

Mexico's Security Dilemma: Michoacán's Militias

The Rise of Vigilantism in Mexico and Its Implications Going Forward

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ABSTRACT

This working paper explores the rise of citizens' self-defense groups in Mexico's western state of Michoacán. It is based on extensive field research. The militias arguably mark the most significant social and political development in Mexico's seven years of criminal hyper-violence. Their surprisingly effective response to a large criminal organization has put the government in a dilemma of if, and how, it plans to permanently incorporate the volatile organizations into the government's security strategy.

Executive Summary

Since 2006, violence and criminality in Mexico have reached new heights. Battles amongst criminal organizations and between them have led to an unprecedented spike in homicides and other crimes. Large criminal groups have fragmented and their remnants have diversified their criminal portfolios to include widespread and systematic extortion of the civilian population. The state has not provided a satisfactory answer to this issue. In fact, government actors and security forces have frequently sought to take part in the pillaging.

Frustrated and desperate, many community leaders, farmers and business elites have armed themselves and created so-called “self-defense” groups. Self-defense groups have a long history in Mexico, but they have traditionally been used to deal with petty crime in mostly indigenous communities. These efforts are recognized by the constitution as legitimate and legal. But the new challenges to security by criminal organizations have led to the emergence of this new generation of militias. The strongest of these vigilante organizations are in Michoacán, an embattled western state where a criminal group called the Knights Templar had been victimizing locals for years and had co-opted local political power.

These new militia groups came together quickly in a largely rural area known as the Tierra Caliente, or “hot country,” of Michoacán. They have different backgrounds, motives and long-term interests. Some are small farmers and businessmen seeking some relief from Knights Templar stranglehold. Others appear to be rival drug trafficking organizations (DTOs) looking for a way to take advantage of the situation. They armed themselves with what they could, which in many cases included high-powered weaponry that is technically illegal for civilians to wield. However, these and other transgressions were overlooked given the desperation to deal with the DTO problem at hand. Their unified goal of ridding themselves of the Knights Templar made for a powerful, although seemingly temporary, alliance. They quickly took control of numerous towns, expelling the Knights Templar from urban areas and forcing local government officials from office.

The militias' rapid spread surprised many, including the federal government. The Enrique Peña Nieto administration did not know what to do at first and deferred to its default response: sending army personnel and federal police. However, de facto power in the hands of the militias meant the federal government had to offer more. The president sent in a special envoy, who quickly took control of the state, created an ad-hoc legal framework and talked of incorporating the groups into the security fold. The government also said it would spend more money on economic and social programs in Michoacán. And its security forces turned a blind eye to the militias' illegal weaponry and the shady pasts of many of their leaders.

In the meantime, the federal government “green-lighted” joint operations. Federal troops, police and militias entered towns together, manned checkpoints and consulted with one another about strategy. Drawing from the sudden trove of intelligence coming from the vigilante groups and locals who supported them, the federal forces arrested hundreds of suspected Knights Templar and corralled several important leaders. The culmination of this alliance came on March 9, when federal troops killed Nazario Moreno, the leader of the Knights Templar. Several weeks later, they killed one of Moreno's successors.

The alliance, however successful it has been, is unraveling. The government has pulled back its support and arrested a top militia leader for his suspected involvement in the murder of a vigilante rival. Alfredo Castillo, Peña Nieto's envoy, ordered the militias in early April to disarm or face arrest as well.

What's more, the government so far has shown little inclination to fold more than a fraction of the militiamen into formal security forces as agreed to in late January. The militias have also fractured. Some militia leaders claim the government has betrayed them and vow to fight it. Others are setting up their own, permanent version of self-defense groups in their communities with or without government support.

As the story unfolds a number of issues remain unresolved. Among the most important of these is to determine how self-defense groups fit into the struggle against large criminal organizations. The Mexican State, on the local and state level, has shown itself incapable of protecting its citizens. Other self-defense groups will surely emerge in its absence. Yet Michoacán's experience has not moved Mexico any closer to understanding what role the militias should play, if any, in helping to ensure security. In fact, the vigilante groups seem to be operating in a gray space in which the difference between legal and illegal is not clear. They are, for instance, not condemning drug trafficking even though that is a major source of income and power for criminal organizations like the Knights Templar.

In the end, Michoacán's self-defense experiment has successfully illustrated that criminal organizations can be dismantled quickly with a strong, functional alliance between community and government. However, without a clear legal framework and definition of roles, there is little guarantee that the job will not remain half-finished and that a new version of the Knights Templar will not emerge, perhaps from the militia movement itself.

General Background

Faced with the government's failure to rein in the criminals, communities across crime-besieged Mexico have been trying for years to organize effective civic resistance. Michoacán's vigilantes express the most extreme response by society to date, but other efforts have been less belligerent. In battle-torn cities along the US border, a number of civic, business and church groups have pressured mostly the federal government to implement more effective crime fighting strategies. There have been some success stories, but most of these civic efforts have come up short.¹

It is in this context of frustration with the government and a lack of effective non-violent models that the self-defense groups have emerged in Michoacán. These groups embody both a cry for help and a threat to peace. They include a wide range of actors from earnest civilians scrambling to save their families and businessmen trying to protect their livelihoods, to criminal organizations seeking to take advantage amid a perceived power vacuum. And they illustrate a central problem that remains unanswered in Mexico's current situation: how can the state fortify its weak local security and judicial forces and repair the social contract with its citizens in these crime-ridden areas?

Though by many measures a backwater, with only three percent of Mexico's territory, four percent of its population and two percent of the national economy, Michoacán has held a crucial place in the country's political and social history.² The state has fewer than five million inhabitants, two-thirds of them living in cities and towns. It comprises 23,000 square miles and is about as large and nearly as mountainous as West Virginia. But as an agricultural hub with access to the sea, varying terrain and connections to important population centers, Michoacán serves as an important area for transit, as well as farming for the local market and for international export.

Anchored by the market city of Apatzingán, today's so-called Tierra Caliente, or "hot land," is home to some 500,000 people and, apart from the production and trafficking of illegal drugs, is the country's second most important producer of limes, primary source of avocados and font of a wide variety of other fruits and vegetables. Trade with Asia in recent years has converted the once minor Pacific Coast port of Lázaro Cárdenas into one of Mexico's most important commercial gateways and a major steel-making center.³

The Apatzingán valley's agricultural potential was developed early last century by Italian immigrant Dante Cusi, who bought out distressed hacienda owners shortly before the outbreak of the Mexican revolution. Settling into what is now the town of Nueva Italia, 20 miles east of Apatzingán, Cusi built pipelines and irrigation canals to bring water from the high mountains 30 miles to the north, transforming his arid lands into vast rice fields. Migrants poured to the area from across Michoacán and neighboring states, creating a large pool of poorly paid field laborers.

