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Chapter 2
Drug Related Violence in Mexico: Its Historical Dimension

In trying to describe the history of drug related violence, it is important to bear in mind that like the Mexican movie Amores Perros, a few lines evolve separately but intertwine at the same time. There is the story of drugs and its acceptance in society. Positions have been alternating from tolerance towards religious, professional and recreational drug use, to diabolization and prohibition resulting in criminalization and persecution for consumers as well as producers. Others take a moderate position, advocating limited and conditional legalization for certain drugs. There is the story of drug production itself, how it evolved from a crop cultivated by peasants for a supplementary income to the mega billion-dollar industry it is now and how international, sophisticated crime syndicates run it. The most powerful cartels have all the same roots in Sinaloa and Guadalajara, although in the last decades new players from other parts of Mexico challenged the traditional crime groups and were able to conquer important positions.

One of the most important historical elements, however, is how the narco-industry coexisted with, or in the words of Luis Astorga, was ‘mediated’ by the official authorities. The position of the last, as we shall see, could be considered highly ambivalent, in the words of Watt and Zepeda, actually schizophrenic, ranging from combating, controlling and condoning to active cooperating and participating. Mexican history shows extreme examples of blatant corruption and involvement in organized crime at the highest government levels. For some, notably investigative journalist Anabel Hernández, there is no distinction between legitimate authorities and criminal mafia. In this light it is important to see how the changing of the political landscape, the end of a nearly 70-year rule of the PRI (Partido Revolucionario Institucional) that was replaced by the PAN (Partido Acción Nacional) in 2000 shook up the drug trade that had developed over decades a close symbiotic relationship with those in political power and law enforcement.

Related with this is the transformation of strategy used by narco-traffickers. It changed from a quiet, behind the scenes cooperation with the authorities that were still respected and feared, to a rebellious stand of extreme violence and direct confrontation and challenge -- what some observers call an insurgency. The history of the drug violence is also the history of escalation, a factual inventory of massacres, bloodbaths, examples of extreme violence where one act of extreme cruelty was soon outdone by another even more perverse act. It is the story how rather simple business operations evolved into complex, hyper-capitalist corporations, each with its own territory and business model and each being engaged in fierce competition with the others.
It is also the story how a peaceful co-existence of narco-business with authorities evolved in a violent war fought at five, six levels at the same time. It is also the story of the different battlegrounds. Ciudad Juárez, Nuevo Laredo, Culiacán and many more cities have been for a period flash points and epicenters of the drug war until the smoke cleared up and the fight moved elsewhere.

A recurring theme is the tension between local players and the federal authorities. In some instances, while local authorities were deemed too corrupt, federal authorities intervened, mostly by sending the army or federal police. In most instances, they were received with a hostile attitude from the local people and were seen as an outside, occupying power. Interesting is to see the role from the perspective of journalists, where we can see independent critical investigative journalists (who often become victims of the violence themselves) as well as reporters that are on the payroll or in the grip of the narco-mafia. Lastly, it is impossible to see the problem of drug trafficking without looking at the relation between Mexico and the United States. These countries have an interesting, symbiotic relationship that is also highly ambivalent. Mexicans view their powerful neighbor with a mix of hostility and admiration. The United States are equally part of the problem as of the solution. Not only is the United States the biggest consumer of drugs, but also supplier of arms to the DTOs and home to many financial institutions that launder the illicit gains of the drug business. The War on Drugs was initiated by the United States and the US continues to set the agenda on the global drug war. In some instances, the Mexican government used the War on Drugs as a pretext to suppress opposition movements. Most scholars agree that the war on drugs has failed. US authorities have exerted pressure on the Mexican government to attack the drug problem, but there have also been embarrassing examples where the Mexican authorities refused to intervene in clear-cut examples of narco-related crime and blatant corruption.

The studies and research of Luis Astorga describing the early years are unique and have been quoted by most Mexican scholars as well. For the more contemporary history, the work of scholars such as George Grayson, Jorge Balderas, Carlos Antonio Flores, Anabel Hernández, Peter Watt and Roberto Zepeda are indispensable, as well as journalists such as Ioan Grillo and Charles Bowden, the last two having an interesting outsider’s perspective on the Mexico’s drug history.
2.1 From leisure farming to serious business: The early years

2.1.1 The emergence of drug cultivation and narco-trafficking

The first recorded use of mind-altering substances goes back thousands of years with the mention of the special powers of opium on clay tablets in Mesopotamia, 3400 BC. As for coca leaves, remains were found in settlements in Northern Peru that date back as far as 2500 BC. Shamans in the Americas knew hallucinogenic properties of mushrooms and cacti in the pre-Colombian era. 16th century conquistadors confronted with widespread coca use in Andean cultures considered it, according to Watt and Zepeda, another ‘heathen custom of the savages’ (2012: 11). However, the Spaniards recognized the commercial potential of the coca plant and soon controlled the coca leaf market in the Andes. Cultivation and consumption was mainly left to indigenous communities, but the Spanish raised taxes on the trade and even accepted coca leaves as payment. It is in this period that ambivalent discourses, questionable moral stances and conflicting interests start to emerge that continues to surround the drug world to this day.

Large-scale drug trafficking started in the 19th century when the British East Indian Company and other British businesspeople started to export in Indian opium29 to China. In this sense the British East Indian Company was the first internationally operating drug cartel. According to Harari, millions of Chinese people became addicted, ‘debilitating the country both economically and socially’ (Harari, 2015:325). The Qing dynasty issued in 1810 a decree banning opium (Grillo, 2011: 25) and in the late 1830s China completely outlawed the opium trade, one of the first acts of prohibition in history. The British were defiant and ignored the ban, resulting in seizure and destruction of the contraband by the Chinese government. The British drug trafficking industry, including many members of parliament who had themselves stakes in the trade, put pressure on their government to act. Britain declared war in 1840 in the ‘name of free trade’. It was actually the first drug war in history, and not one waged by a criminal underworld against state authorities, but between one legitimate government against another. The British won due to their overwhelming firepower. Grillo calls the Royal Navy ‘the first band of violent cartel enforcers’ (2011: 25). According to Andreas, ‘no contemporary transnational criminal organization has come remotely close to matching the power, influence, and global reach of the opium smuggling British East India Company’. (Andreas, 2011: 413)

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29 Large scale opium production in India had already started in the 18th century.
In the ensuing peace treaty, China agreed to lift all restrictions on the British opium trade and was forced to concede control of Hong Kong as compensation for damages suffered by the British. Hong Kong became an operational base for the opium trade. Around the late 19th century, about forty million Chinese, or a tenth of the population, had become opium addicts (Harari, 2015:326).

Ironically, the current explosion in drug production, trafficking, corruption and violence in Mexico has its roots with the Chinese people that in the first place had become addicted through British trafficking. According to Watt and Zepeda (2012: 15), Chinese immigrants, came in the late 1800s in great numbers as laborers to work on the North American and Mexican railroad system. They settled in places along the Pacific Coast of the Americas and brought with them not only their taste for opium, but also the tools and knowhow to cultivate poppies. Grayson points at the 1880 agreement between the US and the Chinese government, in which bilateral traffic in opium was prohibited, creating a domestic demand. Northern Mexico, including Sonora, Chihuahua, and especially Sinaloa, had the ideal climate and the perfect soil. In the late 1800s, opium cultivation started on a very small scale and with mostly the Chinese involved in production and trafficking.

Sinaloa, currently home base of the powerful Sinaloa cartel, became the cradle of the Mexican drug culture due to a combination of factors. Already in the 1800s, the state of Sinaloa had a relatively well-developed infrastructure and economy, compared with other parts of Mexico. Geographically, the state was an ideal place for legal as well as illegal activities. The long pacific coastline is perfect for smuggling and trafficking. Inland are the remote Sierra Madre Mountains, a rugged mountain range that runs nearly 1000 miles north up to the United States border where the range eventually becomes the Rocky Mountains. The Sierra Madre is one of the most inaccessible areas on earth, making it an ideal hideout for outlaws, fugitives, plantations and landing strips. It is exactly here that most wanted drug lord El Chapo managed to hide for years. In between the coast and mountains are fertile valleys that yield rich agricultural crops. Actually, the current state symbol of Sinaloa, as pictured on license plates, is a tomato. The thriving industrial, commercial, agricultural and fishing sectors provided a firm financial backbone for the state and turned its capital, Culiacán, into a commercial and financial hub, a prerequisite for the narco business. According to Grillo, the Sinaloans boast a fiercely independent character that might be attributed to earlier local Indian tribes that for a long time successfully resisted the Spanish colonization and actually had a reputation for being fierce cannibals (Grillo, 2011). During the Mexican revolution, Sinaloa was a hub for arms trafficking.
and silver smuggling, creating a culture where illegal activities were not frowned upon and where distrust of the state, be it Spanish conquistadores or the federal government, became internalized. Interestingly, Mexican scholar, diplomat and politician Jorge Castañeda shows in his book Mañana Forever (2011) that this distrust in the federal government and a strong focus on self-reliance, the ‘tradition of an absolute disregard for the law’ (2011: xv) is a breeding ground for corruption and patrimonial structures on a local level, an attitude summarized in the saying ‘El que no transa, no avanza’.30 ‘The resistance to living by the law, and as well the traditional justifications for not doing so, are (...) deeply entrenched in the Mexican psyche’, Jorge Castañeda concludes, until it became a second nature. Cultural phenomena will be addressed more broadly in the chapter 5.4 that covers Mexican culture of violence.

Long before the Second World War, all the elements that are present today were already in place, albeit in a rudimentary form. Mexican academic Luis Astorga, himself from Sinaloa, made the classic study, El Siglo de Las Drogas (2005) by extensively researching historical archives and other sources. El Siglo stands at this moment as the standard work on the early history and is extensively quoted by most scholars who discuss the early years of the drug business. Astorga paints a dynamic picture of a drug industry that was already blooming in the 1930s with opium kits (fumadores), drug lords, corrupt law enforcement, smuggling routes to the United States, politicians who not only protect traffickers and cultivators, but are actively involved in the trade, and the first investigative journalist to uncover these drug scandals as well as the first narcoperiodistas who paid lip service to drug lords avant la lettre. The seeds for the current US War on Drugs and the historically ambivalent, in the words of Watt and Zepeda (2012: 57), the schizophrenic attitude of the Mexican Federal government is in detail described by Astorga who gives many striking examples of how the government condoned and even cooperated with the industry, while at the same time condemned and repressed the business. Although the current situation has become of course indefinitely more complex since the scale of the drugs business has grown exponentially in a globalized world with more actors involved, it is however essential to appreciate the genealogy of the narco-business since the same mechanisms are still at work.

Until the early 1900s opium (laudanum) and cocaine (coca wine) were legal in Mexico and served mostly medicinal purposes, they were actually governed, even marihuana, by medical regulations to guarantee its quality. According to Astoria, the amount of imported

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30 Castañeda, p. xv translates this roughly as ‘He who doesn’t trick or cheat gets nowhere’.
opium in the *Porfiriato*, the rule of dictator Porfirio Díaz (1876-1911) was between twelve and eight hundred tons (2005: 17). Up until the 1930s, the pharmaceutical properties of opium were widely advertised. However, as early as 1906 there was the first mention of open abuse in Mexico. In the early days, mainly the Chinese were associated with opium abuse that took place in *fumadores*, opium kits.

On the international level, during the 1909 Shanghai conference, the problem of opium was acknowledged. In the United States, a demonization of drugs started to take place, and according to Watt and Zepeda, this demonization came with racist connotations. Authorities and media reported that Afro-Americans started to use cocaine, not as a means to cope with harsh working circumstances, but because they were ‘intent on raping white women and assaulting respectable white males while under the influence of mind-altering substances’ (2012: 15). Chinese were rumored to use opium to seduce white women. The original anti-drug warrior in the United States was Hamilton Wright, a man who, according to Grillo, ‘was influenced by puritanical beliefs and sharp political ambition.’ In an interview in *the New York Times* in 1911, Wright rang the alarm bell and warned of a drug epidemic of unseen proportions (Grillo, 2011: 27).

The Harrison Narcotics Act of 1914 banned all drug use for recreational purposes and became a model for anti-narcotics legislation worldwide. In Mexico, the Revolution (1910-1920) was in full swing, narcotic regulation not being a priority of all parties involved. North of the border opium was illegal, south of the border there was a country in turmoil where opium was legal, thus creating an ideal environment for trafficking. Grayson (2010: 20) notes that opium trafficking from Mexico to the United States, mainly in the hands of Chinese, had already taken off in 1880, when the US and the Chinese governments reached an agreement to stop the bilateral opium trade, part of a strategy of the Chinese to cut down internal consumption and addiction. In the early years of the 20th century, the Chinese had already set up their production centers and smuggling lines, from Mexico’s West coast all the way up the United States. As one of the first interesting cases in drug related corruption, Grillo (2011: 30) describes the affair of Esteban Cantú, according to Kenny and Serrano the ‘first major Mexican racketeer’ (2012: 30). In 1916, a special agent at the US customs sent a damming report to Washington DC, describing how informants had uncovered a drug smuggling ring in which Chinese drug syndicates from Mexico were smuggling opium through Tijuana to the US and distributing it in Los Angeles and San Francisco. One of the associates in the ring had paid off the Governor of Baja California, Esteban Cantú, with a one-time sum of US$ 45,000 and a monthly sum of
US$ 10,000 for not interfering with the syndicate’s operations. Later, even more implicating evidence was revealed, such as how the governor, who actually was an intravenous morphine user himself, resold confiscated opium. The US Treasury and Customs agency urged the US State Department to pressure the Mexican authorities to act. There is no indication that the State Department ever undertook any action and Cantú could finish his term without any prosecution against him. Grillo ponders if foreign policy consideration might have played a role in not intervening. This was the first striking example of how United States drug agents built a convincing case against Mexican criminals, though these cases were never pursued due to inaction of the State Department or corruption of the Mexican authorities. According to Kenny and Serrano, Cantú eventually left the state in 1920 after General Abelardo Rodríguez was dispatched by the federal government to restore control. Predictably, Rodríguez started to exploit the profitable opium business. In 1932 he became Mexico’s first millionaire president.

It was only in 1920 that marihuana, and even later in 1926 that opium became criminalized in Mexico. Coincidentally, the American alcohol prohibition that started in 1920 and lasted until 1933 created new opportunities for illegal entrepreneurs in the border area. US law enforcement was largely focused on bootlegging, giving opium traffickers the leeway to operate with their goods. Production became firmly established and authorities discovered the first large plantations, both with poppies (one with ten hectares managed by Chinese) and marihuana. Astorga (2005: 37) mentions that one ton of cocaine and fifteen tons of opium were confiscated, quantities quite spectacular for that time (the end of the 1920s). Around the same time, fumadores popped up in cities such as Mexicali, Culiacán and Mazatlán in the North, but also in Guadalajara and Mexico City. According to Astorga, the authorities started to become concerned about opium consumption and addiction, which was still associated with the Chinese segment in the population. It is important to note that the drug business was a small fraction of what it is today and, according to Grillo and Astorga, attitudes from the authorities were relatively permissive. It was viewed as a misdemeanor committed by many local peasants, in the same way as brewing ‘moonshine’ in the Southern States of the US is seen. Still, although actual consumption was limited, Mexican authorities passed legislation based on American hysterical anti-drug attitudes, where drug addiction was at that time (and continues to be) much higher as in Mexico (Watt and Zepeda, 2012: 22). A civil group ‘Pro-Humanidad’ started to campaign against the evils of not only alcohol, but drugs as well. Public discourse referred to drug users as lowlifes and degenerates, and pointed at the debilitating effects drugs had on the physical and mental wellbeing. Meanwhile, drug consumption was slowly spreading to other
segments of the population and in artistic circles; Astorga mentions the muralists David Alfaro Siqueiros and Diego Rivera, the latter being jubilant about marihuana.

2.1.2 The 1930s and 1940s: Expansion of drug trade and incorporation in society

Astorga writes that by the mid-1930s, the drug problem had grown to larger dimensions and media reported on the enormous profits that could be made, the criminal context, and the eroding and corrupting effect the trade had on the legal system and justice in general. Ciudad Juárez was described as one of the most dangerous drug trafficking centers in the country where *gangsterismo* reigned freely. According to Grillo, one of the reasons for the expansion of the drug trade in particular in Ciudad Juárez was that prohibition ended in 1933. Ciudad Juárez had already acquired a reputation for being a nexus of bootlegging, prostitution and arms running, the ‘big three underground industries’, according to Grayson (2010: 22). With liquor now legal in the United States, criminal entrepreneurs eagerly jumped on the drug business, which was even more lucrative than contraband alcohol. Grayson points out that drug peddling in Ciudad Juárez dated from 1906, when many Chinese immigrants were uprooted during the San Francisco earthquake and relocated to the city. At that time a Chinese man, Sam Hing, was one of the most important drug lords, soon to be succeeded by other, local criminals. One of the first original Ciudad Juárez gangsters was Ignacia ‘La Nacha’ Jasso, a dealer who openly sold drugs from her house on Avenida Juárez and obviously enjoyed government protection in the highest circles. Later in the mid-1930s, one of the most powerful gangsters of that era became Enrique Fernández Puerta, nicknamed the Al Capone of Juárez. Starting out with alcohol smuggling, he later took on counterfeiting money and trafficking narcotics, in the same way as the current DTOs have diversified their portfolios in different illegal and legal activities.

