

Mexican Vigilantism: The Role of Self-Defence Groups in a Fragile Security Apparatus

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Abstract

Around 2012-2013, citizens in southern Mexico formed self-defence groups to protect their communities from cartel violence, as the state had failed to do so. Administrations failed to capitalize on a potential enabler in security, and instead, permitted vigilante groups to turn toward criminal activity and replace the violence of the cartels they sought to expunge. This article asserts that the policies of heads of state are largely culpable for the worsening trajectory of the state's security situation, which had prospects of improvement by fully incorporating these groups into the Rural Defence Corps when they first emerged.

Keywords: Mexico, cartels, self-defence groups, vigilantism, community police

Introduction

As the federal government failed to curb worsening violence associated with organized criminal organizations in Mexico in the late 2000s and early 2010s, citizens established vigilante groups to confront these threats directly impacting their safety and livelihood. Mexico has a heritage of constitutionally protected community police forces in indigenous areas, but a new style of self-defence groups emerged around 2012-2013 due to address cartel violence directly affecting citizens. The government struggled to deal with this new kind of actor and administrations took different approaches to manage risks, determine how to employ or punish their members, and abate the conditions fostering their creation and growth.

The main question that guides this research is, how do self-defence groups fit into Mexico's security apparatus? A thread in research that is gaining momentum is that local self-defence groups may be an imperfect but effective alternative when states fail to provide public safety, either due to the lack of capacity or willingness.² More nuanced analysis offers insights from case studies from other countries where self-defence groups contributed to security and helped the state to regain control, but they also argue that the state should disband such groups

¹ The opinions expressed in this article are those of the author alone and do not reflect the official position of the U.S. Army, the Department of Defense, or the U.S. Government. Also, the appearance of hyperlinks does not constitute endorsement by the U.S. Army, the DoD, or the U.S. Government of the referenced sites or the information, products, or services contained therein.

²Patricio Asfura-Heim and Ralph Espach, "The Rise of Mexico's Self-defence Forces: Vigilante Justice South of the Border," *Foreign Affairs* 92, no. 4 (July/August 2013): 143-146 and 148-150, 146, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23526915> (accessed 23 March 2021).

after they fulfil their government-granted mandates to restore the monopoly of force to the state.

This article asserts that heads of state failed to leverage likely allies in Mexico's security crisis, which has ultimately worsened the country's security apparatus. This research identifies crucial decision points for heads of state and analyses the impacts of their decisions and policies to deal with this new actor in the security arena. Inaction and indecisiveness by heads of state, as well as a lack of commitment to follow through with courses of action once decided, contributed to the devolution of self-defence groups as more turned to criminal activities and transitioned from potential security enablers to nefarious actors.

Analysis in this essay is divided into three sections based on chronological events, exploring the government's interactions with self-defence groups and their impacts on Mexican national security by the presidential administration. Section A, exploring significant events during the Calderon administration (2006-2012), introduces the concept of self-defence groups and describes their emergence and early ambiguities that contributed to government inaction and indecision. Section B describes the Peña Nieto administration's (2012-2018) range of reactions from ignoring these groups to co-opting them, public perceptions, and key developments in terms of how self-defence groups influenced local security. Section C explores López Obrador's stance toward self-defence groups, how these groups and threats evolved during his term, and poor policy decisions. The conclusion outlines policy recommendations and implications and presents possibilities for further research.

Calderón Administration (2006-2012): A Security Alternative Born Out of Necessity

The Drug War and Cartel Fragmentation

In December 2006, newly inaugurated Mexican President Felipe Calderón dispatched 6,500 troops to his home state of Michoacán, initiating a war on drugs that, within a few months, involved 20,000 troops in counter-drug operations across the country.³ Cartels retreated to their support zones, where they diversified portfolios with new criminal enterprises to make up for destroyed drug crops and decommissioned shipments. This led to cartel fragmentation that, over the course of the following 13 years, increased the number of large cartels from six to nine and produced 24 medium-sized cartels and over 200 smaller factions.⁴ Scattered throughout Mexican communities, these organizations engaged in crimes affecting citizens in more direct ways than drug trafficking, including theft, kidnapping, and extortion.

Crime steadily increased and the nation experienced a rate of organized crime-related homicides that nearly quadrupled between 2007 and 2010 (Table 2). This heightened crime persisted until the end of Calderón's term, reflected by Mexico's worsening security apparatus indicator score in the Fragile States Index (FSI) (Figure 1). When the cartels in Mexico's southwestern state of Michoacán diversified their sources of income, they seized lime crops and mines, property, and possessions of citizens and taxed them on anything they could—even

³ Nina Lakhani and Erubiel Tirado, "Mexico's war on drugs: what has it achieved and how is the US involved?" *The Guardian*, 8 December 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2016/dec/08/mexico-war-on-drugs-cost-achievements-us-billions> (accessed 21 March 2021).

⁴ Linnea Sandin, "Abrazos, no Balazos"—Evaluating AMLO's Security Initiatives," *Center for Strategic & International Studies*, 13 December 2019, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/abrazos-no-balazos%E2%80%94evaluating-amlos-security-initiatives> (accessed 21 March 2021).

bread and tortillas.⁵ Cartels' tactics also became more brutal as their members began to kidnap, rape, and sometimes kill citizens' young daughters and wives.⁶ In a country where an estimated 98 percent of crimes go unpunished,⁷ these citizens knew they would not find justice through state institutions or police forces, who many citizens believed to be collaborators with the cartels. Citizens required an alternative to those slow and unreliable institutional approaches.

