. The case made is necessarily circumstantial, but given the subject matter, it must suffice.

Introduction

Mexico—a country with historically close trade, cultural, and demographic ties to the United States—is plunged into the abyss of intensifying criminal-cartel violence. Though the criminal organizations are commonly referred to as "drug cartels"—illegal drugs being the foundational product for many of them—their reach extends into nearly every facet of social and economic life. Whether it is in avocado production, poppy cultivation, port operations, human trafficking, extorting tortilla mills or beyond, the cartels are present (Sheridan et al., 2024).

The illicit drug trade has occupied part of Mexico's history for a long time, and this has led to more criminal organizations vying for dominance over regional drug markets and smuggling routes into the U.S. As cartels continue to fight among each other and wrestle with local law enforcement for territorial hegemony, a more sinister struggle is taking place: a Sisyphean internal battle to purge the government of corrupt officials quietly working with (or active members of) the drug organizations they piously pledge to eliminate. The recent disintegration of cooperation between Mexico and the U.S. amid a relentless war on drugs reflects that conflict in greater detail and serves as the focus of this research.

Felipe Calderón's militarized anti-cartel efforts beginning in 2006 have been pursued with diminishing ardor by his successors, Enrique Peña Nieto in 2012 and Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO) in 2018. Both Peña Nieto and AMLO have cast the crackdown on drug trafficking organizations (DTOs) as, effectively, "Calderón's war." Peña Nieto pursued an agenda of structural reforms in energy, telecommunications, and labor regulations—while staying silent on security. AMLO promised to tackle what he considered the root causes of crime: poverty and corruption. Both incoming presidents proposed overhauls of the security institutions established by their predecessors; Peña Nieto created a gendarmerie, which was introduced as a unit of the Federal Police in 2014 but disbanded in 2019 (Presidencia de la República EPN, 2014; El Sol de Tampico, 2019). AMLO proposed the creation of a National Guard,

which would comprise soldiers and Federal Police officers—while effectively disbanding the Federal Police, which he considered irredeemably corrupt, and voiced suspicions over due to its origins under the command of García Luna (López & Díaz, 2019). AMLO has subsequently spoken of plans to introduce a reform to place the National Guard under the command of the Defense Secretariat. Consequentially, the Mexican government appears unwilling to address the systemic complicity of state actors with drug trafficking organizations and deliberately destabilizes the mechanisms in place to uphold law and order.

Judicial incompetence and political powerlessness breed societal cynicism toward the government. Police who solicit bribes; soldiers, who commit human rights abuses; and high-ranking political figures, who collude with and protect drug kingpins, are hallmarks of a state gone awry. The post-2006 violence has cost Mexico at least 125,000 lives (Beittel, 2020)—including more than 64 journalists (Committee to Protect Journalists, n.d.) and left more than 100,000 people missing (The Economist, 2022). The nature of the violence, which began as a sincere effort to defeat the cartels, now mostly reflects a fluctuating system of patronage and competing sovereignties—sometimes with state complicity.

Cartels and their bosses have come and gone since the 1960s, and the Mexican government typically responds in the time-honored fashion: Organized-crime groups function as de facto government actors while top officials often ignore underground criminal activity. Modern Mexico, in 2022, is no exception, but several factors make the current era uniquely dangerous:

- An extraordinary level of violence, including but not limited to a persistently high homicide rate. By some estimates, close to two thirds of all Mexican homicides are cartel-related (Calderon et al., 2019).

- A de facto loss of Mexican-state sovereignty over its own territory, with credible estimates suggesting that about 35% to 40% of Mexican territory is under direct cartel rule (Davidson, 2021).

- An overt disinterest from the Mexican president—unprecedented in the past century—in combating criminal cartels, and a concurrent shutdown of cooperation with the United States in that sphere.

The unfortunate reality is that criminal cartels have burrowed their way into the government—and vice versa. Well-meaning public servants, of whom Mexico has many,

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are powerless against a nexus of senior officeholders, societal elites, and criminal cartels. The lens through which to understand the modern Mexican state, then, is not through the manifest virtues of ordinary Mexicans—who possess a cultural richness and a capacity for industry that is properly the envy of the world—but through the chosen vices of Mexican elites.

Disillusioned Politics: An Overture (1968–2005)

Mexico's antidrug agenda was born amid the aftermath of the 1968 Tlatelolco massacre, which destroyed public consensus around the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI)—a political party that enjoyed 71 consecutive years in power (Walker, 2013; Flaherty, 2016; Doyle, 2003). The student protest that ended in a storm of bullets from the military took place during a broader rebellion against Mexico's authoritarian regime. In an attempt to appear more politically transparent and stable than his predecessor, President Luis Echeverría (1970–1976) superficially embraced a U.S.-imported antidrug campaign to reconcile PRI's political challenges and public image (Teague, 2019). While there is scant evidence of U.S. agents instigating the PRI's manipulation of the war on drugs to suppress internal dissent, the White House did not outwardly oppose the PRI's actions either because—although means were questionable—the ends were politically consistent with America's contemporaneous war on communism (Cedillo, 2021).

Echeverría's perfunctory anti-cartel efforts were short-lived. His questionable friendship with Mexico City's drug-smuggling police chief Arturo "El Negro" Durazo Moreno (Beezley & Maclachlan, 2016) and Tijuana-based cocaine boss Alberto Sicilia Falcón (Redmond, 2017) represented the kind of implicitly acceptable narco-government alliance that continued to pervade later administrations. If that weak commitment to the war was not evidence enough, amid the lenient anti-narco policies, the Guadalajara Cartel, founded by Miguel Angel Felix Gallardo and Rafael Caro Quintero, began to flourish during Echeverría's administration.

Mexico's Operation Condor campaign, launched in 1975 and later overseen by President José López Portillo (1976–1982), replaced independent local police agencies with military control over the population on the pretext of attacking the illegal drug trade (Cedillo, 2021, p. 4). Although the government used Operation Condor to attack some cartel activity, its actual effect was to reorganize and subsume drug-trade networks by subjecting cartel leadership to

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PRI clientelism—a system of protection and impunity in exchange for political loyalty and bribes (Smith, 2013). This mechanism has encased certain Mexican authoritarian proclivities in amber. The victory of Portillo's federal police after killing Pedro Aviles Pérez, the founding father of modern drug trafficking and Sinaloa Cartel kingpin, was quickly eclipsed by headlines about the corrupt and now-defunct federal ministry of security (DFS) smuggling countless drug shipments on behalf of the Guadalajara Cartel (Scott, 2000).

In the 1980s, as U.S. President Ronald Reagan escalated the American war on drugs, Mexico struggled to maintain an autonomous drug policy. The 1985 kidnapping, torture, and murder of U.S. DEA agent Enrique "Kiki" Camarena catapulted President Miguel de la Madrid's (1982–1988) administration and the U.S. into a major diplomatic storm (Grant, 2012). Several DFS agents along with Rafael Caro Quintero of the Guadalajara Cartel were accused of Kiki's death, leading to their eventual arrest. To the dismay of the head of the DEA, Mexico refused to extradite the suspects to the U.S. The bungled investigation and extradition left many U.S. law enforcement agents incensed and asking more questions than when they began (Baker & Archibold, 2013). In 2013, a Mexican federal judge made the controversial decision to free Caro Quintero on a technicality (Archibold & Zabludovsky, 2013). Since then, Interpol has designated Caro Quintero as an international fugitive. The laconic response from Mexico's attorney general at the time, Jesus Murillo Karam, was that "lo teníamos y se nos fue" ("We had him and then he escaped [our grasp]"; Araizaga, 2013).