Grillo describes how after prohibition ended, ‘Mexican bootleggers scrambled for a new product’. Bandits in Sinaloa became jealous of the Chinese opium merchants and ‘wanted a piece of the pie. They soon realized they could take the whole lot’ (Grillo, 2011: 32). Racist attitude were already commonplace in which the *chinitos* were portrayed as *viciosos* and evil low lives (Astorga, 2005: 40) but now villains started to stir up ethnic divisions. In an explosion of racial hatred, the Chinese were pushed out the business by the Sinaloans. Some were rounded up by lynch mobs while their properties were confiscated, other Chinese were simply shot dead. This ethnic cleansing and pogroms happened at the same time as the Nazi regime was
persecuting Jews in Germany, a comparison not lost on one of the participators in the anti-Chinese riots, the student Manuel Lazcano Ochoa, later to become Sinaloa’s attorney general for three terms. He describes in graphic detail (Grillo, 2011: 33) how Chinese were hauled from their homes and tied up in illegal jails before being put in boxcars and shipped out of the state.

In 1937, the Department of Public Health proposed a national and coherent strategy to combat the drug problem, which was to be spearheaded by the PGR, Procuraduría General de la República, the public prosecutor. Investigative reporter Martínez Manera was the first to coin the term international drugs mafia and he writes about how traffickers successfully turn to politicians for protection and how impunity started to rise. According to Astorga, it is at this point that it becomes clear that the drug trafficking sector has not emerged ‘as a parallel or autonomous power’, but is structurally linked to politics, campo de cultivo de ‘padrinos’ reales y potentiales - breeding ground of real and potential Godfathers’ (2005: 42). Grillo argues that the cacique system provided the perfect mechanism to facilitate corruption. Caciques, originally installed by the Spanish colonizer as local chieftains, became under the Porfirio Díaz regime local strongmen aided by their police force. When the PRI rose to power, this system remained in place and was actually perfected. ‘Businessmen would pay off small-town caciques who would pay off governors who would pay off the president. Money rose up like gas and power flowed down like water’ (2011: 35). This is the beginning of what would later be called the plaza system, in which the local authorities tolerated and protected drug trafficking in a certain territory (plaza means village square in its original sense) in exchange for financial compensation. Kenny and Serrano speak as to how local authorities ‘protected drug production and trafficking for economic benefits and political subordination’ (2012: 31).

Meanwhile, as drug production was increasing, anti-drug legislation was evolving. The old Código Penal from 1931, in which drug trafficking and consumption became federal offenses, focused mostly on consumption. In early 1940, the law changed in order to target trafficking, reflecting a changing attitude in which addicts should be seen in the first place as patients, not as criminals. It is also in this period that marihuana consumption was spreading over Mexico and the United States, accompanied by a hysterical discourse of the maddening effects of marihuana. Prime examples are the American propaganda film ‘Reefer Madness’ (1936) and statements by the first US ‘Drug Czar’ Harry J. Anslinger, head of the Federal Bureau of Narcotics, founded in 1930. Anslinger made statements such as ‘Hasheesh makes a murderer who kills for the love of killing out of the mildest mannered man who ever laughed at the idea that any ‘habit’ could ever get him’ and ‘if the hideous monster Frankenstein came
face to face with marijuana, he would drop dead of fright’ (Snead, 2008: 10). Interestingly, Jack Herer argues in *The Emperor Wears No Clothes* that marihuana prohibition was a complot of the paper and pulp forest industry and the upcoming petrochemical industry to outlaw hemp which is a good source of fuel and fiber.

In Mexico, anti-marihuana attitudes were less extreme, notably with the research of Dr. Leopoldo Salazar Viniegra, head of the Department of ‘Toxicomanía’ who put the dangers of marihuana in perspective and compared them with alcohol. Viniegra actually pleaded for its use as a source of fiber (Astorga, 2005: 41)’… *no está probada la psicosis por marihuana, … no es posible comprobar trastornos mentales de forma delirante o alucinatoria en fumadores habituales o circunstanciales*, concluded Salazar Viniegra in his study ‘El Mito de la Marihuana’ (1938: 205), published in a journal of criminology and sociology. Under pressure from the US, notably Anslinger, who remained in his position until 1962, Salazar Viniegra was relieved of his position and exaggerated stories about the consequences of cannabis became common in Mexico. In the United States, the use of marihuana was mostly associated with Mexican immigrant workers, in the same way the Mexicans associated opium with the Chinese, both opinions bearing stereotypical and racist connotations. The Marihuana Tax Act of 1937 tried to curb the use and traffic of marihuana, that actually only became popular in large segments of the populations in the hippie age in the 1960s.

The Second World War created a scarcity in opium – and other drugs - worldwide. Demand for opium as a painkiller rose where supply lines were cut. Soldiers acquired habits of drug consumption and spread these around. Prices of opium and marihuana rose tenfold, creating new opportunities for traffickers. It is still today a contentious issue as to whether the USA actually purchased opium from Mexico to produce morphine for its army. The *código penal* from early 1940, focusing on trafficking, was indefinitely suspended later that same year and the Mexican authorities pointed at the problem in obtaining the necessary supplies of opiates for their health departments. Astorga also mentions pressure from the US State Department to change the law (2005: 46). Most authors agree only on the fact that no written proof of open commerce in opium between the United States and Mexico during the World War exists. Astorga points at direct involvement of North American gangsters like Benjamin ‘Bugsy’ Siegel, who acted as a liaison between the opium producing sector and the United States Government. Grayson quotes a Mexican official who says it was ‘one of these black box things’, and quotes a publication that states the United States had ‘reached a secret accord… poppy flourished and prosperity reached the lost people of the mountains’ (2010: 24). Grillo is
skeptic: ‘The notion that the U.S. Government bought Sinaloan opium during the Second World War is the classic conspiracy theory… The Mexican Defense Department confirms the trade, US officials deny’. According to Anslinger, the theory was ‘utterly fantastic and (...) beyond even the wildest imagination.’ Grillo concludes that ‘Mexico’s finest narco-ologists have also been unable to dig up any conclusive evidence… some question whether Mexican authorities made it up to ease their own conscience’ (2011: 36).

Whether Mexico provided opium to the United States government or not, it is clear that the drug business started to expand and acquired its own momentum after the war. Many plantations were found and destroyed, some of them as large as one hundred hectares, a scale never before seen. Traffickers, some of Chinese origin, and at other times the local authorities themselves were apprehended with large amounts of opium, from fifteen to one hundred kilograms; again, quantities hardly seen before. According to Astorga, prices rose drastically, not only over time, but also once they had crossed the border in the United States. A kilo of opium that was worth US$ 2,000 a kilo in Sonora could fetch ten times as much once in Arizona (2005: 64). Linguistically, a host of new names came into being for traffickers, such as sembradores, tiburones, contrabandistas, raqueteros and finally gomeros, a name referring to goma, opium paste, that even become a nickname from people from Sinaloa that firmly had established itself as center of the trade. In the same way, new names come up against the struggle against the drug business, mostly with military connotations, such as lucha, batida, combate, cruzada, guerra, campaña.

The governor of Sinaloa, Rodolfo T. Loaiza (1941-1944), who formerly worked as a public health official, started a very pro-active anti-drugs policy in which many plantations were destroyed. He was assassinated in 1944 and became the first high profile victim in the drug war. The perpetrator, a gunman from the countryside nicknamed ‘El Gitano’, was quickly apprehended and he accused the former secretary of War and Navy, Pablo Macías Valenzuela, of being the mastermind behind the attack. The case was suspended by the federal authorities and handed over to the state authorities of Sinaloa. Macías later became the new governor of Sinaloa (1945-1950) and he had the power to directly influence the legal proceedings. Other people that were mentioned in the complot were high placed people in military and political circles in Culiacán and Mazatlán. According to Astorga, the identity of the intellectual masterminds of the murder of Loaiza remains up to this day one of the best kept secrets of Sinaloa’s political upper-class, who stuck to a Sicilian omerta (2005: 67-68).
Together with the Cantú-case, the Loaiza case was another example how authorities at the highest level became involved in organized crime and how impunity and corruption reigned freely. This conclusion was voiced by US drug czar Anslinger who declared that Mexico was the main supplier of opium for the United States and that high-level politicians and state government had direct interest in the drug trade. Astorga writes that the United States, who had come out as the mightiest winner after World War II, started to set the global agenda in the fight against drugs. Up to this day, the country continues to set the agenda.

In 1947, an enormous political scandal exploded when investigative reporter Armando Rivas Torres wrote how Sinaloa had become the leading center of drug production and accused high placed politicians, including governor Macías Valenzuela, of actually leading a drug trafficking organization. Rivas continued describing how federal investigations were actively being blocked by local and state authorities and how investigative reporters like himself had to be protected for fear of being assassinated. Attorney general of Sinaloa, Jesús Lazcano Ochoa, rejected the accusations, saying they were lies fabricated by political enemies. According to Astorga, it was only after a personal intervention of President Alemán that the scandal was covered up. Local editorials, in what could be called one of the first examples of narcoperiodismo, defended the honor of Sinaloa and accused ‘foreign’ journalists that came on short trips from the capital to Sinaloa to exaggerate matters and even fabricate facts in order to produce sensational stories. In the same way as the relation between authorities and organized crime consolidated, the relation with media and crime were set in this period. In Mexican journalism, there has been this tradition with on the one hand brave investigative reporters that are threatened and on the other hand media who defend the interests of the authorities and function as mouthpieces of organized crime.

US authorities, notably Anslinger, used the accusations against Macías to repeat their claims how the Mexican political elite was involved in the drugs trade. The Mexicans on their turn reiterated by accusing the United States of having the biggest consumer base. This pattern of mutual accusations has not changed much up to this day: There are many examples in which the DEA or other agencies have built a clear case against Mexican traffickers, but are unable to pressure the Mexican authorities to take effective action. When the United States points an accusing finger at Mexico, Mexico blames Americans’ insatiable appetite for drugs as part of the problem.

Around the same time (1947), President Alemán founded the DFS, Dirección Federal de Seguridad, modeled after the CIA and the FBI. According to Watt and Zepeda (2012: 28),
the DFS’s primary aim was to weaken labor and leftist movements. Alemán appointed Colonel Carlos Serrano as its director. Serrano was later implicated in drug trafficking and set the tone for the ongoing involvement of the DFS in organized crime. According to Astorga (1999), the PJF (Policía Judicial Federal) and DFS agent aided by the military were at the same time both fighting and helping drug trafficking, ‘controlling them to restrain their autonomy, and getting a share of the profits, all this in exchange for their mediation role between drug traffickers and the political power, their silence and their disposition to serve as scapegoats to protect their political masters.’ Crossa (2015) argues that after the DFS became so obviously intertwined with narco-trafficking, it was disbanded in 1985. ‘Many of its 1,500 unemployed agents found their way into organized crime and brought with them their training in covert activities and brutal counterinsurgency operations’, he concludes, the same mechanism later replicated by the Zetas cartel who employed former special forces.

The scandal with Macías exposed the unprecedented co-optation, corruption, cooperation and cozy arrangements between politicians, police, producers and traffickers at a local scale in Sinaloa, and a shared hostile attitude against outsiders, whether they were media, politicians or actual law enforcers. In this case, the federal authorities were seen as interfering outsiders. Poppy cultivation, although no longer a small-scale ‘mom and pop’ business conducted by impoverished peasants like it had been a few decades earlier, was still seen in Sinaloa as a minor transgression, writes Astorga (2005). It was said that even president Alemán was condoned opium cultivation since, at least, it brought in foreign currency. Interestingly, around this same period, the first legalization discourses also sprung up. Dr. Salazar Viniegra, pointed out how half-hearted efforts to curb opium cultivation had only benefitted traffickers and he pleaded for a government monopoly and medically regulated opium commerce instead of leaving it in the hands of a criminal class with great corrupting potential. Astorga (2005: 84) mentions that in retrospect, Viniegra’s words and plea for partial legalization had a prophetic value. In retrospect, the seeds of corruption and cooptation that is currently pervading Mexico were laid in the early 1930s and 1940s. The scale, the interests and the profits have only become much larger, as I will show in the next subsections.

2.2 Post-war growth, professionalization, and international expansion

In the second half of the twentieth century, the narco-business grew exponentially. Marihuana consumption rose drastically in the 1970s. When the Mexican DTOs took over cocaine trafficking from their Colombian partners in the late 1980s, it became a multi-billion dollar
industry that became firmly entrenched in Mexican society, corrupting authorities with relations that ranged from acceptance to active involvement.

2.2.1 The marijuana boom and Operation Condor

After the Second World War, the drug business continued to expand until it became the multi-billion-dollar industry it is today. In Sinaloa, opium production steadily grew and became part of the local way of life. The enormous expansion of the drug industry was, however, caused by two other factors. First, the rise in drug consumption in the ‘hippie age’ of the 1960s in the United States, notably marihuana, but also heroin, that was supplied mainly by Mexican traffickers. As Grillo (2011: 39) points out, ‘within a decade, recreational drugs went from being a niche vice to a global commodity.’ The second was the closing of the Caribbean smuggling routes for cocaine in the 1980s. The Colombian cartels started to use the Mexican route to transport their product to the American market.

The explosion in marihuana use gave the drug industry its first boost. In 1962, the number of adolescents that admitted having smoked marihuana was only four percent (Watt and Zepeda, 2012: 35). Fifteen years later, a White House survey in 1978 found that approximately thirty-eight percent of high school students used marihuana. According to Astorga, in 1967, the number of marihuana users in the United States was approximately 360,000. In the 1960s, a kilo of marihuana that would cost US$ 60 in border towns like El Paso and Laredo could be sold for US$ 300 in universities on the East Coast (Grillo, 2011: 43). In the early 1970s, Mexico supplied ninety-five percent of the marihuana consumed in the United States and marihuana represented nine percent of Mexico’s exports to the United States. A farmer could make up to forty times as much from marihuana as from legal crops (Watt and Zepada, 2012: 37).

Heroin became a fashionable drug in the 1960s and early 1970s in American counterculture. Cocaine was hardly used and only gained popularity in the late 1970s. According to numbers from the Federal Bureau of Narcotics, in 1966, the total black-market value of drugs in the United States, at that time mainly heroin, was worth US$ 600 million. In 1980, this number had increased to US$ 100 billion, which was, according to Grillo, ‘a truly seismic shift that reshaped America from its universities to its inner cities and Mexico from its mountains to its palaces’ (2011: 43).

US president Richard Nixon, who was inaugurated in 1969, was, like Anslinger, one of the fiercest anti-drug warriors in US history. Nixon sincerely believed the social fabric of the
country was destroyed by drug use. ‘You see, homosexuality, dope, immorality in general: These are the enemies of strong societies. That's why the Communists and the left-wingers are pushing the stuff, they're trying to destroy us’, Nixon told his staff, discussing, among other things, homosexuality and boy scouts (Nixon tapes, 1971). In 1971, Nixon declared drug abuse ‘public enemy number one’ and coined the term ‘War on Drugs’, referring to the multifaceted campaign to prevent consumption, production, trade and traffic of illicit substances. Interestingly, Nixon was known for his confrontational politics and zealous anti-drug stance, but his policy also had a strong focus of prevention and treatment. Nixon actually gave more funding to rehab programs than some of his liberal successors.

One of Nixon’s first measures was Operation Intercept in 1969, in which every vehicle, and even every pedestrian, entering the United States from Mexico was searched for drugs at the border. According to Grillo, the operation was a response to US demands that the Mexican authorities start spraying marihuana and poppy fields with defoliants, which Mexico had politely but resolutely refused, citing the side effects of Agent Orange. The United States considered this a slap in the face, according to Grillo, who cites the memoirs of Nixon aide Gordon Liddy: ‘The Mexicans, using diplomatic language of course, told us to go piss up a rope. The Nixon administration did not believe in the United States taking crap from any foreign government. Its reply was Operation Intercept’ (Grillo: 2012: 44). ‘The unilateral decision did obviously not resolve anything… but created a diplomatic conflict and one more antecedent in the long list of American pressures towards Mexico to align its drugs policy according to the will of the government from its Northern neighbor’, writes Astorga (2005: 100). Operation Intercept became a failure. There were hardly any drugs confiscated since most traffickers just suspended their transport, but cross-border trade was seriously disrupted. After severe complaints from the Mexican government, the operation was suspended after seventeen days. The United States and Mexico agreed to work together in Operation Cooperation, which prescribed that Mexican authorities would fight production, while the US was allowed to have their agents work in Mexico. According to Astorga (2005: 100), ‘The technology, the know-how, the measures taken, became each time more and more dependent from the will and vision of the USA.’ According to Grillo, the model of Operation Cooperation became the modus operandi for the drug war abroad: Asking or coercing countries to destroy the crops at the source while allowing US agents in the field to advise and sometimes oversee the local anti-drug efforts. Nixon applied this tactic in 1971 to Turkey; under threat to withhold military and economic aid, Nixon pressured Turkey to destroy its poppy crops. At the same time, the so
called ‘French Connection’, the route that smuggled heroin produced in France into the United States, was disrupted (Feldab-Brown, 2010:171). Predictably, as in the often-used metaphor of a squeezed balloon, suppression in one part of the world results in the materialization of the same phenomenon somewhere else. In this case, it provided Sinaloa with new, even greater opportunities. According to Watt and Zepada (2011: 36) the Mexican share of the US heroin market was fifteen percent in 1972. In 1975, this had increased to eighty percent. In the same year, as mentioned before, Mexico also produced ninety-five percent of marihuana consumed in the United States, showing, among other things, the flexibility of the drug business.

