

## State Vacuum and Non-State Actors: The Case of Michoacán



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## **Brief Abstract**

Many authors and scholars agree about the close relationship between the development of organized crime and the State vacuum. Historically, the rise of criminal actors is often a consequence of States' institutional weaknesses in social, economic and political areas. In particular, strong criminal organizations rise up when the State is not able to reflect the Weberian definition of the State as "monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory". This issue is particularly relevant in relation to the current Mexican criminal scenario. This paper aims at analyzing the case of Michoacán, a western Mexican state where a complete absence of a State and legitimate institutions have led to the expansion of the drug cartels presence and self-defense group. In order to understand the relevance of this paradigmatic case, this work is divided into two main parts. The first section is characterized by a theoretical framework where the relations between the State vacuum and the consequent development of non-state actors, especially organized crime will be underlined. In the second part the case of Michoacán will be described. Firstly the economic, social, geographical and political factors that have led to the development of a parallel "criminal" state will be emphasized. Here thanks to weak local government and massive police corruption, some drug cartels imposed their law, such as *Familia Michoacana* and *Caballeros Templarios*, creating a strong social base. Secondly, this paper aims to investigate the rise of self-defense groups during the last three years. It is important to underline that the impotence of institutions (mainly local government) and the power vacuum have forced the population to take up arms to defend themselves from the various cartels activities, like extortions and kidnappings. Finally, some considerations will be drawn on the relationship between theoretical framework and this particular case of Michoacán.

## **Theoretical Framework**

"Horror vacui", literally "terror of vacuum", is a Latin expression used to describe different concepts in various areas. One of these concepts, concerns a philosophical theory attributed

to Aristotle, and asserts that “Nature avoids emptiness”<sup>1</sup>. It means that natural elements tend to fill the empty spaces, because there is a “lack of substance”, such as gas and liquids.. In the same way, also human behavior has a similar tendency<sup>2</sup>. In fact it is usual for us to “fill the spaces”, both in a physical sense and temporally, articulating our days with many commitments. For instance, institutions and other human constructs, including first the States, abhor and sometimes fear these “vacuums”. For this reason, during time power structures have expanded their range of control and implemented their functions; both indoor and internationally, becoming the “actors” we know today. Their purpose is to control everything<sup>3</sup>.

However, during the State’s evolution process, and even today, there have been moments and situations in which the institutions have been unable to fill this vacuum. This happened because, in particular periods, capabilities and interests of governmental organs weren’t strong enough, or their structures weren’t sufficiently organized.

Acting in this way, they created a series of “vacuums”, which can be divided in different categories: firstly, the “social nature” vacuum. This is the case in which certain parts of society are stored or placed in a condition of marginalization from the rest, creating a shortcoming regarding the management of their needs and requirements. A relevant example concern immigrant populations.

Secondly, “vacuums” can also have an “economic nature” when some economic sectors have no rules or there is nobody able to enforce the rules in an efficient way. Finally, they can also be of a “political nature”: when the administration of states or territories is in a situation of impasse or difficulty. This will create a lack of certainty about who really has the power over a region, causing a situation of “administrative vacuum”.

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<sup>1</sup>Criterion of the school of Aristotle. (A cura di) Emanuele Severino, Aristotele, *I principi del divenire*, La Scuola, Brescia, 2012

<sup>2</sup> Jean – François Gayraud, *Le monde des mafias*. Géopolitique du crime organisé, Les éditions Odile Jacob, Paris, 2005

<sup>3</sup> Kenneth N. Waltz, *Man, the State and war*. A theoretical analysis, Columbia University Press, New York, 1954 e Thomas Hobbes, *Il Leviatano*, Biblioteca Universale Rizzoli, Milano, 2011

These “vacuums” can have quite different origins and different consequences. Among the most common causes there is certainly the weakness of the States, when it is unable to exercise strong control over a particular area and over its population. It means that the State leaves entire areas on their own. These shortcomings results in some needs and requirements of some sectors or groups of population remaining dissatisfied or unheeded, because the structure that will be appointed to meet them is absent or deficient. At this point new opportunities for someone else arise. It means that new actors take place in those empty spaces and replace the legitimate power<sup>4</sup>.

