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**Title**

A Tale of Two Missions

**Permalink**

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/6345t7xv>

**Journal**

Armed Forces & Society, 43(1)

**ISSN**

0095-327X

**Author**

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**Publication Date**

2017

**DOI**

10.1177/0095327x16631084

Peer reviewed

# A Tale of Two Missions: Mexican Military Police Patrols Versus High-Value Targeted Operations

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Armed Forces & Society  
2017, Vol. 43(1) 53-71  
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DOI: 10.1177/0095327X16631084  
journals.sagepub.com/home/afs



## Abstract

Latin American scholars often maintain that militaries should be kept out of internal security operations. Soldiers, they claim, are ill suited for these assignments, inevitably placing innocent civilians in harm's way. This study instead argues that not all counternarcotic missions are the same. When a specific operation coincides with a military's capabilities and proclivities, it can be conducted effectively and humanely. When there is a disconnect between the operation and the institution, there is a greater chance for mission failure and civilian casualties. Those differences are revealed in a comparative case study of the Mexican military's crime patrols versus its targeted operations against cartel kingpins. It finds that while there are justifiable doubts about transforming soldiers into cops, it is also the case that soldiers can conduct themselves professionally and with restraint when they are tasked with assignments that conform more closely to their skills sets.

## Keywords

military, military mission, military operation, internal security, Mexico

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## Introduction

The dramatic February 2014 capture by Mexican marines of the notorious Sinaloa drug cartel leader, Joaquín “El Chapo” Guzmán, followed by Guzmán’s equally dramatic escape from a high-security prison in July of the following year, reminds us of how hard it is to track down and then detain well-protected narco-traffickers. It took months of planning, intelligence gathering, and coordination between the Mexican navy and U.S. agencies to pinpoint Guzmán’s whereabouts and then move in to make the arrest. But it also took the complicity of Mexican federal police and prison guards to allow Guzmán’s associates to dig, undetected, a mile-long tunnel leading into his prison cell, through which the cartel leader made his way to freedom (El Universal, 2015; Vicenteno, 2014).

The episode encapsulates the conundrum facing many Latin American states: They are plagued by pervasive drug-related crime and violence (Arias, 2006; Bailey & Dammert, 2006; Bruneau, Dammert, & Skinner, 2011; Dammert, 2012) and yet unable to rely on their police forces to provide citizens with the protection they demand. While police are normally at the front lines in the battles to defeat crime, they are also part of the problem: inept, corrupt, outnumbered, and outgunned by what are lethal criminal syndicates with sufficient resources to purchase police docility or connivance. The public more than anything yearns for protection from rampant violence, which is why there are periodic calls for the military to step in to either supplement or supplant the police in counterdrug security operations. And yet, the armed forces themselves present societies with a challenge: They are not conditioned nor necessarily trained to operate with the restraint they must exhibit if they are to spare the public harm even as they use lethal force to pursue heavily armed criminal elements.

In fact, there are two powerful reasons—one historical and one ontological—why we might not expect militaries to operate with great circumspection when hunting down narco-traffickers. First, throughout most of the 20th century, the Latin American public was often the victim of military abuse of power. Always under the pretext of defending national security, armies would routinely resort to excessive force within their national borders against perceived enemies of the regime, while innocent civilians would inevitably be caught in the dragnet. Even after the transition to democracy in the mid- to late 1980s, militaries earned notoriety for transgressing the law and for failure to observe human rights standards, when operating within the borders. Scholars maintain that so long as Latin American militaries are directed toward internal security operations, they will do so not only at the expense of citizens’ rights but also at the expense of civilian control (Desch, 1999; Loveman, 1999; Stepan, 1986). Thus, if the past is prologue, we might expect the same pattern of behavior in Mexico during this contemporary period.

Second, militaries are normally socialized into the use of maximum force, not restraint (Lutterbeck, 2004; McDavid, 2007). When faced with a formidable foe, militaries instinctively do two things. Defensively, they hunker down in heavily

guarded, fortified bases and thickly plated armored vehicles and uniforms. When they do emerge from their fortresses, they resort to uninhibited explosive force against the “enemy” to subdue it enough to shield their own units from counter-attack. It is an exercise in shifting back and forth between isolation and annihilation. This creates a stark separation between soldier and public which has the disadvantage of dulling the military’s sensitivities to situations requiring calibrated, gradual, and deferred violence. In short, militaries have a difficult time striking the balance between force protection and target protection. Add to the mix the fact that militaries engaged in counternarcotic missions are often asked to operate within densely populated urban areas where thousands of innocent civilians could easily be placed in harm’s way. Hence, one would think that such deployments would inevitably invite trouble because militaries resist being compelled to abide by principles of restraint, which are thought to interfere with combat readiness.

If these propositions were always true, all Latin American militaries, and indeed many from outside the region, would have the same problems each and every time they were asked to conduct internal security operations. By dint of customary practices of the past, and/or innate qualities of the institution, the military would pursue drug criminals in ways that would do intended or, more likely, unintended harm to the surrounding population. But that leaves unresolved the puzzling behavior of the Mexican military during its counterdrug, internal security operations. The fact is there were sizable differences between the military’s urban patrol missions on the one hand and its high-value targeted operations on the other. The first engaged the army and navy in citywide crime sweeps, where officers patrolled block by block either alone or alongside of the police in search of lower level criminal suspects. There were countless instances of citizen maltreatment at the hands of army and navy personnel, and those patrol operations were seldom successful. The second involved military-styled operations to capture or kill known drug trafficking leaders. Innocent civilians were not harmed, and those operations were by and large quite successful.