Emergence of a Citizens' Vigilante System: Self-defence Groups

In 2012, citizens in Michoacán began to arm and organize themselves into self-labelled *autodefensas*, or self-defence groups. Under the leadership of Mexican doctor Jose Manuel Mireles, recognized as the founder of self-defence groups, small farmers, shopkeepers, and other citizens of various backgrounds united. Agricultural and mining communities in other areas formed similar groups to protect their interests.⁸ Although Mexican laws forbade these citizens from possessing certain weaponry or engaging in security operations, they acquired sophisticated weapons and began to conduct patrols to protect their communities from the criminal activities of cartels. One self-defence leader explained, 'I know that we're doing something illegal. If in order to defend my family I have to step out of legality, I'm willing to do it every time.'⁹

This development in the security apparatus of Mexico threatened the state's monopoly on the use of force, although that was already tenuous. The speed with which these militia groups could form also exposed an arms proliferation problem the state could not contain, as group members either already possessed weapons or obtained them with ease. Most importantly, this phenomenon of self-defence groups revealed the government's inability to address security challenges and its perceived unreliability to protect citizens.

Ambiguities regarding Legality and Justification

Ambiguities surrounding the identity, characteristics, and legal status of these emerging groups complicated the government's response. Circumstances blurred lines between self-defence groups and certain types of armed groups condoned by the state. This condition has clouded media coverage and complicated security, political, and juridical responses. For instance, the Mexican Constitution permits community police forces (*policia comunitaria*) through its recognition of 'the right to indigenous peoples to self-determination and autonomy [to] apply their own normative systems for the regulation and the resolution of internal conflicts.'¹⁰ Such groups have a long history in rural areas of Mexico, as well as a legacy of maintaining security in areas with limited government presence or influence.

⁵"Fighting Mexico's Knights Templar Cartel," *Vice News*, 26 February 2014, 3:14, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dzalpuffwFI> (accessed 23 March 2021).

⁶"Fighting Mexico's Knights Templar Cartel," 0:28 and 6:55.

⁷"Mexico's Vigilante State – Fault Lines," *Al Jazeera*, 22 February 2016, 1:40, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mmnMgDEp_R0 (accessed 20 March 2021).

⁸Steven Dudley, "Mexico: Policy on "Auto-defensas" Makes Things Worse," AULA Blog, 13 February 2014, <http://aulablog.net/2014/02/13/mexico-policy-on-auto-defensas-makes-things-worse/> (accessed 23 March 2021).

⁹Hipolito Mora (Self-defence Leader) in an interview with Vice News, "Fighting Mexico's Knights Templar Cartel," 9:30, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dzalpuffwFI> (accessed 23 March 2021).

¹⁰Constitución Política de los Estados Unidos Mexicanos [Political Constitution of the United Mexican States], Article 2, 5 February 1917 (as amended).

While the lines between these types of organizations have ‘become increasingly blurred,’¹¹ some experts have sought to distinguish them by observing that community police forces ‘[seek] to preserve the autonomy of indigenous peoples, allowing them to apply their own justice system,’ whereas self-defence groups ‘arise in response to a public security crisis, that is, when the State has failed to protect its citizens.’¹² In spite of such nuanced differences, analysts often group them together as identity militias—‘armed and violent groups organized around a collective, common feature including community, ethnicity, region, religion or, in exceptional, cases, livelihood’¹³—as they are in Figure 3, because in practice, these groups ‘have a very similar field of action’ and a number of groups may self-identify as either type of organization.¹⁴

Although there are relatively high rates of identity militia incidents in Chiapas and Oaxaca (Figure 3), these are more characteristic of legal community police groups designated for indigenous areas, as opposed to self-defence forces that emerged in response to elevated crime rates and a weak security apparatus. Indigenous heritage is prevalent in southern Mexico, including among citizens of Michoacán and Guerrero, but whereas the population that can speak an indigenous language in those states is less than four percent and around 15 percent, respectively, that figure is about 28 percent in Chiapas and 32 percent in Oaxaca.¹⁵ The number of organized crime-related homicides in Chiapas is also relatively low (Figure 2) and not consistent with precursor conditions that provoked the formation of self-defence groups elsewhere. The Mexican government wrestled with this ambiguity early on, and this condition still complicates academic analysis and methodologies to understand the self-defence group phenomenon and its effects. This ambiguity persisted and caused disagreements among political figures at the local, state, and federal levels in each successive administration.

11 On this, see “Mexico struggles: whether to dialogue with ‘self-defence’ groups or persecute them,” *Yucatan Times*, 22 August 2019, <https://www.theyucatanimes.com/2019/08/mexico-struggles-whether-to-dialogue-with-self-defence-groups-or-persecute-them/> (accessed 22 March 2021). This report states that some self-defence groups “exist legally in indigenous communities,” not drawing the same distinction as experts between constitutional community police forces in indigenous communities and self-defence groups that recently emerged in high-crime communities.