Among those who are able to fill the empty spaces there are often organized crime groups. This depends on the fact that criminal organizations are characterized by specific features such as “use of violence” and “control of the territory” (partially linked to the first feature). Thanks to their skills, criminal organizations are successful in occupying empty spaces almost everywhere and of every nature they are. On this regard, history has offered various examples. An example is given by the presence of organized crime in foreign countries and its expansion in vacuums of a “social nature”. it’s related to the Italian migrants in the USA and the need to meet their necessities .Solutions are found thanks to Cosa Nostra in the districts called “little Italy”. Another example of “economic nature” vacuum is when organized crime in the USA was able to manage the alcohol trade during the prohibition period. On this regard, the drug trade is another interesting example. The last examples are related to the vacuums of a “political” or “administrative nature” such as the “Mafia – States”; where organized crime has taken over the formal power and has assumed direct responsibility for political representation and control " de jure " of the geographical areas, both social and economical, bringing together key prerogatives of statehood: standardize, manage and judge:

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<sup>4</sup> Samuele Motta, *Il contesto criminogeno. Criminalità organizzata e conflitti bellici: sei casi a confronto*, Facoltà di Scienze politiche, Economiche e Sociali, Università degli Studi di Milano, 2013, tesi di laurea

“The Mafia-state is characterized by direct involvement in illicit trafficking by institutional leaders, who are not limited to a role of connivance but who themselves belong to criminal organizations. In the State-Mafia the close relationship between private and public interests makes it impossible to distinguish one from the other”<sup>5</sup>.

Another example of economical, political and administrative vacuum is the development of a “Narco-state”, an area that has been taken over and is controlled and corrupted by drug cartels, where law enforcement is effectively non-existent or coopted and in which the illegal trade in narcotic drugs forms a substantial part of the economy. Mexico is certainly a case that reflects this definition, where the link between the political-administrative establishment, corrupted by drug money, and the organized crime groups has become strong and effective. The Mexican transition in political and economic matters, in particular during the last fifty years, has created some power vacuum in this country. The supposed democratic transition from a PRI regime (Institutional Revolutionary Party) to a plural political system and the transition from a nationalist and protectionist economic system to neoliberalism have caused the withdrawal of the Mexican State with regard to the management and organization of society. “Mexico’s democratic transition involved a change from a vertical to a more democratic scheme; this process is not over but, while institutions are in a more democratic environment, this does not necessarily mean greater effectiveness. In this context, the state institutions of government have lost legitimacy with regard to society, particularly in the areas of public safety and justice administration.”<sup>6</sup> At the same time neo-liberal policies have had disastrous consequences on the social fabric. The liberalization of the agricultural sector, together with cuts in subsidies to the rural areas and the poorest of the country pushed many

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<sup>5</sup> “Lo Stato mafia è caratterizzato dal coinvolgimento diretto nei traffici illeciti dei vertici istituzionali, che non si limitano ad un ruolo di connivenza ma appartengono essi stessi alle organizzazioni criminali. Nello Stato mafia la compenetrazione fra interessi privati e interessi pubblici è tale da renderne impossibile la distinzione”. In Maria Luisa Fichera, *Guinea Bissau. Come nasce uno Stato mafia*, in *Il circuito delle mafie*, Limes, n.10, 2013.

<sup>6</sup> Jerjes Aguirre, Hugo Amador Herrera “Institutional Weakness and Organized Crime In Mexico: The Case of Michoacán” *Trends in Organized Crime*, p.228, april 2013.

farmers to enter the drug market, in fact the social disruption and economic pressure of the free market intensified in rural areas, fueling the tendency to cultivate illicit crops as a survival strategy for the impoverished agricultural classes. These important transitions had two consequences: the change in the relationship between organized crime and institutions and the expansion of legal and illegal markets thanks to open market policies. The centralized PRI power over drug traffickers during the last century has given way to a fragmented scenario, where the drug cartels have to build their relationships with a more decentralized and weakened political and administrative landscape. With concern to economic matters, the signing of NAFTA (North American Free Trade Agreement) with the United States and Canada, has fueled an incredible flux of licit (and illicit) goods. These kind of transitions, the endemic situation of corruption and impunity, the increase of the the Mexican cartels power in the global and regional drug trade had one natural consequence over Mexican state: the loss of Weberian monopoly concerning the use of force over certain territories. This is the case of Michoacán, a state located in Western Mexico.