Later, in 1987, de la Madrid's declaration that drug trafficking posed a threat to national security led to the expansion of the Mexican military's counterdrug mission (Chillier & Freeman, 2005).

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To show Mexico's fitness as a partner in NAFTA, President Carlos Salinas de Gortari (1988–1992) oversaw the capture and incarceration of Guadalajara kingpin Miguel Ángel Félix Gallardo (Rohter, 1989). Salinas navigated a strained relationship with the U.S. throughout his tenure. The Mexican president worked closely with the George H.W. Bush administration to fight drug trafficking and sanctioned 39 DEA agents to operate in Mexico—a bold move requiring the Mexican government to relinquish some of its sovereignty. However, in an effort to reinforce U.S. security operations in Mexico, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in 1992 that the unilateral abduction of another Mexican national by American federal agents did not violate the U.S.-Mexico extradition treaty or U.S. Constitution. The move was derided as "arrogant" and "dangerous" by Mexican figures. The indignant reaction sparked American suspicions that Mexico was not behaving as a trustworthy partner in the battle against cartels (Miller, 1992).

Salinas did enjoy a brief celebration for his NAFTA accomplishments, but reports later revealed his fraudulent profiteering from several immediate family members' drug-smuggling operations (Golden, 1998). Like nearly every Mexican president, Salinas leveraged public enthusiasm for highly anticipated diplomatic coordination and the arrest of one prominent kingpin to shift—whether out of intent or mere organic consequence—administrative support and clientelism to a different cartel offstage (Lupsha, 1995).

The authenticity of President Ernesto Zedillo's antidrug efforts (1994–2000) mirrored that of his predecessors. Two years into his administration, Zedillo successfully arrested and extradited Gulf Cartel head Juan García Abrego to the U.S. in 1996 (Tampa Bay Times, 2005). Just one year later, however, Jesús Gutiérrez Rebollo, a top Mexican army brigadier general appointed by Zedillo, was convicted of drug and firearm trafficking, racketeering, and corruption. He was promptly sentenced to 40 years in prison, although, two presidential administrations later, a court would reduce Gutiérrez Rebollo's prison sentence and reinstate his military title—a result of disintegrating anti-narcotic policies and a desperate desire to rescue the military's damaged reputation (Gómez Licón, 2013). A month later, in 1997, Brigadier General Alfredo Navarro Lara became the second highest ranking military officer to be jailed on drug charges and attempting to buy off authorities (Preston, 1997). Zedillo followed a familiar procedure indeed: a humble collection of successes followed by the same pattern of predictable and "scandalous" arrests of some important right-hand men.

During the Zedillo administration, a leaked document (Farah, 1999) from the National Drug Intelligence Center described one of Mexico's most prominent political families as posing "a significant criminal threat to the United States" (para. 13). The document, first published by the Mexican newspaper El Financiero, alleged Carlos Hank González—a former Mexico City mayor and federal cabinet member under Salinas—along with his sons Carlos Hank Rohn and Jorge Hank Rohn used his businesses to move cocaine into the United States and laundered drug money. Carlos Hank Rohn was cited as a shareholder in Laredo National Bancshares (purchased by BBVA in 2008), while Jorge Hank Rohn held an important gambling concession in Tijuana and would later become PRI mayor of Tijuana.

"Several years of investigative information strongly support the conclusion that the Hank family has laundered money on a massive scale, assisted drug trafficking organizations in transporting drug shipments, and engaged in large-scale public corruption," read the document, according to the Washington Post in its June 2, 1999, story (Farah, 1999, para. 12). The family "has begun to extend its interests from Mexico to the United States," the document also said. "[It] has purchased or exercises control over several U.S. banks, investment firms, transportation companies and real estate properties" (para. 3).

The family—known as Grupo Hank—vigorously denied the accusations, which they said were politically motivated. Carlos Hank González cut a controversial course through Mexican politics. He became a billionaire while rising through the PRI ranks—starting as a schoolteacher and explaining his fortune with the infamous Mexican political maxim, "A politician who is poor is a poor politician." The family actively fought the drug accusations. They hired lawyers (Bergman, 2000), including former New Hampshire Sen. Warren Rudman to lobby for the document's withdrawal. Eventually, then-Attorney General Janet Reno disavowed the document, saying in a March 21, 2000, letter to the Hanks' lawyers that the document "was beyond the substantive expertise and area of responsibility of the

NDIC [National Drug Intelligence Center]," according to the Associated Press (Briscoe, 2000).

In 2000, the victory of National Action Party (PAN) presidential candidate Vicente Fox (2000–2006) finally broke PRI's 71-year grip on power. Fox's election generated an ephemeral optimism about the government's efforts to professionalize the police and military (Chabat, 2010). However, none of the several important drug arrests he supervised could counteract Fox's image of institutional weakness nor vindicate him from rumors that PAN helped notorious drug boss Joaquín Guzmán Loera, commonly known as "El Chapo," escape from prison (McKinley, 2005). Suspicion surrounding the Fox administration continued to compound when the public learned that nearly a month after El Chapo's great escape, Fox began to buy property and remodel his ranch despite starting his presidency with just "$1,000 in the bank" (Grillo, 2014). Fox allegedly turned the proverbial cheek while the infamous Sinaloan cartel chieftain escaped in exchange for $20 million in bribes (Beith, 2011).

Despite the efforts and achievements of these six presidential administrations, neither the volume of illegal drug shipments nor the power and influence of DTOs decreased (Chabat, 2010, p. 5).

Felipe Calderón: *Fragmenta y Controla* (2006–2012)

By the time PAN presidential candidate Felipe Calderón took power in December 2006, drug traffickers were already controlling large territories across Mexico, increasing instability, and openly challenging the government's authority (Chabat, 2010, p. 6). The 2,700 people who had been killed in DTO violence in 2007 more than doubled to 5,600 deaths in 2008, with no sign of slowing down (Beittel, 2009). In response to public pressure from his constituents, as well as persistent demands from the U.S. to take a harder stance against the violence, Calderón elevated the effort on the now-simmering war on drug cartels by launching Operation Clean House. This historic decision marked the last time the Mexican government took such drastic actions to eradicate drug cartels (Brookes, 2009).

The 2007 extradition of 15 major drug defendants, including Gulf Cartel boss Osiel Cárdenas (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2010), and the 2008 arrest of kingpin Alfredo Beltran Leyva of the Beltran Leyva Organization (BLO; Associated Press, 2008) were Calderón's way of demonstrating that he would not tolerate DTO activity the way his predecessors had.

Bush and Calderón commit to the Merida Initiative.

Source: *Hands Across the Border*, Politico, May 15, 2008 (https://www.politico.com/story/2008/05/hands-across-the-border-010350).

Calderón also accomplished what Salinas, Zedillo, and Fox never could in their polarized political environments—a profound reform of the Mexican judicial system that expanded the purview of preexisting law enforcement statutes (Felbab-Brown, 2011). These new proposals were especially crucial because, knowing that the legal structure left something to be desired, the existing laws that declared drug trafficking a crime worth prosecuting were near impossible to enforce (Chabat, 2010, p. 10). By strengthening existing state institutions and improving Mexico's ability to enforce the law, Calderón attempted to provide an alternative solution to idly tolerating trafficking or combating the phenomenon with insufficient forces.