In the 1930s, President Lázaro Cárdenas, a Michoacán native who had served previously as the state's governor, confiscated the huge haciendas owned by Cusi and others in the Apatzingán area. Cárdenas

¹ Steven Dudley and Sandra Rodríguez, "Civil Society, the Government and the Development of Citizen Security," Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, August 2013. Accessed 7 April 2014, at: http://wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/Dudley_Rodriguez_Civil_Society_Border.pdf

See also David Shirk, Duncan Wood, Eric L. Olson, et al., *Building Resilient Communities in Mexico: Civic Responses to Crime and Violence*, Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, March 2014. Accessed 7 April 2014, at: <http://wilsoncenter.org/publication/resilient-communities-mexico-2014>

² Data from the Mexican government's statistical agency, INEGI. Accessed March 2014, at: <http://www.inegi.org.mx/>

³ Dave Graham, "Chinese Iron Trade Fuels Clash With Mexican Drug Cartel," *Reuters*, 1 January 2014.

converted the Apatzingán valley into a showcase of the collectivized farming system, creating a politicized rural population in the Tierra Caliente.

Many of the *ejido* lands have been privatized in the past 20 years, creating a class of prosperous farmers in the Tierra Caliente. But Michoacán remains one of the poorest and least developed states in Mexico. The United Nations places it in the bottom third in terms of human development index.⁴ And many in the valley today work low paying jobs: caring for orchards, picking fruit or working seasonally in the packing sheds. Not surprisingly, the Tierra Caliente and the rest of Michoacán have been a major source of migrants to Mexico's cities and the United States since the 1940s, with the Los Angeles area, Chicago and Texas primary destinations. Some of that same migrant labor has also fed criminal groups.

Indeed, the region has a long history of violence. Though it played a less central role in the 1910 Revolution, Michoacán nevertheless suffered years of fighting by militias of competing loyalties and agendas. The state's more prominent “revolutionaries” – in particular José Inés Chávez García, nicknamed the “Scourge of Michoacán” – operated more like common vandals than soldiers, plundering and murdering at will, burning villages and entire towns.⁵

More recently, Michoacán has become home to a number of criminal organizations, some of which made their reputation in much the same way as the current “self-defense” groups did. Drug producing and trafficking gangs have flourished in Michoacán since the 1970s. Like other states along the Pacific Coast's Sierra Madre range, Michoacán's lengthy coastline and remote mountains make the state ideal for importing, producing and trafficking illicit drugs. Marijuana and opium poppies serve as important cash crops in the remote mountains and valleys, especially in the ranges surrounding the Apatzingán Valley and in the Sierra Madre range.⁶

⁴ United Nations Development Programme, “Informe sobre el desarrollo humano: Michoacán 2007.” Accessed 7 April 2014, at: http://www.undp.org.mx/IMG/pdf/03IDHmich_cap1.pdf

⁵ Miguel Estrada, “La historia de José Inés Chávez García,” Agencia Mexicana de Noticias, 29 September 2010. Accessed 7 April 2014, at: http://www.agenciamn.com/index2.php?option=com_content&id=2988

⁶ Dudley Althaus interview with Coalcomán Mayor Rafael García, May 2013.

DTOs and the Battle for Michoacán

In the 1990s there were two major organizations operating in the state. A clan known as the Beltrán Leyva Organization (BLO) controlled coastal areas near the port of Lázaro Cárdenas, while the Valencia family gang, also known as the Milenio Cartel, controlled much of the Tierra Caliente. The Valencias smuggled its US bound drugs through Nuevo Laredo on the South Texas border, and forged a strong relationship with the Gulf Cartel, which dominated that part of the border, and the Zetas, the armed wing of Gulf Cartel boss Osiel Cárdenas.

Sometime around the year 2000, a Valencia associate named Carlos Rosales Mendoza broke with the Valencia family and formed a new organization he called La Empresa, or The Company. Rosales, who was a close associate of Gulf Cartel boss Cárdenas, requested his help in driving the Valencias, the BLO and other gangs out of Michoacán. Cárdenas dispatched the Zetas, at the time his personal army of assassins and enforcers.⁷

The Zetas, who were largely ex-military personnel, recruited locals and trained them in how to manage weapons, collect intelligence, ambush rivals, control territory and other tactical approaches unique among criminal groups at the time. However, the Zetas were also predators of the worst sort, kidnapping and extorting local businessmen and residents, and flooding the local market with drugs. Profits on activities like extortion were rising. The North American Free Trade Agreement had led to a five-fold increase in avocado exports increasing the take of legitimate and illegitimate businesses alike.⁸

Following the arrests of Cárdenas and Rosales, a group of Rosales' lieutenants split from the Zetas to form their own organization.⁹ Fittingly, they called it La Familia Michoacana, an homage to their native land, which they vowed to defend with their lives. They also claimed to protect the local businesses and residents from "foreign" incursions and abuses. For a time, La Familia did just that, expelling the Zetas and their satellite organizations and taking firm control of the state. The organization also formally declared itself to the world in September 2006 by rolling the decapitated heads of five alleged rapists, and Zetas members, on the dance floor of a gangster-frequented disco in Uruapán.

"La Familia doesn't kill for money, doesn't kill women, doesn't kill innocent people," a message left with the heads advised. "Only those who deserve to die, die. This is divine justice."

The violence prompted President Calderón, a Michoacán native who had barely won his election amid charges of fraud, to send federal forces into Michoacán a few weeks after taking office in December 2006. Through the next four years Calderón sent troops and federal police into the state seven times, achieving only temporary and limited success. The president's efforts to decapitate the political side of La Familia also failed. Beginning in late May 2009, federal police arrested 38 local and state officials – including a dozen mayors, many from towns where the militias now operate – in a sweeping dragnet

⁷ Arturo Rodríguez García, "Por las trincheras de Tierra Caliente," *Proceso*, 3 November 2013. Accessed 23 April 2014, at: <http://www.proceso.com.mx/?p=357111>

⁸ "Free Trade on Trial," *The Economist*, 30 December 2003. Accessed 7 April 2014, at: <http://www.economist.com/node/2312920>

⁹ No author, "La Empresa que originó a Los Caballeros Templarios," *Milenio*, 10 March 2014. Accessed 24 April 2014, at: http://www.milenio.com/policia/nacimiento-templarios-familia-michoacana-michoacan_0_259774453.html

that became known as the “Michoacanazo.” The officials were accused of collaborating with La Familia Michoacana. But all were released for “lack of evidence” within the following 16 months.¹⁰

Meanwhile, the two leaders of the group, Nazario “El Chayo” Moreno and Jesus “El Chango” Méndez, divvied up Michoacán. Méndez took control of the western half, including Apatzingán and the nearby towns of Buenavista Tomatlán and Tepalcatepec, near the border with Jalisco state. Moreno, considered the more brutal of the two, reigned in the northern and western reaches, including the state capital of Morelia and the port city of Lázaro Cárdenas.¹¹ Under Moreno's guidance La Familia also developed a spiritually-infused code of ethics demanding that members treat locals, especially woman, with respect and abstain from drug use, drinking and other vices. The group encoded these rules in a mini-bible that members toted around with them. Their religious ethos made them more difficult to infiltrate and gave them an in with potential soldiers, especially former drug addicts who they would readily recruit from half-way houses.