### **The Michoacán context**

This Mexican state has particular geographical, political and socio-economics characteristics. Michoacán touches on the Pacific Ocean and borders six other states: Colima, Guanajuato, Guerrero, Jalisco, Querétaro, and the State of México. It has over 4.3 million inhabitants and a significant indigenous population, with approximately 3.5% of the population still speaking one of four main indigenous languages, predominantly Purépecha (over 85%), but also Náhuatl, Mazahua, and Otomí.<sup>7</sup> While there are a total of 113 municipalities in the state, nearly one in five people reside in the state's capital, Morelia, and in other important centers such as Apatzingán, Uruapan and Zamora.

Michoacán is rich in natural resources, and a leader in agricultural production, specializing in avocados, limes, mangos, blackberries, and other produce. The state is also frequented by tourist thanks to cultural and historic places such as Apatzingán, Morelia, Paztcuaro, as well

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<sup>7</sup> Kimberly Heinle, Cory Molzhan, David A. Shrik, Citizen Security in Michoacán “Building Resilient Communities in Mexico: Civic Responses to Crime and Violence”, Briefing Paper Series, January 2015.

as its Pacific beaches. The geographical features of the state, especially in the south, make Michoacán one of the classic examples of “ungovernable spaces” that can evolve into the ideal place for drug trafficker. As claimed by researcher Salvador Maldonado Aranda, we can divide south of Michoacán in three main areas: Tierra Caliente region, Sierra Madre del Sur and Michoacán coast. The Tierra Caliente region (“the warm lands”) is the most important agro-industrial zone for the cultivation and export of lemons and other citrus fruits. Tierra Caliente is a livestock and agricultural zone with dynamic trade flows to the US market, and in particular with soda and juices manufacturers. It is also an area where the country’s most important criminal groups are concentrated, since it is a necessary stopping point on the route to other major cities. Drug traffickers came to control almost all the legal and illegal markets through their armed power and corruption. Secondly, the Sierra Madre del Sur is one of the most important areas of drug cultivation in all of Mexico, in fact some areas of Michoacán bordering with the states of Guerrero and Jalisco are known as “small golden triangles”, such as the most known “Golden Triangle” placed in Sinaloa, Durango and Chihuahua. In these remote and inaccessible areas of Sierra Madre del Sur, the only transport that the inhabitants can use is the airplane but, during the years, drug traffickers have taken possession of the small airports and have built their drug routes. Lastly, the Michoacán coast includes the port of Lázaro Cárdenas, one of the most disputed places for drug trafficking. Furthermore in the ’80s the federal highway between the port of Lazaro Cardenas, Manzanillo and Ixtapa-Zihuatanejo was built, covering much of the Pacific coast, prompting an increase in drug trafficking by land, sea and sky. Since then there has been uninterrupted violence over disputed communal and small properties in the Michoacán coast, due to pressure from legal and illegal economic groups to appropriate land areas for tourism investment, drug trafficking and mining, but especially to control seaports.<sup>8</sup>

Beyond the geographical aspects the peculiar political history of this Mexican state must be stressed. In the 1920s and 1930s, Michoacán was the trial state for some of the post-

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<sup>8</sup> Salvador Maldonado Aranda, “Drogas, violencia y militarización en el México rural. El caso de Michoacán” *Revista Mexicana de Sociología*, vol. 74, núm. 1, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México Distrito Federal, México enero-marzo, 2012, p. 13, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México Distrito Federal, México.



revolutionary government's most progressive social policies. The state's governor, General Lázaro Cárdenas, organized labor and agricultural unions and redistributed the property of wealthy landowners. Cárdenas was elected president from 1934 to 1940, and incorporated many of these same policies at the national level, in addition to nationalizing foreign oil fields in 1938. His legacy helps explain why Michoacán became one of the bastions of opposition to the ruling Institutional Revolutionary Party.<sup>9</sup> Despite the PRI's hegemony over Michoacán governor elections throughout the nineteenth century, from the '90s until today political competition increased in many municipalities and, in particular from 2002, in the governor elections. The leftist Party of the Democratic Revolution (Partido de la Revolución Democrática-PRD) ruled Michoacán from 2002 to 2012 with Lázaro Cárdenas Batel and Leonel Godoy Rangel. This was the confirmation of the general retreat of the party that ruled the country for over 70 years. PRI also lost the presidential election for the first time in 2000, when Vicente Fox of the National Action Party (Partido Acción Nacional – PAN) settled in “Los Pinos”. The increasing political competition in the state of Michoacán—particularly in the early and mid-2000s—was accompanied by growing competition and conflict among organized crime groups that resulted in severe problems of crime and violence. The power vacuum left by the PRI and the new political entities that ruled municipalities and governorship caused an incredible disorder over the relationship between State institutions and organized crime. In this complex scenario Michoacán has become one of the best examples of a state where the fight for power, drug routes and control of important economic sectors has caused the birth of non-state actors.