12 “Policía comunitaria: ¿qué es y cuánta legalidad tiene?,” *Arena Pública*, 29 May 2018, <https://www.arenapublica.com/articulo/2018/05/29/11722/es-legal-policia-comunitaria-mexico-guerrero-nestora-salgado>, as cited in Romain Le Cour Grandmaison, “Self-defence groups, cartels and territorial reconfiguration in Michoacan,” *Noria Research*, September 2013, <https://noria-research.com/self-defence-groups-cartels-and-territorial-reconfiguration-in-michoacan/> (accessed 20 March 2021).

13 ACLED, “Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) Codebook, 2017,” 2017, 23, accessible at <https://acleddata.com/resources/general-guides/#1603120929112-8ecf0356-6cf0> (accessed 18 March 2021).

14 “ACLED Methodology and Coding Decisions around Political Violence and Demonstrations in Mexico,” Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), 2020, 5, https://acleddata.com/acleddatanew/wp-content/uploads/dlm_uploads/2020/02/ACLED-Methodology-and-Coding-Decisions-around-Political-Violence-and-Demonstrations-in-Mexico_FINAL.docx.pdf (accessed 22 March 2021).

15 “Panorama sociodemográfico de México, 2015,” *Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía*, 2015, 96, https://web.archive.org/web/20160304103300/http://www.inegi.org.mx/est/contenidos/proyectos/encuestas/hogares/especiales/ei2015/doc/panorama_sociodemografico_2015.pdf (accessed 18 March 2021). In Guerrero, these indigenous speakers are highly concentrated in the southeast, bordering Oaxaca, whereas self-defence groups are more distributed along the north-south center of the state and around Acapulco. On this, see “Armed civilian groups operate without control in 36 municipalities of Guerrero,” *Mexico News Daily*, 3 August 2018, <https://mexiconewsdaily.com/news/armed-civilian-groups-operate-without-control/> (accessed 23 March 2021).

Peña Nieto Administration (2012-2018): Controversy and Co-optation

Positive Momentum

Communities in Michoacán supported emerging self-defence forces and permitted them to set up barricades and establish checkpoints¹⁶ to ensure safety and root out members of the Knights Templar Cartel, the most significant threat at the time. This cartel dominated Michoacán and controlled cocaine shipments and methamphetamine precursor chemicals through the port at Lázaro Cárdenas and charged “protection fees” from 85 percent of legal businesses’ in the state.¹⁷ Citizens had generally tolerated aspects of cartel activity in their locales prior to Calderón’s drug war, but with the subsequent fragmentation of cartels, criminals invaded communities with crime that directly affected their families’ safety and livelihood. In the words of one self-defence group leader in Tierra Colorada, ‘Narcotraffickers as a rule usually keep things under control in their territories, but lately they’ve been getting involved in extortion and murders, and that’s not right. The drug problem is for the state to resolve, but kidnapping and robbery touches us.’¹⁸ This condition and notoriety of early successes in Michoacán provided the impetus for more communities to organize self-defence forces throughout Mexico.

By July 2013, self-defence groups operated in at least 13 different states and 68 municipalities, with hotspots including Michoacán, Jalisco, Chihuahua, Veracruz, Tabasco, and on the outskirts of Mexico City.¹⁹ Self-defence groups in Michoacán aggressively occupied territories controlled by the Knights Templar Cartel as the year moved forward. Although these groups helped to curb violence conducted by the Knights Templar, they did not manage to weaken other cartels within Michoacán to the same extent, or curtail their violence. On the contrary, organized crime-related homicides increased after 2013 as splinter cells of former cartels continued to grow and conflicts grew (Figure 2). A similar dynamic played out in Guerrero, where organized crime-related homicides also increased after 2013 (Figure 2), despite a robust vigilante group presence.

Co-optation: Self-defence Groups Join the Rural Defence Corps

Early on in his administration, Peña Nieto condemned vigilante groups, but then largely ignored them and the security situation in Michoacán throughout 2013, which permitted conditions to ripen to a point requiring federal government intervention in that state in early 2014. As more self-defence groups emerged in 2013 and attracted attention of policymakers, some recognized the merits of self-defence groups in general, such as their ability to be quickly and cheaply assembled, the advantage of its members’ geographic knowledge of the area, and members motivations to protect their communities and families causing these groups to have higher morale and less predatory tendency than state security forces.²⁰ In 2013, as the government struggled with organized crime-related homicide rates that nearly quadrupled from five years prior (Figure 2), President Peña Nieto sought to address the failures of corrupt local police forces and a weak military by creating an elite, 10,000-member national police force by

¹⁶ “Fighting Mexico’s Knights Templar Cartel,” 6:19.

¹⁷ “Knights Templar,” *InSight Crime*, 5 May 2020, <https://insightcrime.org/mexico-organized-crime-news/knights-templar-profile/> (accessed 21 March 2021).

¹⁸ Asfura-Heim and Espach, “The Rise of Mexico’s Self-defence Forces,” 145.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, 144.

²⁰ *Ibid*, 146.

the end of the year.²¹ He and many other political figures considered self-defence groups to be illegal organizations and perceived them as a threat to the rule of law, fomenting a form of anarchy in areas where the government had a limited security presence.

