

¿Todos somos Nuevo Laredo? How Mexico's PRI can make Nuevo Laredo into Juarez

By Christopher Wilson

Mexico's Ciudad Juarez, once the country's most violent city, has seen violence drop dramatically in the last three years. The Woodrow Wilson Center's Christopher Wilson explores whether the current government can do the same with Nuevo Laredo, the current epicenter of violence along the border.

In early 2010, as violence in Ciudad Juarez skyrocketed, former Mexican president Felipe Calderon declared that the 15 young people who had been gunned down at a celebration following a youth league baseball game were themselves criminals, that in a certain sense they had it coming. He was wrong, and the parents of the victims made sure he would not forget it.

Their children were innocent victims of Juarez's gang war, a case of mistaken identity, and though President Calderon may have initially visited Juarez in an effort to atone for the gaffe, in the end he created a major federal program, "Todos Somos Juarez" (We Are All Juarez), that brought together the business community, civil society and the various levels of government to take on the challenge of organized crime. In part as a result of the investments and efforts of all of these groups, by the beginning of 2013 the murder rate in Ciudad Juarez had fallen 90 percent from its high point at the end of 2010.

Yet even as crime has subsided on the western stretch of the border, the [US State Department reports](#) murders in Nuevo Laredo, Tamaulipas are up 92.5 percent from their 2012 level and that the state's kidnapping rate is the highest in the nation. The police was disbanded in 2011, and thousands have fled into the United States, including large numbers of community and business leaders. At the heart of this violence are the Zetas, the local criminal powerbrokers of the region. And following the capture of the group's leader, Miguel Angel Treviño Morales, alias "Z40," on July 16, the situation may get worse as rivals seek to fill the power vacuum.

Still, Nuevo Laredo has hope. With a new president in Los Pinos, Zetas leader Treviño behind bars, and the election of a new party to the [mayor's office](#) for the first time in 38 years, it might be possible for federal, state and local actors to design and implement an effort to reduce violence and restore the rule of law in the city. This article seeks not to design such a plan but to suggest that despite the challenges, if the right group of actors is brought together and sufficient resources are dedicated, Nuevo Laredo can become a key success in the new Mexican administration's security policy.

The Geography of Violence

Geography is both a blessing and a curse for Nuevo Laredo. It is the crossing point for forty-five percent of all US-Mexico trade, more than \$200 billion a year, and the city's businesses are able to benefit from all of that traffic by helping businesses fill out their customs declarations and trucking their goods to and from warehouses on each side of the border.

But the same geography that makes Nuevo Laredo the crossing point for so much legal trade also makes it appealing for illicit commerce. The approximately ten thousand trucks carrying everything from auto parts to frozen strawberries across the border both ways each day offer an endless array of options for traffickers looking to plant their drugs. The long tradition of drug trafficking that is the result of this unique geography has left the city and state with a robust criminal infrastructure but conversely weak civil society and government institutions.

For all the benefits it brings to Nuevo Laredo, the nature of legitimate commerce presents its own challenge in terms of the structural incentives it creates, or fails to create, for civil society to demand effective government responses to the situation of organized crime and violence. A full 35 percent of all the trucks crossing the southern border into the United States pass through Nuevo Laredo, causing the city to rely less on the functioning of its own local economy than to serve as a logistics hub for binational trade beginning and ending far in the interiors of the United States and Mexico.

The international nature of this business makes it harder to get these business leaders to buy into the need for more security at home. Customs and logistics, the industries that service the massive flow of bilateral trade through Nuevo Laredo, are the heart of the local economy, employing nineteen percent of the local workforce. As a result, the *agentes aduanales*, or customs brokers, are natural leaders in the community. Nonetheless, since Nuevo Laredo sits on the main thoroughfare connecting Mexico City, Monterrey, Dallas, and the Midwest and Eastern United States, their business is only marginally affected by the destructive influence of organized crime on the local community. What's more, many of them have left Nuevo Laredo to reside in the safety of Laredo, Texas.