### **From drug trafficking to mafia system**

During the past century, Michoacán has develop a strong regional economy. During the 1960s, for example, the main characteristic of certain regions was the production and export of cotton. A decade later lemon came to the fore and continues to dominate until today. These

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<sup>9</sup> Heinle, Molzhan, Shirk cit. p.9



economic flows, of course, have been interspersed with the rise of some products and crises among others, both legal and illegal. During the 1980s, a period when the state's economy suffered a major agricultural crisis, marijuana and poppy production grew exponentially in Michoacán.<sup>10</sup> Throughout the past century this illegal business was controlled by small groups and families. However, starting from the 1990s, some cartels have emerged on the criminal scenario and imposed their laws. Firstly the *Milenio* cartel, dominated by the Valencia family, became the most powerful non-state actor in Michoacán. Amado Valencia Cornelio and his brother Luis Valencia Valencia built the first important drug network in the region and to United States, thanks to the relationship with the main Mexican (Sinaloa, Juarez, Golfo) and Colombian cartels (Valle del Norte and Medellín) and with the support of several corrupt politicians and police officers. The Milenio cartel was characterized by a low profile strategy, that allowed the Valencia brothers to dominate the traffic for nearly a decade without major problems. After this period of Milenio's monopoly of drug routes and trafficking in Michoacán, other Mexican cartels began to fight for this strategic point.

It is important to underline that during this time there was not a parallel or coopted government in the state. It is possible to affirm that this region had become a major drug transit route, with high levels of corruption and violence, but it was not a region which contained a strong and alternative authority. However this situation began to change during the terror regime installed by Los Zetas, the armed branch of Gulf Cartel, that dominated Michoacán for around five years (2001-2006). The Los Zetas *modus operandi* was a domain model based on brutal force, the impositions of protection, extortion, kidnapping and the control of political and economic sectors.<sup>11</sup> These kinds of activities, in particular the "protection industry"<sup>12</sup>, extortions and payment of fees to the organized crime, caused an important change in the criminal environment: the transition to the mafia model, where the

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<sup>10</sup> Salvador Maldonado Aranda, "You don't see any violence here but it leads to very ugly things": forced solidarity and silent violence in Michoacán, Mexico" *Dialectical Anthropology* June 2014, Volume 38, Issue 2, p.161 First online: 12 April 2014.

<sup>11</sup> José Gil Olmos, *Batallas de Michoacán, Autodefensas, el proyecto colombiano de Peña Nieto*, ediciones Porceso, febrero 2015

<sup>12</sup> Diego Gambetta was the first scholar to make an interpretation of the Sicilian Mafia in this particular sense. Diego Gambetta, *The Sicilian Mafia: The Business of Private Protection*, Harvard University Press, 1996.

impositions of taxation to the people (*derecho de piso* in Spanish) shows the existence of a parallel government over these territories.

### **The era of *La Familia Michoacana* and *Caballeros Templarios***

In order to govern Michoacán, the Zetas included leaders from the Tierra Caliente region that had migrated and contacted the Zetas in the north. After the fall of the Zetas and their expulsion from Michoacán, its remnants formed a new organization called La Familia Michoacana. This new non-state actor profoundly changed the Michoacán criminal scenario and the entire Mexican organized crime. Under the leadership of Nazario Moreno González “El Pastor” or “El Más Loco” and Jesús Méndez Vargas alias “El Chango”, La Familia became famous through some particular characteristics. In the first place its members shared with Zetas the paramilitary base, in fact some of them were ex-military and ex-kaibiles from Guatemala<sup>13</sup>. At the same time the use of brutal violence characterized La Familia’s *modus operandi*. For example, the show of five Zetas human heads on the dance floor at a strip club in the city of Uruapan, marked its public debut in 2006.

Secondly La Familia distinguished itself from other criminal groups in the country by being able to count on an important social base and having an interest in conserving its presence in society and local social structures. The “protection rhetoric”, “divine justice” and semi-religious profile were the main, and innovative, contribution to Mexican organized crime:

“The Family doesn’t kill for money; it doesn’t kill women; it doesn’t kill innocent people; only those who deserve to die, die. Everyone should know . . . this is divine justice.”<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> The Kaibiles are a special operations force of the Military of Guatemala. They specialize in jungle warfare tactics and counter-insurgency operations. Some Mexican cartels, such as Los Zetas and La Familia, integrated them within the criminal group.