“These were boys that didn't use drugs, that we made sure were good in every sense of the word and that they managed things well, that they didn't go around kidnapping, that they acted properly,” La Familia's other leader Méndez would tell interrogators later. “They were very disciplined.”¹²

However, once the state was under its purview, La Familia began perpetrating the same transgressions as the previous landlords. Extortion and kidnappings became commonplace. They also expanded their portfolio, importing precursor chemicals from Asia and Europe through Lázaro Cárdenas and using them to manufacture methamphetamine in laboratories across the state.¹³ And they began openly battling federal police and troops. In 2009, the group killed 21 police across the state in just a few days following the arrest of a top Moreno lieutenant. The bloodiest attacks were in the areas that Moreno supposedly controlled, including Zitacuaro, near the border with the state of Mexico.

With more money at stake and pressure from the government and rival groups increasing, tensions also rose within the organization. During a pitched battle with government forces in December 2010, La Familia founder Moreno disappeared and the government pronounced him dead. Following Moreno's disappearance, Méndez struggled for control of La Familia with two Moreno lieutenants, Servando “La Tuta” Gomez and Enrique “El Kike” Plancarte. Seeking to make the break definitive, the latter two renamed their faction the Knights Templar, bringing with them the same rules of conduct and religious ideology developed by Moreno.

Méndez and the Knights fought one another through the winter and spring of 2011, capped by a three-day battle near Buenavista Tomatlán that killed many and drove residents into shelters in Apatzingán and other towns. Méndez lost, and many of his gunmen switched sides to join La Tuta and Plancarte. In May 2011, federal troops attacked a large group of Méndez's remaining loyalists in a rural area just across the Jalisco state line near Tepalcatepec, killing 15 suspected members of the group and arresting 36 others. The attacks on La Familia began what has been the group's steady decline from national

¹⁰ Ely Castillo, “Libre, ex-edil de Múgica, último involucrado del “michoacanazo,” *El Universal*, 13 April 2011. Accessed 21 April 2014, at <http://www.eluniversal.com.mx/estados/80095.html>

¹¹ Carlos Quiróz, “El Chango Méndez estaba rodeado por sus '12 apóstoles,” *Excelsior*, 22 June 2011. Accessed 7 April 2014, at: <http://www.excelsior.com.mx/node/746637>

¹² “Testimonio del Chango Méndez,” *La Razón*, 23 June 2011. Accessed 7 April 2014, at: <http://www.razon.com.mx/spip.php?article81497>

¹³ Althaus interview with security analyst in Michoacán, May 2013.

prominence, though it remains a powerful force in Peña Nieto's home state of Mexico, including many of the poor suburbs of Mexico City.

The Knights Templar, on the other hand, have grown stronger. Moreno, who had survived the 2010 attack and gone deeper underground, rallied and began expanding his reach into La Familia territory in the Tierra Caliente. In all, the group gained criminal dominance in two-thirds of Michoacán's townships. In some areas, their control was total: they anointed local politicians and controlled municipal budgets; they used the local police as their first line of defense and their arms purveyors; their soldiers extorted and often raped with impunity. They also allied themselves with other criminal groups such as the Gulf Cartel to expel other “foreign” groups such as the Jalisco Cartel – New Generation (Cartel de Jalisco Nueva Generacion – CJNG). By 2012, the Knights Templar control of Michoacán was nearly equivalent to La Familia at the peak of its power.

Their ascendance, however, coincided with major multi-agency task force operations aimed at hobbling Michoacán criminals' smuggling and distribution networks in the United States. Project Delirium in 2011 led to the arrest of 221 people across the US. Operation Knight Stalker, in December 2012, took down another 30. While the methamphetamine and other drugs seized by U.S. agents were quickly replaceable, the distribution networks proved harder to rebuild. Seeking new revenue, Knights Templar cells began increasing their extortion, kidnappings and outright takeover of lime and avocado orchards. Gang levies were imposed on everything from limes, avocados and cattle to the square footage of homes and businesses.¹⁴

“They took a piece of everything,” Hipólito Mora, founder of the first self-defense group of La Ruana, a town of 10,000 tucked among the irrigated lime groves about 30 miles west of Apatzingán, told a radio interviewer last May. “I got tired of it and said I had to do something for my people.”¹⁵

¹⁴ Althaus interview with García, op cit.

¹⁵ Interview by Luis Cárdenas, “Responde Hipolito Mora, No le tengo miedo a El Tio Ni a Nadie, El Tio me da Risa: Le responde al Tio,” MVS Radio Network, 13 May 2013. Accessed 7 April 2014, at: <http://narconoticias.blogspot.mx/2013/05/audioentrevistano-le-tengo-miedo-el-tio.html>

Rise of the Militias

Volunteer community policing has been a tradition in indigenous communities across Southern Mexico for centuries. Though controversial, advocates argue the practice is supported by international law and has been codified in the 1917 constitution that permits local frameworks for “the regulation and solution of internal conflicts.”¹⁶ These volunteer police forces vary in size and function, depending on the communities they serve. Their main job is to keep “internal” order, targeting petty thieves and, in the worse case scenario, rapists. In almost all areas, they are directly under the control of community elders rather than state or federal officials. In Guerrero, the state bordering Michoacán to the east, community police were given official recognition by the governor in the mid 1990s to calm unrest related to a crime wave and police repression in indigenous communities.¹⁷

