Military or Municipalities: Rethinking the Strategy for Combating Criminal Governance in Mexico

In the early hours of Sunday, February 22, 2026, the Mexican government, aided by United States intelligence, conducted an operation targeting Nemesio Oseguera Cervantes, known as El Mencho, the most-wanted cartel boss in Mexico. The operation ultimately killed Cervantes, and in the immediate aftermath of his death, violence erupted in several states across the nation, with armed groups setting roadblocks and burning vehicles (Livni 2026). The reported leader of one of the most notorious Mexican criminal groups, the Jalisco New Generation Cartel, was dead, but violence still waged across Mexico and the vast criminal network beneath him remained.

Under the leadership of President Sheinbaum, Mexico has launched an aggressive campaign against criminal organizations, focusing on the capture of high-level targets and the dismantling of their logistics, often with military operations (Coste 2025). This strategy of military dominance and the deployment of a federally centered security response is not sustainable for long-term, systemic changes, as it categorizes criminal organizations as mere enterprises and ignores their profound political effects in the regions in which they operate. Implementing a less militarized, bottom-up restoration of municipal authority will be crucial for the long-term objective of diminishing the control of criminal networks and the violence they inflict in Mexico.

Beginning predominantly in the 1980s, criminal groups in Mexico became significantly more organized by forming complex networks and allocating areas of control. This expansion deepened the influence of criminal organizations whose dominance systematically displaced formal state authority through their regulation of territory, markets, individual behavior, and systems of justice (Rojas 2026). These powerful functions of criminal networks have effectively positioned them to have significant political effects, with estimates from the U.S. military in May 2024 asserting that cartels controlled about 1/3 of Mexico's territory (Center for Preventive Action 2026). Notably, the intent of criminal organizations behind efforts to assert control has not been to overtly seek regime change or a full overthrow of the formal state government, but merely to disrupt it (Rojas 2026). The fight against criminal groups in Mexico has been ongoing and continues to expand under different executive administrations. In the more recent years of

Mexico's war on criminal organizations, President Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO), who led Mexico from 2018 to 2024, campaigned on the promise of "abrazos, no balazos" ("hugs, not bullets"), pledging a less securitized approach to the war (Belloube 2025). AMLO's approach avoided major, direct confrontations, but at the same time, the administration instituted a largely militarized and federally centered security structure.

The current president of Mexico, Claudia Sheinbaum, and her administration inherited AMLO's system of militarized security in 2024 and have continued to improve upon it without disturbing its fundamental framework. Contrary to her predecessor, President Sheinbaum has moved public security higher up on the national agenda and emphasized strategic actions against violent groups with "the prosecution and capture of logistical leaders and the 'violence generators' of criminal organizations" (Coste 2025). This Kingpin strategy eliminates high-profile leaders but creates power vacuums within an already extensive scene of criminal networks. These open positions are continuously refilled, and the organizations repositioned, keeping criminal groups in control and further eroding formal governance. Furthermore, the military personnel heading security efforts often lack the training and knowledge required "to work closely with community members or to grasp the nuances of civilian law enforcement" (International Crisis Group 2023). Combating criminal networks from the top down is not effective for disrupting the activity of these groups that are deeply embedded within local communities and political structures. While reliance on the military for police handling and function may impose fast and active confrontation, this system of military dominance will not provide results that diminish the political effects of Mexico's criminal organizations in the long term.

To effectively dismantle criminal organizations and remove the criminal governance present in several regions across Mexico, a strategic pivot from the top-down militarization model towards a bottom-up restoration of municipal authority is required. This can be achieved by enhancing the role of local institutions, deepening collaboration among state governments, municipal governments, and local security forces to utilize the knowledge and commitment of existing local authorities (International Crisis Group 2023). Although federal backing for municipal authority is currently a weaker measure for challenging criminal groups, it is a preliminary step in improving the authority of local government. The 2,469 municipalities in Mexico individually possess a wide range of nuances and circumstances with local and regional

variations in crime (International Crisis Group 2023). This makes local authorities best suited to manage the violence and criminal governance in their area, if they are well equipped. To ensure local institutions maintain the necessary resources, besides symbolic support, greater financial backing from the federal government is necessary to enhance the effectiveness of local law enforcement agencies and government institutions. To illustrate this imbalance, "military expenditures ballooned to record levels in 2024 as the government doubled down on a failed militarized response to contain organized crime," while at the same time expenditure on civilian law enforcement over the last decade fell by 12% (Woolston 2025). By redistributing these military funds directly to municipal institutions and security forces, these institutions could be better equipped to challenge criminal groups within their regions. The entrenched nature and political effects of these criminal organizations demand a strategic response that transitions away from militarization and instead prioritizes investment into municipal governance and local security forces.

Supporters of Mexico's militarized security strategy point towards corruption within several municipalities as justification for a federalized, top-down approach to handling criminal organizations. The issue of corruption within municipalities must be acknowledged, as it is one of the primary reasons why local governments currently rank among Mexico's most discredited institutions (International Crisis Group 2023). Equally important is recognizing that this corruption is a symptom of the federal government's abandonment of local government. The federal government has largly ignored the notion of working with municipal-level institutions thus far, creating a vacuum where "corruption becomes an access problem exploitable by external actors seeking leverage" (Rojas 2026). Therefore, real investment in local government through both symbolic and financial means can reduce the risk of corruption, as it provides local authorities with the legitimate resources required to reject outside, illicit influence. Additionally, corruption can be combated through the implementation of stronger oversight and the use of anti-corruption agencies and systems (International Crisis Group 2023). Through these countermeasures and continued investment in municipal institutions, the corruption of local officials would be minimized. Thus, corruption in municipal governments is not a valid assertion to advocate for the continuation of the current militarized system for fighting criminal organizations.

With the recent death of El Mencho through the combined efforts of Mexican and United States forces, it is important to revisit the effectiveness of the current security strategy to combat criminal organizations in Mexico. Increased interest from the United States government in international intervention, particularly in Latin America, has continued to place foreign pressure and influence on Mexico's handling of national security. National and foreign policy aimed at addressing the threat posed by criminal groups in Mexico should reflect a commitment to demilitarized security and a shift from a federally centered approach to a decentralized model designed to empower local institutions. Criminal networks in Mexico operate as political regulators of the territory they occupy, rather than purely illicit enterprises, making an exclusively militarized security approach fundamentally ill-suited for addressing what is, at its core, an absence of effective civil governance. Recognizing the political effects of these groups and reclaiming governance through municipal authority are essential to instilling systemic and enduring change. An end to Mexico's war on criminal organizations is long overdue, yet the path towards greater stability does not lie in further militarization, but in establishing strong local authority within each Mexican city, town, village, and community.

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