<sup>14</sup> George W. Grayson “La Familia Drug Cartel: implications for U.S.-Mexican Security”, Strategic Study Institute, December 2010, p. vii.

As pointed out by an eminent scholar, George W. Grayson, with La Familia we can observe the roots of a “dual sovereignty” in Michoacán. “This means that parallel to the elected government stands a narco-administration that generates employment (in growing and processing drugs), keeps order (repressing rival cartels), performs civic functions (repairing churches), collects taxes (extorting businessmen), and screens newcomers to the municipality (employing lookouts).”<sup>15</sup> The La Familia parallel authority was expressed through the monopoly on the use of legitimate force to punish and to enforce their laws. The bosses pledged to:

“Eradicate from the state of Michoacán kidnapping, extortion in person and by telephone, paid assassinations, express kidnapping, tractor-trailer and auto theft, [and] home robberies done by people like those mentioned, who have made the state of Michoacán an unsafe place. Our sole motive is that we love our state and are no longer willing to see our people’s dignity trampled on.”<sup>16</sup>

At first, this rhetoric allowed La Familia to obtain a strong social base in Michoacán. La Familia trumpeted such social works as rebuilding schools, erects lights, contributing to churches, donating books, laying out sport courts and extending credits to farmers and businesses. Like the Mafia, La Familia professed to bolster grassroots support through acts of beneficence. Furthermore the members used it as an artifice to attract alienated, unemployed, uprooted young men, who may also have drug and alcohol addiction, into a La Familia community. The choice of the name is not casual. The Family is the main social glue and the primary place of socialization. The family unit represents the core of some famous and powerful mafia organizations such as ‘ndrangheta, (the Calabrian mafia) and Cosa Nostra (the Sicilian mafia). Cosa Nostra was the most important criminal syndicate in New York City during the nineteenth century, where the groups that dominated the licit and illicit activities were better known as “The Five Families”.

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<sup>15</sup> *Ibidem*

<sup>16</sup> G. Grayson cit. p.35.

The natural consequence of this “new authority” in Michoacán was the complete abdication of State officials and local politicians. In many cases La Familia infiltrated the municipalities with the famous phrase: “plata o plomo” meaning “silver or lead”, that is “accept a bribe or face assassination”. This brutal colonization made by La Familia and the continuous war between cartels to take control of Michoacán routes forced a federal intervention. Michoacán thus served as the testing ground for the Calderón doctrine of massive military deployments to “recapture public spaces,” as well as targeted arrests to disrupt the leadership structures and networks of organized crime groups. Yet, federal government efforts in Michoacán were not limited to targeting key leaders but extended to many of the state’s elected and appointed officials. On May 26, 2009, Mexican federal authorities unveiled an unprecedented operation that ultimately led to the arrest a total of 38 state and local officials—including ten mayors—from all three of the country’s major political parties (PRI, PAN and PRD) in 12 of Michoacán’s 113 municipalities.<sup>17</sup> This operation, known to the history as “Michoacanazo” showed not only the level of corruption reached by local authorities, but also the weaknesses of the Mexican judicial system. Indeed, in subsequent years, all of these corrupt officials remained free and without judicial punishment.

In March 2011 the state of Michoacán saw the birth of a new cartel, which emerged as a splinter group of La Familia, named Los Caballeros Templarios (The Knights Templar). It is not easy to understand the real motivations of the division inside the La Familia cartel. Certainly federal interventions undermined the La Familia’s organization. However, as pointed out by a Mexican journalist Josè Gil Olmos, the internal division and the subsequent fight for the leadership was provoked mainly by the death of Nazario Moreno, the spiritual leader of La Familia.<sup>18</sup> Though La Familia remained on the scene, with El Chango Mendez at the top, the new faction was directed by two former members of La Familia: Servando Gomez alias “La Tuta” and Enrique *Kike* Plancarte. The presence of Los Caballeros Templarios in the Michoacán criminal scenario marked a new and more dramatic era. This cartel deepened the main characteristics of La Familia, such as the “protection rethoric” and

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<sup>17</sup> Heinle, Molzhan, Shirk cit. p.15,16

<sup>18</sup> Josè Gil Olmos cit. P.120

semi-religious profile. They strengthened the structure, increased the number of members and improved the system of social control and communications. The Caballeros Templarios also extended the predominance over most of Michoacán's territories and escalated the level of connivance and infiltration in local institutions. Los Caballeros Templarios essentially refined the parallel authority and government that La Familia had created in the past.