There are other challenges as well. The Maquila industry, so prevalent in Juarez, is less influential in Nuevo Laredo. Supported by foreign investors constantly scouring the globe for the best location for their factories, the managers of local Maquiladora assembly plants have more to win or lose based on the reality and the perception of violence and corruption. Still, many higher level managers live in the safety of the

other side of the border, and the Maquiladora industry represents a smaller share of the economy in Nuevo Laredo than it does in many other Mexican border cities.

From a civil society and business perspective, this leaves much of the struggle to the mom and pop shops of downtown Nuevo Laredo. With much of the population minimizing trips out of their homes for fear of being caught in a shootout, kidnapping or robbery, local retailers and restaurateurs have a tough time keeping their doors open. A brave few have banded together to do more than that, to work with the military police to find safe ways to report crimes and suspicious activities. This is a courageous and important act in the context of Zeta control, but in the absence of an alliance with a broader group of community leaders, the impact is insufficient.

A Challenge to the Federal Government—A Need for Greater Support

The examples of Tijuana and especially Ciudad Juarez, other border towns that have experienced major spikes and then declines of violence, have made the need for strong federal support quite clear. However, so far local actors, even with the support of the Mexican military, have been unable to overcome the challenges of geography and the Zetas' business model of brutality and territorial control. The need is doubly important in a state like Tamaulipas, where municipalities like Nuevo Laredo (population 384,000) are smaller and have fewer resources at their disposal than the larger border cities to the west.

The severity of the crisis of governance and public security should be enough, but there are additional compelling reasons why the federal government may want to pay special attention to the case of Tamaulipas and Nuevo Laredo. Like the current federal government, Tamaulipas is governed by the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI). It has been ruled by the PRI for as long as the party has existed, and the democratic transition that has transformed Mexico over the past decades has yet to fully reach the state. The dominance of the PRI in Tamaulipas makes the state a test of the new government's security policy, and it also makes Tamaulipas a potential liability. Insofar as corruption, as suggested by the [allegations](#) against three former governors, and extreme violence, like the 72 migrants found in a mass grave in San Fernando, continue to be issues, they will likely form part of a counternarrative to the story of the emergence of a new, modern and democratic PRI.

Recently, cracks have appeared in the PRI armor in the state, with the National Action Party (PAN) candidate taking more votes than President Peña Nieto while also winning six out of eight federal congressional districts in the 2012 elections. The PRI came back to win the majority in the state congress and most of the mayoral elections contested in 2013, but, Carlos Cantú Rosas of the PAN became the first non-PRI mayor of Nuevo Laredo since his father held the post 38 years ago.

Following the capture of Z40, a spike in violence in the region is likely, even if in the long term his arrest strengthens the rule of law by limiting impunity, taking one of the most violent criminal actors off the streets and virtually completing the destruction of the Zetas' top leadership. In this context, Nuevo Laredo and indeed the entire state of Tamaulipas could become the "Ciudad Juarez" of the Peña Nieto administration, meaning it could become a defining challenge for the security strategy being designed and implemented by the new government.

The federal government has made coordination among the various security agencies and the federal, state and local levels of government a centerpiece of its anti-crime strategy, and the alignment of PRI leadership between the federal and state governments creates an opportunity to improve coordination. To be sure, within a few months of Enrique Peña taking over the presidency, the current mayor reported that regular meetings were taking place between those responsible for public security in Nuevo Laredo from the three levels of government, a promising development. The recent election of a PAN mayor could complicate this somewhat, but it also offers an opportunity to re-launch local anti-crime efforts and certainly does not change the serious need for greater coordination and greater support from the federal government.

Nonetheless, the lack of capacity of the rule of law institutions at the state and local levels put severe limitations on the ability of such cooperation to bear fruit. In part, these weak local institutions are the legacy of the old system of single-party, top-down federal control that has since given way to democracy and decentralization, in many parts of Mexico without the requisite capacity-building or the creation of transparency and accountability mechanisms to facilitate better subnational governance. To the extent that federal support can be extended to institution building, the federal government will find it has more partners in the state with which it can successfully coordinate public security efforts.