Fierce anti-drug rhetoric was a cornerstone is Nixon’s campaign for his re-election. ‘Our goal is the unconditional surrender of the merchants of death (..) the total banishment of drug abuse from the American life’, Nixon said during an election speech in 1972. He won by an overwhelming sixty percent, setting a precedent for other politicians by showing that a strong anti-drug stance is popular with voters, as Grillo remarks. In 1973, Nixon oversaw a merger of several agencies dealing with the drug problem into one single federal agency, the DEA, or Drug Enforcement Agency. At its beginning, the DEA had roughly 1,500 special agents and an annual budget of less than US$ 75 million. In 2014 it had 11,000 employees, of which roughly 5,000 were special agents and an annual budget of US$ 50 billion (Grillo, 2012).

The cracking down on the Asia/French opium and heroin market in the early 1970s was a boost for the Sinaloa opium industry. The opium farmers used to be called gomeros, but local media started to refer to them as narcotraficantes. Astorga mentions that this semantic transformation reflected a changed state of affairs on the ground, the new word referring to ‘all the social agents related to the cultivation, processing, consumption, and trafficking of illicit substances’ (2005: 100). According to Grillo, the shift in language ‘implied a shift in status, from mere poppy growers to international smugglers’ (2012: 48). In 1952, Astorga mentions quantities of 200 kilos of opium exported to the United States, with a total estimated street value of US$ 200 million. While the street value of opium was approximately 500 pesos in Culiacán, in Mexico City it would fetch 4000 pesos, or roughly US$ 300. These prices nearly tripled in a matter of a few years, making business extremely profitable. More and more plantations and illegal landings strips were discovered. By the late 1950s, Culiacan had already earned the reputation of El Nuevo Chicago, as shoot-outs between rival gangsters were frequent. In the

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31 The Bureau of Narcotics and Dangerous Drugs (the successor to the Federal Bureau of Narcotics), the Office of Drug Abuse Law Enforcement, the Customs Agency Service and several others.
32 The dollar pesos rate from this period was roughly 13 pesos for a dollar.
1970s, things had become even worse. Both Astorga and Grillo describe how Sinaloa became a lawless place, where los narcotraficantes had built their own neighborhood, Tierra Blanca, where they lived in ostentatious homes and drove around in unregistered cars. Gun fights between traffickers and federal police or soldiers were common. Astorga (2005) and Watt and Zepada (2011) mention one notorious trafficker of this time, Manuel Salcido Uzeta, also known as ‘El Cochiloco’. On a farm he owned, the authorities found the remains of six youths that had disappeared. After investigations, it became clear that federal police officers that were paid by El Cochiloco were responsible for the kidnapping of these six individuals. An editorial in the local media mentioned explicitly ‘there exists an excessive partnership between narco-traffickers and those in charge to fight them’ and lamented how the authorities had been infiltrated. Cochiloco was later arrested but managed to escape, just like El Chapo in 2001, by bribing prison officials and lived for years unhindered thereafter. This episode, in which organized crime paid law enforcement officials to actually kidnap and kill opponents and competitors, was later to be replicated many times on scales even bigger, the most recent example the 2014 kidnapping by police of forty-three students in Guerrero who have since completely disappeared.

Around this time, the first cultural expressions of the drug world manifested. Astorga mentions songs extolling the heroic feats of traffickers, which later came to be known as narcocorridos, and mentions the gangster film Operación Opio. La Droga Maldita. By the 1970s, media and politicians talked about the narco-mafia having Culiacán in its grip. A spokesperson for the state government declared that Sinaloa had a ‘Trojan Horse, the mafia of producers and traffickers, with arms, power and money, within its walls’ (Astorga, 2005: 114).

In the mid-1970s, the Mexican government launched Operation Condor. 10,000 army soldiers were mobilized and deployed in 1976 in the so-called Golden Triangle, the tristate area of Sinaloa, Durango, and Chihuahua, to destroy plantations and arrest suspected narco-traffickers. Operation Condor was the biggest anti-drug operation in the history of PRI rule and its spraying tactics, backed up by the United States, were a novelty that would be replicated in other anti-drug operations around the world such as in Afghanistan and Colombia. The Mexican government officially declared that it would use only innocent herbicides, but soon it became clear that ecologically dangerous defoliants such as Paraquat33 had been used, poisoning other crops, soil and groundwater and directly affecting the health of the public. The DEA supplied

33 Trade name, Gramoxone; popular name Agent Orange.
planes for crop spraying and were allowed to carry out verification flights to assess the results. This was actually the first time that Mexico formalized the permanent presence of US agents on its soil. Some thirty agents were sent to assist and oversee operations (Watt and Zepeda, 2001: 48). It is questionable if spraying crops to destroy a drug industry is effective, but in the case of Mexico there was another unforeseen side effect: Farmers still harvested their marihuana that was now contaminated with Paraquat. It is unclear how much of it reached the American market, but the US Health Department issued a strong warning against the possibility of smoking poisonous drugs that could cause irreversible lung damage. According to Grillo (2011: 49), US dealers sought a new supply for their hippie clientele and went to Colombia, which saw a sudden boom in its marihuana production, another example of the balloon effect.

Operation Condor was notorious for its heavy-handed tactics. General José Hernández Toledo, who had commanded military operations during the 1968 Tlatelolco massacre in which hundreds of students and protesters were killed, headed the operation at the military level. Carlos Aguilar Garza from the PGR coordinated it on the civilian level. Soldiers stormed villages in the Sierra Madre and arrested hundreds of people. According to Astorga, after complaints of abuses, the Culiacán lawyers association started an investigation and interviewed 457 people out of the 1,300 that were arrested for drug charges. All these 457 complained of heavy torture. High level military and police commanders also became victims, murdered by narco-traffickers with heavy weapons, a new stage in the escalation in the drug violence. The killing of police chiefs became ‘normal’, says Astorga, although it never was clear if they were killed because they were fighting narco-trafficking or because they were involved in it. The media also became targets. One of the first journalists killed in the drug war was Roberto Martínez Montenegro, assassinated in 1978. Martínez’s revelations implicated high-level government officials and he described in detail the ‘silent complicity of Sinaloa society’ with the drug industry and a class of ‘untouchables that influences and corrupts justice.’ He mentions how the industry pressured journalists to report their version of the facts, a practice called narcoperiodismo that has become common in Mexico (Grillo, 2012: 74, Valdez, 2016). According to Astorga, these observations were not radical new ones, but Martínez was the first to combine facts and history to make a thorough analysis of the Sinaloa drug world, an analysis

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34 Estimates range from 30 till 300. The exact number has never been estabished. Toledo had also been in charge of the occupation of the UNAM and repression of students protest in Sonora and Morelia.

35 Alejandro Valenzuela Chávez, a high-ranking Judge from the PGR and governor Valdés Montoya, caught with 750 kg of Marihuana (Astorga, 2005: 117).
firmly contradicted by the official authorities, notably the governor of Sinaloa, who downplayed the importance of the drug sector in his state.

Several drug lords were killed, among them the kingpin Pedro Avilés Perez, who was killed in a shoot-out with the PJF in 1978. Faced with the strong approach of Los Federales, many narcotraficantes, among them Avilés’ lieutenants, fled to Guadalajara, Mexico’s second largest city. It is estimated that approximately thirty percent of campesinos fled to the city, says Astorga. Some of the notorious drugslords that escaped were Rafael Caro Quintero, Ernesto Fonseca Carrillo, and Miguel Ángel Félix Gallardo. This diaspora formed what would be called the Guadalajara Group, that would in its turn become the basis for the Sinaloa and Juárez cartels. This is the first example of what later, during Calderón’s war on the drug cartels, would become known as ‘fragmentalization’ of cartels. The Mexican officials declared the operation a success, the governor of Sinaloa and the mayor of Culiacán said that narco-traffickers had been completely defeated, prompting ironic editorials in the Sinaloa media questioning the authorities self-assured rhetoric (Astorga, 2005: 116).

Astorga, Watt and Zepada, and Grillo point at the ambivalent character of Operation Condor and similar campaigns that would follow. Under the cover of the war on drugs, military operations were used for political purposes. Leftwing insurgents and government critics that had risen up after the Tlatelolco massacre had found a safe haven in the Sierra Madre. Now they were being persecuted. Hundreds of activists were arrested on drug charges and simply disappeared. In Guerrero, the so-called dirty war reached its peak in the late 1960s and early 1970s; in 1974 a total of 24,000 troops, a third of the Mexican Army, occupied the state. Under the pretext of fighting narco-traffickers, the army targeted armed peasants and guerrilla movements such as the Brigada de Ajusticiamiento and Partido de los Pobres led by Genaro Vázquez and Lucio Cabañas, who was killed by the army in 1974 (Watt ad Zepeda, 2011: 38).

The CIA was aware of these tactics and wrote in a memo to the White House: ‘The army will take also advantage of the eradication campaign to uncover any arms trafficking and guerrilla activities… Army eradication forces may devote as much effort to internal security as eradication… they may seek helicopters and other equipment…’ (Grillo, 2012: 51). Operation Condor provided Mexico with unprecedented opportunities to obtain military hardware. The Mexican army could keep the fleet supplied by the United States for spraying operations. This amounted to thirty-nine Bell helicopters, twenty-two small aircraft, and one executive jet, making it the ‘largest police fleet in Latin America’ (ibid: 50).
The effectiveness of Operation Condor was highly questionable. According to Astorga, one of the results of the eradication campaign was that narco-trafficking groups had to rethink their strategy and professionalize their business. Two years after Operation Condor was unleashed, Mexico announced in 1978 it would continue its eradication efforts but would no longer allow the DEA to carry out verification flights. DEA agents on the ground suspected a cover up and noticed that within a short time, Mexican marihuana was flooding back into the American market, with the Paraquat scare being forgotten. Watt and Zepada acknowledge that opium exports to the United States were reduced by roughly fifty percent during and immediately after the operation, but that demand in the US for heroin remained stable, creating a scarcity and making it even more profitable for Mexican growers to produce opium. Balderas quotes former revolutionary and prosecutor Manuel Lazcano who explicitly states that Operation Condor actually resulted in a ‘diversification and increase’ in narco-trafficking. ‘The narco-trafficker targeted were like a hydra: when you cut off one head, two or three would grow back’ (Balderas, 2012: 87). In short, Operation Condor forced the DTOs to become flexible and professional enterprises, as I will discuss in chapter 3.2.

Several incidents tarnished the image of Operation Condor as a heroic anti-drug effort. Watt and Zepada mention drug trafficker Alberto Sicilia Falcon bribing the authorities to spray the crops of his competitors, a tactic that was replicated by others when Sicilia was arrested. Sometimes, herbicide in spraying planes was substituted by water mixed with fertilizers, a ‘plot worth a Hollywood movie’. Watt and Zepada argue that Operation Condor not only facilitated and legitimized a permanent military presence in the area but also was driving out smaller, independent farmers who did not have the resources to afford protection against eradication efforts. (Watt and Zepeda, 2011: 51, 54) Well-organized, large plantation owners could shoot with heavy weapons at spray planes, and in a Darwinist mechanism, they survived, while smaller, less protected plantations were left vulnerable and perished. Interestingly, journalist Anabel Hernández quotes a general who says that in the 1970s, no large-scale marihuana and poppy plantations were possible without the complicity of the authorities. ‘No consignment of narcotics could be exported without the explicit approval of the army, the DFS and the federal police’ (Watt and Zepeda, 2012: 60).

Federal prosecutor Carlos Aguilar, who spearheaded the operation and was heralded as the Mexican Elliot Ness,36 was arrested in 1984 in possession of six kilos of heroin. He jumped

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36 Elliot Ness was responsible for nailing down Al Capone and his stature rose to mythic proportions. Recent research shows however that Ness may have exaggerated his role.
bail, was arrested again in 1989, but managed to stay out of prison. In 1993, he was found shot
dead, apparently over a drug deal. The Aguilar case is another blatant example of how deep
corruption is entrenched in all levels of the Mexican government.

The fact that verification flights were stopped after two years and Operation Condor
effectively came to an end and narco-trafficking continued as before raises questions. Grillo
offers a few possibilities. Top Mexican officials had been bribed with narco dollars to scale
down operations, or Mexican authorities had learnt to live with the notion that total eradication
was impossible and condoned a certain amount of trafficking. It could also be that Operation
Condor was an exercise in demonstrating the narco-trafficking sector who had the monopoly
on power and violence; as Grillo argues, the authorities ‘had to show narco-gangsters who was
really in charge and put them back in place.’ One explanation does not necessarily exclude
another one and it was probably a combination of all of these reasons.

2.2.2 From Miami to Mexico: The cocaine boom

In the late 1960s and 1970s, consumption of drugs in the West was part of a counterculture and
was seen as a rebellion of a baby boom generation against the establishment, not in the least
because that same establishment overreacted to the use of drugs. The original drugs of choice
were marihuana, heroin, and LSD. Cocaine was only consumed by a very small elite in
aristocratic and artistic circles but became hugely popular in the mid-seventies. Unlike
marihuana, heroin, and LSD, all of which can send their users into an introspective, trance-like
state of mind, cocaine was the exuberant party drug that gained quick acceptance in circles that
worked in the music, advertising, and arts industries. In the early 1980s, cocaine use gained
large acceptance in wider segments of the population. ‘A veritable blizzard of the white powder
is blowing through the American middle class’, wrote Time magazine in a 1981 cover story
called ‘Cocaine: A Middle-Class High’ (Demarest, 1981). The magazine went on to write if all
international dealers who supplied cocaine to the United States would form a united
corporation, it would rank number seven on the Fortune 500 list between Ford Motor Company
and Gulf Oil. Street sales in the United States in 1980 were estimated at US$ 30 billion, an
average of US$ 200 for each American.

37 Private conversation with Howard Campbell, El Paso, 2010
It remains popular up to these days, despite the introduction of several synthetic drugs such as ecstasy, speed, and crystal meth, and is not only the staple drug of the hip and trendy but has conquered the financial world as well.\textsuperscript{38} Most of the cocaine in the 1970s was produced in Peru, Bolivia, and Colombia and reached the American market through the Caribbean in Florida. Compared with marihuana and LSD that cost less than US$ 10 a gram or a hit, cocaine was expensive - between US$ 50 and $150 a gram in the 1970s - creating huge profits for dealers and traffickers. Forbes estimated the personal fortune of Pablo Escobar, boss of the Medellin cartel, at US$ 9 billion in the 1970s, making him the richest criminal of all time.

Originally, most of the Colombian cocaine entering the United States was transported by plane or boat to the coast of Florida, where Americans, Cubans, or Colombians would pick it up and handle distribution. The Colombians and Cubans acquired their reputation as ‘Cocaine Cowboys’ for their willingness to use violence to protect their business. These golden days of smuggling were immortalized in popular culture with the TV-series ‘Miami Vice’ and the film ‘Scarface’. The cocaine business provided an enormous financial injection for Florida: In 1980, the Miami Branch of the Federal Reserve Bank was the only branch in the US to have a cash surplus, an amount of 4.7 billion (Grillo, 2012: 62). When violence hit the streets of Miami - in a few years the number of homicides in Dade County tripled to 600 (in 1981) - the authorities started to develop concerns and decided to intervene and crack down on the smuggling. In early 1982, President Ronald Reagan created the South Florida Task Force. With surveillance planes, helicopter gunships, and navy boats, it was not too complicated to secure the Florida coastline, which was only a few hundred miles. Within less than a year, cocaine seizures were up fifty-six percent.

As in any business faced with such enormous losses, the Colombian cocaine cartels looked for an alternative strategy and decided to subcontract the smuggling part to the Mexican narco-trafficking organizations who had already established their routes across the 2,000-mile porous border with the United States. According to a DEA agent (Grillo, 2012: 63, 64), the agreement was straightforward. The Colombians would be responsible for production and delivering the cocaine to Mexico. The Mexicans would deliver it to Colombian agents north of the border, who would as before handle distribution in the USA. This outsourcing operation provided profits that dwarfed earlier income and transformed the Mexican DTOs into some of the richest crime syndicates worldwide. ‘The historical importance of this deal cannot be overstated’.

\textsuperscript{38} Some say cocaine consumption, making its users self-confident and self-absorbed, is partly responsible for the reckless behavior that cause the banking crisis. Private talks with friends of bankers in New York.
according to Grillo. ‘Once billions of cocaine dollars poured into Mexico, the drug trafficking would become bigger and bloodier than anyone imagined.’ ‘With the ascendance of cocaine, corruption burst all barriers’, writes Kenny and Serrano (2012: 41). Interestingly, in the same way as the Sinaloans had pushed the Chinese out of the business half a century earlier, now they started to take over from the Colombians. ‘The Mexican started off as paid couriers. But after they got a sniff, they would take the whole pie’ (Grillo, 2012: 64).