The rise of hyper-violent, predatory criminal groups through the past decade changed the security equation in Mexico. These criminals usurped territory from security forces, changed the balance of political power and disrupted the marketplace. The militias that have emerged in both Michoacán and Guerrero have sought to deal with this outside threat rather than merely manage internal community matters. But when writing the history of this second group of self-defense groups, Mexicans may start in Tamaulipas. There, in November 2010, Alejo Garza, a farmer and businessman faced with the prospect of handing his land title to the Zetas, allegedly lined all of his hunting rifles and ammunition at the doorways and windows of his ranch outside of Ciudad Victoria and waited for them to come and collect.¹⁸ Garza died in the ensuing battle but killed at least four Zetas prompting homages via a ballad, a Facebook page and a twitter hashtag (#alejo).¹⁹

The first organized manifestations of this second type of vigilantes came in early 2011 when ethnic Purépecha residents of the mountainous Michoacán town of Cherán created armed militias to fight off criminals they said were illegally logging the community’s forest.²⁰ Later in 2011, the so-called “Mata Zetas” (Kill Zetas) organization emerged in Veracruz, killing scores of alleged members of the Zetas.²¹ The “Mata Zetas” appeared to have at least some connection to the Jalisco-based CJNG criminal organization.²² Pockets of vigilante groups have since formed in Guerrero. Most notably, in early 2013

¹⁶ Netzaí Sandoval, “Presunto narco buscó incriminar a excomisionado de la Policía Federal,” *Revista Contralinea*, 3 March 2013. Accessed 7 April 2014, at: <http://contralinea.info/archivo-revista/index.php/2013/03/03/la-constitucionalidad-de-las-policias-comunitarias-de-guerrero/>

¹⁷ Martha Peral Salcido and Amor Ortega Dorantes, “Seguridad e Impartición de Justicia Comunitaria Regional en la Costa Montaña de Guerrero: La Policía Comunitaria,” Centro de Investigaciones y Estudios Superiores en Antropología Social (CIESAS), 2006. Accessed 7 April 2014, at: http://www.ciesas.edu.mx/proyectos/relaju/cd_relaju/Ponencias/Mesa%20Terven-Maldonado/OrtegaDorantesAmorPeralSalcidoMartha.pdf

¹⁸ Ovmex, “Mexican Marines Reconstruct the Death of Don Alejo Garza,” *Borderland Beat*, 22 November 2010. Accessed 23 April 2014, at: <http://www.borderlandbeat.com/2010/11/mexican-marines-reconstruct-death-of.html>

¹⁹ See “Don Alejo Garza Tamez: El hombre que peleó hasta la muerte”: <https://www.facebook.com/pages/Don-Alejo-Garza-Tamez-El-hombre-que-peleo-hasta-la-muerte/104533106287075>

²⁰ Elyssa Pachico, “Vigilantes Take Over Mexican Town,” *InSight Crime*, 10 May 2011. Accessed 23 April 2014, at: <http://www.insightcrime.org/news-analysis/vigilantes-take-over-mexico-town>

²¹ Ronan Graham, “Mexico Navy Finds 32 Alleged Victims of ‘Zeta Killers’ in Veracruz,” *InSight Crime*, 7 October 2011. Accessed 23 April 2014, at: <http://www.insightcrime.org/news-briefs/mexico-navy-finds-32-alleged-victims-of-zeta-killers-in-veracruz>

²² No author, “Detenidos 20 sicarios en Veracruz, incluidos presuntos autores de Matanzas,” EFE, 7 October 2011. Accessed 23 April 2014, at:

<http://www.google.com/hostednews/epa/article/ALeqM5gdDtWLZfHXprTyJJxr4DgEsL2diA?docId=1624940&hl=es>

communities throughout the coastal mountain range outside Acapulco, Guerrero, formed militias to confront violence, extortion and other abuses perpetrated by organized criminal groups.²³

Inspired by these groups, a handful of community leaders in La Ruana, a small town near Apatzingán, decided to form their own militia in early 2013. As militia founder Hipolito Mora tells it, the leaders began slowly, calling townspeople together and explaining that they were arming themselves against the Knights Templar. At the beginning, Mora and others say, the group had only shotguns and pistols, but the townspeople reacted favorably to the proposal anyway.

“If the town hadn't shaken off its fear, I would be dead,” Mora said in a later radio interview. “I was surprised by the response.”²⁴

Other vigilante groups quickly rose in the nearby towns of Buenavista Tomatlán and Tepalcatepec. They targeted the Knights Templar political and military base, chasing off mayors and police officials they accused of abetting the criminals. They also began to effectively train their gunmen, spread their message and obtain more and better weapons. In fact, the militias were suspiciously well-armed from the start. Their members carried AK-47s, AR-15s and even .50-caliber sniper rifles, which, according to Mexican law, can be used only with a permit issued by the military. These weapons were also more commonly associated with the drug gangs. The militias defended their decision to obtain these weapons by indicating they could not fight the Knights Templar without them.

However, rumors circulated that the vigilantes were mere fronts for Knights' rivals, particularly the aforementioned Jalisco Cartel – New Generation (CJNG), who were supplying them with the weapons. As its name indicates, the CJNG hails from neighboring Jalisco state; they are, in part, remnants of an old Sinaloa Cartel wing and operate in numerous states in Central Mexico. Less than two weeks after the militias formed, soldiers arrested nearly four-dozen militiamen in La Ruana, accusing them of working for the CJNG. The troops seized four-dozen weapons, including assault rifles, machine guns, shotguns and pistols.²⁵ In reaction, the militias briefly shut down roads leading into the country seat, Buenavista Tomatlán. When the army detained four self-defense members in Buenavista that spring, militia-led townspeople briefly detained a platoon of soldiers until the men were released.

Mora, in a 2013 interview, denied links to the CJNG but fell short of a full rebuttal of the accusations. When pressed, he said the newly formed militia acquired the guns with money raised by supporters or captured them from the Knights Templar. And in response to the accusation they were tied to a drug cartel, another militia leader simply said his town's gunmen were “the people's cartel.”

“You serve God or you serve the Devil,” the leader said. “I stand with the people.”²⁶

Yet doubts about the militias' means and motives run deep among officials and in the communities where they operate. Mexican Attorney General Jesus Murillo stands among the unconvinced. In

²³ Dudley Althaus, “Can vigilante justice save Mexico?,” *GlobalPost*, 1 February 2013. Accessed 7 April 2014, at: <http://www.globalpost.com/dispatch/news/regions/americas/mexico/130201/mexico-vigilantes-law-justice-nieto-acapulco>

²⁴ Interview by Cárdenas, op cit.