In 2008, U.S. President George W. Bush launched the Mérida Law Enforcement Initiative in response to Calderón's request for more American security assistance in fighting transnational cartel operations (Congressional Research Service, 2021). The agreement represented a substantial diplomatic pivot for Mexico, which had long been wary of U.S. intervention in its affairs (Sheridan & Sieff, 2021). With U.S. backing, Calderón deployed the Mexican military against the cartels to an unprecedented degree.

Calderón's "fragment and control" strategy of targeting kingpins, reforming the law, and partnering with the U.S. ultimately led to fractured cartels seeking to regroup and reorganize in the power vacuum left behind (Miroff & Booth, 2012). His militarized approach spurred violence that resulted in 40,000 deaths toward the end of his term—leaving many American leaders wondering whether the strategy was not making matters worse. Representative Michael McCaul of Texas commented that he admired

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Calderón "for taking them head on, which is a very dangerous thing to do. He is the first president to … do something about it … [but it] seems to keep getting worse" ([Archibold et al., 2011, para. 11](#)). As a response to mounting skepticism, Calderón doubled down on his tactics in an impassioned speech in September 2011, declaring that "the only way to really put an end to this cancer is to persevere with this strategy" ([Hughes & Graham, 2011, para. 4](#))— "this" being his army-backed offensive.

The Mérida Initiative would end up costing the United States $3.5 billion to date ([Congressional Research Service, 2021, p. 1](#)). The militarized anti-cartel initiative produced no effective return on investment in its primary aim to reduce violence in the streets. Although the Mérida Initiative was not expressly designed to fight institutionalized corruption, that phenomenon has not decreased since its launch, suggesting that the approach and implementation of the program were flawed since the beginning.

Operation Clean House struck at many figures close to Calderón. In November 2008, Calderón's own drug czar, Noé Ramírez Mandujano, was arrested for taking $450,000 in monthly bribes from BLO in exchange for leaking information on government drug enforcement operations ([Justice in Mexico, 2013](#)). Mandujano's arrest was an embarrassment to his own special investigations on organized crime unit. Calderón's reputation also suffered, as he promised to distinguish his cartel-combating efforts from his predecessors by engaging in meticulous interventions with cartel criminals, but not necessarily members of his own government and law enforcement wing ([McKinley, 2007](#)). That same month, two high-ranking Mexican liaisons with Interpol were placed under arrest amid reports of information leaks to cartels ([The Associated Press, 2008](#)). Rodolfo de la Guardia and Ricardo Gutiérrez Vargas were part of a string of detained public officials in Operation Clean House ([Justice in Mexico, 2009](#)). In reaction to the surprise scandal, Calderón shifted his antidrug operations to his home state of Michoacán in 2009. There, his security forces arrested 27 mayors and other government officials for having ties to La Familia Michoacana ([Wilkinson, 2009](#)). The Michoacanazo occurred on the eve of the 2009 midterm election, drawing accusations it was politically motivated and targeting the political left. Detainees were eventually released within two years ([Ferreyra, 2015](#)).

Yet, such activity led some individuals, including Mexican law professor and organized crime expert Edgardo Buscaglia, to speculate that Calderón was selectively fighting the cartels. A 2010 analysis from NPR revealed that his government fought organized crime syndicates all over the republic except for the state of Sinaloa, which is home to El Chapo and the largest cartel of the state's namesake in Mexico ([Burnett et al., 2010](#)). Concurrent leaked documents also revealed that El Chapo had informants at various levels of law enforcement and that the government was aware of El Chapo's counterintelligence scheme ([Lacey, 2010](#)). Calderón denied the accusations of cartel favoritism, according to a New York Times article: "It's absolutely false. I can state clearly that the government has attacked without favor all criminal groups in Mexico" ([para. 10](#)). Calderón's detractors have pointed out, however, that of the countless arrests, other cartels have faced far more detentions than those associated with the Sinaloa Cartel. Later in 2012, two former army generals, a retired lieutenant colonel, and an active general were all charged with providing protection to the BLO cartel ([The Times, 2012](#)). Thus, Sinaloa was not the only cartel that received protection after all.

Still, the most damaging act of the Calderón administration took place within a few weeks of Calderón assuming his role as president. Toward the beginning, Calderón assigned Juan Camilo Mouriño the responsibility of selecting the members of his presidential cabinet. As part of his diligent research to appoint a new secretary of defense for Calderón, Mouriño was informed by several Mexican army generals that Genaro García Luna—who was Mexico's director of the Federal Investigative Agency at the time—had amassed an incriminating portfolio of corruption practices ([Murataya et al., 2013](#)). The generals warned Mouriño and wanted Calderón to be aware that García Luna protected a number of DTOs during the Fox administration. Despite the tips, Calderón appointed García Luna to the Public Security Secretariat, where he took on the title of "architect" of Calderón's militarized approach to battling DTOs. Mouriño later died in a plane crash in 2008, which many speculated was an act of vengeance on the part of El Chapo because Mouriño was putting too much pressure on DTOs (Beith, 2010). A preliminary report attributed the crash to pilot error as the Learjet carrying Mouriño encountered turbulence from a passenger jet preceding it toward the Mexico City airport ([Malkin, 2008a](#)). To this day, the nature of the relationship between García Luna and Mouriño remains unclear, but where Mouriño allegedly stopped cooperating with cartels, García Luna continued.

Over the course of his decades-long career (including six years at a cabinet-level position), García Luna accrued a personal fortune that was "inconsistent with the salary of a civil servant in Mexico," according to prosecutors who obtained his financial records ([Feuer, 2019b, para. 10](#)). He allegedly received millions in bribes from the Sinaloa

Cartel and awaits what will likely be a historic trial in the U.S. in late 2022 (Devereaux, 2021).

Though it will be addressed in greater detail later in the paper, García Luna's dramatic arrest in Texas exposed the vulnerability in Mexico's legal system and compounded a growing resentment about what Mexico perceived as American overreach in their bilateral relationship. As the New York Times succinctly describes it, "what looked like justice to American prosecutors was perceived in Mexico as undermining an ally" (Sheridan, 2020, para. 5).

Calderón entered office with a bang and left with a whimper. The Calderón administration launched the modern war on drugs but relapsed into the timeworn government tactic of secretly protecting one cartel while cracking down on the others. With Mexico still in a state of drug warfare, Calderón handed off the presidency to Enrique Peña Nieto.

Enrique Peña Nieto: Investigación Interrumpida (2012–2018)

Upon taking office in 2012, Enrique Peña Nieto vowed to reduce violence but significantly curtailed Mexican cooperation with the United States almost immediately upon taking office. Where Calderón at least sought to combat police corruption by enhancing vetting protocols (Congressional Research Service, 2013), Peña Nieto's law enforcement let 14,100 of 134,000 municipal police who failed their vetting exams keep their jobs (Seelke & Finklea, 2017). That number does not include the many senior officials who outright refused to participate in the same vetting procedures and polygraph tests since Peña Nieto entered office (Center for U.S.-Mexican Studies, 2018). By not honoring U.S. vetting requests for those involved in U.S.-Mexican joint task forces, the new president signaled a disinterest in basic mechanisms, and fundamental relationships, for combatting rising crime.

Peña Nieto's big security promise was to create a gendarmerie to fight organized crime. But it was never properly supported by his administration and became part of the Guardia Nacional, under the succeeding administration, in 2019 (El Sol de México, 2019). Peña Nieto prioritized economic reforms that had stalled for more than a decade, seeking to change the narrative from bloodletting and cartel conflicts to unleashing Mexico's vast economic potential. His agenda won plaudits—and he was personally portrayed as a transformative figure, with Time magazine infamously publishing a cover story titled, "Saving Mexico" (Moreno, 2017). On the issue of security, Peña Nieto pursued a policy of silence—out of sight, out of mind. It seemed to work

Demonstrators burn a photo of Peña Nieto at a protest to demand justice for the 43 missing Ayotzinapa students.

