



Mexico's Drug War & AMLO

Crime; Drug Trafficking; Narco-Terrorism

Western Hemisphere > Mexico

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Introduction

President-elect Andrés Manuel López Obrador (known popularly as AMLO) will take office on December 1, representing a coalition of the left-wing Labor Party, right-wing Social Encounter Party, and the social democratic National Regeneration Movement. His policy proposals have thus far been aimed at revitalizing the Mexican economy (e.g. constructing more oil refineries, ending Pemex's monopoly in the oil industry, stimulating the agricultural sector) and domestic social policies (e.g. increasing financial aid for students and the elderly, ensuring universal access to public colleges, decentralizing the executive cabinet, mitigating corruption). One particular policy proposal has drawn international attention and has the potential to impact the U.S. private-sector security posture in Mexico directly -- amnesty for some drug war criminals.

Hot Spots for Mexican Criminal and Narco-Violence

In addition being a hot button issue for US-Mexico relations, the drug war and cartel infighting has caused severe, nationwide security repercussions. The U.S. Department of State assesses the security level in five Mexican states (Colima, Guerrero, Michoacán, Sinaloa, and Tamaulipas) at the highest of four levels, indicating that U.S. citizens should **not travel there**, due to violent crime, such as homicide, kidnapping, carjacking, and robbery.

In these states, gang activity, including gun battles, is widespread. Criminal organizations operate freely and sometimes with impunity. Local law enforcement has limited capability to respond to violence in many parts of these states, as criminal organizations have laid territorial claim to significant portions of the region.

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Due to the “kingpin” strategy against these criminal organizations by Mexico’s past two administrations, many traditional cartels have fractured into smaller factions as their leaders were captured or killed. This led to violent fighting within and among these groups, which now compete against each other to annex key territories and lucrative trafficking routes.

Shootouts between organizations and with Mexican security forces are common, and have occurred outside of restaurants, at gas stations, and in various other public areas, significantly affecting Mexico’s homicide rate and general security environment. The final homicide count of 29,168 made 2017 Mexico’s deadliest year on record. With ongoing conflict through Mexico, the number of victims in 2018 is poised to overtake that record; there were over 13,000 homicides recorded in the first five months of 2018 alone.

AMLO’s Drug Policy Outlook

Andrés Manuel López Obrador has attempted to differentiate himself from previous Mexican politicians, which most likely contributed to his landslide victory in the 2018 presidential election. From the beginning of his campaign, AMLO sought to try a new tactic in fighting Mexico’s cartels and drug-related violence. In his election victory speech, he stated, “The failed crime and violence strategy will change... We will address the root causes of crime and violence.” Up until recently, there has only been speculation about his policy proposal for dealing with the ongoing issue. According to Forbes, his policy leanings became clearer when, on September 25, he applauded former President Ernesto Zedillo’s statement that his hardline anti-drug policy had been a mistake. Zedillo’s statement was part of the Global Commission on Drug Policy’s new policy recommendation that suggests regulation rather than prohibition of some drugs.

AMLO’s response to Zedillo, in addition to comments from incoming administrative officials, has driven belief in online news and analytic outlets that the President-elect will seek at least to decriminalize marijuana and some poppy cultivation early in his term. According to NPR, Mexico is the primary supplier of heroin to the U.S., and the world’s third-largest producer of opium poppy.

According to Insight Crime, AMLO and his political advisers have now proposed ending the Mexican military intervention in the drug war, pardoning nonviolent drug offenders, and restructuring the justice system to increase prosecution rates. These policies, including

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removing the military from as a police force, echo those promised in his failed 2012 election campaign, according to CNN. The so-called “transitional justice system” would include reduced sentences for criminals who cooperate with authorities on unsolved crimes. The future Interior Minister notes that this is one way that the new administration plans to tackle the 37,435 missing persons cases in the country that have accrued since 2014. Amnesty International notes that the actual number of missing persons is probably higher, because the official figures exclude cases classified as other criminal offenses such as hostage-taking or human trafficking.

Concern for Impunity and the Impact on the U.S. Private Sector

The promised amnesty deal with organized criminal groups and the pledge to investigate and prosecute corrupt politicians, many of whom are in business with the cartels, prompts concern about increased impunity for violent offenders. According to Al Jazeera, the public appears split between peace and reconciliation and a desire for justice and retribution. Moreover, the details of AMLO’s proposed drug policy and how the President-elect intends to pardon the cartels without also pardoning corrupt politicians is not yet clear.

Nonetheless, narco-violence and cartel-associated crime remains one of most dangerous threats against U.S. private-sector interests in Mexico. While U.S. citizens are not necessarily the targets of cartel violence, they are often caught as innocent bystanders in “wrong-place, wrong-time” situations. More specifically, OSAC constituents have expressed concern about the following cartel-related crimes affecting their operations in Mexico:

Kidnapping and extortion: The FBI investigated 116 kidnapping events in Mexico in 2017. Of the investigated cases, 81 were kidnappings for ransom, 25 were virtual kidnappings, and in 10 cases there was no ransom demand. Telephonic extortion typically involves an unknown perpetrator calling a potential victim to notify them that a friend or family member has been kidnapped. The perpetrator will then demand a ransom for their release. These schemes, which occur as many as 20,000 times a year, according to one source, have become increasingly sophisticated.

Assassinations of journalists and politicians: During the 2018 general elections, a total of 774 attacks against politicians and 429 against non-elected officials were reported. These attacks resulted in the death of 152 politicians and 371 non-elected officials; of these, 48 were

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pre-candidates and candidates for elected positions. On Election Day alone, 138 assaults were reported and seven politicians were murdered. In comparison, nine murders occurred during the entire 2012 election season.

Spillover intra-cartel violence: Although Mexico employs strict gun-control laws, criminals are often armed with guns, which has resulted in the increase of homicide incidents in Mexico. While most of these homicides appeared to be targeted, criminal organization assassinations, turf battles between criminal groups have resulted in violent crime in areas frequented by U.S. citizens. Shooting incidents injuring or killing bystanders have occurred. In some states, members of these groups frequently maintain roadblocks and may use violence towards travelers.

Oil theft and pipeline taps: Gaps in law enforcement have left many energy pipelines vulnerable to theft. In the first two months of 2018, more than 2,200 illegal taps were discovered along Mexican pipelines (an increase of 38% over the same period in 2017). Corruption may play a role in the theft of energy resources as well. Multiple mayors, as well as the former head of police, from the Mexican state of Puebla (one of the major regions for illegal tapping) have been arrested in the past year on grounds of involvement with, or protection of, a fuel-tapping ring.

Cargo theft: SensiTech ranks the level of cargo crime in Mexico to be “severe,” primarily due to supply chain threats posed by drug trafficking organizations and corrupt law enforcement personnel. According to one study, more than 3,300 incidents of cargo theft were reported during the first quarter of 2018.

Additional Resources

For additional information on this report and other questions on the security environment in Mexico, please contact OSAC’s Western Hemisphere Team.

OSAC Mexico Webpage

U.S. Department of State Country Information: Mexico

OSAC Annual Briefing 2017: Mexico’s Deadliest Year on Record

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