Political figures from municipal levels to the head of state argued about how to deal with these citizen organizations, with opinions ranging from confiscating weapons and arresting members with lengthy prison sentences to legalizing and training groups. In February 2013, ‘the governor of the state of Sinaloa said that the legalization of these [self-defence] groups would amount to an admission of state failure,’ a sentiment later echoed by the director of the National Security Commission.²² The federal government officially refused to recognize the groups, but several state and municipal governments defied its example and recognized self-defence forces.²³ The governor of Michoacán ‘pledged to support self-defence groups in his state with formal police training and equipment.’²⁴ As a hotbed for conflict between cartels and self-defence groups, the security situation in Michoacán necessitated a response from the federal government to quell the unrest and set a precedent.

On 15 January 2014, 9,000 army and police forces entered Michoacán to restore order and force self-defence groups to disarm. Twelve days later, after vigilante groups refused to lay down their arms, the government made the controversial offer to incorporate vigilante groups into local police forces or the Rural Defence Forces (subordinate to the army), and groups agreed. This drastic policy shift from condemnation to deputization of vigilante groups, along with a \$3.4 billion development spending plan for Michoacán, reflected the ‘reality on the ground’ that these militia groups were a formidable force that the federal government could no longer ignore.²⁵ This rapid development and apparent ability to ‘finess[e] the militia leaders’ is indicative of bait-and-switch strategies employed by Pena Nieto’s special envoy to Michoacán, former Mexico State Attorney General Alfredo Castillo, reminiscent of other Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) tactics used to retain control of the government for the better part of the past century.²⁶ Adherents of these community organizations also complied with government requirements to register their weapons. The framework, however, failed to outline groups’ purview, jurisdiction, or service terms, nor did it authorize the use of automatic weapons.²⁷ These groups based in Michoacán accepted President Pena Nieto’s deal, but they ‘violated it and continue to act extralegally and illegally and refuse the authority of that state.’²⁸

Disillusionment at Apatzingán

On 8 February 2014, a 500-person mixed grouping of military, police, and self-defence forces prepared to reclaim Apatzingán, the Knights Templar stronghold in Michoacán. This would be the first large-scale joint operation since the Mexican government legalized these vigilante forces and designated them part of the Rural Defence Corps, just twelve days prior.

²¹ Ibid, 143.

²² Ibid, 148.

²³ Ibid, 149.

²⁴ Ibid, 148-149.

²⁵ Dudley Althaus and Steven Dudley, “Mexico’s Security Dilemma: Michoacán’s Militias,” *Wilson Center and InSight Crime*, 2014, 13, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/mexicos-security-dilemma-michoacans-militias> (accessed 21 March 2021).

²⁶ Althaus and Dudley, “Mexico’s Security Dilemma,” 13.

²⁷ Steven Dudley, “Mexico: Policy on “Auto-defensas” Makes Things Worse.”

²⁸ Vanda Felbab-Brown, “AMLO’s Security Policy: Creative Ideas, Tough Reality,” *Brookings Institute*, March 2019, 31, https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/FP_20190325_mexico_anti-crime.pdf (accessed 20 March 2021).

Beyond just a symbolic gesture, these groups had the local knowledge to serve as guides to state security forces operating within Apatzingán and could also help identify members of the Knights Templar. In terms of symbolism, however, a successful joint operation would be paramount, as it would facilitate future collaboration, build trust between community groups and the disconnected and scorned state security forces, and legitimize the new, government-sanctioned self-defence forces as local members of the Rural Defence Corps. Such an operation would help the federal government regain the confidence of the local populace who felt betrayed by a government they believed to be corrupt and disinterested in their security problems.

With the prospect of much progress, however, the government committed a blunder that nullified much of its administrative headway in treating the security issue over the previous weeks. As federal forces entered Apatzingán, they ordered self-defence forces to remain outside the city on standby, and radioed hours later that they had completed the operation.²⁹ The federal government forces had completed the task independently, without incorporating its newest local enabler. Commanders on the ground likely assessed that there would be risks in bringing an informal security organization into the conflict, but the prospect of greater trust, integration, and legitimacy should have led these decisionmakers to assume risk and conduct the operation as a mixed force. Instead, resentment for federal troops pervaded among the self-defence groups. They still achieved security benchmarks, as these newly-sanctioned self-defence groups had gained control of 22 percent of the state's territory by the end of that month,³⁰ but the government had failed to capitalize on a significant opportunity to strengthen local trust and send a message to cartels and self-defence groups in other states through media coverage.

Strong Public Support for Self-Defence Groups

Mexicans' approval of these vigilante groups in their early years (2013-2014), especially when compared to state security forces, reflect the perceived contributions of these groups to Mexican national security. Many of their effects gained national publicity and cultivated the formation of new self-defence groups in other states suffering from high crime rates. Media coverage bolstered support for self-defence movements throughout the country as perceptions reflected legitimacy in their existence and cause. According to one survey in Mexico in June 2013, 57 percent of respondents agreed that some communities should form their own police forces to defend themselves against crime, while only 22 percent disagreed, the remainder taking no definitive stance.³¹ In that same survey, polled Mexicans expressed more trust in informal self-defence groups for protecting their communities from crime than government forces.³²

Significant developments in the struggle against organized criminal groups influenced public perception. In a *Parametría* survey in late January 2014, when asked whether the government or self-defence groups did a better job defending communities in Michoacán, 53 percent of respondents stated self-defence groups, compared to only 26 percent who believed

²⁹ "Mexico's Vigilante State – Fault Lines," 15:03.