Source: *Will Obama Press Mexico's President for Answers on the Disappearance of 43 Students?* Slate, January 6, 2015 (https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2015/01/enrique-pena-nieto-will-obama-press-mexico-s-president-for-answers-on-the-disappearance-of-43-students.html).

in the first year of his administration. But the silence was shattered by the rise of the autodefensas—self-defense groups in Michoacán (Agren, 2014)—who armed themselves to fight off the predatory Knights Templar cartel.

While Peña Nieto faced similar basic levels of endemic corruption as his predecessors, his administration's record is stained with two major events, both of which signaled a concrete end to meaningful governmental accountability—both toward ordinary Mexican citizens and toward the Mexican state's putative partner in the United States.

The first event was the now-infamous 2014 Ayotzinapa massacre. In the middle of the night on September 26, a group of university students entered the city of Iguala to commandeer a convoy of buses for transportation to an upcoming protest in Mexico City. Unbeknownst to the students, those buses were carrying huge loads of heroin as part of a drug-smuggling operation—and the students unwittingly hijacked the cargo (Kryt, 2021). Later reports concluded that it was the municipal police and members of the military—at the direction of a local drug gang—who opened fire on the students, killing five and "enforceably disappearing" 43 more students (Tuckman, 2015; Reuters, 2021).

Two separate teams of international forensic experts were "invited to leave the country" in the middle of their investigations upon independently verifying a catalog of failures

According to Mexico's National Search Commission, more than 99,000 people have gone missing since 2006. More than 80% of the disappearances occurred between 2006 and 2022 and "more than one quarter in the last three years."

by Mexican authorities during and immediately after the massacre ([Amnesty International, 2016](#)). For example, local law enforcement knew about the attack in real-time and deliberately chose not to act ([Tuckman, 2014](#)). As a result, there is no mechanism in place to ensure that those responsible are brought to justice. Peña Nieto's official response to the international scandal signaled a downward turn in the government's efforts to combat crime spawned by cartels. The botched investigation generated suspicion that Peña Nieto was trying to cover for the government's lengthy record of human rights abuses ([Reuters, 2021](#)). The Peña Nieto administration naively relied on the Mexican public's short-term memory to erase the scandal—but the Mexican public did not forget, and the administration eventually paid the price in the form of protest and plummeting public trust. It may have cost Peña Nieto electorally, too.

López Obrador met with the parents of the Ayotzinapa students during his successful 2018 campaign, promising to solve the case by establishing a truth commission ([El Financiero, 2018](#)). The commitment aligned with his campaign themes of delivering justice, eradicating corruption, and ending impunity. The truth commission issued its first report in 2022, labeling the tragedy, "a crime of state," in which state actors such as police and soldiers either did not intervene or colluded with the Guerreros Unidos drug cartel ([López, 2022](#)). However, the investigation hit a roadblock when it encountered resistance from the military—an institution on which AMLO has heavily relied—causing it to stall. The international experts, many expelled under Peña Nieto, but invited back by AMLO, once again left the country. The truth commission also came under fire for relying on questionable evidence ([Kitroeff et al., 2023](#)). Parents of the missing students objected to AMLO's

defense of the military and his attempts at describing them as being misled by their lawyers by saying, "We would like to remind you that you are not the victim, rather those of us who lost our sons are" ([Latinus, 2024a](#)).

The Americas director of Human Rights Watch called the Ayotzinapa case the worst humanitarian crisis since the 1968 Tlatelolco massacre ([Vice News, 2015](#)). The similarity between the two tragedies is in the glaring lack of a proper investigation and allowing politically connected figures impunity. The Ayotzinapa massacre is widely considered to be emblematic of the country's broader (and oft-neglected) disappearance crisis closely associated with cartel violence ([Segovia, 2015](#); [Goldman, 2016](#)).

Although disappearances are not a new phenomenon in Mexico, they have risen exponentially in the context of the cartel war. According to Mexico's National Search Commission ([2022](#)), more than 99,000 people have gone missing since 2006 ([Blust, 2022](#)). More than 80% of the disappearances occurred between 2006 and 2022 and "more than one quarter in the last three years" ([Brewer, 2022](#)). Disappearances in Mexico differ from the traditional image of "enforced" disappearances perpetrated by a state against political opponents. Mexico's version of this brutality is characterized by the combined intervention of both state and non-state actors—especially DTOs ([Guercke, 2022](#)). What compounds the severity of nearly all disappearance cases in the country, especially that of Ayotzinapa, is the persistence of impunity. Existing evidence and public and scholarly opinion converge to regard the state as guilty of attempting to hide the causes of the Ayotzinapa atrocity in part to protect the armed forces—the alleged antagonists working alongside the cartel ([Frausto & Castellanos, 2021](#)).

The Peña Nieto administration's troubles compounded El Chapo's escape from a federal maximum-security prison in 2015. The Sinaloa cartel leader had been in custody only since 2014. With public skepticism at an all-time high, a new recurring question in the media became whether top law enforcement knew about El Chapo's conveniently well-lit and ventilated mile-long tunnel leading out of his cell ([Shoichet et al., 2015](#)). U.S. officials, too, did not contain their criticism, especially since they had demanded his extradition since his first escape in 2001—again, another squandered bilateral opportunity ([Perez & Gaynor, 2015](#)). One would think that El Chapo was the most closely watched criminal in the world. The prison warden was fired, and scores of Mexican prison officials were arrested ([BBC, 2015](#)), but Peña Nieto's administration could not recover from the embarrassment of losing track of Mexico's largest crime boss. It was doubly embarrassing that the

then-attorney general refused to extradite El Chapo to face drug trafficking charges in a U.S. court, saying it might occur "about 300 or 400 years later" (Associated Press in Mexico City, 2015, para. 3).

El Chapo's recapture in 2016 provided no political relief for Peña Nieto. After he was finally extradited to the U.S. in 2017, El Chapo's 2019 trial proved one of the most damaging moments of Peña Nieto's presidency. A key witness testified that Peña Nieto himself accepted a $100 million bribe from El Chapo. The bombshell testimony stunned the courtroom and the country, because it implied that corruption by drug cartels had reached the highest echelons of Mexico's political establishment (Feuer, 2019a). The veracity of the claim has yet to be confirmed, and the president vehemently denied any actions of corruption, but the rumors of Mexico's political elite and extreme criminal kingpins swept the country (Grillo, 2018).

The penultimate case of botched law and order under Peña Nieto surrounded the case of Ivan Reyes Arzate, a high-ranking commander in the Mexican Federal Police, who was found guilty of obstructing a DEA investigation on international drug trafficking and money laundering (Northern District of Illinois, 2018). Such damning reports came out just before Peña Nieto left office and represented the first time a high-level foreign law enforcement officer was held criminally accountable in a U.S. courtroom for interfering with a transnational organized crime investigation.

The *coup de grace* for Peña Nieto's administration came as part of the investigation of Emilio Lozoya, the former head of state-run oil company Petróleos Mexicanos, and his ties to the 2012 presidential campaign trail (Montes & de Cordoba, 2020). The new National Anti-Corruption System, originally inaugurated by the president himself in part as a response to Ayotzinapa, started as an earnest anticorruption campaign to conduct probes into government activity. Yet, the landmark anticorruption drive was deliberately blocked by the government's refusal to cooperate on some of the largest cases facing the nation (Ahmed, 2017). It was not until 2020, when Peña Nieto had already sheepishly exited the office, that Mexico decided to launch an investigation into any bribery scandal related to him. Lozoya was only put in pre-trial detention after being spotted dining in a posh restaurant (Murray, 2021).

