



# Mexican Drug Cartels and the Crime-Terror Nexus

Alexander Salt

11 March 2018

## **The sheer scale of cartel related violence in Mexico has yielded debate over what type of violence it actually is. Is it terrorism, an insurgency or something else altogether?**

The levels of narcotics-related violence in Mexico can only be aptly described as extreme. Since the Mexican government declared a “War on Drugs” in 2006, tens of thousands of lives have been lost to small-arms attacks, bombings and torture across the country. The Mexican state has also struggled to deal with this phenomenon and there seems no clear end in sight for this chaotic situation. Although there was initially a decline in the levels of violence in Mexico following the election of President Enrique Peña Nieto in 2012, there has been a dramatic increase in the past 3 years. In 2016, there were 23 000 homicides across Mexico, which had more deaths than Iraq and Afghanistan over the course of that year. Despite this reality, the deteriorating security situation in Mexico has received relatively lukewarm attention by the North American and international media.

Due to the scope of the violence in Mexico, some scholars and government officials have referred to Mexican drug cartels as terrorists rather than mere criminals. Is this description accurate? Defining terrorism is a difficult task. There are literally hundreds of definitions that have been used across the globe; even different government agencies within the same state may have differently worded definitions. Thus, “terrorism” is a contested subject, in that its usage remains somewhat subjective. Some experts feel the term has been used far too widely, making any sort of specific distinction for its usage near impossible. There are, however, certain themes that can be found in most definitions of the term. For example, many definitions consider terrorism to be

### Latest

**An Update on the Security Policy Change Programme**

---

**Chances for Peace in the Third Decade**

---

**A Story of ORG: Oliver Ramsbotham**

---

**A Story of ORG: Gabrielle Rifkind**

### Related

**Planning for the World After COVID-19: Assessing the Domestic and International Drivers of Conflict**

---

unlawful politically motivated violence that is directed at an audience beyond its immediate victims. The key aspect with terrorism is thus the intent behind the use of violence.

## Defining Cartel Violence

On the surface, Mexican cartels do seem to have much in common with terrorist organizations. Structurally, they are organized into clandestine networks that seek to avoid legal authorities. At the tactical level, cartels certainly have engaged in acts of horrific violence including car-bombings, assassination of journalists, politicians and policemen as well as massacres of civilians. Some of these attacks have been quite bold, including ambushing a large convoy of police vehicles or assassinating mayors and police chiefs in public. Mutilated corpses of cartel rivals are often left in grotesque public displays intended to gain maximum exposure in the public eye. The cartels have developed sophisticated propaganda campaigns, including the use of social media that has been directed at both their rivals and state security services. Cartels will release videos showing the execution of rivals, and of well armed gunmen issuing threats. The Cartels have also [used brutal violence](#) to silence traditional and social media outlets that have been critical of their actions.

However, it would be a mistake to classify cartel violence under the banner of terrorism. The reason for this is that cartels remain, first and foremost, focused on profit making from their narcotics businesses, as well as other illicit ventures such as human smuggling. As noted, a central theme of most definitions of terrorism is that motivations are mostly driven by political reasons. Sometimes traditional terrorist organizations have crossed over into organized criminal activity; for example, Hezbollah has smuggled narcotics and

## The Integrated Review: Lessons Learned From Remote Warfare

---

### WarPod Ep #8 | International Engagement in the Sahel

---

### ORG Explains #12: The UK's Pivot to the Sahel

## Most read

### The Role of Youth in Peacebuilding: Challenges and Opportunities

---

### Making Bad Economies: The Poverty of Mexican Drug Cartels

---

### ORG's Vision

---

### Remote Warfare: Lessons Learned from Contemporary Theatres

has engaged in money laundering; while the Irish Republican Army has participated in illicit arms sales. However, when these terrorist groups have committed for-profit crimes, it was purely to financially support their political causes. Cartels have engaged in some political related activities such as bribing or assassinating public figures. Nevertheless, the motivations for the bulk of cartel violence so far has been to increase their control of the illicit drug market, rather than usurp and take over the Mexican government for themselves. They are extremely violent criminals, not political actors.

### **Mexican Cartels and Regional Security**

Although cartels should not be defined as terrorists, they remain a clear and present threat to the stability and security of Mexico and its neighboring countries. Classifying cartels as terrorists is unhelpful as it distorts any proper understanding and analysis of the phenomenon and has the potential to help foster overly-militarized reactions, rather than the necessary whole-of-government response to the problem. Referring to cartels as terrorists presumes that politics and ideology rather than economics are the leading motivators of violence, and any government strategy based on that understanding is bound to fail.

Should the cartel violence continue to grow, it will result in the deaths of the tens of thousands more civilians. It has the potential to further create thousands of refugees fleeing such violence into neighbouring states, including the southern United States. Cartel violence has **displaced** over 280 000 people within Mexico and it is estimated that several hundred thousand Mexicans **have fled** into the United States. If the security situation worsens, there is even the potential for Mexico to become a quasi-failed state. Further, the cartels have been developing complex transnational networks across North

America, including a presence in every major metropolitan centre, and so it would be easy for this violence to spread **well beyond** the borders of Mexico.

There is no simple solution to this growing and complex problem, but it must be dealt with as a regional security issue, not just a Mexican one. There must be continued cooperation between the Mexican government and the United States, where both countries' security services must further develop a multinational anti-cartel strategy. The US, in turn, must do more to disrupt cartels from purchasing small arms and munitions within its borders and smuggling them back into Mexico. The US should also do what it can to reduce its population's domestic demand for narcotics as it remains the largest consumer of illicit drugs. Canada must also play a larger role in helping resolve this issue. To date, the Canadian government has unfortunately often ignored the cartel situation in Mexico but, in a globalized world, threats can only be ignored for so long. There are several pragmatic reasons for Canada to involve itself further in the situation, as cartels have already begun to spread their operations into Canadian territory, and the continued violence back in Mexico has the potential to disrupt trade with Canadian companies. Canada can provide financial aid and its Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) force can act as advisors for local policing services in Mexico, as they have previously done in Haiti.

Unfortunately, the current North American political climate remains somewhat cool towards cooperation given the ongoing disputes over the North American Free Trade Agreement renegotiations and potential for a border wall along the US-Mexico border. Political elites in all major regional countries must seek to increase cooperation, rather than drift apart if the cartel problem is ever to be properly solved.

Image credit: [Claudio Toledo/Flickr](#).

---

**Alexander Salt is a PhD Candidate with the University of Calgary's Centre for Military, Security and Strategic Studies and a SSHRC Joseph-Armand Bombardier Doctoral Award holder. He holds an MA in Political Studies from the University of Manitoba and a BA (Hons.) in History and Political Studies from Queen's Unive**

### Share this page



## Contact

Unit 503  
101 Clerkenwell Road London  
EC1R 5BX  
Charity no. 299436  
Company no. 2260840

[Email us](#)

020 3559 6745

## Follow us



## Useful links

[Login](#)  
[Contact us](#)  
[Sitemap](#)  
[Accessibility](#)  
[Terms & Conditions](#)  
[Privacy policy](#)