²⁵ David Vicenteño, “PGR: Cártel de Jalisco arma a grupos de autodefensa,” *Excelsior*, 8 March 2013. Accessed 7 April 2014, at: <http://www.excelsior.com.mx/2013/03/08/887952>

²⁶ Dudley Althaus, “Confronting Mexico's Knights Templar cartel,” *GlobalPost*, 4 June 2013. Accessed 7 April 2014, at: <http://www.globalpost.com/dispatch/news/regions/americas/mexico/130602/coalconan-Michoacán-drug-war-knights-templar-militia>

January, he said he had “clear evidence” that the CJNG was arming the militias.²⁷ In addition to the CJNG, critics contend that militia ranks have been populated with accused former or current members of the Milenio Cartel. Mexican media, quoting leaked government documents, have reported many militia leaders have criminal records.

The leaders deny ties to drug trafficking but some admit to less than sterling pasts. With the militias growing so rapidly, controlling the quality of their members has been difficult, leaders say. They've acknowledged allowing former Knights Templar “hawks” or lookouts to join their ranks but say no leaders or active assassins have done so.

At the same time, characterizing the militias as drug gangs in waiting is also unfair. Militiamen include local farm and factory workers, shopkeepers and even municipal officials. Scores of men, women and children turn out to fill sandbags and build guard posts where militias set up checkpoints on the roads leading into towns. Many of the vigilante leaders and foot soldiers have also spent considerable time in the United States, a number of them either born or primarily raised north of the border. Mora, Jose Manuel Mireles and “Comandante Cinco,” a thirty-something businessman commanding the militiamen in Apatzingán, all lived for years in California. Both Estanislao Beltrán and Luis Antonio Torres, the militia commander and Mora rival known as “El Americano” because of his California birth, spent many years in El Paso, Texas.

Several young militia gunmen admitted to reporters in January to having been deported back to Mexico in recent years after U.S. criminal charges or convictions. Many sport tattoos touting affiliation with U.S. street gangs and brag they know how to handle weapons from their time in the gangs. The smell of marijuana hangs heavy at some of the militia checkpoints. But there is also a palpable sense of pride and excitement among many of these young gunmen. They're having fun. They are both proud to be doing something for their communities and caught up in the drama of the movement.

“Up there you might go see a movie,” a 20-year old vigilante said of his years in southern California. “Here I am living it.”²⁸

It is clear that many in the militias also believe that they are serving their communities and are willing to break the law and to commit ugly acts to do so.

“The great heroes who gave us this country really weren’t the best people,” one senior militia leader told local media.

In the weeks following their founding the militias clashed several times with the Knights Templar, leaving as many as 30 dead on both sides. The initial bloodletting taught the militias some early tactical lessons, increased morale and raised confidence. Fighting eased briefly beginning in May 2013, when Peña Nieto sent 6,000 troops and federal police into the Tierra Caliente. The federal forces guarded the main highways, including the toll highway connecting the capital of Morelia to the port of Lázaro Cárdenas. The lull gave the militias time and space to expand further into the Tierra Caliente and the nearby sierra, the new incursions spearheaded by gunmen from Buenavista, La Ruana and Tepalcatepec.

²⁷ Rosa Santana, “Cártel de Jalisco armó a autodefensas: Murillo Karam,” *Proceso*, 30 January 2014. Accessed 7 April 2014, at: <http://www.proceso.com.mx/?p=363688>

²⁸ Althaus interview with militia, January 2014.

Knights Templar gunmen struck back in late July, opening fire on locals protesting in favor of the self-defense groups in Los Reyes, a town north of Apatzingán, killing five. Other Knights Templar cells attacked federal police patrols and offices across the state. Several dozen were killed, most of them Knights Templar members, according to the government. Still, the militia movement continued spreading to new municipalities.

Self-defense leaders say they only move into a new community after being invited by residents who have formed their own militia groups. The movement is overseen by a board, comprised of militia bosses from each of the communities, that reaches decisions by vote, leaders say. For instance, townspeople in Gambara, a village of poor farm workers near Apatzingán, opted to join the movement in February after militiamen called a meeting and explained the benefits to them. The Knights had not really bothered people in what is a poor town, where many work in the orchards and fields, Gambara's top elected official said. But residents hoped that by joining the self-defense forces they could be protected from any gangster backlash. A day after the vote, a dozen Gambara teenagers were manning checkpoints on the edge of town, assault rifles kept out of sight but within easy reach behind the sandbags.²⁹

“People just want to be able to work without getting bothered so much,” said Aaron Sanchez, an official in Nueva Italia, a large market town flanked by both Apatzingán and Gambara that militiamen captured in mid-January. “We’ve lived eight or nine years suffering [at the hands of] these people. They took away your neighbor, your cousin, your friends, who never came back. The government hasn’t been able to deal with the situation so we as a people have had to.”³⁰

By this spring, the militias had taken control of 32 municipalities throughout western Michoacán and, as this went to press, they had identified several more for “liberation.” The expansion, however, may run into problems, as the government retools its own response to the vigilantes.

²⁹ Althaus interviews, February 2014.

³⁰ Althaus interview, January 2014.

The Mexican Government's Response: Bait and Switch

The Peña Nieto government scrambled and improvised its way through the first phase of this self-defense phenomenon but seemed to gain its footing as time passed. After first condemning the militias as criminals, the government all but ignored them through most of 2013, downplaying their advances and Michoacán's insecurity. That changed early this year as vigilantes seized towns and villages surrounding the Knights Templar bastion of Apatzingán, vowing to claim it as well. Fearing a bloodbath, the government dispatched thousands of troops and federal police to the Tierra Caliente.

Once engaged, Peña Nieto's political operatives seem to have adeptly finessed the militia leaders, using many of the bait-and-switch strategies by which the president's Institutional Revolutionary Party, or PRI, has governed Mexico for most of the past century. Peña Nieto in mid-January named a trusted associate, former Mexico State Attorney General Alfredo Castillo, as his special envoy to Michoacán. Just 38 years old, Castillo has shouldered aside Michoacán Governor Fausto Vallejo (who had appeared powerless to stop the rising violence in the state) from any meaningful role, bringing in several dozen other federal officials who effectively took control of the state police, prosecutor's office and other agencies.

Castillo then dangled the bait, cutting a deal with militia leaders that created a legal framework for the groups in return for their cooperation with federal authorities. The fact that the framework was more half-measure than codified law mattered little. It was the *de facto* recognition that was important as it served to mollify what had become a spirited collective shout from the hilltops for help from the government. The security agreement forged by Castillo required militia leaders to register themselves and their weapons with federal authorities. And it outlined a procedure for them to be incorporated either into municipal police forces or temporary "rural defense corps" under the control of the army. Rural defense corps were militias first formed to control banditry in the 19th Century and played a role in defending cooperative farm communities following the Mexican Revolution. Formally regulated by the army, the corps all but disappeared.³¹

The government then announced a \$3.4 billion spending plan in Michoacán aimed at creating jobs, improving education, building public works and public housing, bolstering household budgets, financing social development and building housing and public works projects.³² Within days militia leaders were showing reporters projects in their communities where the windfall could be directed.