Maldonado Aranda summarizes very well the Caballeros Templarios' system:

“They have created a mechanism for wealth extraction through extortion and the payment of fees, along with the dispossession of property from private owners. They not only control the production, sale, and export of drugs as a criminal activity, but also to have infiltrated large local and regional economies by extracting attractive revenue through the collection of a sort of tax in parallel to state taxation.”<sup>19</sup>

The Caballeros Templarios started to meet merchants, business men, entrepreneurs, farmers, ranchers and peddlers of each municipality to impose the new “criminal” taxation: for example they wanted 200 pesos a day for each butcher; two pesos for every kilo of tortillas; the miners had to pay 100 pesos a day for each truck while the farmers had to give 50 pesos per land hectare; each ton of avocado was taxed 1000 pesos and three pesos per kilo for lemons. Furthermore the Caballeros Templarios created a taxation to provide “security” and protection to shops, pharmacies, *tortillerias*, butchers and bars: the owners had to pay 60.000 pesos each month for every business.<sup>20</sup> This parallel system of taxation showed the organized crime power in Michoacán and reflected the state vacuum in this state. In order to confirm this “criminal” sovereignty the group announced a temporary ceasefire ahead of Pope Benedict XVI's trip to Mexico in March 2012, acting as true and exclusive authority in Michoacán.

Some authors and scholars underlined that Michoacán situation can be interpreted like the clearest example of “State Capture”.<sup>21</sup> In Michoacán this capture and reconfiguration of the

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<sup>19</sup> Salvador Maldonado Aranda, “You don't see any violence here but it leads to very ugly things”, cit.p.162

<sup>20</sup> José Gil Olmos cit. P.126

<sup>21</sup> Guillermo Valdés, Castellanos, *Historia del Narcotráfico en México*, Penguin Random House Grupo Editorial México, 2013.

State was developed progressively, thanks to organized crime groups such as Zetas, La Familia and Caballeros Templarios. La Familia and in a more capillary way Los Caballeros Templarios started to control the public administrations and public spending for private purposes, often with the use of brutal force, coercion and corruption. No political parties that ruled municipalities and the Michoacán State were saved by co-optation of organized crime, voluntarily or involuntarily, from Tinoco Rubí government (1996-2002) to Fausto Vallejo (2012-2014). As pointed out by Guillermo Valdés Castellanos, CISEN's former director (Centro de Investigación y Seguridad Nacional), Michoacán "was a pioneer State in this type of privatization of all municipal public affairs".<sup>22</sup>