The Lozoya investigation is still ongoing, and Peña Nieto is residing in Spain. Several of Peña Nieto's close collaborators have joined parties allied with López Obrador, including his successor as governor of the Estado de México, Eruviel Ávila (Yañez, 2024). Peña Nieto's infamous track record of stifling any government-backed investigations and perceptions of personally profiting from the presidency left him with an abysmal 18% approval rating and a heavily strained public presence (Ortega, 2018). Low public trust in the government's ability to conduct genuine investigations for the sake of public security (much less stable diplomacy) set the stage for Andrés Manuel López Obrador.

Andrés Manuel López Obrador: Abrazos no Balazos (2018–2024)

Synthesizing an objective analysis of Andrés Manuel López Obrador, the sitting Mexican president, is not straightforward. He concludes his administration on Sept. 30, 2024, handing power to his protégé, former Mexico City mayor Claudia Sheinbaum. Between the stubbornly high homicide rate—which López Obrador claims has trended downward during his administration between December 2018 and June 2024 (AMLO, 2024)—sympathetic gestures to the Sinaloa Cartel, and the shocking arrests of General Salvador Cienfuegos and Genaro García Luna, more than enough evidence has already been provided to distill a clear and convincing pattern of political complicity, at best, with criminal-cartel operations.

In 2018, AMLO, as he is known, ran on a platform of amnesty for people involved in the drug war—delivering the promise in Mexico's heroin-producing heartland of Guerrero state (Agren, 2018). It was a step toward abandoning the Mérida Initiative and further promoting a famously soft on-crime policy known as abrazos no balazos: "hugs, not bullets." AMLO has doubled down on "hugs, not bullets" and rejected calls to change his security strategy. "No, we're not going to modify the strategy. The human being is not bad by nature: circumstances lead them to take the path to antisocial behavior," he said (Presidente de México, 2022) on June 23, 2022, after the slayings of two Jesuit priests in their parish in the Sierra Tarahumara of Chihuahua state. "We believe in rehabilitation, and we do not think that people have no other destiny than to be eliminated."

On October 8, 2021, Mexico and the United States agreed to the Action Plan for U.S.-Mexico Bicentennial Framework for Security, Public Health, and Safe Communities (Bureau of International Narcotics, 2022), which was promoted as a revised version of the Mérida Initiative. The action plan proposes "transforming our cooperation to better protect the health and safety of our citizens and promote the development of the most

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President Lopez-Obrador shaking hands with El Chapo's mother.

Source: *AMLO Defends Meeting El Chapo's Mother Amid Quarantine,* Mexico Today, March 30, 2020 (https://mexicotoday.com/2020/03/30/amlo-defends-meeting-el-chapos-mother-amid-quarantine/).

vulnerable communities in both countries, prevent criminal organizations from harming our countries, and pursue and bring criminals to justice" (para. 1). An analysis from the Center for Strategic & International Studies described it as "something of a reshuffled Mérida Initiative with a different name," which fit with López Obrador's preference for scrapping existing institutions and starting over from scratch (Berg, 2021). The action plan took effect in December 2021.

AMLO had previously promised to send soldiers "back to the barracks" (Sheridan, 2020), but López Obrador has increasingly depended on the military and tasked soldiers and sailors with everything from building a new airport for Mexico City and trains circling the Yucatán Peninsula to public security tasks to running the country's seaports. The number of confrontations between security forces and drug cartels has diminished since AMLO took office, according to SEDENA (Páez, 2023). The most notorious example was soldiers being forced to release Ovidio Guzmán, son of El Chapo, after he was captured in Culiacán in October 2019. Sinaloa Cartel gunmen mobilized after the younger Guzmán's detention, taking soldiers hostage and threatening the families of military personnel (Tuckman, 2019). The Mexican president personally intervened to order Guzman's release to the cartel.

AMLO says he ordered Guzmán's release in the interest of peace and preventing loss of life. One observer, Bishop Salvador Rangel of Chilpancingo-Chilapa in Guerrero state—who regularly dialogues with cartel bosses—said in a March 2022 interview with Catholic News Service that

drug cartel leaders have interpreted the president's passivity as "a sign of weakness" (Agren, 2022a, para. 16). "There's a federal government policy of not directly confronting criminal groups," Eduardo Guerrero, a Mexican security consultant and director of Lantia Consultores, said in an April 2024 presentation. "This causes the expansion of criminal groups into new areas and to colonize these areas and control them" (Save Democracy, 2024).

As a rough metric for the success of this measure, the homicide rate—a function of cartel turf battles—jumped from 33,000 in 2018 to 36,000 in 2020 (Maxouris & Gallon, 2019). In an attempt to increase centralization of AMLO's MORENA political party and reassert the impression that he could maintain control over domestic security, AMLO deployed a revamped 60,000-strong national guard to confront organized crime. Drug-related violence did not decrease (Semple & Villegas, 2019). Even AMLO's senior aides did not tiptoe around the phenomenon. As the aids described it in a bleak analysis, Mexico had been "transformed into a cemetery" (Sheridan, 2020).

The outgoing president's motives for increasingly relying on the military remain ambiguous. However, hints can be found in his morning press conferences, which often touch on issues unrelated to public security. AMLO has long railed against his predecessors' privatizations of state-run companies. In 2021, he explained that handing control of money-losing prestige projects, such as the Felipe Ángeles International Airport north of Mexico City and Tren Maya in the country's southeast, to the military would "shield" the projects from future closure and privatizations (Aristegui Noticias, 2021).

AMLO often refers to the army as the "pueblo uniformado"—the people in uniform—and speaks of soldiers as symbols of honesty. He even described the Defense Secretary Luis Cresencio Sandoval as "incorruptible" on multiple occasions (Presidencia de la República, 2019). However, a series of hacked SEDENA emails, known as #GuacamayaLeaks, revealed troubling connections between soldiers and criminal organizations. One of the leaked emails outlined military intelligence reports showing National Guard members protecting *hauchicol* gangs, who were involved in gasoline theft and fencing, as well as gangs involved in drug and human smuggling in southeastern Mexico (Álvarez Torres, 2022). Another email exposed army intelligence surveilling a soldier selling weapons, including fragmentation grenades, to a drug cartel from the main military base in Mexico City (MCCI, 2022).

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His preference for the military over civilian security forces has been a constant. AMLO eliminated the Federal Police (founded by Calderón and headed by García Luna) shortly after taking office, arguing it was irredeemably corrupt and soldiers were more "professional" (Ivey, 2021). He instead proposed the creation of the National Guard, which he envisioned as an amalgam of former Federal Police officers, soldiers and military police from SEDENA and the Navy Secretariat (SEMAR). Its efficacy has been questioned as the National Guard has made few arrests. In 2023, the Guard delivered 3,588 persons to the judicial authorities—just 9.8 daily—according to the state statistics service, INEGI (Migueles, 2024). It also lost intelligence and investigative capabilities when the Federal Police was abandoned. "The number of people who have been detained as a result of intelligence work is vanishingly small," Samuel Storr, a security researcher at the Iberoamerican University, told the Financial Times in 2022 (Agren, 2022b). Stories of National Guard inaction amid drug cartel conflicts are rife. The family of slain lime grower Hipólita Mora, who led an uprising against drug cartel control in the Tierra Caliente region of Michoacán in 2013, says National Guard members abandoned their base prior to his 2023 execution, which occurred nearby (Verdugo & Stevenson, 2023). Residents escaping rising drug cartel violence in Chiapas and seeking refuge in Guatemala say the National Guard failed to intervene, despite AMLO's admonishment that people turn to the authorities rather than fleeing (Escobar, 2024a; Perez, 2024).