An obvious starting point would be addressing the current lack of police presence. As noted earlier, the municipal police was disbanded, as it was completely infiltrated by the Zetas. The state police, which includes approximately two thousand members of the new [Mando Unico](#) as well as deputized members of the military police, is quite simply not large enough to replace the several municipal police forces that have been disbanded throughout the state, including in Nuevo Laredo. Thousands of soldiers are currently helping to fill this void, but both the military and government admit this is not a long-term solution.

According to the Sistema Nacional de Seguridad Publica, with 184 police per 100,000 residents in 2011, Tamaulipas was the Mexican state with the second lowest number of police per capita. The absence of police not only opens up spaces

for organized crime to continue its operations and inter-group battles, it also opens the door for small time crooks to take advantage of the near total impunity to begin their own robbery, extortion and kidnapping rackets, whether under the auspices of a larger criminal group or independent from them.

The state is working to grow its police force, but federal support is needed to ensure it is created efficiently and with proper standards and training. Should the Mexican federal government decide to request it, the United States may be able to support efforts to create national policing standards and to assist states like Tamaulipas set up training and professional development programs to help their police forces meet federal standards as part of the next round of Merida Initiative projects, as it has already in states like Chihuahua, where Juarez lies.

The municipal government in Nuevo Laredo may also need support in order to officially disband its police force, which is still receiving pay from the city despite the fact that its members have not been patrolling the streets for approximately three years. Whatever the specific solution, something must be done to free up this critical portion of an already strained municipal budget.

In addition to supporting efforts to build capacity and create trustworthy partners in the state's rule of law institutions—police, judiciary, prosecutors, prisons—the president and his team also have an opportunity to use their leadership role within the PRI to make sure that Tamaulipas has strong, qualified and trustworthy candidates for key municipal and state posts. Those leaders will be their partners as they jointly work to address impunity and degrade the strength of organized crime throughout the current presidential term.

Support Must Extend Beyond Government Actors

Given the extremely difficult climate in which civil society organizations and community leaders are acting in Nuevo Laredo, it is important that they are supported and protected by governmental and non-governmental groups.

With some effort, it may be possible to turn the disadvantage of the middle and upper classes that have fled the violence in their native Nuevo Laredo into something of an advantage. From their safer position in Laredo, Texas, members of the community may feel more comfortable organizing and supporting civil society efforts to combat violence, tend to the victims of violence, and promote educational and economic development opportunities in their hometown. This may be a particular opportunity for the United States government and philanthropic organizations, since the activities to support anti-crime efforts would take place on US soil and under the US legal framework.

Mexico City-based organizations have used similar tactics in support of civil society in other parts of Tamaulipas, inviting local leaders to workshops in Monterrey, where they tend to feel more free to express their challenges and search for solutions. There may be opportunities to expand these activities to Nuevo Laredo, especially if they are supported by the Mexican government, US government, or large philanthropic organizations.

Particular emphasis might also be put on supporting the local businesses that are firmly rooted in Nuevo Laredo. They are already designing and implementing innovative solutions to complex problems in an extraordinarily difficult context. For example, members of a local chamber of commerce are working directly with a leader of the local military police to report crimes. While this may seem simple, the method provides security forces with much needed intelligence while rebuilding citizen confidence in the government. It is also helping to overcome the [high rate of false emergency calls](#) inundating the '911' service. These efforts, and other social programs, need to be nurtured. Without support, the climate of fear and impunity has overwhelmed and stymied the vast majority of social anti-crime initiatives, but with backing and protection, they may begin to take root, grow, and encourage others with new ideas to begin their own efforts.

Getting the city from a collective sense of “duck and cover” to “We Are All Nuevo Laredo” will be a difficult task. It will require significant outside support and also courageous and dedicated local leaders. But it is possible. If Juarez shows us anything, it's that the darkest days may also provide the push that is needed to reach the light.