Deputizing the militias and giving them a share of the public monies was a recognition of reality on the ground. Local and state government had long since lost credibility. The federal government could not, without creating a severe backlash, reverse the militia process. Despite their disparate backgrounds and opaque origins, the militias had inspired hope among many residents that the Knights Templar stranglehold on their communities could be broken. More importantly, in the year since they had emerged, the militias had done more to push back against organized crime than governments at every level had managed since La Familia had formed in the mid-2000s. The depth of the militias' popularity

³¹ Francisco Medina, "La negra historia de la policía rural," *Al Momento Noticias*, 29 January 2014. Accessed 7 April 2014, at: <http://www.almomento.mx/la-negra-historia-de-la-policia-rural/>

³² "Peña Nieto anuncia inversión de 3.400 millones de dólares para Michoacán," CNN/Mexico 4 February 2014. Accessed 7 April 2014, at: <http://cnnespanol.cnn.com/2014/02/04/pena-nieto-anuncia-inversion-de-3-400-millones-de-dolares-para-reconstruir-michoacan/>

was evident at their one-year anniversary celebrations in late February, when thousands of townspeople turned out to cheer them in La Ruana, Tepalcatepec and other towns.³³

“The government has never wanted to recognize that we could do the job that it never wanted to do,” Mireles, the militia founder and leader, told one journalist later.³⁴

For a time, the government also seemingly ignored the dark origins and criminal intentions of these groups and embraced the positive outcomes of their collective actions. Castillo, for instance, met privately with Juan Jose Farias, alias “El Abuelo,” an alleged member of the Milenio Cartel and the brother of a former Tepalcatepec mayor who was among the officials jailed in the Michoacanzao. Farias is now a leader of that town's militia.

Vigilantes and federal forces also jointly seized some new towns together, entering in tandem or going in close behind one another. They manned highway checkpoints in unison, or within yards of one another. The government turned a blind eye to obvious transgressions: soldiers and police pretended not to notice the smell of marijuana that sometimes hovers above the sandbagged positions manned by the vigilantes; the militiamen, aware their weapons were technically illegal, started keeping them out of sight, and the government did not ask to see permits.

The security work took on a new formality and efficiency arguably unprecedented in the time since Calderón sent troops into Michoacán in 2006. Intelligence from the militias led to quick arrests or defections by Knights Templar foot soldiers, which led to a cascading amount of more intelligence. Those detained by the civilian gunmen at checkpoints were mostly turned over to federal police. In the end, working together, the vigilantes and authorities arrested hundreds of suspected Knights Templar and killed several others.

The high point of this relationship came on March 9, when authorities killed Nazario Moreno, the founder and ideologue of the Knights, who many thought was dead. By the end of March, Marines had also killed Enrique Plancarte, one of Moreno's two top operatives, and had the other, “La Tuta” Gomez, on the run. Just a few weeks later, the federal government took another bold step by arresting Jesús Reyna, Michoacán's interior minister, accusing him of working with the Knights Templar.³⁵

However, after this successful period of working together, the government took the opportunity to make the switch. Perhaps feeling it now had the upper hand on the depleted Knights Templar or perhaps sensing that the self-defense groups were getting out of control, security forces have begun targeting the militias' leadership. Just a few days after Moreno was killed, authorities arrested militia leader Hipolito Mora accusing him of involvement in the murder of a rival in La Ruana. This came after Mora's rivals, lead by El Americano, had attacked Mora's home base, accusing him of the murder.

Mora's arrest has further divided the militia movement and driven a wedge between it and federal officials. Michoacán has since devolved into a low intensity four-front battle: militias fighting militias; militias fighting DTOs; militias fighting the federal security forces; federal security forces versus DTOs. There are more potential fighting forces that have been neutralized, such as the local municipal

³³ See video, “La Ruana Primer Aniversario Libres de Crimen,” accessed on YouTube, 7 April 2014, at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Kbj1bUHSG-0>

³⁴ Zayin Daleth Villevicencio interview with Mireles, *RevolucionTresPuntoCero*, 19 March 2014. Accessed 7 April 2014, at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RWcnjUhdITo>

³⁵ “Arraiga la PGR a Jesús Reyna por posibles vínculos con el narco,” *Proceso*, 5 April 2014. Accessed 7 April 2014, at: <http://www.proceso.com.mx/?p=368939>

police, which may also enter the fray. The resulting chaos has terrifying implications that the government, and the Mexican populace, are only now beginning to comprehend.

The fighting also made it clear that any real incorporation of the militias into the police or rural defense corps is unlikely to happen. The government has not been able to keep pace with its own purge of police forces, much less to forge a new security force with the vigilantes. With regards to the Michoacán development projects, it was later revealed that much of the announced spending had already been budgeted. By early April, Castillo all but confirmed the sidelining of the militias.

“I am the first to recognize the bravery of the people who, in a genuine way, said ‘enough!’ and demanded the presence of the government,” he told a radio station. “[But] the original argument [of the self-defense] groups in some places is no longer valid...Put simply, the situation has evolved.”³⁶

Castillo called for the militias need to disarm and demobilize. Yet, as an arbitrary deadline he set approached, the federal government continued to play it both ways. In some areas, the militiamen remain armed and deployed, and they continued to work with government security forces. In late April militias backed by federal forces moved into three towns – Huetamo, Arteaga and Tumbiscatío – that had remained under the control of the Knights Templar. Then, after brief fighting between militiamen and supposed Knights Templar gunmen in Huetamo, near the Guerrero state line, federal forces arrested nearly four dozen men official said were criminals posing as vigilantes.³⁷

Recent events, especially Mora's arrest, have deeply embittered many of the vigilantes, firming their resolve. While militia leaders talk about continuing to cooperate with federal officials, they also make it clear they are tiring of the Peña Nieto administration's duplicitous nature.

“If the government wants war, war it will have,” Mireles told *Proceso* magazine a few days after Mora's arrest. “No one messes with Michoacán. Not even the damned government.”³⁸

The situation remains in flux, and the militias say they are showing no near-term intentions of giving up their weapons or their fight.

“There's no going back,” Mireles explained to a Mexican journalist. “We have to continue.”³⁹

³⁶ Denise Maerker interview with Castillo, *Radio Formula*, 1 April 2014. Accessed 7 April 2014, at: <http://www.radioformula.com.mx/notas.asp?Idn=401478&idFC=2014>

³⁷ No author, “Suman 46 falsos autodefensas detenidos en Huetamo,” *El Universal*, 22 April 2014. Accessed 23 April 2014, at: <http://www.eluniversal.com.mx/estados/2014/huetamo-autodefensas-michoacan-detenidos-1005151.html>

³⁸ Castellanos, op cit.