The president has tried unsuccessfully throughout his term to put the National Guard under SEDENA command , with the Supreme Court invalidating one attempt (Maza, 2023a). AMLO, however, appears likely to achieve this goal as his MORENA party and its allies—running on a platform of passing 20 constitutional reforms outlined by AMLO, including SEDENA overseeing the National Guard—won a supermajority in the lower house of Congress and came just three seats short of a supermajority in the Senate in the 2024 elections (Berg & Bledsoe, 2024).

Homicides have remained stubbornly high since AMLO took office. But the president often speaks of improved public security during his administration. Citing numbers from the state statistics service, INEGI, he points to a steady drop in the homicide rate, which has fallen from 34,690 murders in 2019 to 29,675 murders in 2023, a drop of 14.5% (Cortés, 2024). AMLO came to see the issue of Mexico's missing as a political liability, too. He dispatched a team of political operatives known as Servidores de la Nación—whose job is ostensibly to sign people up for

Criminal organizations continue to commit brazen acts of violence, threaten citizen security, and undermine governance in both Mexico and, increasingly, the United States.

social programs—to check the whereabouts of people on the list of missing persons. The undertaking showed more interest in thinning the list of Mexico's missing than in actually discovering their whereabouts (The Economist, 2024).

The government's crime statistics raise questions, however. News organization Animal Político reported a nearly 28% increase in disappearances at the same time the homicide rate was decreasing (Maza, 2023b). Animal Político also showed that Mexico City, where Sheinbaum was mayor, increasingly classified violent deaths as "events of undetermined intention" rather than homicide (Maza, 2023c). Sheinbaum boasted of a 51% drop in homicides between 2018 and 2023, while the impunity rate for murder hit 99.1%, reflecting poor prosecutorial and investigative work (México Evalúa, 2024). The president-elect, who took office October 1, campaigned on the premise of AMLO's policies have already reduced violence in Mexico. She flatly told the country's Catholic bishops that she disagreed with their "pessimistic" security assessment—part of a proposal for pacifying Mexico— and said, "I'm not in agreement with references to a supposed militarization of the country" (Camhaji, 2024a).

Sheinbaum, like her mentor AMLO, pins Mexico's security problems on Calderón and his decision to send soldiers into Michoacán state to confront La Familia Michoacana, along with his decision to name García Luna as public security. That decision came barely 10 days after he took office in December 2006—after winning an election AMLO considered fraudulent and refused to recognize.

AMLO still relitigates the 2006 election—which he lost by less than a percentage point—and the alleged fraud has become a cornerstone of his political movement. His supporters often refer to the drug cartel crisis as "La guerra de Calderón"—"Calderón's war"—as they appear unwilling to accept responsibility for Mexico's security troubles, instead blaming them on a president they believe sought legitimacy

after a contested election ([Infobae, 2024a](#)). AMLO's approach to what is arguably his country's number one predicament—and therefore his own number one responsibility—was underscored by his reaction to the 2019 arrest and 2023 conviction of Calderón-era Public Security Secretary Genaro García Luna on cartel-related corruption charges. According to AMLO, the arrest signified not any enduring problem endemic to the Mexican state but a simple example of the corruption of his political rival. He has not expressed similar scorn for accusations of corruption and collusion against figures he finds politically necessary.

The president staunchly defends allies accused of drug cartel collusion as well. #GuacamayaLeaks implicated the then-interior minister Adán Augusto Lóepz—who occupied Mexico's top cabinet post under AMLO and ran for the MORENA presidential nomination in 2024—in the appointment of three alleged CJNG members to senior security positions in Tabasco, where he was governor from 2018 to 2021 ([Tourliere, 2022](#)). Another leak highlighted a 2019 SEDENA report warning the MORENA governor of Veracruz, Cuitláhuac García, allowed the Cártel del Noreste entry into the state, prompting violence from the CJNG ([Morales, 2022](#)). García vehemently denied the claim ([Vanguardia de Veracruz, 2022](#)).

Cuauhtémoc Blanco, the soccer star-turned-governor of Morelos and a close ally of AMLO, appeared in a photo with his arms around a trio of known drug cartel leaders ([Rueda, 2022](#)). During Blanco's tenure as mayor of Cuernavaca, the Morelos capital, Reuters reported, "Control of the city's water utility and its cash receipts ended up in the hands of [Homero] Figueroa," one of the crime leaders from the photo ([Jorgic, 2023](#)). AMLO and partisans from Mexico City subsequently attacked the Morelos state prosecutor, hindering efforts to impeach Blanco. Leaked SEDENA emails also revealed that Ricardo Gallardo Cardona, the Green Party (PVEM) governor of San Luis Potosí and another AMLO ally, had entered into pacts with the CJNG in a bid to establish a "narco peace" in the state ([Infobae, 2022](#)). Gallardo, known as "El Pollo," was arrested in 2015 on charges of organized crime and money laundering while on leave as a mayor but later secured an injunction against the charges ([Vanguardia, 2023](#)).

Accusations of drug cartels funding political campaigns are commonplace in Mexico and long predate AMLO's arrival in the Palacio Nacional. These accusations grew more common as Mexico moved away from one-party rule, with politicians often motivated purely by the pursuit of power. Gustavo Cárdenas, a 2016 gubernatorial candidate in Tamaulipas, told the Guardian newspaper that

politicians turned to drug cartels for manpower and money in close election campaigns—but criminals started making demands afterward and gaining control of municipal departments. "They [still] have a ton of people working for municipal governments," he said ([Agren, 2016](#)).

Today, drug cartels attempt to control crime territories by taking over municipal governments. This control allows cartels to dominate police forces, loot local treasuries, and direct public works' contracts to friendly firms, while also expanding criminal enterprises such as extortion, gasoline theft and human trafficking ([Agren, 2024](#)). Drug cartels now influence candidacies in many Mexican municipalities—across party lines—and mobilize voters, reflecting their expanding social influence ([Sánchez & Solís, 2024](#)).

The 2024 election cycle was marred by violence, including the murders of at least 39 candidates or potential candidates and 889 victims of political violence, according to a report from Integralia Consultores ([Cano, 2024](#)). AMLO, per his style, downplayed the violence, insisting 12 days after the June 2 election that only six candidates had been murdered ([Animal Politico, 2024](#)).

Three years earlier, during the midterm elections, AMLO claimed that organized crime had "behaved" during the midterm election cycle, even though at least 30 candidates were slain and a drug cartel mobilized in favor of his party in Sinaloa. However, in January 2024, accusations of drug cartel funds entering AMLO's 2006 presidential campaign rocked Mexico. Three media outlets—ProPublica, InSight Crime and Deutsche Welle—ran exposés on drug traffickers channeling $2 million towards his unsuccessful campaign ([Golden, 2024](#)). AMLO vehemently denied the accusations, alleging a DEA vendetta and demanding an apology from President Joe Biden ([Miller, 2024](#)).