³⁰ "Fighting Mexico's Knights Templar Cartel," 20:08.

³¹ "6 de cada 10 aprueba policías comunitarias: Parametría," *Animal Político*, 13 March 2013, <https://www.animalpolitico.com/2013/03/6-de-cada-10-mexicanos-aprueba-policias-comunitarias-parametria/> (accessed 27 March 2021).

³² "6 de cada 10 aprueba policías comunitarias: Parametría."

the government was more effective.³³ This survey took place immediately after the federal operation to reclaim Apatzingán, which likely contributed to stronger perceptions about state security forces than previous surveys, but even after that critical operation, more than double the number of Mexicans favoured self-defence forces to state security forces, reflective of these groups' considerable contributions to a fragile Mexican security apparatus.

Drawbacks and Challenges as Vigilantism Set In

While desperation and the desire to restore order led to the creation of these vigilante groups—conditions void of want for personal gain—greed, corruption, and infiltration by criminal groups quickly disrupted progress and public trust once self-defence groups gained leverage and control. Some leaders and members used their influence and power to exploit communities and became a new form of organized crime, replacing the problem they originally sought to extinguish. This development led the government to again demand self-defence groups to disarm. Communities began to distinguish between community police forces that protected their own neighbourhoods and self-defence groups that operated outside their own communities, going on the offensive, as exploitation became increasingly associated with the latter.

In addition to extortion and other forms of crime, growing violence forced some citizens out of their communities. Some fled violence associated with military operations or territorial disputes between criminal elements, but violence linked to 'battles with self-defence militias' also caused the number of Mexico's internally-displaced persons (IDPs) to rise,³⁴ as reflected in Mexico's worsening score in 2017 for refugees and IDPs in the State Fragility Index (Figure 1).

López Obrador Administration (2018-Present): Formal, Unenforced Condemnation

Security Central in Platform

As Mexico's public safety continued to worsen under Peña Nieto's failures to curb violence and institutionalize self-defence forces, as reflected in a worsening FSI security apparatus score (Figure 1), presidential contender Andrés Manuel López Obrador featured security in his campaign platform. In 2018, citizens elected this left-wing populist in response to 'the political establishment's inability to stem the country's rampant security crisis.'³⁵ His rhetoric targeted his predecessor's interactions with self-defence groups, such as when he remarked, 'What they did in past governments was improper because security must be guaranteed by the State. We cannot promote the creation of groups to address security issues.'

³³ "Carta Paramétrica: Divide a mexicanos regularización de autodefensas," *Parametría*, 25-29 January 2014, https://www.parametria.com.mx/carta_parametrica.php?cp=4618 (accessed 28 March 2021).

³⁴ Kyra Gurney, "Mexico's Internally Displaced An Invisible Problem: Report," *InSight Crime*, 25 July 2014, <https://insightcrime.org/news/analysis/mexico-s-internally-displaced-an-invisible-problem-report/> (accessed 23 March 2021).

³⁵ Sandin, "'Abrazos, no Balazos'—Evaluating AMLO's Security Initiatives."

That doesn't work and generates a lot of disorder.'³⁶ He criticized Peña Nieto's decision to deputize their adherents, arguing that instead of improving conditions, 'things got worse.'³⁷

Although President López Obrador's words indicate his disapproval of these groups, his deeds are another matter. He has been reluctant to confront vigilante groups with punitive steps and has demonstrated little will to take any actions against them.³⁸ He has made some firm remarks indicating his unwillingness to compromise, such as when he stated, '[w]e cannot have illegal groups performing law enforcement duties,'³⁹ but his inaction and lack of enforcement make such assertions less convincing. In his *Plan for Peace and Security: 2018-2024*, López Obrador outlined his strategy to form a 50,000-member National Guard to preserve public safety and combat crime,⁴⁰ similar to the creation of security-oriented federal bodies by his predecessors, but his plan to improve national security does not mention self-defence groups.

A Worsening Security Apparatus

During the López Obrador administration, the country's security situation has continued to deteriorate, as reflected by Mexico's worsening security apparatus score after 2018 (Figure 1). New illicit market opportunities also hastened the devolution and moral decay of community militia groups as they grew in force and more members turned to criminal activity for profit. For instance, analysts anticipated violence in Guerrero to subside in 2019 as synthetic opioids disrupted the opium market, upon which criminal groups in that state had relied.⁴¹ Instead, violence increased as financial prospects in fuel theft, gold mines, and trafficking of precursor chemicals 'pitt[ed] warring gangs against vigilante squads.'⁴² Largely as a result of these conditions, Guerrero has been Mexico's most troubled state in terms of identity militia incidents in the past two years (Figure 3), registering over 45 percent of all such incidents in Mexico during that period. High incident rates in Michoacán reflect a government failure to address self-defence groups and security. The geographic extent of such incidents, which occurred in 20 of Mexico's 31 states and federal district (Figure 3), also reveals that although the greatest density remains in Mexico's southern states, this is a national problem necessitating a federal response.