According to Grillo, the Honduran Juan Ramón Matta Ballesteros was the first liaison to facilitate the new arrangements. On the Colombian side, Matta Ballesteros was working with the Colombian cartels, notably the Medellín cartel, and on the Mexican side he worked with Sinaloa drug lords Rafael Caro Quintero and Miguel Ángel ‘El Padrino’ Félix Gallardo. The last was according to some, the ’jefe de jefes’, or the unchallenged capo and biggest narco-trafficker in the Sinaloa underworld at his times. Caro Quintero and Félix Gallardo had fled Sinaloa during Operation Condor and had chosen Guadalajara as their base of operations. While Operation Condor slowly faded away Gallardo and his compatriots started new operations. The DEA started to designate the loose federation of Sinaloan traffickers ‘Guadalajara Cartel’, to stress the important menace this group posed.

Around these times (the 1980s), narco-trafficking grew to a larger and more ambitious scale never before seen. These also were the days of unbridled corruption. Astorga and Shirk note that ‘during the 1980s, under President Miguel de la Madrid (1982-88), Mexican DTOs developed especially close ties to the DFS, then headed by José Antonio Zorrilla Pérez. Complicity between the DFS and Mexican DTOs ensured that organized criminal activity was extensively protected and well regulated’ (2010: 9).

Top traffickers Félix Gallardo, Caro Quintero, and Fonseca Carrillo carried DFS badges, presumably given by DFS chief Zorrilla Pérez. According to Watt and Zepeda, these were golden times for the Guadalajara Cartel. Gallardo, Quintero, and Fonseca were ‘apparently earning 5billion a year’ (2011: 67). Court documents showed that Gallardo and his partner Matta Ballesteros earned US$ 5 million weekly with cocaine trafficking into the United States. Notorious was the marihuana plantation in Buffalo, Chihuahua, which was nearly twelve square kilometers and employing thousands of campesinos for US$ 6 a day (Grillo, 2012: 65). Up until this day, it remains the largest marihuana farm ever. Tipped off by the DEA, Mexican authorities raided the place in 1984, but were unable to arrest the higher echelons. Gallardo, the mastermind of this operation, had already fled the scene, probably after being warned ahead of time. One of the DEA agents who plays a pivotal role in discovering the Buffalo plantation was
Enrique ‘Kiki’ Camarena, who had already been on the track of the Guadalajara gangsters and had exposed the complicity of Mexican authorities, PRI officials but also DFS agents, with the Guadalajara Cartel. Predictably, DEA agent Camarena became a high value target after his successes in exposing the endemic corruption.

Camarena was kidnapped, according to Cockburn and St Clair (Watt and Zepeda, 2011: 86) in February 1985 by armed DFS agents, in one of the rare examples of Mexican narco-traffickers targeting American agents. His tortured body was found a month later. In court documents, Caro Quintero, Félix Gallardo, and Matta Ballesteros were implicated. The unprecedented murder of an American agent sent shockwaves through the DEA and the Unites States demanded a thorough investigation, an investigation however that ‘descended into a tangle of botched crime scenes and scapegoats’ (Grillo, 2012: 67) exposing blatant incompetence and corruption on the part of the Mexican authorities and causing widespread tensions between the DEA and the DFS.\(^{39}\) Eventually, Caro Quintero was arrested in 1985 and Félix Gallardo in 1989. Matta Ballesteros was abducted by American agents in 1988 and flown to the USA where he now serves a life sentence in a maximum-security prison.

In the United States, the Reagan administration showed an ambiguous attitude. The war on drugs reached new heights focusing this time on the crack epidemic that was spreading like ‘wild fire’. But at the same time, in semi legit arrangements clouded in secrecy, often planned by the CIA and carried out by third parties with tacit support from US government circles, the Contra rebels in Nicaragua were supported by secret arms deal with Iran and cocaine trafficking, cocaine that later wounded up as crack on the streets of Los Angeles. Investigative journalist Gary Webb described these shady dealings in *Dark Alliance: The CIA, the Contras, and the Crack Cocaine Explosion* (1998). Webb died under mysterious circumstances in 2004. Panama’s dictator Noriega, strongly supported by the United States until his removal by US forces in 1989, was a known cocaine trafficker, and so were many US backed generals in Honduras. ‘… with so many conspiracies, wars, gangsters and side stories of cocaine in the eighties, you can get lost in a dozen of tangents’, writes Grillo (2012: 6). Interestingly, CIA and the DEA had conflicting agendas. While for the CIA backing the Contra rebels was important, the DEA was fighting drug trafficking. This same contradictory mechanism was at work in Afghanistan in 2001, where the Northern Alliance, supported by the USA to oust the Taliban, had notorious drug lords amongst its commanders. Back to the period in the late 1990s. Not

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\(^{39}\) One striking example was that the DEA had located Matta in a house in Mexico DF but the Mexican authorities reacted to slow so the suspect could drive away unhindered.

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only the Mexican DTOs grew to multinational powerful organizations through an expansion of the drug trade, but also political groups, from left wing FARC guerrillas in Colombia to Mujahideen fighters opposing the Soviets, discovered new opportunities to finance their struggles. This is continuing up to these days, with the Colombian guerilla movements FARC, ELN, and EPL still in business and the Afghan Mujahideen now replaced by Taliban as drug lords.

2.2.3 The consolidation of the big cartels under corrupt PRI rule

The 1988 elections, in which PRI candidate Carlos Salinas was elected as president, were among the most contested in the history of Mexico. Opposition candidate Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas, son of president Lázaro Cárdenas was heading a center left coalition, the Frente Democrático Nacional. During the counting of the votes, while it seemed that Cárdenas was winning, the ballot counting machines mysteriously stopped. When they resumed counting, Carlos Salinas was declared winner. Later, thousands of missing ballots were found. According to Cockburn and St Clair (Watt and Zepeda, 2011: 101), Cárdenas had actually won with forty-two percent over his opponent with only thirty-six percent.

Harvard educated Salinas favored free market and neoliberal policies, privatizing eighty-five percent of formerly national companies, among them telephone and railroad companies and a TV network. He negotiated NAFTA, the North American Free Trade Agreement with US President Bill Clinton, which came into effect in January 1994. Importantly, he ended land redistribution, the ejido system that had been in place since the Mexican Revolution, but that was, according to some, ‘a quasi-socialist system of communal land tenure’ (Smith, 1992). ‘Suddenly a new class of tycoons buzzed around in private planes’, writes Grillo (2012: 77) arguing that in 1987, when Forbes began its billionaire list, there was only one Mexican, while when Salinas left office in 1994, that number had grown to twenty-seven. Thousands of migrants from the impoverished countryside flocked to industrialized border cities such as Ciudad Juárez and Tijuana to work in assembly plants, the so-called maquiladoras. Cheaply built neighborhoods to house the laborers expanded in the deserts and these became later the slums that were to provide the foot soldiers once the drug violence started to explode in the 21st century. Cross-border trade with the United States grew exponentially, from US$ 49 billion in 1989 to $247 billion in 2000.
Mexico’s biggest drug lord, jefe de jefes Miguel Ángel Félix Gallardo, was arrested in 1989, by Guillermo González Calderoni, a federal police commander who was one of the most prolific anti-narcotics officers. The two had apparently meet a few times before to discuss the terms of his arrest, proving the government still had some power over the narco-mafia (Grillo, 2007). Gallardo later said he had entertained very cordial relations with Calderoni but was betrayed by him later. Calderoni indeed had a mixed reputation. According to DEA agents, he was instrumental in finding the suspects of the murder of their colleague ‘Kiki’ Camarena, but others accused him of murder and corruption. He fled to the United States and claimed the Salinas government framed him since he had too much information on corruption at the highest levels. Calderoni was killed in McAllen, Texas in 2003, a murder that has still not been solved (Weiner, 2003).

According to Grillo, the Gallardo affair made one thing clear: ‘in 1989, mobsters still relied on the police to operate and these officers could take out narcotics when they needed to. The detention of the head honcho reminded traffickers who was boss’ (2012: 78). After the arrest of Gallardo, a meeting was convened between most important narco-traffickers in Acapulco to discuss the future and strategy of the trade. Gallardo says he organized the meeting from behind bars, others say it was actually Calderoni who had arrested Gallardo. ‘Almost all the guests were from the old Sinaloa narco tribe, a sprawl of families intertwined by marriages, friendships and drug deals’, writes Grillo. All the drug lords who came to dominate the next two decades were present to discuss the territory each would control. Joaquin ‘El Chapo’ Guzmán and Ismael ‘the Mayo’ Zambada would head the Sinaloa cartel, Amado Carrillo Fuentes (later known as ‘El Señor de los Cielos’ for his fleet of Boeing jets transporting cocaine from Colombia into Mexico) would take the Juárez cartel and the Arellano Félix brothers would lead the Tijuana cartel. The Gulf cartel was headed by Juan García Ábrego. In a few years, a fierce competition would break out between these cartels, resulting in bloody battles in cities such as Tijuana, Juárez, Nuevo Laredo, and Culiacán, but in the early years, there was still a level of cooperation. According to a classified intelligence report from the 1990s, Guzmán and Carrillo Fuentes worked together on transporting shipments from Bolivia and Colombia into Sonora, Mexico and onwards into Arizona. The first inter-cartel violence started in Tijuana between the Arellano Félix and Guzmán groups over access to the California market. There were regular shootouts, but no killings with paramilitary death squads as later would be common. The authorities, according to Grillo, were not too concerned since their authority was not being challenged since
it was only ‘narcos killing narcos.’ ‘The government could sit back and get paid, whoever won’, writes Grillo (2012: 80).

An incident that shook up the drug world was the killing of Cardinal Juan Jesús Posadas Ocampo in 1993 at Tijuana airport. Posadas Ocampo was caught in a firefight between Arellano Félix and Guzmán gunmen, but exact circumstances have never been determined. The official explanation was that Arellano Félix’ men tried to kill El Chapo, but through a mix up accidentally killed the cardinal. Conspiracy theorists say that Posadas Ocampo possessed confidential information on corruption in the government that he was about to release to Girolamo Prigione, the Vatican’s representative in Mexico. Investigative journalist Anabel Hernández claims federal police units killed the cardinal because he supplied weapons to guerrillas (2014: 24). Up to this day, his murder remains unsolved and many clergy members still doubt the ‘mistaken identity’ theory (Astorga, 1999).

One result of the Ocampo murder, according to Grillo, was the mediatization of the cartels, mediatization being a word never before used in the Mexican context. The protagonists of the shootout, Guzmán and the Arellano Félix brothers, had been relatively unknown by the larger public but now became celebrities. Guzmán was arrested two weeks after the cardinal’s killing in Guatemala and transferred to a maximum-security prison in Mexico, from which he managed to escape in 2001. The Arellano Félix brothers were left unbothered in Tijuana and became the first DTO in Mexico to pioneer the use of extreme violence to rule over their criminal empire. According to Grillo and Astorga, they recruited an army of killers from gang members in San Diego and, interestingly, also from ‘bored sons from Tijuana’s wealthy families’ (Grillo, 2012: 81), undercutting the popular hypothesis that rental killers and sicarios come exclusively from an excluded underclass. New killing tactics were devised: dissolving bodies in acid, not only for destroying evidence but with the psychological side effect of devastating the victims’ families since they had not even a corpse to mourn. Ramón Arellano Félix, the most ruthless of the family, invented a new tactic: wrapping up the victims’ body in a blanket and dumping the encobijado, as it became known, with a note, a narcomensaje, in a public place. The communicative dimension of violence eventually came to dominate most drugs related killing among all cartels. It was rumored that Ramón even threw his victims in a fire and cooked steaks over them. The Arellano Félix brothers’ methods marked a new escalation in the drug business: ‘Ramón had created the first army of enforcers and pioneered Mexico’s first gangster terror’, concludes Grillo (2012: 81).
Another new development was the continuing expansion of the Mexican cartels until they \textit{de facto} usurped the Colombian cartels and became themselves the most powerful criminal organizations in the world. There were certain distinguished phases in this development. The first phase was when the Mexican organizations, after the closing of the Caribbean routes, started to work as couriers. The second phase was when the Colombia DTOs started to pay out their Mexican counterparts in cocaine rather than money, creating for the Mexican DTOs new income generating opportunities, selling drugs to a domestic market that hardly was tapped into. The last stage is when the Colombians, faced with tough persecution by US Customs, DEA, and FBI and risking extradition, decided to even give up the US distribution and leave that in Mexican hands. From a business point of view, it was a rational strategy. The Colombians still made profits selling cocaine to the Mexican DTOs while not doing direct business in the USA with the risk of being extradited, the most fearsome thing for Latin American drug lords as described by García Márquez in \textit{Noticias de un Secuestro}.\footnote{The Colombians narco-mafia unleashed a campaign of terror in the 1990s to have the government reverse an extradition agreement with the United States. Later US laws were changed that not only directly selling drugs on US soil, but facilitating as well would be a reason for extradition.} On top of that, they still had the European market. However, Colombian drug lords underestimated the long arm of the US law and they were still arrested and extradited to the United States, this time on grounds that they were conspiring indirectly to import cocaine into the American market.

In the mid-1990s, domestic consumption rose exponentially. According to Grillo, capos started to pay their lieutenants with drugs, which they in turn started to sell to small dealers. In Tijuana, the number of heroin and crack addicts rose. These addicts bought their products from small \textit{tiendas} that were overseen and protected by strongmen affiliated with the Arellano Félix Organization. In Juárez, Amado Carrillo, leader of the Juárez Cartel, banned the sale of cocaine, part of a deal with the government according to Bowden and Molloy (2011: 62, 132), but after his death in 1997, domestic consumption and dealing grew exponentially. Predictably, drug related violence such as turf wars and robberies rose accordingly. Homicide levels shot up to 300 people a year, unseen numbers for Tijuana and Juárez, but still nothing compared with Juárez’ most violent year of 2010 in which 3,660 drug related killings were registered. The element of local, small-scale narcotics dealing -- in fact, unorganized crime -- added new dimensions to the matrix of violence. The drug violence south of the border started to receive international attention. Time magazine published an article on the terror of the Arellano Félix brothers with the telling title ‘La Nueva Frontera: The Border Monsters. Mexico's top drug
lords, the bloodthirsty Arellano Félix brothers, horrify even Tijuana’ (Padgett and Shannon, 2001). The violence in Tijuana also inspired the popular movie Traffic (2000), starring Benicio del Toro.

Carlos Salinas’ rule ended in 1994. Observers say the Salinas presidency was the zenith of corruption in Mexican politics and the presidency was marred with scandal after scandal. Allegation of corruption at the top were very pronounced during seventy years of PRI rule, but nothing was ever conclusively proven. However, as Grillo remarks, ‘investigations themselves highlight the depth of suspicion about the government’s role in organized crime at the end of the twentieth century’. Investigations focused mostly on the brother of the president, Raúl Salinas, whose wife was arrested when she tried to withdraw US$ 85 million from a Swiss bank account. Swiss police estimated Raúl Salinas to have US$ 500 million spread over 289 bank accounts all over the world. After interviewing ninety former associates, the Swiss police stated: ‘When president Carlos Salinas de Gortari became president of Mexico in 1988, Raúl Salinas de Gortari assumed control over practically all drug shipments in Mexico. Through his influence and bribes paid with drug money, officials of the army and the police supported and protected the flourishing drug business’ (Grillo, 2012: 84).

The president and his brother denied all allegations. At the end of the term of Carlos Salinas, 1994, brother Raúl was arrested for orchestrating the murder of José Francisco Ruiz Massieu, former brother-in-law and General Secretary of the PRI. In 1999, he was convicted to ten years of prison, but was released in 2005. According to Watt and Zepeda, one of the factors of the demise of the PRI and the election debacle in 2000 was ‘Mexicans’ disgust with the level of corruption within the presidential family’ (2010: 106).

In 1995, PRI candidate Ernesto Zedillo became president. Mexico was hit by a severe economic crisis, with the peso losing value and a double-digit inflation. The middle class lost its live savings, the number of billionaires halved, and companies went bankrupt creating high rates of unemployment. US President Clinton was able to bail out Mexico with US$ 50 billion and prevented the country from collapsing. Crime rose, especially in the capital of Mexico City, which had always been relatively safe. Carjacking, robberies, and kidnapping developed into an industry. According to Grillo, the failure of police to respond adequately to this crime wave laid the foundation for the general mood of lawlessness that became the feeding ground of the all-pervading impunity for the worst drug violence still to come. Important major players in narco-trafficking disappeared under Zedillo, leaving vacancies that were quickly filled by new capos. Juan García Ábrego from the Gulf cartel was arrested in 1996 on his ranch in Monterrey.
Amado Carrillo Fuentes died during complication of plastic surgery in 1997 in Mexico City, with his doctors being murdered shortly thereafter. Interestingly, a conspiracy theory presented by Hernández (2014: 110) says that Amado still lives but retired to live with his second family in Cuba.

