

(In)security and organized crime in Latin America

Panel proposal for the European Initiative for Security Studies 2023 Conference at the Institut Barcelona d'Estudis Internacionals

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Speaker: Lucia Tiscornia (UCD)

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Most lethal violence now occurs outside of war zones. In Latin America, countries like Mexico, Brazil, El Salvador, and Honduras have often had yearly homicide rates exceeding those in Afghanistan or Syria. In 2018, 78,667 people were killed violently in Brazil and 43,089 in Mexico, compared with 29,584 in Afghanistan and 16,905 in Syria in the same year. Direct conflict deaths now account for only a fraction of violent deaths worldwide, and organized violence outside armed conflict is increasingly of concern to policymakers, and to conflict and security scholars. The burgeoning literature on the causes, consequences, and dynamics of “criminal wars” is nonetheless underdeveloped relative to that on the causes, consequences, and dynamics of civil wars.

With a focus on Mexico and Central America, this panel makes several original contributions to that scholarship, emphasizing local, national, and international responses to organized criminal groups. We begin with a paper on criminal governance in Mexico during the COVID-19 pandemic, adding to our understanding of how organized crime groups affect people’s everyday lives through both violent and non-violent measures. The second paper asks why and how communities affected by criminal violence mobilize against violent criminal actors. In doing so, it contributes to current knowledge on local-level, unofficial responses to criminal violence. The third paper focuses on the response of the Mexican state, and specifically on the use of force by the state and how this is regulated under international law. Finally, the fourth paper examines the international response in the Northern Triangle of Central America, arguing that the World Bank follows a peacetime logic focused on developmental rather than humanitarian response, and questioning its appropriateness in contexts characterized by high-intensity criminal violence and severe humanitarian consequences.

Criminal Governance amid the COVID 19 pandemic in Mexico

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During the COVID-19 pandemic, organized criminal groups (OCG) in Mexico adopted various social control strategies to adapt their interests to the health risks stemming from the pandemic. Some used violent measures to enforce social distancing while others provided basic goods to ameliorate the economic consequences of the health crisis. What explains the variation in OCG governance strategies during the pandemic? What are the political consequences of such actions? To answer these questions, we deployed an online survey containing a list experiment to understand the extent and strategies of criminal control during the pandemic. Our research contributes to current knowledge about the manifestations of criminal governance regimes and opens new lines of research for the understanding of the effects of criminal governance on a wide range of behavioral outcomes.

Violent and non-violent mobilization in criminal wars: Current determinants and historical legacies

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What explains collective mobilization against criminal violence? Why do communities mobilize against criminal victimization in different ways? Mexico has been entrapped in a vicious cycle of violence since 2006. Given the absence of state-sponsored security, ordinary citizens in many parts of the country have mobilized to resist the violence and coercive orders imposed by criminal organizations. Mobilization strategies, however, have not been homogeneous. Some communities have engaged in violent forms of collective action, such as organizing self-defense groups, while others have resorted to peaceful protest. We examine original data on citizen mobilization against criminal violence in Mexico from 2013 to 2018 to understand the forces that drive the emergence and type of collective mobilization against criminal groups. We find that similar dynamics drive violent and non-violent mobilization, in particular, moderate levels of violence and inter-cartel competition. However, while violent mobilization is associated with past experiences of armed struggles, non-violent mobilization is not. Based on detailed qualitative evidence from a set of cases of contemporary armed mobilization, we contend that past experiences of armed struggles leave organizational and normative legacies that make violent mobilization more available.

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Not war nor peace: Regulating the use of force in the context of large-scale criminal violence in Mexico

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The scale of violence in Mexico and some other Latin American countries is comparable to that in some of the deadliest contemporaneous civil wars, and criminal violence is now firmly on the agenda of conflict studies, International Relations (IR) and political science. Significant attention has been paid to the similarities and differences between criminal violence and political insurgencies, but less has been paid to the international legal regulation of state responses to organized crime. In principle, international humanitarian law (IHL) regulates the conduct of hostilities in armed conflict contexts, and international human rights law (IHRL) applies in full in peacetime. The (in)applicability of IHL has important implications for, *inter alia*, who can use force, whom they can use force against, and the conditions under which they can use *lethal* force. Through analysis of the discourses and practices of domestic and international actors regarding organized criminal violence in Mexico, this paper argues that the “criminal wars” there are treated as a legal grey zone, regulated neither as war nor as peace. Even though the violence in Mexico is not formally classified as a non-international armed conflict, selective quasi-IHL thinking underpins public discourse and militarized responses, in particular in official designations of who is a legitimate target and who deserves protection from violence.

Development aid, humanitarian assistance, and criminal violence: A “triple nexus” for Central America’s Northern Triangle?

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Development and humanitarian relief organizations often follow contrasting operational logics: while humanitarian assistance is short-term, neutral, and prioritizes access to populations in need, development aid is long-term, partisan for the state, and dependent on state capacity to succeed. In cases of protracted armed conflict, this division becomes problematic, as only through development aid can humanitarian emergencies be overcome and prevented. Increasingly, humanitarian and development organizations work jointly within UN peacebuilding in a “triple nexus” aimed at long-term peace and security. This paper examines the relevance of the triple nexus construct for organized criminal violence in Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador. While not formally armed conflicts, the intensity and humanitarian toll of transnational criminal violence in the region is comparable to armed conflicts. And yet, prominent development aid organizations have followed the peacetime logic, instead of working jointly with humanitarian actors or UN agencies. The paper looks specifically at World Bank practice, contrasting its protocols for “Fragile and Conflict-Affected States” with its strategies of adjustment and response to organized criminal violence in the region.