The nature of self-defence groups has also continued to evolve, further complicating matters of distinguishing between organizations and how the government should confront them. In Michoacán, a new, all-female vigilante group formed in January 2021, when around

³⁶ "AMLO rebukes his Interior Secretary, denies that his government is negotiating with self-defence groups," *La Política Online*, 21 August 2019, <https://www.lapoliticaonline.com.mx/nota/124741-amlo-rebukes-his-interior-secretary-denies-that-his-government-is-negotiating-with-self-defence-groups/> (accessed 23 March 2021).

³⁷ "AMLO rebukes his Interior Secretary."

³⁸ On this, see Vanda Felbab-Brown, "AMLO's Security Policy: Creative Ideas, Tough Reality," 4.

³⁹ "Mexico struggles: whether to dialogue with 'self-defence' groups or persecute them."

⁴⁰ Andrés Manuel López Obrador, "Plan Nacional de Paz y Seguridad: 2018-2024," 15, https://lopezobrador.org.mx/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/Plan-Nacional-de-Paz-y-Seguridad_.pdf (accessed 19 March 2021).

⁴¹ Mark Stevenson, "Toxic mix of gangs, vigilantes fuels rising Mexican violence," *AP News*, 21 June 2019, <https://apnews.com/article/Odd55be1b2814b60944fe87b2a105db4> (accessed 22 March 2021).

⁴² Stevenson, "Toxic mix of gangs, vigilantes fuels rising Mexican violence."

45 women, some of whom were pregnant, took up arms against the Jalisco Cartel.⁴³ Enraged with the cartel's kidnappings and brutal killings of their family members, this crew of women created barricades and roadblocks, constructed a homemade tank, and welded steel plate armour to heavy-duty pickup trucks.⁴⁴ Such dramatic developments reveal the further decline of security conditions in Michoacán, the government's continued inability to provide public safety, and the desperation of citizens as the most vulnerable members of society wield weapons in self-defence. Given these stark conditions, such self-defence groups seem even less likely to cooperate with the federal government in laying down their arms when ordered than Michoacán's vigilante groups that agreed to the Peña Nieto administration's terms in 2014. López Obrador's failure to curb the cartel violence and confront the topic of self-defence groups is repeating Peña Nieto's initial apathy and following the trajectory of his first year in office, toward an unavoidable federal intervention that will yield more pain for the community with each passing day of delay.

Continued Lack of Consensus and Inaction

Internal division regarding how to deal with self-defence groups endured beyond Peña Nieto's administration, and now troubles even the highest echelons of López Obrador's government. In August 2019, López Obrador's Interior Secretary (second in the line of presidential succession) reported the government was 'in talks with many (armed) groups [who stated] they d[id] not want to continue with this violence,' apparently referring to self-defence groups, which deviated from policies discussed in security cabinet meetings.⁴⁵ That same month, López Obrador's Assistant Interior Secretary attended the ground-breaking ceremony of an agricultural processing plant in Michoacán in the presence of self-defence group leaders, but López Obrador refused to attend and disagreed with government presence at the event.⁴⁶

The new National Guard offers prospects for improved public safety. López Obrador could deploy these forces to Mexico's southern states to augment police forces and establish ties with self-defence groups. This would rekindle the intent of nesting them into security forces by incorporating them into the Rural Defence Corps as bodies subordinate to the army to enforce laws and contribute to security efforts. Instead, López Obrador has diverted these forces to Mexico's northern and southern borders to stem the flow of migrants.

Summary, Implications, and Future Research

Self-defence groups enhanced local security in their early years and many continue to deter crime by cartels, but continued lawlessness, prospects in illicit markets, infiltration, increasing power wielded by these groups, and the government's failure to operationalize them as members of the Rural Defence Corps has catalysed their ethical decay and transformed many into nefarious actors. Poor decisions and policies of heads of state failed to leverage these likely allies in Mexico's security crisis, which ultimately worsened the country's security apparatus. Their inaction, as well as a lack of commitment to follow through with their chosen courses of action, permitted many of these potential security enablers to become nefarious actors.

⁴³ Armando Solis, "In Mexico, women take the front lines as vigilantes," *AP News*, 16 January 2021, <https://apnews.com/article/mexico-11bf21a9a3cce149fb4b8bbc56366923> (accessed 19 March 2021).

⁴⁴ Solis, "In Mexico, women take the front lines as vigilantes."