Under Zedillo, an attempt was made to attack government corruption. Like many of the similar attempts by predecessors before Zedillo, it was questionable if these were sincere attempts, halfhearted intentions, or plainly cynical political moves to garner popular support by arresting some high profiles cases while leaving the corrupt system unchanged. Zedillo had Raúl Salinas arrested for attempted murder, ‘brave moves against his own corrupt establishment’, according to Grillo, as well as the governor of the South Eastern state of Quintana Roo on drug trafficking charges. In what seems a recurring pattern of drug fighting officials eventually becoming criminals themselves, Zedillo’s drug czar, General Jesús Gutiérrez Rebollo was arrested in 1997, barely eleven weeks after he had been appointed as chief of the anti-narcotics bureau, the Instituto Nacional para el Combate a las Drogas in 1996. He was, according to US drug czar General Barry McCaffrey, ‘a guy of absolute unquestioned integrity’. Gutiérrez Rebollo was accused of working with Amado Carrillo Fuentes, El Señor de los Cielos, in the early 1990s, Eventually, he was convicted to forty years and died in prison of cancer in 2013. The 1,100 Mexican troops trained by the United States for the Instituto Nacional para el Combate a las Drogas also became a liability. Watt and Zepeda note that the new forces hardly yielded any important arrests or seizures, but that on the contrary, many trainees were arrested for trafficking. They note that ‘in a terrible irony’ many of these drug fighting trainees later were employed as enforcers for the Gulf cartel and its armed wing, Los Zetas, in the same way that agents from the disbanded DFS had made a similar career move (2012: 129).

These incidents of blatant corruption confirm the tight relationship between authorities and organized crime as pointed out by Astorga, Grillo, Balderas, Hernández, Kenny, and Serrano, in fact nearly all authors studying Mexico’s drug problem. Watt and Zepeda put it explicitly: ‘The notion that the narco-trafficking industry existed in parallel to and entirely separately from the state, as Mexican politicians always claimed, has little credibility. […] since the beginning of the twentieth century, the smuggling of contraband in the United States has benefitted from official backing, complicity and collusion, despite legislation and campaigns to eradicate production and interdict shipments’ (2011: 6). Hernández takes the most radical stance, describing in Los Señores del Narco, translated as Narco Land, how cartels, government authorities, PJF, DFS, and the PGR work together in elaborate yet effective mechanisms.
According to her, there is effectively hardly a difference between mafia and authorities, a point of view repeated to me in a private conversation with Mexican investigative journalist Javier Valdez in 2016, before he was killed a year later.

During seven decades of PRI rule, the plaza arrangement between traffickers and authorities had been perfected. Certain areas could be very lucrative for police chiefs, write Watt and Zepeda. ‘Some would bribe their bosses in order to secure a placement in Tijuana or Guadalajara for example, where the profits for corrupt police willing to provide protection for police were considerable’ (2011: 57). In one example, a police chief paid the Mexican Attorney General one million dollars to be stationed in Guadalajara. ‘Those shrewd enough to understand who really had power, dutifully paid off the police, army and PRI every month’, conclude Watt and Zepeda (2011: 57). Conclusinly, the last decades of the twentieth century saw not only an explosive growth of the Mexican drug industry, but its firm entrenchment in all layers of Mexican society. The distinction between criminals and authorities not only became blurry, but in some cases, there was a complete overlap between the political, judiciary, and criminal class that became, so to say, ‘partners in crime’.

2.3 Changing the Guards: From PRI to PAN

2.3.1 The democratic transition and rearrangement of old structures

In 2000, Vicente Fox from the PAN (Partido Acción Nacional) was democratically elected, a historic moment for Mexico that meant the end of the seventy-one-year rule by the PRI (Partido Revolucionario Institucional). Most observers agree this was a groundbreaking event that shook up Mexican society at its foundations. Astorga, Grillo, Watt, and Zepeda all argue that the controlling mechanisms of the PRI state ended with the new transition and that the Mexican crime syndicates exploited this disintegration of traditional power structures to the fullest and repositioned themselves within Mexican society. This restructuring had two elements, first a challenging of the new authorities, the other a fierce competition in between cartels. It was exactly this reshuffling that resulted in levels of violence unseen before in the narcotics industry. ‘The Mexican Drug War is inextricably linked to the democratic transition’, argues Grillo. The ‘delicate dance’ between narco-traffickers and authorities suddenly ended. ‘The old regime may have been corrupt and authoritarian. But it had a surefire way of controlling and managing organized crime: taking down a few token gangsters and taxing the rest’ (2012: 10).
Whether the term ‘democratic’ is the appropriate term for the transition is highly disputable considering the ongoing corruption, human rights abuses, and clientelistic power structures, which are all well documented since the PAN took power. As Watts and Zepeda argue, ‘the so called “democratization” contributed to the escalation in the “war on drugs” as the PRI finally surrendered its dominance over the drug trade’ (2011: 143). Astorga is equally adamant while Grillo makes a useful analogy: ‘Just as the collapse of the Soviet Union ushered in an explosion of mafia capitalism; so did the demise of the PRI. Mexican special-force soldiers became mercenaries for gangsters. Businessmen who used to pay of corrupt officials had to pay off mobsters’ (2012: 10).

Like so many of his predecessors, Fox promised to attack the drug problem, saying on ABC’s program Nightline: ‘We are going to give the mother of all battles against organized crime in Mexico. No doubt.’ Initially, Fox was hesitant to use soldiers to fight narco-traffickers, but after meeting with American officials, he changed course and decided to deploy the army after all, reassuring the United States that in Fox they had found a reliable ally in the war on drugs after decades of corrupt PRI officials. During the Fox administration, major players of the narco-business were eliminated. The Tijuana cartel was severely weakened. Ramón Arellano Félix was killed at a traffic stop in Mazatlán in 2002. His brother Benjamin was arrested the same year. Javier Arellano Félix was arrested in 2006. The other members of the Arellano Félix clan is still at large, although the power of their once mighty family has dwindled. In 2003, Armando Valencia, from the Milenio cartel (based in Michoacán and Jalisco) and Osiel Cárdenas, from the Gulf cartel, were arrested in Tamaulipas. According to Grillo, a general mood of optimism that the narco-mafia could be rooted out started to take hold. He quotes three DEA agents: ‘Compared to the bad old days of Kiki Camarena, it is night and day. Mexico has really turned the corner in the fight against drug gangs. This country has a great future ahead’ (2012: 94).

However, a major embarrassment for the Fox administration was the escape of ‘El Chapo’ Guzmán in 2001 from the maximum-security prison Puente Grande, a prison that after the escape was jokingly called Puerta Grande. The escape was called ‘The Golden Kilo’, referring to the enormous amounts El Chapo had allegedly used to bribe prison officials so he could be smuggled out in a laundry cart. A popular conspiracy theory was that the Fox administration had deliberately allowed El Chapo to escape so his Sinaloa cartel might defeat the Arellano Félix group after which the government could make a gentleman’s agreement with Guzmán’s Sinaloa cartel, the same way Miguel Ángel Félix ‘El Padrino’ Gallardo, being the main capo in the 1980s, had worked together with the government and had guaranteed stability in the narco-
underworld. This conspiracy theory still holds firm ground, not only among large groups of the population, but is common amongst academics, journalists and politicians as well, most notably Mexico’s prime investigative reporter, Anabel Hernández. Many believe the government was protecting El Chapo so he could finish off with the Gulf Cartel and Los Zetas, using tactics the authorities were unwilling or unable to employ. This theory is not only prevalent in common opinion but has been found many times explicitly scrawled on the so-called narcomantas, banners hung up by crime groups to make statements or threats. A typical narcomanta, this one appearing in Piedras Negras, August 2008 said: ‘Si quieres que termine la Anarquía del Narcotráfico, ¿por qué tu gobierno no ataca a narcos como Joaquín ‘El Chapo’ Guzmán, a Ismael ‘Mayo’ Zambada…’ (El Universal, 2008, Grillo, 2012: 128)

One of the most prolific defenders of the thesis that El Chapo works with and for the government is investigative journalist Anabel Hernández who claims that El Chapo escaped from El Puente -- actually, walked out of the door -- after paying a multi-million bribe to the family of President Vicente Fox. She states very explicitly that the war on drugs as started by Calderón is ‘just as fake as that undertaken by the administration of Vicente Fox. In both cases, the ‘strategy’ has been limited to protecting the Sinaloa cartel’ (2014: 7). Grillo adheres to what he calls ‘the cock-up theory’ in explaining El Chapo’s first escape, meaning that it was not the result of deliberate policies, but became possible through a combination of coincidence, luck, and intelligence from the side of El Chapo, and mismanagement and incompetence on the side of the authorities. ‘Fox may have had nothing to do with Chapo Guzmán’s escape and no power of his subsequent rise. Simply, Guzmán and his mafia partners were the most effective gangsters at building a network of corrupt officials from all wings of government’, Grillo argues (2012: 93). Headed by El Chapo, the Sinaloa cartel became the most powerful cartel in Mexico in the early 2000s. This was not only because of El Chapo's expansive network of politicians and law enforcing authorities that were bribed by the cartel, but also by innovative use of technology. Where Pedro Avilés Pérez, godfather of the Sinaloa drug lords in the 1960s, had pioneered with airplanes to smuggle contraband, Chapo introduced the technique of digging tunnels under the border and employed engineers and architects to eventually build sophisticated underground passages. In Culiacán, he had several safe houses connected by a tunnel system. El Chapo was

41 Roughly half the people in Mexico I ever discussed this subject with, subscribed to this theory. In a private conversation in 2011, Howard Campbell also confessed his surprised that El Chapo had been at large for so long.
42 El Chapo was rearrested in 2014 but managed to escape again in 2015.
re-arrested in 2014, but managed to escape again in 2015 in a rather spectacular fashion: a nearly a mile-long tunnel was constructed leading to his cell.

2.3.2 The Battle of Nuevo Laredo, the first open drug violence in 2004

Popular opinion holds the drug violence started in 2006 when Calderon declared, like Fox had done before, an all-out war against the cartels. Except for the violent period in Tijuana in the late 1990s, which I mentioned in the preceding subsection, the drug violence actually started in the state of Tamaulipas in 2004, in what Grillo calls the Battle of Nuevo Laredo. This is the moment when the ‘War on Drugs’ transformed into the ‘Drug War’. It coincides with the rise of Mexico’s most brutal crime group, Los Zetas. They introduced ruthless tactics such as the use of paramilitary death squads, direct assaults on police forces with heavy weapons, mass kidnappings and massacres, tactics not seen before in the narco-world. The methods introduced by the Zetas were mimicked by other crime groups and spread to other regions and became commonplace all over Mexico. Grillo, who covered the events in Nuevo Laredo as a reporter, describes in detail the changing face of the drug violence. ‘Few saw the significance of the Nuevo Laredo turf war’, he says. Nuevo Laredo, on the eastern side of the 2,000-mile long border with the US is an important transit point for trade with the United States, with large cities such as Dallas and Houston close by. A relatively small city with only 307,000 residents in 2004, Nuevo Laredo was still the passing point of legitimate exports worth annually US$ 90 billion, twice as much as the US$ 43 billion that went through much larger Ciudad Juárez and four times as much as the US$ 22 billion worth that transited through Tijuana (2012: 95). During the prohibition, the area was already a hub of criminal activities centered around a bootlegger called Nepomuceno, whose crime syndicate later evolved into the Gulf Cartel. In 1998, Osiel Cárdenas Guillen ascended as ruthless head of the Gulf Cartel after killing Chava Gómez, who was at that time boss of the cartel. It earned him the nickname ‘El Mata Amigos’, Friends’ Killer, for his Machiavellian backstabbing tactics.

Tens of thousands of trucks and two thousand railways cars passed daily through Nuevo Laredo, a ‘trafficking fire hose’, according to Grillo, who points out that Nuevo Laredo was the only part of the border not controlled by the Sinaloa cartel while the Arellano Félix group was significantly weakened in their former power base of Tijuana. In a similar way as the Arellano Félix group had recruited gang members from San Diego as security personnel, Cárdenas wanted to create a ruthless militia that could form the bodyguards, foot soldiers and enforcers
of his Gulf Cartel. For this he looked into the army, more specifically, in its elite troops, who were already in the region to fight drug trafficking. According to Grillo, Cárdenas befriended Arturo Guzmán Decena, a commander from the Special Forces, the GAFE (Grupo Aeromóvil de Fuerzas Especiales). According to Turbiville (2010: 130) ‘a watershed moment in paramilitary recruitment’. Guzmán was to become the first Zeta with code name Z-1. Grillo gives some explanations why a Special Forces soldier would defect to join organized crime. He points at the turbulent period the army found itself in during the period of democratization. Protesters marched in the capital and wanted justice for disappeared family members. Immunity and impunity for members of the armed forces were no longer guaranteed and many found themselves under intense scrutiny, and many were court-martialed, for human rights abuses and involvement in narco-trafficking. A notorious example was General Gutiérrez Rebollo, mentioned earlier, who received a forty-year sentence for narco-related corruption.43

Guzmán started to recruit a few dozen fellow officers from the ranks of Mexico’s Special Forces that, trained by US and Israeli commandos and with combat experience brutally repressing the Zapatista uprising in the mid-1990s, had a fearsome professional background. Soon, Guzmán headed a militia of forty Zetas, heavily armed with sophisticated weaponry and trained by the best people in the field worldwide. Cárdenas, according to Grillo (2012: 98), confident with the fearsome militia that backed him up, made the mistake to assault an envoy with FBI and CIA agents and their informer in 1999. A shootout was narrowly averted and the Americans and informer managed to escape, but the United States put a US$ 2 million price on Cárdenas’ head. The Mexican government sent more troops to Tamaulipas to defeat the Gulf Cartel and its armed wing. According to Grillo, back in the ‘old days’ traffickers would negotiate a surrender, like Félix Gallardo in 1989, and would hand themselves over without bloodshed, confident that a mutual beneficial deal could be made with authorities. Cárdenas, however, chose to confront the authorities head-on and became what Grillo calls the first narco insurgente. ‘The modus operandi that had regulated the Mexican drug trade for decades was dead, opening the curtains for the coming war’ (2012: 99). Fierce gun battles between Zetas and the army became common in Tamaulipas. In November 2002, while eating in a restaurant, army units opened fire before Guzmán could even defend himself. The autopsy showed fifty bullets killed Guzman, a remarkable contrast with the 1989 arrest of top capo Gallardo, also in a restaurant, but without firing a shot. In March 2003, the army managed to locate Cárdenas in

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43 Gutiérrez Rebollo took bribes from the Juárez cartel and was recorded while discussing with Amado Carrillo Fuentes bribes in exchange for facilitation of trafficking.
a safe house. A siege resulted in a fierce shoot out in which more than thousands of rounds and fragmentation grenades were used by his loyal Zetas in an escalation of weaponry employed and never before seen. Cárdenas was eventually arrested, but even the army convoy on its way to the airport was ambushed by Zetas to free the captured Gulf Cartel boss. The fierceness of these battles, and the fact that it was an all-out assault on the authorities were novelties in the drug violence.

Another new dimension in the drug violence came in the form of inter-cartel violence. Back in the old days of the Guadalajara group, cartels respected each other’s territory. Now the Sinaloa Cartel sensed there were new business opportunities and tried to make an incursion in the territory of the Gulf Cartel that had been weakened after the arrest of Osiel Cárdenas and the killing of Guzmán. According to a trafficker turned informant (Grillo, 2012: 100), important capos from the Sinaloa cartel, including the recently escaped ‘El Chapo’ Guzmán, and ‘El Barbas’ Beltrán Leyva, discussed how they could extend their control, which now was from the Pacific Coast to Juarez eastwards to control the complete Texas/Mexican border. ‘The first phase of the Mexican Drug War pitted the might of the Sinaloa Cartel against the insurgent Zetas’, writes Grillo. The Sinaloa cartel seriously underestimated its adversaries. Many of the foot soldiers fighting for the Sinaloa cartel were former gang members recruited from the Mara Salvatrucha gangs from El Salvador and Honduras, but even these ferocious fighters were easily defeated by the Zetas with their military style tactics. According to Slater, members of Los Zetas carried out raids on Sinaloa safe houses and these captured enemies, called ‘contras’, were sometimes killed and sometimes used as live targets in training exercises (2016: 103).

In October 2004, the bodies of five murdered Mara Salvatrucha members were dropped in front of one of their safe houses with a narco manta: ‘Chapo Guzmán and Beltrán Leyva. Send more pendejos to us to kill’. This use of communicative, expressive, and symbolic violence as a tactic to terrorize the enemy was also a novelty in the drug war, and was quickly adopted by other groups as well. President Fox sent 700 additional troops (soldiers and federal police) to stop the violence in what was called Operación Mexico Seguro. The intervention of the Army to pacify competing and fighting drug cartels was another novelty in the drug war. According to Grillo, ‘Nuevo Laredo was a laboratory for government strategy as well as cartel tactics’ (2012: 102). He describes how the army arrested a group of seventeen Zetas and had them pose for the press, a common practice in Mexican law enforcement for propagandist

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44 Literally pubic hair, but normally used in the sense of ‘asshole’.
purposes, showing the country humiliated criminals captured by the victorious authorities. However, according to Grillo, ‘The thugs flashed across Mexican television, standing straight-backed and staring hard in front of automatic rifles, flak jackets and radios. It let everyone know the Zetas were a gang to be feared.’ Images of these seemingly unmoved criminals with their sophisticated weaponry inspired other criminal groups as well. These mimetic aspects and imitation of violence will be discussed in subsection 3.2.5 where I will discuss the matrix of violence.