Mexican social media responded to the accusations with the hashtag #narcopresidente ("narco-president"), drawing fierce criticism from AMLO, especially as the tag was extended to include Claudia Sheinbaum, for whom no known evidence of cartel collusion exists ([Escobar, 2024](#)). In retaliation, AMLO doxxed a New York Times reporter who had sent his spokesman questions on a story on U.S. officials probing alleged links between his confidants and drug cartels after his 2018 election victory ([Franco, 2024](#)). The case was not pursued ([Feuer & Kitroeff, 2024](#)).

U.S. Cooperation Unravels

Ten months after García Luna's 2019 arrest, Mexico's former defense minister, retired General Salvador Cienfuegos, was arrested by the DEA at the Los Angeles International

Airport for taking bribes in exchange for protecting cartels (Lopez, 2021). Cienfuegos, who served as secretary of defense under Peña Nieto, was accused of assisting the nascent H-2 Cartel in moving thousands of kilograms of cocaine, marijuana, heroin, and methamphetamines into the U.S. The evidence put forth by American prosecutors included confirmation that he was indeed the shadowy, powerful "El Padrino" figure and key H-2 contact whom the DEA had been trying to identify for months (Ahmed & Feuer, 2020). Other sources added that Cienfuegos ensured "military operations were not conducted against the H-2 Cartel" and "initiating military operations against its rival drug trafficking organizations" (Janowitz, 2020). The Nayarit state prosecutor at the time, Edgar Veytía, was arrested on drug trafficking charges upon entering the United States in 2017 (Agren, 2017). He presided over an astonishing drop in crime, which appeared promising on paper but was proven fictitious. Veytía, a dual U.S.-Mexican citizen, was convicted in 2019. Prosecutors said at the time, "Veytia used his position as the top law enforcement officer in the State of Nayarit to assist and sanction the [H-2] cartel's operations in Mexico, in exchange for bribes on a monthly basis" (U.S Attorney's Office Eastern District of New York, 2019, para. 8).

Mexico and AMLO himself demanded that the U.S. hand back the general. The U.S. begrudgingly complied, reasoning that "sensitive and important foreign policy considerations outweigh the government's interest in pursuing the prosecution of [Cienfuegos]" (de Cordoba & Luhnow, 2020). Upon Cienfuegos' return, the Mexican government dropped all drug-trafficking and corruption charges against him. The Mexican state's—and the Mexican president's—deliberate blind eye to the body of evidence collected by U.S. agents on Cienfuegos is a textbook case of government complicity in cartel-related corruption.

Mexico's federal prosecutor decided against charging Cienfuegos, saying the case lacked evidence and that the general never met with the cartel he was alleged to have been protecting (Fiscalía General de la República, 2021). Analysts say the AMLO administration's quick actions in defense of Cienfuegos showed its dependence on the Mexican military for carrying out its political agenda (Montes & Luhnow, 2020). AMLO has tasked the defense secretariat (SEDENA) with everything from building and operating airports to overseeing the Guardia Nacional to distributing gasoline. He's asked the Navy Secretariat (SEMAR) to operate ports and customs and even organize tourist expeditions to the Islas Marías, a former prison island (Rodríguez, 2022). He refers to the army as the "pueblo uniformado"—the people in uniform—and speaks

of soldiers as a synonym for honesty. Cienfuegos' standing in Mexico's military and security circles was confirmed in 2023, when AMLO publicly awarded him a medal at the country's main military college (Raziel, 2023).

In the aftermath of Cienfuegos' escape from justice, Mexican lawmakers passed legislation to curb the operations of foreign agents—targeting specifically the DEA—within Mexico as retaliation for American anti-cartel and anti-corruption efforts (de Cordoba & Perez, 2020). The new law mandates that "all Mexican officials [at every level] report to the federal government every phone call, meeting, or any other communication with foreign law enforcement" (Felbab-Brown, 2020). It sends a not-so-subtle message to the U.S. that the Mexican government intends to curtail bilateral cooperation. Reuters (Jorgic, 2022) later reported in April 2022 that AMLO shut down an elite anti-narcotics unit, which worked closely with the DEA for 25 years. AMLO later insisted the unit, which helped capture El Chapo, was infiltrated by drug cartels.

AMLO's antagonism toward the DEA intensified as his term progressed. In April 2022, he harshly criticized the agency after it was revealed it had infiltrated Los Chapitos, a faction of the Sinaloa Cartel led by El Chapo's sons (Presidencia de la República, 2023a). The DEA considers the Sinaloa Cartel—which includes Los Chapitos as a major faction—"largely responsible" for the production of fentanyl, its export to the United States, and its distribution within the country (U.S. Department of Justice, 2023). AMLO later denounced a U.S. assessment of Mexico's drug cartels, which claimed that the Jalisco New Generation Cartel (CJNG) and Sinaloa Cartel had extended their reach and power into all 50 U.S. states and into more than 100 countries (José Díaz Briseño, 2023; Suarez, 2023).

AMLO has also defended Mexican criminal groups against accusations from other countries. After Ecuadorian anti-corruption activist and presidential candidate Fernando Villavicencio was assassinated in 2023 by a gang linked to the CJNG, AMLO lambasted the media for reporting on the event "in a very sensational and unserious way, very irresponsibly" (Presidencia de la República, 2023b). Villavicencio had remarked earlier that year, "(AMLO) should face his problem with the mafias there in that country, where a large part of the political class has been financed by drug trafficking" (Jiménez, 2023).

AMLO has promoted a "Mexico first" policy in response to U.S. demands for action on fentanyl interdiction. He has insisted that fentanyl is a U.S. problem that doesn't exist in Mexico (Associated Press, 2023). Additionally, he has stated that Mexico will not "act as policemen for any

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foreign government," framing its assistance as "humanitarian … because a lot of young people are dying in the United States because of fentanyl" ([Stevenson, 2024](#)).

Sinaloa Cartel Collusion?

AMLO's rhetoric and actions suggest a tacit accommodation, if not allyship, between the Mexican president and the Sinaloa Cartel. AMLO fails to condemn cartels in public—a notable omission given the vehemence of his language against his political enemies and groups raising complaints such as doctors, scientists, and artists. He has never once criticized organized crime from the pulpit of his morning press conference, a daily spectacle dragging on for more than three hours at a time. Instead, he has referred to organized crime as part of "*el pueblo,*" the people, a classic populist trope he frequently invokes ([Rangel, 2024](#)). In contrast, he labels his political opponents as "traitors," including the thousands of Mexicans who marched to defend democracy—a demonstration in central Mexico City greeted by AMLO's orders not to fly the Mexican flag over the massive Zócalo square ([Escobar, 2024b](#)).

He has also made various gestures of sympathy toward El Chapo and his kin. He has decried El Chapo's prison conditions as "inhumane" ([Eschenbacher & Gutierrez, 2019](#)) and helped El Chapo's mother and sisters obtain humanitarian visas so they could visit him at the Florence Supermax prison in Colorado ([Reuters, 2019](#)). In an especially curious stunt, AMLO shook hands with El Chapo's mother while traveling past La Tuna de Badiraguato—the remote hamlet where El Chapo was born—and promised to help her visit her son in prison ([Linthicum, 2020](#)).

The embrace captured incredulous international attention and caused a social media scandal. Victims of violence in Mexico such as the *Madres Buscadoras*—mothers leading search parties to find their missing loved ones—would note wryly afterward that AMLO had time for Consuelo Loera (El Chapo's mother), but never for them ([Aristegui Noticias, 2023](#)). Indeed, AMLO has never had a cross word for the Sinaloa Cartel—or any drug cartel—and has even come to its defense, such as in the case of the DEA infiltrating the cartel in 2023.