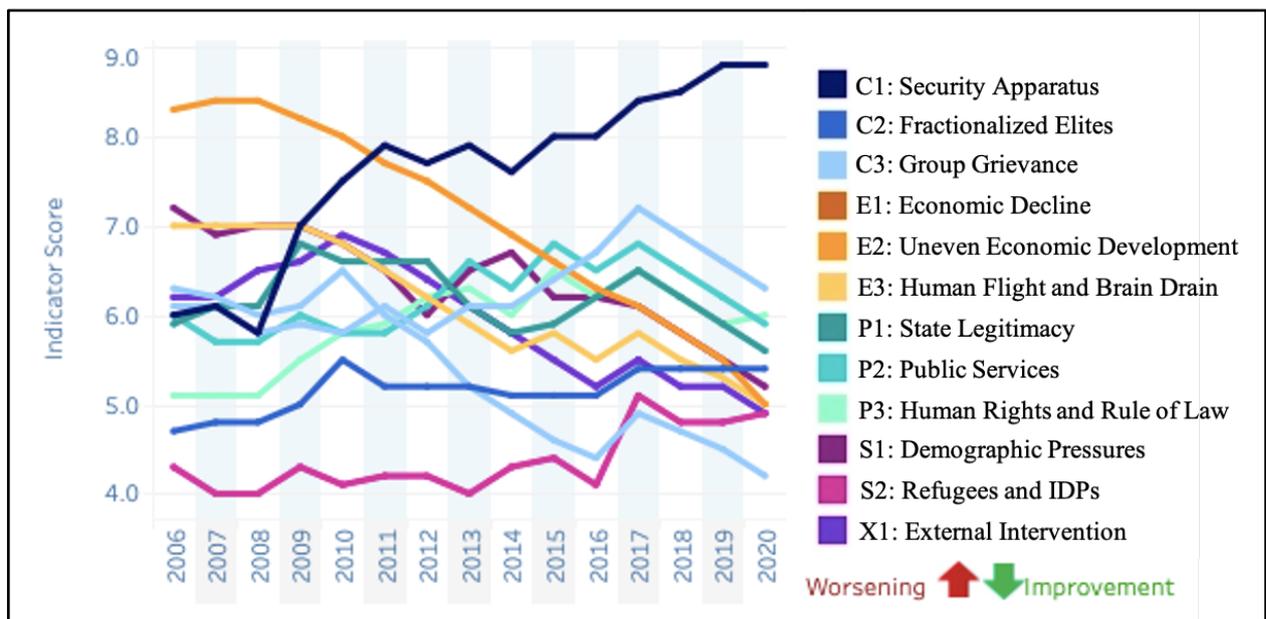
⁴⁵ "Mexico struggles: whether to dialogue with 'self-defence' groups or persecute them."

⁴⁶ "Mexico struggles: whether to dialogue with 'self-defence' groups or persecute them."

In light of these findings, one implication of continued government inaction is the increase in number, size, and capabilities of self-defence groups that, operating outside of government oversight and control, eventually turn to criminal activity. This can hasten the country’s security decay to the point of national collapse, beyond its present condition of dispersed lawlessness. Lessons from Colombia and Peru offer insights on how the Mexican government might manage self-defence groups as enablers, but Mexico seems to have missed the opportunity during Peña Nieto’s term to train self-defence forces and integrate them into the Rural Defence Corps to enhance security, although this may still be possible for some groups with a concerted effort reliant on the National Guard. The country lacks the capacity to force vigilante groups to relinquish their weapons or enforce laws regarding possession of arms, and those groups are unwilling to comply with such demands. Instead, the country should focus on working alongside those citizens still disposed to cooperate with the government in defeating their common enemy, the cartels.

Appendix

Figure 1: Cohesion Indicator Trends: Mexico, 2006-2020



Source: The Fund for Peace, “Fragile States Index,” Washington, D.C.: The Fund for Peace, 2018, accessed 27 March 2021, <https://fragilestatesindex.org/country-data/>.

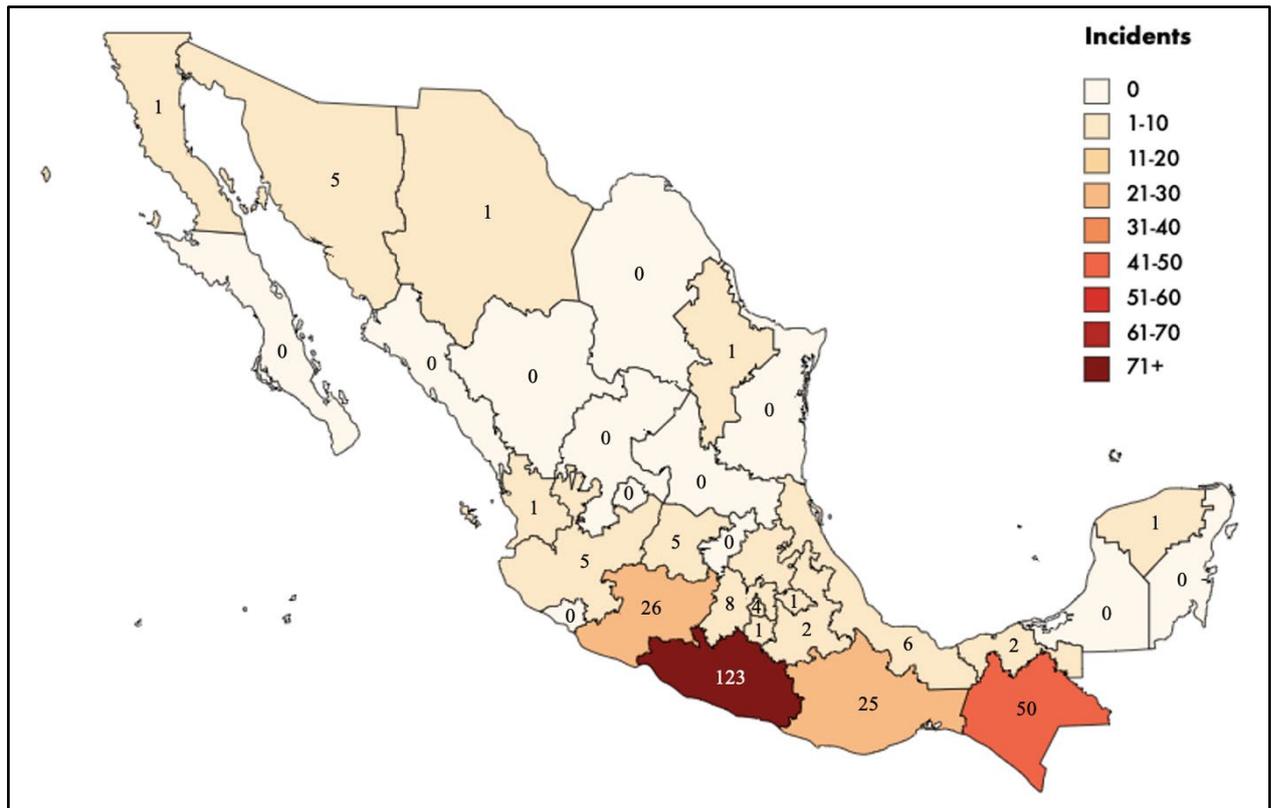
Table 2: Organized Crime-related Homicides in Mexico, 2007-2016