After the death of Guzmán, Heriberto Lazcano, nicknamed ‘the Executioner’, took up the leadership of the Zetas. Whereas Guzmán, as the original Zeta with codename Z-1, Lazcano became Z-3. Zeta tactics became increasingly brutal and aimed at intimidating the authorities. When prison guards in Matamoros refused to smuggle in luxuries for Zeta prisoners, six guards were abducted, blindfolded, handcuffed, and executed point blank.45 When Alejandro Domínguez Coello, head of the chamber of commerce, was nominated head of the Nuevo Laredo police force in 2005, he explicitly spoke out against criminals holding the city hostage. ‘Within hours of taking office Wednesday, the new top cop was killed in a hail of gunfire, presumably by drug traffickers’, wrote the LA Times (Dickerson, 2005). In 2011, in a striking resemblance of the Domínguez murder, another Nuevo Laredo police chief, former army general Manuel Farfán, was killed (Althaus and Buch, 2011).

Criminals targeting authorities was a new phase. The next phase in the escalation of violence was that of federal police attacking local police and vice versa. This could be seen as a form of proxy war, adding a new dimension to the matrix of violence as I will discuss in more detail in subsection 3.2.1. During the battle of Juárez, which will be discussed shortly, a similar proxy war was going on between the municipal police who were said to be ‘in the pockets’ of the Juárez Cartel, and the Federal Police, who were said to work for the Sinaloa Cartel. ‘The rot in the Mexican state was rising to the surface’, writes Grillo (2012: 103). One day after the murder of Domínguez, a row between local and federal police that started with a traffic search escalated into a fistfight and subsequently in a firefight. The next day, the federal police raided the local police station and detained the complete local force of 700 men who were tested for drug use and investigated whether they had ties with organized crime. ‘There is clear evidence of the relationship between drug gangs and the Nuevo Laredo police force’, the presidential spokesman Rubén Aguilar declared (Althaus and Grillo, 2005). In another incident, federal

45 This is the version from Grillo. Grayson suggests it may have been a revenge for a siege by federal troops in the La Palma prison near Mexico City where many top Zetas were held (Grayson, 2010: 61).
police officers raided a safe house and found forty-four bound and bleeding prisoners, who said they had been kidnapped by the local police force and handed over to the Zetas. ‘Evidence of police working for the insurgent Zetas was startling, but would soon become depressingly typical in Mexico’, writes Grillo. Six years later, in 2011, right after the murder of Nuevo Laredo police chief Manuel Farfán, the US Consul General in Monterrey wrote to Washington DC about the ‘thorough penetration’ of the Zetas in many local police forces in Tamaulipas (Althaus and Buch, 2011). To complicate the situation, many federal police officers were found working for the Sinaloa cartel, putting the arrests of Zetas by los federales in a different perspective. Some questioned if these arrests were carried out in the name of public security, or on the orders of the Sinaloa Cartel. Even if Zetas were arrested with sincere intentions, it made their opponents stronger. This mechanism has been exploited by the cartels, especially the Sinaloa Cartel, which informed the authorities of the whereabouts of their competitors. Roston describes how Humberto Loya Castro, a lawyer who was one of ‘El Chapo’ Guzmán’s advisers, worked as an informer for the DEA and was instrumental in dismantling the Tijuana Cartel (Roston, 2012). Grillo comments on this new dimension in the drug violence where law enforcing agencies working for competing crime groups started to fight each other in a proxy war. ‘In the old days, police officers were rotten, but at least they worked together’ (2012: 104).

While the war had its epicenter in Nuevo Laredo, the Zetas infiltrated in areas traditionally controlled by the Sinaloa Cartel and expanded their territory, helped by the fact that their numerical strength kept growing. Not only was their reputation of the most ferocious criminal group attractive for aspiring young criminals who wanted to join ‘the winning team’, Heriberto ‘the Executioner’ Lazcano even put up job advertisements on banners hung across the streets, one of them proclaiming: ‘The Zeta operation group wants you, soldier or ex-soldier.’ The Zetas also started to recruit foreign elements, notably Kaibile special forces from the Guatemala army that had, according to Grillo, proved in the Guatemala civil war to possess a ferociousness that was superior to that of their Mexican counterparts. It is worth noting that in a bitter form of cultural appropriation, the Kaibile took their name from an Indian chief who fought bravely against the conquistador Pedro de Alvarado, ‘thus taking on the courage of the indigenous peoples while committing the atrocities attributed to the conquerors.’ (Franco, 2013: 6)

Zeta units were paid for by the Gulf Cartel, but they also started to generate their own income, notably with extortion. Local cells of Zetas sprung up all over the country, made

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46 Others banners said: ‘We offer you a good salary, food and attention for your family. Don’t suffer hunger or abuse anymore.’ ‘Join the ranks of the Gulf Cartel. We offer benefits, life insurance, a house for your family and children…’ (Grillo, 2012: 105).
possible by a franchise system, where locale criminals would receive training and could use the ‘brand’ name, in exchange for payments to the leadership in Tamaulipas. I will further elaborate on the business model and corporate tactics of the Zetas in subsection 4.2.1.

The new Zeta cells clashed now in areas that used to be under tight control of the traditional crime groups, mostly the Sinaloa cartels. Extreme violent incidents started to happen in Sonora, Michoacán, and Guerrero. New, even more brutal tactics became common. The Zetas broke ‘every cardinal rule’ of the traditional DTOs, comments Longmire (2012) in Small Wars Journal, killing innocent bystanders, pregnant women and children, an observation shared as well by Campbell and Valdez.\(^47\) and later by poet Javier Sicilia who compared the cartel hit men with Nazi Sonderkommandos (2011).

In April 2006, the heads of two Acapulco police officers were deposed at the town hall. It was the first incident in modern day Mexico of decapitation, which became common all over Mexico in a matter of years. Observers disagree if this tactic was learned from the Kaibite commandos who in Guatemala sometimes beheaded their captured rebels to terrorize the population, or if it was a copycat reaction to the Al Qaeda decapitation in 2002 of Wall Street Journal reporter Daniel Pearl, whose beheading had been for all to see on TV and internet. Others point at the pre-Colombian practices of beheadings to assert dominion over enemies, a practice that is common in many conflicts, and was a standard procedure to deal with class enemies during the French Revolution (Janes, 1991). In subsection 3.2.5 I will elaborate more on the brutal tactics employed by the DTOs.

Other groups took over the Zeta tactics and created well-armed paramilitary hit squads as well. In September 2006, members from the La Familia cartel in Michoacán threw five decapitated heads on a disco dance floor. By the end of 2006, there were dozens more cases of decapitations. In the next years, this number rose to the hundreds. Most were filmed and put on YouTube, one of the cruelest being an execution decapitation with a chain saw (Livegore).

2.3.3 Michoacán, Culiacán, Juárez: Calderón’s war on drugs and the escalation of violence.

The elections of 2006 were tight and contested. The candidate of the PAN was Felipe Calderón, a Harvard educated career politician. His father was Luis Calderón, who had been a militant in the so-called Cristero rebellion, an armed conflict in which Catholics defended the church

against the repression of revolutionary generals. This war, in the late 1920s, claimed the lives of some 90,000 people and was the most recent extreme violent Mexican conflict before the current drug violence broke out. Luis Calderón became one of the co-founders of the PAN, in which he sought a third way, a faith based political Catholicism with a strong focus on social justice as an alternative for two other main political currents at that time, atheist socialism and protestant liberalism.

The contender of Felipe Calderón was Andrés Manuel López Obrador from the leftist PRD (Partido de la Revolución Democrática). López Obrador, the former mayor of Mexico City, was a charismatic speaker who could inspire crowds of thousands. Others called him a populist in Hugo Chávez’ tradition. The PAN tried to obstruct his campaign, and prosecutors filed charges over an obscure land deal, charges that could result in annulling López Obrador’s candidacy. For many it was obvious that it amounted to a political maneuver, and López Obrador was able to mobilize hundreds of thousands of supporters, while international media criticized incumbent president Fox for sabotaging Mexico’s democratic elections. Seeing that the charges backfired, Fox eventually dropped them, but according to Grillo, it left a permanent stain on Mexican politics in which politicians facing accusations of criminal and corrupt character would claim these charges were political motivated fabrications, making ‘the job of cleaning up Mexico’s rotten establishment’ even more complicated. ‘The left was right to defend López Obrador. But later they rallied around politicians facing credible charges of working with the mafia’ (2012: 107).

Campaign rhetoric was in particular polarized. López Obrador accused the political elite of being a ‘gang of mafia capitalists’, Calderón accused his opponent of being a populist with mad and messianic tendencies who would steer Mexico into an abyss. Eventually, in July 2006, Calderón won with a margin of 0.58 percent, the smallest ever in Mexican history. Both sides declared themselves winner. López Obrador accused Calderón of stealing the elections and protests broke out all over Mexico. In the capital, supporters set up camps, and in Oaxaca, a teachers’ strike turned into a full rebellion against the PRI governor, escalating in violent protests, barricades in the streets, and buses burned causing fifteen casualties. Still acting president Fox sent 4,000 federal police to take back the capital of Oaxaca. At Calderón’s inauguration, PRD deputies in congress were physically fighting to occupy the podium where the new president was to be sworn in, while López Obrador announced that he was the legitimate president and formed an alternative parallel government.
In this atmosphere of chaos and insecurity, Calderón first priority was to restore order and portray himself as a strong leader. Ten days after being sworn in under loud protest from PRD delegates, he declared Operación Conjunta Michoacán (Presidencia, 2016), the start of an all-out war on the drug cartels and assigning the armed forces a crucial role. Calderón used strong rhetoric (*El Universal*, Discurso, 2016), with phrases such as ‘reconquering territory’, ‘we are not going to surrender’, ‘persevere until victory is achieved’, ‘a fight between good and evil’. Many observers like Grillo (2016:110), Campbell and Hansen (2014: 158) question if this show of strength and decisiveness was a compensation for his narrowly won elections and even for Calderón physical stature, short, bald and bespectacled, that had been mocked by political opponents and cartoonists.

Michoacán was the home state of the president where the cartel of La Familia, at that time affiliated with the Zetas, was carrying out brutal acts with near impunity, one of the most shocking of which was the dumping of five severed heads on a disco floor in Uruapán, which occurred a few months before Calderón took office. The same as his predecessor Fox had done in Tamaulipas, Calderón sent in the army, with 6,500 troops, backed up by helicopters and navy gunboats. Later he opened other fronts, sending 7,000 troops to Acapulco, 3,300 soldiers and federal police to Tijuana and 6,000 more into the Sierra Madre. Within a few months, nearly 50,000 troops – nearly the complete federal police force and a significant part of the military – were involved. Army involvement has always been disputable. Astorga and Shirk (2010: 3) point at the lack of ‘legal mandate and training for domestic law enforcement and criminal investigations’ and quote Moloeznik who suggests at its worst, army involvement has produced a ‘dramatic increase in human rights violations’ and ‘unnecessarily escalated the level of violence and conflict.’

To defeat the narco-trafficking organizations, Calderón opted for the so-called ‘kingpin’ strategy’: capturing or eliminating the leaders of the cartels. Comparable with the deck of cards released by the Americans after the 2003 invasion of Iraq that featured all the high commanders in Saddam Hussein’s entourage, Calderón’s attorney general Eduardo Medina Mora released in 2009 a list (PGR, 2009) of the thirty-nine most wanted drug traffickers. Twenty-two of them were actually apprehended during Calderón’s presidency. Extraditions were facilitated and in the first month fifteen capos were sent to the United States, among them Osiel Cárdenas.

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(arrested in 2003), former head of the Gulf Cartel, and Héctor ‘El Güero’ Palma (arrested in 1993), one of the early leaders from the Sinaloa Cartel.

Calderón was confident that his heavy-handed tactics would deal a decisive blow to the narco-trafficking industry, in the same way that Operation Condor had actually inflicted considerable damage on the narco-trafficking industry in the 1970s. Critics charged that under the pretext of restoring order, like in Operation Condor, Calderón cracked down on leftist movements that, during the Fox presidency, had taken some brazen actions with near impunity, such as occupying the capital of the state of Oaxaca and the protests in Atenco near Mexico City where militants had kidnapped police officers to protest the construction of an airport (Thompson, 2002). ‘The militarization of Mexico under the rubric of “the war on drugs” can be seen as a tool with which to maintain control of an unpredictable political climate’, write Watt and Zepeda, and they give the example of attacks of Zapatista communities in 2008 and Operation Chihuahua in September 2009 in which the army targeted peasant and indigenous leaders who had become visible after anti-NAFTA protests (2012: 205-207).

In early 2007, Calderón met with US President George W. Bush, a meeting in which the United States offered a package of $1.6 billion spread over three years consisting of military equipment (thirteen Bell and eight Black Hawk helicopters, four Casa CN-235 transport planes, gamma scanners and surveillance and phone tap gear) as well as training. Although the aid was actually small compared with Mexico’s annual security budget of US$ 15 billion, advocates said the plan showed the United States was finally taking responsibility, quietly acknowledging the American appetite for drugs was part of the problem. Critics argued that the Mérida Initiative primary focused on military support, while ignoring social ills and endemic government corruption that made it possible for narco-trafficking to flourish in the first place. Initially, Calderón’s offensive produced spectacular results. In March 2007, federal agents raided a house in Mexico City owned by Chinese business man called Zhen Li Gon and confiscated US$ 207 million in cash, a world record that has not yet been broken and that was allegedly made from the trafficking of crystal methamphetamine. Li Go was arrested in the United States and accused of importing huge quantities of precursor chemicals to produce crystal meth. He claimed he was innocent and explained the cash as campaign funds for the PAN that he had been asked to store, a story a large segment of the Mexican public actually believed, illustrating the lack of confidence in the authorities amongst the population.

Another world record was set in October 2007 when marines entered a ship in the industrial port of Manzanillo on the Pacific coast and found 23.5 metric tons of cocaine. Sold on the
consumer level, the amount had a street value of roughly US$ 2 billion. Meanwhile, the drug violence that had raged during the last years of the Fox presidency continued unabated. Now the Sinaloa cartel and the Zetas were fighting each other in six states. Decapitations and gory snuff movies were increasingly circulating on the Internet. However, in August 2007, as reported by a police informer and later corroborated by narco-trafficker Édgar ‘La Barbie’ Valdez (Grillo, 2016: 116), the Sinaloa Cartel sat down with the Gulf Cartel and Zetas and discussed a truce. The meeting took place in Monterrey and the competing cartels agreed on the territories they would control. The Gulf and Zetas would control their original territory, the northeast including Nuevo Laredo, as well as the entire eastern state of Veracruz as well as Monterrey, Mexico’s third largest industrial city. The Sinaloa Cartel, represented by Beltrán ‘El Barbas’ Leyva, would keep their territory, including Acapulco but also acquired San Pedro Garza, a suburb of Monterrey and actually the most prosperous municipality in Mexico. Predictably, with this agreement amongst cartel leaders, the violence abated later that year. Attorney General Eduardo Medina Mora was confident that the Calderón’s war yielded results.

In 2008, however, the violence exploded once again in what Grillo calls phase two of the drug war. Phase one was the 2005 incursion of the Sinaloa Cartel into Gulf and Zeta territory in Nuevo Laredo. Phase two was ‘a civil war in the Sinaloa Empire’ (2016: 117). Nuevo Laredo was now under control by the Zetas and was quiet, whereas most of the violence took place in the triangle formed by the three northwestern states: Baja California, Chihuahua, and Sinaloa. The leaders of the Sinaloa cartel, ‘El Chapo’ Guzmán and Ismael ‘El Mayo’ Zambada, started to challenge their former allies and became involved in territorial disputes in Juárez, where they fought against the Sinaloan Vicente ‘El Viceroy’ Carrillo Fuentes, the brother of Amado ‘El Señor de los Cielos’ Carrillo Fuentes. In Tijuana, El Chapo and El Mayo were pitted against the remnants of the Arellano Félix group and in Sinaloa, in Culiacán actually, they battled their former friend and ally Beltrán Leyva.49

Grillo offers two possible explanations for this sudden escalation in violence in 2008. The Mexican government and the DEA argued that their offensive, with for instance the seizure of 23.5 tons of cocaine, was successful and had increased the strain and competition on the Sinaloa Cartel who now took revenge by killing federal officers. There was infighting in the Sinaloa Cartel over who would compensate for the lost drugs lost. There were also disputes over plaza

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49 Stewart pinpoints the internal fighting in the Sinaloa cartel a few years earlier, September 2004, when Rodolfo Carrillo Fuentes was killed in Culiacán, allegedly by El Chapo’s gunmen. Brother Vicente Carrillo Fuentes retaliated by having El Chapo Guzmán’s brother killed in jail (Stewart, 2012).
payments, the taxes for the right to work in a territory controlled by a certain crime group. The other argument was the conspiracy theory discussed earlier, which was actually presented by the narco-traffickers themselves and widely supported by Mexican academics and journalists. It was said that ‘El Chapo’ Guzmán and ‘El Mayo’ Zambada had made an agreement with officials in the federal government with the aim to become the dominant drug cartel that would guarantee stability and peace and would end the violence. Part of their strategy was to betray competitors, like they had done with the Arelano Félix groups and with Alfredo Leyva Beltrán, the brother of Arturo ‘El Barbas’ Leyva Beltrán, who was arrested in early 2008 in Culiacán. The other capos reacted by attacking not only El Chapo Guzmán’s troops, but also federal officers who they considered allies of El Chapo.