### **The self-defense groups**

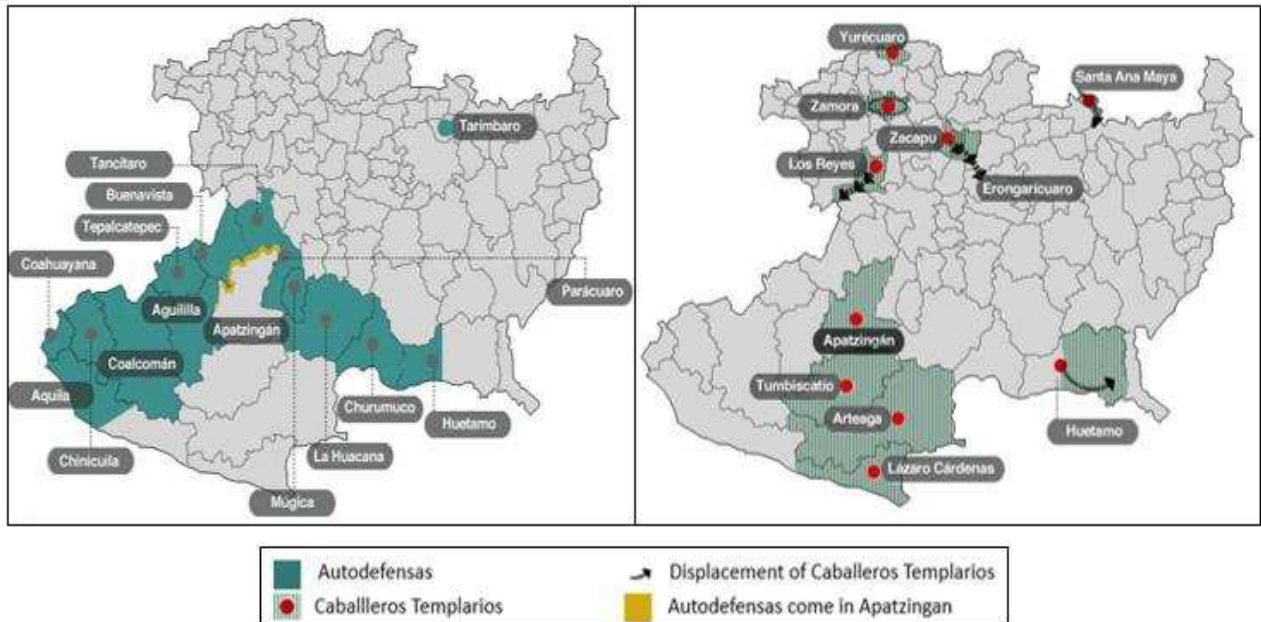
The rise of hyper-violent, predatory criminal groups through the past decade changed the life of thousands of people in Michoacán. This situation provoked the rise of self-defense groups called *autodefensas*. These groups differ substantially from community police (*policía comunitaria*)<sup>23</sup> because they assumed an offensive character and, in many cases, are not socially legitimate: they reacted to the brutality and criminal system created by Caballeros Templarios and wanted to recover municipalities. The *autodefensas*' initial strategic methods consisted primarily of occupying municipal police stations, placing officials they claimed to be corrupt under detention, and setting up armed checkpoints at access points entering and leaving affected towns. They also employed an increasingly visible and widespread public relations campaign involving social media. The first reported emergence of *autodefensas* occurred in the municipalities of Buenavista and Tepalcatepec in the Tierra Caliente region in January 2013, and spread quickly, first to nearby municipalities, and then beyond. By the end of the year, there were an estimated 20,000 members of the *autodefensas* operating in

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<sup>22</sup> Josè Gil Olmos cit. P.205

<sup>23</sup> Volunteer community policing has been a tradition in indigenous communities across Southern Mexico for centuries. Though controversial, advocates argue the practice is supported by international law and has been codified in the 1917 Constitution that permits local frameworks for "the regulation and solution of internal conflicts." These volunteer police forces vary in size and function, but have not an offensive nature.

eight municipalities: Buenavista, Tepalcatepec, Coalcomán, Aguililla, Tancítaro, La Huacana, Churumuco, Parácuaro.<sup>24</sup>



Map of *autodefensas* territories and Caballeros Templarios presence, January 2014,

*Animalpolitico.com*.<sup>25</sup>

In order to understand the self-defense phenomenon in Michoacán, it can be useful to divide the analysis in three main parts: the “positive” elements, the major problems related to the development of these groups and the relationship with government and federal forces.

Firstly, the importance of these groups in recovering many territories, previously completely in the hands of Caballeros Templarios should be recognized. One of the most the important accomplishment for the self-defense groups was their recapturing of Apatzingán on February 8, 2014, from the organized crime groups. This municipality was the center of the fight for

<sup>24</sup> Heinle, Molzhan, Shirk cit. p.18

<sup>25</sup> Omar Sánchez de Tagle “El mapa del conflicto en Michoacán, según las autodefensas”, Animal Politico, January 22, 2014. <http://www.animalpolitico.com/2014/01/el-mapa-del-conflicto-en-michoacan-segun-las-autodefensas/>