³⁹ Daleth Villevicencio, op cit.

Analysis: A Myopic Approach

The desperation in Michoacán, as in many parts of Mexico, with regards to organized crime has led to a myopic view of this issue. In the short term, it produced, through the militias at least, a temporary solution to the immediate problem: the Knights Templar. In the medium to long term, however, it may have opened up space for another set of criminal actors and complicated the government's job of establishing rule of law in Michoacán.

Proponents of the self-defense groups argue there was no alternative for them. They may be right. As noted, the Knights Templar controlled political representatives and municipal budgets. They extorted and kidnapped at will, employed the police to their own ends. In some places, they may have been committing mass rapes and other horrendous crimes such as organ trafficking. The general population had been, for all intents and purposes, abandoned by local, state and federal authorities. The response of militia groups was historic. Together, they overcame the fear, armed themselves and began to take action against a large, sophisticated criminal organization that had terrorized them for years. Once the federal government sent troops and federal police to the area, this process accelerated. In relatively short order, the Knights Templar organization has been beheaded, its core shattered.

However, the rush to celebrate the militias' advances obscures a number of important issues that neither officials nor the groups' champions have fully faced. Top of the list is the critical question of mandate. While the militias unified in their desire to rid their communities of kidnapping and extortion – and on the immediate task of ridding themselves of the Knights Templar – that is as far as they have gotten in terms of strategy. There is no sense of jurisdiction, job description or overall goals. Nor is there consensus on how the militias should interact with authorities. To be sure, some militias still see the government, especially local and state officials, as the central problem. In some cases, they draw a distinction between local and federal authorities, further complicating matters.

There is also little tradition anchoring this militia surge. Volunteer community police in indigenous communities were developed over many years and have hierarchy and structure that imposes internal discipline and a developed system of punishment for criminals. The anti-Knights Templar militias emerged in primarily non-indigenous communities, coming together quickly and haphazardly. Their success reflects many things: popular support, official backing, good weaponry, courage and gumption are among them; but organization, coherence and viable centralized command are not.

Questions also remain about the motivations of the militias' participants. There are at least four distinct militia models in Michoacán. The first is of the type that appeared in Cherán – indigenous communities who have a longer history and experience creating and maintaining organized vigilante groups. The second comes from a poor rural and semi-urban background, which have organized around protecting their small business and family interests. The third model is backed by larger, industrial-sized interests. The fourth is backed by other criminal groups. There are probably mixtures of all these groups as well working together, at least temporarily.

Each of the groups have different motivations, which may not be evident while they confront a common enemy. However, once that enemy is vanquished, their differing agendas will inevitably rise to the fore and, in some cases, already have. These agendas will inevitably garner legitimate political support, but these groups also wield weapons, giving them an unfair advantage in what is supposed to be a democratic arena ruled by ballots, not bullets.

What's more, few if any of the militias seem interested in facing up to one of the central problems plaguing Michoacán and Mexico: illegal drug trafficking. The Knights Templar, like La Familia Michoacana before it, rose to national prominence primarily via the production and sale of crystal methamphetamine and other illegal drugs. However, militia leaders show little interest in confronting the problem. In fact, they seem to separate it from their own situation, naively calling it "the federal government's job."

"We aren't going to go looking for laboratories because that's not our responsibility. We don't want there to be kidnappings, disappearances, extortion," Estanislao Beltrán, a lime grower known as "Papa Pitúfo" and frequent militia spokesman, said in February. "We aren't going to decide what each citizen does, everyone is free to do what they wish, what suits them."

"There are entire towns that in one way or the other belonged to organized crime," Beltrán said, arguing the impossibility of ending the local drug industry. "As self-defense forces are we going to chase them off, kill them or lock them up?"⁴⁰

Given this position, the laissez faire attitude towards other criminal organizations is not surprising. To a certain degree, Michoacán's own complicated, long-term relationship with criminal groups is also something that is largely ignored in this story. The state's agricultural booms and busts are often smoothed over by criminal proceeds, which finance transport companies, construction projects and local festivals, among other economic and social schemes. The convergence of politics and crime is as much a result of the criminals' rise in capital gains as it is a result of their wielding weapons.

The intersection of the licit and the illicit is at the center of what makes Michoacán, and much of Mexico, work. According to the government, nearly 35 percent of Michoacán's employed are working in the "informal" economy.⁴¹ In addition, the state's migration agency says three million Michoacán natives are living in the United States, many of them illegally.⁴² About a million of them live in Southern California alone.⁴³ The Diaspora provides a ready distribution network for Michoacán's drug gangs and more recently its militias. But it also has placed the state among Mexico's most important recipients of remittances. In sum, there are degrees of illegal, making the job of separating good guys from bad guys that much more difficult. Add to the equation high-powered weapons, competing agendas, and political competition, and the challenge of keeping the peace begins to come into focus.

Despite the bleak picture, the situation is still not as bad yet as other countries where militia and paramilitary groups have appeared. As to be expected, since nearly the time the first self-defense groups emerged in Michoacán in 2013, there have been apt comparisons between the militias in Mexico and those in Colombia. For starters, their origins, makeup and politics are similar. Their financial backers are varied and include criminal groups. Their relationship with the government has evolved in a way that resembles that of Colombia, although the military in Colombia took a much more active role in organizing the first groups. The context in which these groups emerged is also similar. While the Knights Templar are not a guerrilla group per se, they are an ideological organization that

⁴⁰ Althaus interview, February 2014.

⁴¹ Cambio de Michoacán, "En Michoacán suman 636 mil personas en la economía informal," 15 May 2012. Accessed 2 April 2014 at: <http://www.cambiodemichoacan.com.mx/vernota.php?id=174292>

⁴² "Hay 3 millones de michoacanos en EU," *Periódico AM*, 11 July 2013. Accessed 7 April 2014, at: <http://www.am.com.mx/leon/local/hay-3-millones-de-Michoacanos-en-eu-30969.html>

⁴³ Hector Becerra, "To fight the cartel, Mexican emigrants return to their hometowns," *Los Angeles Times*, 25 January 2014. Accessed 7 April 2014, at: <http://www.latimes.com/local/la-me-michoacan-la-20140126,0,6737335.story#ixzz2yFoDcG8J>

sees itself as the protectors of the communities in their areas of influence. They have created a strict hierarchy and have implemented discipline similar to that of the insurgents in Colombia. And they draw from some of the same revenue streams, namely kidnapping and extortion, which have turned the same communities they claim to protect against them.