This theory, explained in detail by Hernández, was put out in narcomantas. This one appeared by the end of 2010 in different places in Mexico: ‘This letter is for citizens so that they know that the federal government protects Chapo Guzmán, who is responsible for the massacre of innocent people… Chapo Guzmán is protected by the PAN since Vicente Fox, who came in and set him free. The deal is still on today… We invite the government to attack all cartels’ (Grillo, 2016: 118). Indeed, in the end of 2008, an operation called Operation Clean House uncovered a network of twenty-five federal officials such as police commanders, detectives, and soldiers that had been paid by the Sinaloa Cartel. Some, however, were working for other people in the cartel and in the same operation, fifty agents were arrested that worked for Arturo ‘El Barbas’ Leyva Beltrán.

The violence in Culiacán, where forces of El Chapo were battling those of El Barbas, was particularly ferocious. In 2008, 1,168 were killed in Sinaloa, most in the capital of Culiacán. There were firebombs, massacres, ambushes, and cut up bodies. The fact that the enemies had once been allies made it even bloodier, since everybody knew the exact whereabouts and details of the private lives of their opponents: ‘they knew each other’s safe houses were; which police they had on their payroll; which front companies they owned’, writes Grillo (2016: 121).

In May 2008, the son of El Chapo, university student Édgar Guzmán, was killed. Édgar was said not to be involved in the family business, taking the feud to an even more personal level. Another grave incident was the murder of federal police chief Édgar Milán who was murdered in his house in Mexico City in the same month. Investigations proved ‘El Barbas' Leyva Beltrán had ordered the attack, most likely to avenge the arrest of his brother Alfredo earlier that year. This incident marked another escalation and was interpreted by the government as a direct challenge of federal authorities. Narco-trafficking no longer posed merely a criminal problem,
but developed into a threat to national security. The government sent more troops to Culiacán to arrest Leyva Beltrán’s people which resulted in more bloodshed, one of the worst incidents being a federal police unit being ambushed and resulting in seven slain officers. Authorities closed in on Leyva Beltrán and in December 2009, American agents located him in a safe house in Cuernavaca, a rich suburb of Mexico City. A unit from the Mexican Navy (SEMAR, Secretaría de Marina) carried out the arrest, having the most respected and incorruptible reputation. As a WikiLeaks cable commented, ‘Its success puts the Army (SEDENA) in the difficult position of explaining why it has been reluctant to act on good intelligence and conduct operations against high-level targets’ (WikiLeaks, 2009), referring to the many instances that the army had refused to arrest certain narco-traffickers after having received specific intelligence of their whereabouts. Hundreds of marines surrounded the complex with a helicopter hovering overhead. Allegedly, Leyva Beltrán called Édgar ‘La Barbie’ Valdez to help him out, but the latter suggested the situation was hopeless and that he would be better off to give up. In true ‘Scarface’ fashion, a two-hour firefight ensued in which finally marines stormed the house and killed Leyva Beltrán and five of his aids. His bullet-ridden body was decorated with peso bills and police took snapshots in much the same way narco desecrate their victims and post images of their results on the web. Leyva Beltrán was buried at La Humaya cemetery in Culiacán, where capos have erected sometimes three-story high mausoleums to honor their dead. At the funeral of one of the marines that had died during the siege, gunmen burst in and killed four family members. Although the death of one of the most notorious traffickers was a victory for Calderón, the violence ensued and entered what Grillo, following phase two of the Sinaloa civil war, called phase three: The drug war spread to a dozen states, including Guerrero, Jalisco, Colima, Veracruz, México, and Puebla, and involving at least an equal number of cartels.

After Nuevo Laredo, Ciudad Juárez was maybe the most strategic city for the DTOs. It is located in the middle of the US-Mexican border, on the other side of the river of its Texan twin city El Paso. The DEA estimates that seventy percent of the cocaine for the US market passes through this boundary (Wainwright, 2016: 32). Juárez became emblematic for the drug violence when the fight between the Juárez Cartel and the Sinaloa Cartel for the plaza escalated in a full-blown war. With thousands of youngsters from the impoverished slums working as hit men for one of the two groups, Juárez became in 2009 the most violent city on the planet, overtaking Baghdad and Mogadishu, with multiple murders, massacres, and drive by shootings. These
were not only daily but sometimes even hourly events. Calderón dispatched thousands of troops and sent in more reinforcements, but they were unable to quell the violence.

In 2010, with 3,660 murders, roughly ten a day, the city had even become worse. At that time, I often accompanied El Diario photographer Lucia Soria and we literally sped from one crime scene to the next. Ninety-eight percent of murder cases were never solved, creating an anarchistic and fatalistic mood caused by the near impunity in the city. Confidence in the authorities plummeted. Municipal police were notoriously corrupt. There were purges of the municipal police, who were thought to be in league with the cartels, and these charges were often correct. In 2011, the new mayor of Juárez, Héctor 'Teto' Murguía, declared that half of his police force had ties with organized crime.50

Thirty percent of the population had fled, those who could afford it to El Paso, the impoverished migrants back to their original states of origin such as Guerrero and Oaxaca, with state governments even paying for transportation for returnees. The remaining population was confronted with a collapsed economy and the unemployed were driven to crime, either by working for the cartels and their armed sections, called the Artistas Asesinos (Sinaloa Cartel) and Los Aztecas (Juárez Cartel) or starting as independent small criminal entrepreneurs. Ciudad Juárez had become a case study for ‘urban failure’ in which one incident that bordered on the unimaginable was soon followed by another that surpassed the first. Sicarios who only wounded their targets went in the emergency rooms where doctors were operating on the victims to finish the kill. Even doctors were targeted. Small, opportunistic criminals exploited the general atmosphere of near impunity and lawlessness, and ‘unorganized crime’ started to flourish. Racketeering and extortion skyrocketed, forcing business to close and creating more unemployment. One of the most cynical examples was that sicarios who wanted from 30,000 to 80,000 pesos monthly (approximately US$ 2000 – $5000) protection money, la cuota, from funeral houses. A funeral parlor worker explained: ‘They told us that it was because of them that we had so much business and that we had to share the profits’ (Noticias Terra, 2007). Illustrative of the level of general chaos was one incident in which aspiring criminals trying to obtain protection money by pretending to work for the Sinaloa Cartel were killed by the real cartel members who objected that their brand name was abused. After sunset, Juárez became a ghost town. The once lively center where Americans from El Paso came to party in bars, clubs,

50 Interview with the mayor Héctor Murguía, 12 December 2012

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and bordellos, was deserted at night. In the business center, roughly half the stores were closed, their owners suspending business after too many threats or simply after having had their shops effectively burnt down after refusal to pay *la cuota*. Even the mayor of Juárez at that time, José Reyes Ferriz, was no longer staying overnight in his own city but crossed every night into El Paso to spend the night in a safe location.

In 2011, murder rates finally started to drop. The authorities boasted that this was caused by the tough law and order approach of newly appointed police chief Julián Leyzola, who had previously managed to get crime under control in his previous position as head of police in Tijuana, but who has also been accused of grave human rights violations. Others say violence decreased simply because the Sinaloa Cartel emerged as victor of the battle for the *plaza* of Juárez. A missionary told me that there was simply nobody left to kill and referred to the dwindling murder rate as ‘the silence of a graveyard’ (Voeten, 2012). President Calderón’s socioeconomic program *Todos Somos Juárez* provided alternatives for excluded youth in the barrios and may have also slowed down crime.

According to Dudley (2014), the Juárez Cartel lost during the battle much of its drug-based income and had to resort to kidnapping and extortion to finance its battle, losing essential support from the population and paving the way for the authorities to make arrangements with the Sinaloa Cartel. Observers such as Hernández and Campbell suggested that the federal authorities and U.S. law enforcement favored the Sinaloa DTO and set them up as the victors. It was likely a combination of these factors. The Juárez Cartel became seriously weakened after the arrest of José Antonio ‘El Diego’ Acosta in July 2011. ‘El Diego’ Acosta was a former police officer who became one of the top enforcers of the Juárez Cartel. He confessed to having been responsible for the killing of more than 1,500 people (Borunda, Eje Central TV, 2011) and was behind some of the worst massacres in Juárez, including the killings at rehabilitation clinics where members of the *Artistas Asesinos*, the armed wing of the Sinaloa Cartel, were allegedly hiding. A year later, another kingpin from the Juárez cartel, Benjamín Valeriano, was arrested, accelerating the demise of the once powerful Juárez cartel.

Meanwhile, Calderón’s policy backfired in other states, notably on the Pacific Coast where the Zetas were rapidly expanding in southern states such as Chiapas, Oaxaca, and spilling over the border into Guatemala, recruiting from the vast reserve of underemployed country boys, the traditional recruitment base for Mexican Armed Forces. By 2010, the Mexican intelligence

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51 Own observations and talks with residents during trips to Juárez in June and October, 2009, March and May 2010, January, April and May 2011 and March 2012.
agency CISEN (Centro de Investigación y Seguridad Nacional) estimated that the Zetas had become an organization numbering tens of thousands of people, expanding its business to extortion, kidnapping, and looting. The Gulf Cartel could no longer control its armed wing that now, under command of people like ‘The Executioner’ Lazcano, had started to become an independent organization that revolved against its former employers. Zetas found fresh waves of victims to be kidnapped and exploited, and extorted the thousands of Central and Latin American migrants that tried to get to the United States. The Zetas committed atrocities, ‘that even made seasoned cartel bosses sick… Violence was no longer a way of control, but a basic language of communication’, comments Grillo (2016: 128), pointing at the symbolic aspect of the violence that overtook the instrumental dimension. One of the most notorious cases was the San Fernando (in the state of Tamaulipas) massacre in August 2010 in which seventy-two Central and Latin American migrants were kidnapped and executed point blank after allegedly refusing to work for the Zetas. In the east, Zetas started to run the prisons and extort fellow criminals (Grayson, 2013: 63). In a particularly brazen attempt, in May 2009, filmed by security cameras, thirty heavily armed men, believed to be Zetas but dressed in federal police uniforms entered the prison and released fifty-three inmates, mostly Zetas. The whole operation took place with military style precision and lasted only a few minutes.

Authorities as well as most narco-traffickers saw the Zetas as a gang of psychopathic killers that needed to be terminated. Battles with Zetas, armed with heavy machine guns (such as the .50 cal) and rocket propelled grenades, sometimes lasted for hours with dozens of casualties, ‘making the drug war look at least like a real, traditional war’, comments Grillo. Vigilante groups, run by other cartels, such as de Matazetas (Zetakillers)52 emerged, adding yet another dimension to the drug violence. Calderón dispatched even more army troops, creating more collateral damages as many civilians fell in the crossfire. In the same way in Sinaloa in the early 1930s, many in Juárez and Nuevo Laredo saw the federal troops as an occupying force. As in most urban battlefields, criminals easily blended in with the local population, considered accomplices by los federales. This charge was not completely untrue, as many locals worked for their local crime group as lookouts. In a query in Juárez in 2009, ninety-five percent of the population indicated in a poll from local newspaper El Diario that they did not have any confidence that the army would bring peace and stability to the city. This was a remarkably

52 According to Steward in Stratfor Security Weekly, November 2012, the Matazetas was a name sometimes used by the Cartel de Jalisco Nueva Generación, an offspring from the Sinaloa cartel.
high percentage since traditionally, according to Grayson, the army is held in high esteem in Mexico and is seen as one of the rare institutions not corrupted by drug violence.

Confidence in the police forces was just as low, especially the municipal police forces, which, having grown up in the same city as the criminals they were supposed to fight, were easily susceptible to corruption. The security forces meanwhile took considerable losses and were being attacked in guerrilla style tactics, being ambushed, kidnapped, and executed. In Michoacán, three soldiers and two police officers were killed in July 2009 in retaliation for the arrest of Arnoldo Rueda Medina, a chief of the La Familia cartel. In July 2010 in Juárez, a terrorist style car bomb killed a police officer and a medical worker who were lured to the scene by a wounded man left as a decoy. Over the years to come, these attacks on law enforcement officials intensified, giving rise to the argument that indeed a true criminal insurgency was taking place.

During his last years, Calderón continued the kingpin strategy. High profile arrests continued to be made. Grayson (2013: 3) presents a list of 110 important capos captured or killed during his tenure, many that were featured on the PGR list of the thirty-nine most wanted, such as Héctor Alfredo ‘El Mochomo’ Beltrán Leyva (arrested January 2008, Culiacán), Ignacio ‘Nacho’ Coronel Villareal (killed July 2010), Édgar ‘La Barbie’ Valdez Villareal (independent Acapulco cartel, captured August 2010), Ezequiel ‘Tony Tormenta’ Cardénas Guillén (killed November 2010), Arturo ‘El Barbas’ Beltrán Leyva (killed December 2010), and Heriberto Lazcano Lazcano (captured October 2012). The violence, however, went on unabated. Secret cables published by WikiLeaks (Wilkinson, 2010b) show the US authorities were getting increasingly concerned by what was called by some a ‘criminal insurgency’ threatening to take over the Mexican state. Both Undersecretary of the Army, Joseph Westphal, and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton (Cattan and Kurczy, 2011) literally called the violence an insurgency, stirring up diplomatic rows in Mexico.

At the end of his term, estimates of how many people were actually killed by drug violence ranged widely, one factor being that most killings were and will be never solved. A passionate crime or a simple dispute could be easily classified as drug-related violence. In some cases, cartel members took away their own casualties after shoot-outs, making accurate statistics even more difficult (Sherman 2013). The government put the figure at 45,000, where Hernández (2014: 8) puts the number at 80,000 (Bush 2012, Cave, 2012). Many powerful drug lords were apprehended and the power of some of the bigger cartels broken; however, organized crime remained unchallenged and even grew more uncontrollable. Observers argue Calderón’s
strategy resulted only in the fragmentation of large crime groups into smaller, more flexible factions that subsequently became more vicious than before. This increasing fragmentation was a new development, with consequences for the business model and modus operandi of these new DTOs, as I will later elaborate on in chapter 4.2.2. Kenny (2003) and Jones (2012) argue, since organizations like the Mexican cartels are not hierarchical structures but have become ‘flat networks’ that taking out the leadership is ineffective. Piñeiro compares the cartels with a ‘thousand-headed Hydra’ (Malkin, 2009), a metaphor often used in describing the results of eliminating head capos. Like the Hydra, other heads appeared after one was cut, all of them emerging from the same root’, Astorga (1999) writes. ‘You cut off one and another one emerges, but the government believes that this tactic of dismembering cartels is effective’ (Flannery, 2013). UNAM researcher Raúl Benítez Manaut, quoted by Neuman (2015), compares the kingpin strategy with the high-value target anti-terrorism strategy of the United States: ‘Al Qaeda has been diminished, but a monster appeared called the Islamic State. With the cartels, it has been similar’, comments Manaut. Grillo argues that eliminating older capos provide new opportunities for the lower, inexperienced echelons, who are more willing to use extreme violence, no longer adhering to the code of honor that for decennia had restrained violence amongst organized crime. According to Evelyn Krache Morris (2013), eliminating kingpins only results in ‘martyrdom and glorification’ and increases violence in conflicts over succession. Furthermore, ‘under pressure to prove they are still powerful, decapitated cartels may lash out in dramatic displays of violence’. Longmire describes the ascendance of new crime groups, in particularly the Gulf Cartel and the Zetas, whose rise was not a slow, organic growth like the Sinaloa Cartel that was somehow tolerated and regulated by the authorities. The new groups rather suddenly burst on the scene. ‘They came into it as pure killers and kidnappers. They’re also not organized hierarchically like older DTOs; they work as a franchise operation, doing business in cells across Mexico that often have a great degree of freedom to extort, kidnap, and kill as they wish… breaking every cardinal rule the original four DTOs have ever followed, and have repeatedly displayed a clear disregard for the lives of innocent bystanders through massacres of northbound migrants and attacks on public spaces’ (Longmire, 2012). ‘Antiguamente, ustedes tenían códigos de honor’, the poet Javier Sicilia wrote, after his son was found murdered with six friends after a kidnapping had gone wrong. In an Open Letter to
Politicians and Criminals, he called the murders ‘cowards, miserable Nazi Sonderkommandos.’