control between cartels and between cartels and *autodefensas*. Another positive factor linked to the rise of self-defense groups is the recovery of the lucrative fruit industry, which had been heavily infiltrated by the Templarios.<sup>26</sup> Secondly it is fundamental to underline some problems related to the self-defense groups and their development. The most important problem is the real origin of *autodefensas*. There are many opinions about this matter. Some Caballeros Templarios members and Fausto Vallejo's former government argue that *autodefensas* were infiltrated and economically sustained by other drug cartels, such as *Cártel de Jalisco Nueva Generación*. Furthermore, as pointed out by José Gil Olmos in his book "Batallas de Michoacán, el proyecto colombiano de Peña Nieto", the creation of self-defense groups is attributable to a precise project conceived and financed by the federal government. Olmos argues that the project was directed by Óscar Adolfo Naranjo Trujillo, former Peña Nieto's adviser on security and former head of the Colombian National Police, repeatedly accused of having supported paramilitary groups against the drug cartels in Colombia. Olmos also observes, thanks to some testimonies, that this project was developed with the fundamental support of others drug traffickers and hit men.<sup>27</sup> The hypothesis should be seriously considered because in one year (from February 2013 to March 2014) the *autodefensas* reached enormous results in Michoacán, although public opinion believed that the groups were formed by simple armed civilians. The federal project continued when the public security functions were effectively taken over by the federal government on January 15, 2014 with Peña Nieto's appointment of Alfredo Castillo Cervantes as public security commissioner for the state, relieving Governor Fausto Vallejo of that component of his governing responsibilities. On January 29, Castillo announced that the process of regulating the self-defense groups in Michoacán had begun, with recruiting, distributing uniforms, and collecting records for members of the new Rural Defense Corps. The document was signed by Castillo Cervantes, Governor Vallejo, and self-defense group leaders Estanislao Beltrán,

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<sup>26</sup> In June 2013, Hipólito Mora, a lime grower and prominent *autodefensas* leader in the La Ruana municipality, estimated that between 70% and 80% of profits would be lost for the year given the Organize Crime Group's involvement and meddling in the business. Heinle, Molzhan, Shirk cit. p.20,21

<sup>27</sup>In particular Olmos argues that Juan José Farías Álvarez, "El Abuelo" (Milenio Cartel boss) was one of the most important figure that drove the rise of self-defense group. José Gil Olmos cit. P.246-306

Hipólito Mora, Jesús Bucio, and Adalberto Rodríguez. This government strategy as recounted by Olmos and confirmed by the testimonies of Manuel Mireles, an eminent *autodefensas* leader, tends to confirm the general thesis supported by this paper. Mireles, very critical about the cooptation of self-defense by federal forces, denounced the infiltration of organized crime in self-defense groups and the pact between the federal government, some self-defense leaders and drug traffickers. The supposed pact and the formal integration of self-defense forces showed the weakness of federal institutions, which without external force (drug cartels or *autodefensas*) could not restore order, peace and security in Michoacán. Today this pact seems to have failed and now authorities are confronted with a new set of criminal actors, further complicating the government's job of establishing law and order in Michoacán. "Homicides and extortion have only gone up in Michoacán during the last two years. The government essentially waved the white flag on the vigilante experiment early last month, when President Enrique Peña Nieto deployed 5,000 federal agents to secure the embattled state."<sup>28</sup>

### Conclusions

The extremely chaotic situation reported above and related to the Mexican State of Michoacán, has been particularly encouraged by the fact that the State is no more the unique actor able to use force effectively. In this context, in fact, other actors have appeared and have developed particular capabilities that made them have access to violence too. This fact is particularly noticeable in the increasing number of armed groups and in the ease of access to weapons.

The spread of violence outside the State "legitimacy" sphere, shows how the State is no longer the unique entity and sometimes neither the most suitable one, able to protect the population from external shocks. This means that the assumption "*protego ergo obli*go" upon which the "state contract" is based is no longer valid here.

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<sup>28</sup> Michael Lohmuller "No Solution in Sight for Mexico's Vigilante Problem" insightcrime.org 13 November 2015.

The state of Michoacán is the clear example of the state and power vacuum: the State, represented by local authority, is often corrupted, coopted or passive against organized crime. On the other hand the federal government, to contrast parallel governments such as Caballeros Templarios, is forced to make a deal with non-state actors. This can occur in a legal form (self-defense cooptation within federal forces) or illegal and covert (making a deal with other drug cartels). Today, the main consequence is the complete disorder in the state, where we have disputes between a large numbers of drug cartels, small criminal cells and many self-defense groups, that often carry out criminal activities.

With the increase of these cases of admixture, it becomes very difficult to distinguish the different groups, because the methods to find money are the same, and the strategies pursued for obtaining power similar. So, there are two main risks in this situation. The first is to undervalue one actor by focusing on others, because the experience teaches that a State is not really able to fight more than one enemy at the same time. The second is trying to contrast each actor by using the same methods used for the others, without understanding in every case that the strength of organized crime lies in becoming invisible and in infiltrate itself into the structures of state institutions. Unfortunately Michoacán is the best example of this disastrous scenario.

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