AMLO's deference to the Sinaloa Cartel dates back to at least 2016, when he was in the state on the day of El Chapo's arrest. He told reporters in Sinaloa that day, "Nothing is said about the cartel that robs the most: the Los Pinos Cartel"—referring to the former presidential palace, which he turned into a cultural center—"which is headed by Enrique Peña Nieto" ([Agren, 2019a](#)). The trope of putting politicians on par with drug cartels works in a state

where El Chapo was seen by locals as a benefactor, whose acts of mob charity—a common practice among Mexican drug cartels —made him more popular than many elected officials, who were seen to be corrupt and predatory. "Organized crime doesn't steal from them. They don't steal tax money. They're nothing more than drug dealers so, yes, people are upset," a MORENA activist in Sinaloa told *The Guardian* in 2019 ([Agren, 2019b](#)).

As president, AMLO has made multiple trips to Sinaloa state. He has paid at least five visits to Badiraguato, the downtrodden municipality of remote hamlets that gave rise to El Chapo ([Mayen, 2024](#)). He ostensibly traveled there to inspect a highway—long promised by predecessors, but never finished—traversing the rugged Sierra Madre Occidental mountains through what's known as the Golden Triangle: an impenetrable lair of poppy and marijuana plantations and, more recently, meth and fentanyl labs. Such was the cartel control of the region that journalists following the president in 2022 were stopped at illegal drug cartel checkpoints ([Ríodoce, 2022](#)).

The relationship between AMLO's MORENA party and organized crime, particularly in Sinaloa, has been subject of speculation. The speculation intensified in Sinaloa after the 2021 gubernatorial election, where political operatives from rival parties were kidnapped by cartel gunmen on the eve of the vote ([Hernández López, 2021](#)). Ismael Bojórquez, editor of Culiacán weekly *Ríodoce* with deep sources in the Sinaloa underworld, wrote of the incident, "(The assailants) forced them to reveal where they were keeping the money for mobilizing their political base and buying votes." Bojórquez wrote that 20 persons were kidnapped the night before the June 6 vote and were not released until polls closed the next day ([Bojórquez, 2021](#)). The day after the election, AMLO infamously remarked that organized crime "behaved" the day after the election. MORENA continued to dominate Sinaloa politics and swept the state's elected offices in 2024, taking all but two of the 20 municipalities, all of the 24 directly-elected seats in the state congress, its seven directly-elected seats in the lower house of the federal congress, and two of the three directly-elected senate seats—the maximum any party can take ([Nájera, 2024](#)). Sheinbaum, meanwhile, took nearly 65% of the vote in Sinaloa, slightly more than the 60% she took nationwide ([Sánchez, 2024](#)).

The relationship between drug cartels and politicians in Sinaloa and other states predates the rise of MORENA. Sinaloa journalist Adrián López Ortiz wrote in the Culiacán newspaper *Noroeste* after the 2021 election, "It's not that MORENA is 'narco.' Rather Sinaloa narcos can

align with MORENA now as it did before with (the PRI and PAN.) It's simple. Sinaloa organized crime plays to win and bets with resources and provoking fear on those closest to its interests and preferences" (López Ortíz, 2021).

The relationship existed as an open secret. Mexican crime reporter Óscar Balmen described how in the 2021 gubernatorial election, candidates sought the approval of Sinaloa Cartel patriarch Ismael "El Mayo" Zambada. Both the MORENA and PRI candidates quietly campaigned so voters—especially in the mountainous communities dependent on the drug trade—knew they had El Mayo's blessing. "'El Mayo' Zambada enjoys enormous popularity and is regarded as The Great Voter. If he approves of a candidate, people vote for him," according to Balmen (Oscar Balmen, 2024).

Zambada was arrested by U.S. agents in late July of 2024 after a small plane carrying him and Joaquín Guzmán López, son of "El Chapo," landed in Santa Teresa, New Mexico (Jorgic, 2024). El Mayo, through his lawyer, let it be known that he traveled to the United States against his will. His U.S. lawyer said that he had been kidnapped by Guzmán López (Lozano, 2024). Details have been hard to verify, but it emerged that no Mexican officials participated in the arrest—nor did they have advance information: Mexico's public security secretary Rosa Icela Rodríguez revealed the day after the detention that her office received a phone call from the U.S. Embassy in Mexico city after Zambada was in U.S. custody (Latinus, 2024b). Sálazar, the U.S. ambassador to Mexico, later clarified that Zambada was brought north "against his will" and attributed his unexpected capture to a conflict between cartel rivals (Associated Press, 2024).

The arrest generated a significant media storm on both sides of the border as it highlighted the lack of cooperation between the United States and Mexico on security matters. After Zambada's arrest, U.S. Ambassador to Mexico, Ken Salazar, issued a statement praising the "historic cooperation" between U.S. and Mexican officials (U.S Embassy & Consulates in Mexico, 2024). However, notable omissions in statements from major U.S. agencies revealed a conspicuous absence of acknowledgement of Mexico's role in the operation (U.S. Department of Justice, 2024).

The arrest also shed light on the alleged infiltration of drug cartels in Mexican politics, especially in Sinaloa. Zambada said in a statement released by his lawyer that he was asked by Guzmán López to mediate a dispute between politicians over control of the state's main university. He followed Guzmán López into a dark room, where he was ambushed,

had a hood placed over his head and was handcuffed, then taken in the bed of a pickup truck and driven to a waiting airplane (Camhaji, 2024b). One of the two bodyguards accompanying him was a commander in the Sinaloa state judicial police, he said.

Zambada's account also included allegations that Sinaloa's MORENA governor, Rubén Rocha, would participate in the meeting. Another attendee was expected to be Héctor Cuen, the former university rector and a recently elected PRI member of congress (de Córdoba, 2024). Cuen was murdered at the site of the meeting, according to Zambada's account. Prosecutors later claimed Cuen was killed in a carjacking at a gas station. Rocha denied the claims he was to attend the meeting, saying he flew to Los Angeles that day to visit family (Camhaji, 2024c). López Obrador and Sheinbaum visited Sinaloa as Zambada's revelations were made public. Both backed the governor, with Sheinbaum insisting, "What's important is that there is peace and tranquility in Sinaloa, the region, and throughout the country," according to (Cordoba, 2024).

Rocha previously responded to a question from journalist Carlos Loret de Mola on whether governments formed pacts with drug cartels: "I believe that there is no need to make an agreement with the (Sinaloa) Cartel, we must set very severe conditions; Even though drug trafficking is a federal crime that the Federation must pursue, the State has a lot to contribute in this regard" (Baena, 2024).

Conclusion

The actions and inactions of the Calderón, Peña Nieto, and López Obrador administrations demonstrate that the Mexican state is plagued by a perennial problem of, at best, ineffectiveness against criminal cartels—and at worst outright complicity with them.

Criminal organizations continue to commit brazen acts of violence, threaten citizen security, and undermine governance in both Mexico and, increasingly, the United States. Moreover, they increasingly supplant the legitimate sovereignty of the Mexican state with their own—often in cooperation with major elements of that state. The qualitative difference since 2018 has been the near-open role of the current Mexican president in allowing, and *perhaps even participating in*, that cooperation. It is a new scenario that demands new solutions from U.S.-side policymakers, who must understand that the Mexican state as a meaningful partner against criminal cartels is likely a thing of the past. Those solutions and ideas will be subjects of other Texas Public Policy Foundation research publications. ⭐

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