Meanwhile, not only the police forces but the army was also found guilty of atrocities and accused by organizations such as the Mexican National Human Rights Commission (CNDH) and the non-governmental Miguel Agustin Pro Juárez Human Rights Center (PRODH) as well as international organizations such as Amnesty International. Human Rights Watch (2011, 2015) produced several reports with incidents of severe human rights abuses such as torture, enforced disappearances and extrajudicial killings. Still, notwithstanding these recorded abuses, and the fact that fifty-seven percent of Mexicans acknowledged that the army had committed human rights abuses, a poll from 2010 showed that four out of five Mexicans still thought the army to be the appropriate instrument to fight the DTOs (Grayson, 2013: 36). Grayson notes that the age of near impunity for the armed forces was over. The SEDENA reported in 2012 that 344 of its members were incarcerated, under arrest, or standing trial. Among the arrested were five generals, two colonels, six lieutenant colonels, and five majors (Grayson, 2013: 49). Critical voices in the army were also heard, the most well-known being Sergio Aponte Polito, who openly condemned the involvement of local authorities in drug trafficking in Tijuana in 2008 (ibid, xiv). This open condemnation was unprecedented for a high officer in the Mexican Army. Aponte claimed that the anti-kidnapping team in Baja California was actually carrying out kidnappings for criminal groups and that police officers were being bribed into working as bodyguards for drug traffickers. After his denouncements, Aponte Polito was transferred to Mexico. The phenomena of the increasing level of complexity in the drug violence will be further elaborated in subsection 3.2.1.

During the last years of Calderón’s tenure, opposition to his policies grew. On the 31st of January 2010, fifteen students were executed in Ciudad Juárez by gunmen who had driven up in SUVs and carried out the killing, apparently undisturbed by nearby security forces who did not intervening during the shooting. This particularly brutal incident involving apparently innocent youth shocked the nation (Wilkinson, 2010a), even more after Calderón suggested that the students had ties with organized crime. Calderón flew twice to Juarez to discuss the events with authorities and concerned citizens. At a town hall meeting, he was challenged by Luz María Dávila, a mother of one of the victims (Luz María Dávila, 2011), who accused him of fighting a ruthless war without consideration for civilian casualties, an accusation that became

more common during Calderón’s tenure. Calderón admitted that he had focused too much on a military solution and had not addressed socioeconomic factors. In Juarez in 2011, I photographed a demonstration where protesters were shouting ‘Calderón, Asesino’. Poet Javier Sicilia, after his son was killed, organized a protest march and declared: ‘We cannot cry out, because this government is the same as members of organized crime and can think only in terms of violence and wish to militarize the country’ (Grayson, 2013: ix).

Although it is impossible, as some activists do, to hold solely Calderón responsible for the drug violence engulfing Mexico during his presidency - it was after all the DTOs that carried out most of the violence - it can be safely argued that Calderón’s anti-drug strategy has turned out to become a complete failure. Hernández goes even as far as to say that the Calderon War on Drugs is completely fake and that the only victor is El Chapo Guzmán (Hernández, 2014: 7).

2.3.4 Peña Nieto’s war on drugs and the continuation of violence

In the 2012 elections, three candidates stood for office: Josefina Vázquez Mota, Mexico’s first female presidential candidate, stood for the PAN, López Obrador was again running for the PRD, and Enrique Peña Nieto was representing the PRI. The PRI came back in power after Peña Nieto was declared the winner with 38 percent of the votes. López Obrador came in second with 31 percent and with only 26 percent of the vote, the PAN was a distant third. As in the 2006 elections, López Obrador refused to concede, but this time his margin of losing was significantly greater than before and he could not mobilize the support he was able to garner six years prior.

‘We are a new generation. There is no return to the past’, Peña Nieto said in his victory speech, trying to convince the roughly two thirds of the population that had not voted for him that the PRI would not return to the same corrupt mechanisms it had developed in its seventy-one--year rule prior to the presidencies of Fox and Calderón. The war on drugs and the unprecedented bloodshed it had produced had been an important theme in the elections and most observers saw the victory of the PRI as a clear rejection of the policies of Calderón and the PAN. PRI president Peña Nieto promised a new approach to fight the drug cartels. While Calderón focused on capturing key leaders of organized crime, Peña Nieto announced that he would focus on violence prevention, intelligence gathering, and what he called ‘coordination’, a vague term ridiculed by political pundits (Hope, 2015). Other measures Peña Nieto announced
was a reorganization of the security apparatus and the creation of a national police, called Gendarmería. The new government made it clear that it would depart from Calderón’s kingpin strategy that had caused, according to new interior minister Miguel Ángel Osorio Chong and attorney general Jesús Murillo Karam, only a break up of larger cartels into sixty to eighty smaller groups that were ‘more violent and dangerous as they branched out into homicide, extortion, robbery and kidnapping’ (Fausset, 2012).’ According to Mexican scholar Jorge Chabat, quoted in the New York Times (Thompson and Mckinley, 2005), the kingpin strategy ‘meant nothing… In fact, all it has done is created more violence’.

Peña Nieto’s focus on violence reduction raised fears that he would reinstate the old PRI modus vivendi of drug trafficking organizations being tolerated. In the Independent, a woman was quoted who articulated this: ‘He’ll stabilize the cartels. He’ll negotiate so they don’t hurt innocents.’ This prompted fear for some, and hope for others. However, in an article provocatively called ‘Why Arresting ‘El Chapo’ Might be a Bad Thing’, Longmire argues that ‘the security landscape in Mexico has changed too much for that to happen anyway, and the US government would never stand for such an arrangement’. Indeed, the time when drug traffickers were subordinated to authorities that could still keep them in check with a form of pax mafiosi were over as new drug trafficking groups had developed from small local crime groups into internationally operating powerful organizations that could afford insurgent tactics to directly confront and challenge the authorities.

The Brookings Institute made in 2014 a sober analysis of Peña Nieto’s anti–crime strategies and results. Peña Nieto’s policy does not seem to differ much from that of Calderón, using Mexico’s most trusted security institution, the armed forces, to eliminate the leadership of the drug cartels: ‘… the current administration has adopted the same, non-strategic, high-value targeting that defined the previous administration’ (Feldab-Brown, 2014). On the other hand, Peña Nieto acknowledged the lack of cooperation between the numerous law enforcement agencies on municipal, state, and federal levels and the necessity to weed out corrupt elements in these agencies. Deadlines, however, to vet all police units for corruption and links with organized crime were missed repeatedly. Overall violence decreased, but not by the fifty percent goal, and it can be asked if this reduction has not so much to do with new power balance in the criminal world as with effective government strategies.

The kingpin strategy was continued and high profile arrests were made at a high rate; in fact, of the 2009 PGR list of the thirty-nine most wanted traffickers, twenty-two being arrested under Calderón, another nine were arrested in the first three years of Peña Nieto’s presidency.
(Alexander, 2015). Some of the most important of these being that of the feared Zeta leader Alejandro ‘Omar’ Treviño Morales (arrested March 2015) who had become leader of the Zetas after his brother Miguel ‘Z-40’ Treviño Morales was arrested in July 2013. Other high-profile arrests included Servando ‘La Tuta’ Gómez Martínez (arrested February 2015), leader of the Caballeros Templarios, Templar Knights, the new name for La Familia Michoacana after its leader, Nazario ‘El Más Loco’ Moreno González, was killed in a firefight with the army in March 2014. Vicente ‘El Viceroy’ Carrillo Fuentes, brother of Amado ‘El Señor de los Cielos’ Carrillo Fuentes, leader of the Juárez cartel, was arrested in October 2014; Héctor ‘El H’ Beltrán Leyva, who was heading the cartel after the death of his brother Arturo ‘El Barbas’ Beltrán Leyva and arrest of his remaining brothers Alfredo and Carlos, was also arrested in October 2014. The biggest catch, however, was ‘El Chapo’ Guzmán, who was arrested in Mazatlán in February 2014 without a shot being fired. This was heralded as the greatest triumph in Peña Nieto’s strategy.

Interestingly, in Culiacán, an estimated two thousand protestors, mostly young people dressed in white, took to the streets to demand the release of El Chapo with banners proclaiming ‘Queremos Al Chapo Libre’ and ‘Joaquín Guzmán daba trabajo, no como ustedes políticos corruptos’ confirming the image as the drug lord as benevolent outlaw and folk hero held in high esteem by the local population. Similar protests were held in other towns in Sinaloa. On the other side, groups affiliated with Los Zetas hung celebratory narcomantas over bridges in some cities of Tamaulipas to celebrate the capture of El Chapo (Borderland Beat, 2014). The one incident, however, that marred the Peña Nieto administration most was an incident that received great international coverage: the disappearance of the 43 students in September 2014 in Iguala, Guerrero. ‘It became a watershed case, emblematic of the killings and disappearances that have ravaged this nation’, wrote Grillo in the New York Times one year later (Grillo, 2015). Anabel Hernández told an audience at the 2017 Freedom Speech lecture in Amsterdam that this incident was only one of the many that showed beyond any doubt the rot and corruption in Mexican society. The students were kidnapped after they had commandeered a bus to drive to Mexico City to stage a protest. The kidnappers were police officers allegedly aligned to


55 I had the honor to introduce Hernández to the public and to have long, private conversation with her on the situation in Mexico.
members from the local *Guerreros Unidos* cartel, headed by the wife of the Iguala mayor José Luis Abarca, María de los Ángeles Pineda, and her brothers. The disappearances provoked violent demonstrations in the capital, with the doors of the ceremonial palace of Peña Nieto set alight by protesters.

One year after the fact, although nearly hundred suspects, including the mayor and his wife and dozens of police officers have been arrested, the investigation stagnated and is stained by reports of mishandling and corruption, accusations of torture of suspects, and suppression of evidence. The remains of the students are still missing; initial reports that they were burned at a garbage dump were not supported by forensic evidence. A motive is still unclear. Some say the students had unknowingly taken a bus that was prepared to smuggle heroin into the United States, while others say the police had stopped the students at the orders of the mayor and his wife who were afraid they would disrupt a public event they were staging. Still others say the students were mistaken for a rival gang from the *Guerreros Unidos*.

Other embarrassments have plagued the Peña Nieto administration as well. One incident was the 2013 release of Rafael Caro Quintero on a technicality. Quintero was arrested in 1985 for complicity in the murder of DEA agent Enrique ‘Kiki’ Camarena. Quintero has completely disappeared since that time. The much-celebrated arrest of El Chapo became a huge loss of face for the government when he managed to escape again in July 2015 from the Altiplano high security prison in a spectacular manner, through nearly a mile-long tunnel that would have cost millions and was built over the course of a year, apparently unnoticed by authorities who had the equipment to detect underground tunnels and excavations (Calderwood and Baverstock, 2015). Illustrative of the lack of confidence in the authorities is a survey by *Reforma* newspaper in which 54 percent of Mexicans declared that they did not believe that El Chapo had escaped through a tunnel and instead had walked out with full complicity of the authorities. In January 2016, El Chapo was arrested for the third time in Los Mochis, Sinaloa, and in January 2017, he was extradited to the United States.

Another case putting a shadow on the Peña Nieto administration was the execution of twenty-two alleged criminals in the town of Tlatlaya in July 2014 by soldiers who had received direct orders to ‘take the men out’. Statistics showed initially a slight decrease in violence; official number of homicides during Peña Nieto’s first year was 22,713. This was a slight improvement from the number of 27,213 in 2011, the year violence peaked under Calderón. (Zabludovsky, 2014). Regardless, observers do not see a considerable improvement in the security situation of Mexico. Actually, the year 2017 closed with a death tally of 28,000 and
became the most violent year in Mexico. According to René Jiménez Ornelas, violence analyst at the UNAM, people would rather not report a violent homicide for fear of revenge by criminal groups (Zabludovsky, 2014). Journalists and activists continue to be targeted. Under threat, self-censorship amongst media is spreading, as explicitly stated in an editorial in Zócalo Saltillo that wrote ‘since there exist no guarantees nor security for the full exercise of our profession, we will abstain from reporting on organized crime.’56 Notorious cases of murdered activists include Sandra Luz Hernández in Culiacan, who was killed in 2014. Hernández was a mother whose son had disappeared and who relentlessly pressured the authorities to investigate the case and find the perpetrators (Wilkinson, 2014, Valdez 2014). Another notorious case was the murder of Miguel Ángel Jiménez Blanco whose bullet riddled body was found in August 2015 (Andrade, 2015). Jiménez was an activist and community organizer that was at the time investigating the case of the 43 missing students in Guerrero.

Attacks on the press continue. With five journalists killed in 2014, the total number of murdered journalists since 2000 rose to eighty-eight and Mexico remains the deadliest country for journalists in the Western Hemisphere. According to a report from Reporters without Borders, the states of Tamaulipas and Veracruz were the most dangerous. In Tamaulipas, attacks on media offices are frequent and local papers are intimidated not to mention incidents related to crime, which I was told by a local reporter when visiting Nuevo Laredo in 2010. Many journalists and citizens resort to social media such as Twitter to report on violence, threats, and dangers. Subsequently, they are targeted too, with five bloggers killed over the last years, one of the most prolific cases being that of María del Rosario who was kidnapped. Her twitter account was hijacked and she was killed after which the attackers posted photos of her before and after her execution on her account (Martínez, 2014). In Veracruz there has been an active repression of free press. Since 2010, eleven journalists have been killed while three have gone missing. The latest case was photojournalist Rubén Espinosa who fled Veracruz after receiving threats, but was killed in August 2015 in Mexico City (Bonello, 2015). The notoriously corrupt governor of Veracruz Javier Duarte de Ochoa57 said in a speech meant for the media: ‘Behave. We are going to shake the tree and a lot of rotten apples will fall out’

56 ‘En virtud de que no existen garantías ni seguridad para el ejercicio pleno del periodismo, el Consejo Editorial de los periódicos Zócalo decidió, a partir de esta fecha, abstenerse de publicar toda información relacionada con el crimen.’ Redacción Zócalo Saltillo, November 3, 2013.
57 Duarte fled at the end of his term in October 2016 to avoid prosecution but was arrested April 2017 in Guatemala.
(Editorial NYT, 2015). Most journalists interpreted these words as a veiled threat and intimidation. According to the International Press Institute (Ellis, 2017), Mexico has surpassed Syria and Iraq and has become the deadliest country in the world for the press, with fourteen journalists killed in 2017. Other high-profile cases were the murders of Miroslava Breach from La Jornada en El Norte in Chihuahua and Javier Valdez in Culiacán.

The wave of disappearances that had been endemic under Calderón continues under Peña Nieto, and the rate has actually increased under the new government, with estimates from the Mexico’s Interior Ministry (Secretaría de Gobernación, SEGOB), the National Commission for Human Rights (CNDH), and a report from the NGO Justice in Mexico (2014) ranging between 22,000 and 30,000 in the time period 2007 until 2014. Attacks on security forces have been more frequent and brutal, some of the more brazen incidents the downing of an army helicopter with an RPG by members of the ‘Nueva Generación’ in May 2015, killing seven soldiers. After the army started operations, the cartel responded by mobilizing 500 men who, besides the helicopter attack, burnt down eleven banks, five gas stations, and thirty-six buses, and blocked twelve highways in the states of Michoacán and Jalisco, killing fifteen people and wounding twenty. In 2014 until mid-2015, in total 276 attacks against the military took place, killing sixty-two armed forces personnel (Noriega, 2015), giving the criminal insurgency thesis credibility.

Most observers agree not much has changed and that Peña Nieto’s attempts to attack organized crime have failed in the same way as the attempts of his predecessor. A new development is the new opioid crises in the United States, where people addicted to prescription painkillers based on opiates turn to more affordable heroin or synthetic alternatives such as fentanyl (Walters, 2017). Where profits from marihuana are dwindling because of partial legalization in the USA, and Canadian marihuana (BC Bud), DTOs started to produce synthetic opiates such as fentanyl from Chinese imported ingredients and increased opium cultivation, especially in the state of Guerrero, which has become the new epicenter of drug violence. In conclusion, we can say that the kingpin strategy has only resulted in fragmentation of large DTOs and the emergence of new players that are eager to prove their ferocity. Currently, the situation has even become more violent and complicated than ever. Authors such as Anabel Hernández and the late Javier Valdez are quite pessimistic and point at the firm entrenchment of the narco-mafia in the ruling class where actually all distinctions are, according to Flores, merely analytical (2009: 51).

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In this short exposé, I have showed two tendencies that will be explored further in the two following chapters. The first tendency is the increasing complexity and intricacy of the drug violence that developed into a complicated war that challenges conventional theories on armed conflict. New players entered the stage, both state, criminal, and civilian ones, and in mutual interaction, the war started to be played out on different levels. Not only the actors and their roles have multiplied, but so have their strategies. Violence has taken on new and excessive forms. The other important development is how the narco-trafficking sector has developed from small ‘mom and pop’ operations in large criminal groups that have become international professional corporations. The DTOs eagerly jumped on the new markets that marihuana and cocaine offered in the 1970s and 1980s and have proven to be highly flexible and innovative organizations that smell new opportunities, while at the same time they ruthlessly exploit the weakness of their opponents, whether those opponents are competing organizations or the authorities.

Connected with these two developments is a changing relationship with the authorities. For seventy years, the PRI dominated authorities cooperated, but still dominated the narco-trafficking sector. This constellation was shaken up by the changing of the political guard in 2000 when the PAN won the elections. The reshuffling led in some cases to even more mutual cooperation and intense involvement, and in other cases to narcos actively challenging the authorities, which sometimes resulted in submission by the authorities. The authorities have been halfhearted in their response to the increasing power of the DTOs. Eliminating capos, the so-called kingpin strategy, has produced many good public relations moments and carefully staged events, but has worsened the violence by splitting up large, known groups into a multitude of unknown, unpredictable newcomers that have to prove themselves.