State Code	State	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	TOTAL
1	Aguascalientes	26	40	32	27	22	11	18	8	22	43	249
2	Baja California	238	725	691	912	420	269	220	193	354	393	4415
3	Baja California S.	2	0	4	10	15	2	3	42	132	133	343
4	Campeche	19	7	10	2	11	4	10	7	17	13	100
5	Coahuila	17	26	98	204	415	880	488	196	127	100	2551
6	Colima	0	1	1	14	18	80	70	24	55	385	648
7	Chiapas	36	22	31	25	11	29	66	30	52	66	368
8	Chihuahua	232	2056	3637	4662	3498	2259	1794	1,143	966	937	21184
9	Distrito Federal	206	84	97	113	57	144	191	232	197	253	1574
10	Durango	70	137	341	436	760	477	304	120	112	103	2860
11	Guanajuato	49	38	108	81	38	129	132	180	366	810	1931
12	Guerrero	359	468	881	853	1233	1448	961	1,075	1,464	1,832	10574
13	Hidalgo	39	18	26	33	36	91	76	52	24	25	420
14	Jalisco	64	57	60	185	285	656	913	518	437	351	3526
15	México (Estado de México)	91	213	227	404	448	570	625	623	667	807	4675
16	Michoacán	292	208	417	297	323	534	436	594	613	922	4636
17	Morelos	22	28	76	268	113	376	403	249	230	417	2182
18	Nayarit	4	16	23	339	190	107	53	4	9	54	799
19	Nuevo León	113	48	71	453	1044	1058	529	168	126	276	3886
20	Oaxaca	45	84	141	181	108	143	154	222	319	298	1695
21	Puebla	1	9	8	4	2	60	87	88	107	190	556
22	Querétaro	8	9	12	16	28	13	25	16	67	21	215
23	Quintana Roo	23	19	42	73	94	68	55	20	35	54	483
24	San Luis Potosí	10	33	5	114	211	290	186	69	69	96	1083
25	Sinaloa	476	958	814	1730	1402	1168	1015	747	502	613	9425
26	Sonora	152	259	294	602	326	245	319	445	179	273	3094
27	Tabasco	25	14	46	13	32	9	58	29	126	146	498
28	Tamaulipas	61	43	31	536	519	392	342	356	239	209	2728
29	Tlaxcala	1	1	1	4	0	2	12	6	17	20	64
30	Veracruz	67	17	28	51	490	472	243	473	727	802	3370
31	Yucatán	13	19	0	4	1	7	3	3	4	12	66
32	Zacatecas	12	22	28	12	134	419	303	61	62	313	1366
TOTAL		2773	5679	8281	12658	12284	12412	10094	7993	8423	10967	80597

Note: Heat map generated by author to show relative homicide rates and identify possible correlations between high homicide rates preceding self-defence group creation or decreasing homicide rates with presence or increased activity of self-defence groups.

Source: Milenio, “Organized-crime group related homicides (2007-2016) from Milenio,” compiled by *Justice in Mexico*, San Diego, last updated 19 April 2017, available at <https://justiceinmexico.org/data/>.

Figure 3: Identity Militia Incidents in Mexico, 2018-2020



Note: Identity Militia includes self-defence groups and community police forces. Incidents include battles, explosions/remote violence, riots, strategic developments, and violence against civilians, as defined in ACLED, “Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) Codebook, 2017,” 2017, accessible at <https://acleddata.com/resources/general-guides/#1603120929112-8ecf0356-6cf0>. There is no ACLED data prior to 2018 for Mexico.

Source: Author-generated using mapchart.net/mexico.html, based on data in Clionadh Raleigh, Andrew Linke, Håvard Hegre and Joakim Karlsen, “Introducing ACLED-Armed Conflict Location and Event Data,” *Journal of Peace Research* 47, no. 5 (2010): 651-660. Downloaded dataset from ACLED database at <https://acleddata.com/#/dashboard> on 28 March 2021.