Analytical Framework – “Self-Defense” Groups in Mexico and Colombia

	Colombia	Mexico
Makeup/support/financing	Small and large landowners; large agri-business; large business; drug traffickers who were also large landowners	Small and large rural landowners; small and large businessmen; rival drug traffickers
Motivations/Context	Guerrillas kidnapping and extorting	Criminal group extorting and kidnapping
Financing	Mix of small and large business interests; criminal interests	Mix of small and large business interests; criminal interests
Arms	Assault weapons; grenades; RPGs	Assault weapons
Recruits	Poor, mostly rural males	Poor, mostly rural males
Training	Military training and counterinsurgency	Minimal training
Relationship with State	Proxy army	Parallel army; intelligence

However, while this is a good starting point in terms of creating an analytical structure to understand these groups, it does not tell us what the future holds. The militias do not yet have the organization, discipline, reach and political wherewithal of the Colombian paramilitaries. Nor do most of them have access or desire to control the means of production and distribution of cocaine. They are decidedly less organized and not yet politically savvy enough to transfer their military victories into municipal or national power. In addition, while they have coalesced around a single issue, they have shown no sign of creating a unified command structure that could spread the model and the message to other parts of the country.

In the end, the militias remain a nascent, relatively small facsimile of what Colombia’s paramilitaries became. They have shown little cohesiveness and seem to have lost their way following the victories against their common enemy. The result of this apparent fragmentation is not yet clear, but the dangers of opening space to violent non-state actors, even those with the best of intentions, is all too evident.

Conclusion: Now What?

The self-defense forces have illuminated numerous important aspects about Mexico, some of which were self-evident and some of which were not. Among the self-evident aspects was the fact that the State had abandoned many Mexican citizens. This is most apparent at the local level where police and local government officials are either co-opted or too afraid to challenge the authority of powerful criminal groups like the Knights Templar.

The Mexican government is in the process of trying to change this equation, but progress is slow and, for some, relief has not come fast enough. The purging and restocking of local police has been uneven at best. Judicial reform has sputtered along. And efforts to hold municipal authorities accountable are out of touch with the reality on the ground that these authorities have little recourse when faced with well-armed criminal groups.

What was surprising was the depth of frustration and the lengths to which civilians were ready to go in order to deal with these issues on their own. While there was a history of self-defense organizations, the threats they had faced were far smaller in nature. The speed with which these new organizations coalesced, even under extremely dangerous circumstances, was startling. There were certainly outside forces involved in that initial push to organize, but their ability to limit casualties on their own side while taking bold actions against the Knights Templar proved crucial in those initial stages and seemed to accelerate the growth of these groups.

It was also not clear that an alliance of armed community members and the government could deal directly with a large, seemingly entrenched criminal organization. However, in just a few months, the alliance has proved to be a powerful means of quickly undoing a large criminal group. In the end, it has both decapitated the Knights Templar and depleted its forces via arrests and desertions.

Now comes the hard part: figuring what to do with the self-defense groups. There are at least three options. The first one is to delegitimize and disarm the groups. The government appears to be moving in this direction. Special Envoy Castillo's statement seems to confirm the federal government, at least, believes the Michoacán experiment has run its course. However, there is a risk of backlash that could quickly devolve into violent clashes, and militia leaders have already hinted at this prospect. What's more, there is the possibility that the Knights Templar could return, or their rivals from the CJNG could fill the void left by the Knights Templar's departure. In order to remove the militias from the equation, the federal government will have to show it can maintain low levels of violence, kidnapping and extortion. But as mentioned earlier, in six years of governing, the Calderón administration found that task impossible. And statistics from the first three months of 2014, show homicides up 55 percent compared to the first three months of 2013.⁴⁴

The second option the government has is to try to formally integrate the self-defense organizations into their security strategy. This has already begun, but the current framework is incomplete. A new framework would have to go through Congress and have to include creating clearer rules for toting guns, registering their members, defining jurisdiction, establishing their role, creating regular channels of communication and other means to keep a watchful eye on the vigilantes. The positive results of the militia's participation in security matters cannot be ignored, nor can their potential for becoming

⁴⁴ Omar Sánchez de Tagle, "Aumentan homicidios en Michoacán, pese a comisión," *Animal Político*, 23 April 2014. Accessed 23 April 2014, at: <http://www.animalpolitico.com/2014/04/pese-comision-de-seguridad-aumentan-55-homicidios-en-michoacan/#axzz2zjBKveV5>

exactly what they say they are fighting. However, this option would be a political gamble that the Peña administration does not appear willing to make just yet.

The third option the government has is to react to the militias individually rather than collectively. This may be the most likely option, particularly if the first option leads to a violent backlash. To date, the government has mostly employed this tactic, negotiating and incorporating some militias – regardless of origin – and shunning, and even prosecuting others. This position has served the government so far. When it needs to, it can distance itself from the groups. However, when the militias serve their interests, they can work together, as they have to clear areas of the Knights Templar. The ambiguity also gives the government solid political leverage with both the militias and those maneuvering around them. The message is clear: behave and get security force and possibly public monies; cross the government and receive no support and possibly criminal charges.

What position the government takes is crucial. There are other groups in other regions that are watching closely, possibly preparing their own militia movements. And how the government handles Michoacán may set the tone for what happens in the rest of the country, particularly embattled states such as Tamaulipas and Guerrero.

Regardless of how it deals with the militias, the government has to rebuild the social contract. The contract goes beyond security matters. With the agreement reached by Castillo, the government has said it is going to improve education, job opportunities and social spending. Such promises are frequently made in Mexico and just as frequently prove short-lived. The need for these economic and social programs persists, especially in rural areas from which the Knights Templar and militias have drawn recruits. Only with sustained investment in growth and opportunity will the government break the spell of the criminal lifestyle in the Tierra Caliente where, as one grade school principal recently explained, even young children want to be gangsters when they get older.⁴⁵

In sum, the militia movement was a cry for help from an abandoned land, and the startling results offer positive and negative lessons for the future. On the positive side is the obvious fact that the Knights Templar are not the threat they were just a year ago. Communities and government officials have also learned that combining their forces is far more effective than working on their own. On the negative side, the militias represent a work in progress, something that could morph into another criminal actor, subverting security and democracy alike; and the government has given mixed signals about how it will control this potential menace. To date, this tension has not led to any major confrontations, and the government appears to have placated enough Michoacán self-defense groups to keep order. However, it is still early in this post-Knights Templar period.

⁴⁵ Althaus interview, February 2014.

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