Neither the mission location nor the generic military tells us enough about the way in which soldiers will conduct themselves once deployed at home, within urban settings. Rather, this study argues that how humanely and effectively a mission is conducted is largely predicated on how compatible the requisites of the mission are with military’s capabilities and proclivities. It is important to know what the specific mission looks like and then to know whether it coincides with a military’s profile: its purpose, structure, training, and professional standards. The probability of mission success is enhanced when it is compatible with military capabilities, professional standards, and inclinations. Mission failure becomes more likely when the gap widens between what the military is being asked to do and what it can and wants to do (Pion-Berlin, 2013). We will find that the Mexican military, like so many Latin American militaries, is at its best when tasked with missions that draw on preexisting organizational strengths that can be utilized in appropriate and humane ways. It is at a disadvantage when tasked with missions that are organizationally incompatible, ill-suited to the skill sets already in place, or professionally demeaning.

The rest of the article will proceed as follows. Scholarly literature will be reviewed on the challenges of converting soldiers into cops and the differences between constabulary roles and urban warfare roles. The selection of two Mexican counterdrug operations as cases will be justified, and subsequently, a comparative assessment will be conducted of army and naval marine police patrols versus high-value targeted operations during the democratic rule period in Mexico.

### *Military Missions: Policing Versus Soldiering*

Ideally, militaries want to engage in missions that are professionally rewarding and consistent with their own purpose, vision, doctrine, training, and customary practice. But the armed forces are sometimes asked to operate outside their comfort zone. They are assigned missions that take them far afield from what they are familiar with and what they know and have prepped for. This raises the question as to whether soldiers can successfully take on counterdrug missions that include police assignments. Morris Janowitz (1960) envisioned a constabulary force that could be usefully deployed in a full range of activities, ranging from roles requiring minimal force and maximum restraint at one end to combat requiring explosive force at another. But he worried that soldiers might not take to constabulary duties easily, since they think of those assignments as embodying less prestige and honor (Janowitz, 1960). Five decades later, Janowitz' preoccupation seems warranted. Today's soldiers seldom consider either peacekeeping or constabulary assignments when contemplating how best to receive promotions and climb through the ranks (Reed & Segal, 2000). In particular, they attach no status to police-like duties and consider them to be professionally demeaning (Lutterbeck, 2004).

Questions of status aside, many militaries comply with orders to undertake a full spectrum of operations, some of which may involve peacetime, police-like duties. Making the transition from combat to constable is doable but requires a high degree of discipline, retraining, and versatility, and while some militaries are up to the task, others are not. U.S. troops are certainly capable of making the transition but, unlike their Latin American counterparts, are legally proscribed (with some exceptions) from directly engaging in core law enforcement activities such as search and seizures, arrests, and detentions (Posse Comitatus Act, 1878). However, the military is mandated to support the police in the face of homeland crises (i.e., natural disasters and terrorist attacks) that overwhelm the capabilities of domestic security agencies (U.S. Army, 1993). Even here, civil support operations require of the U.S. military a nimbleness needed to quickly recalibrate into roles that demand the utmost circumspection, restraint, and respect for civil law and liberties. While Latin American militaries seldom face outright prohibitions on domestic security missions, they often lack the versatility and motivation needed to recalibrate.

Changes like these can be difficult because it demands that soldiers make the mental adjustment from the aggressive war-fighting practices they are accustomed to, to the less prestigious, more unfamiliar, controlled peacetime practices of law

enforcement. Dunlap (1999) agrees that the conversion is difficult and, if made, could potentially harm the military's combat readiness because constabulary soldiers will not be able to easily revert back to war-fighting roles, having lost their combative edge. Others (Zimmerman, 2005) contend that such a reorientation is ultimately too far a stretch to pull off successfully and should be avoided (Bayley, 2001). While soldiers will perform constabulary roles if asked, by large margins they admit that it necessitates additional training and that reorienting themselves to these assignments is hard (Reed & Segal, 2000).

Research by Campbell and Campbell (2010) found that the transition to policing is challenging because soldiers perceive the new tasks to be complex and cognitively demanding. They are being told to absorb more convoluted rules of engagement that require considerable discretion and judgment, along with communicative skills (persuasion and negotiation) they are not at all accustomed to learning. Compounding the difficulty is that the constabulary job is perceived to be less compelling because it is less exciting and not essential for the protection of national security (Campbell & Campbell, 2010). In short, the move from combat to policing can be engineered but affords soldiers nothing in the way of prestige, is often perceived as professionally unfulfilling if not demeaning, and requires of them a change that is cognitively challenging.

These would be sound explanations for why Mexican army and marine units would not likely perform well in certain operations where police-like skills would have to be summoned. The gap between mission requirements and professional vision, training, and practice is great but so too is the gap between the tasks at hand and desirability. The military is neither prepared for these operations, nor does it consider them to be consistent with its professional calling.

But the Mexican internal drug war, like most, has different components, and these need to be carefully distinguished in order to ascertain where soldiers might perform poorly and where they would perform well. The war is a blend of policing and soldiering. As mentioned, some army and marine operations involved police work, where a handful of soldiers entered residential dwellings to search and seize possessions and to interrogate and arrest suspects. Other operations were more akin to urban warfare, albeit on a more limited scale. While not up against opposing armies, guerillas, or paramilitary forces, Mexican soldiers were confronted with heavily armed criminal elements. Their mission was to capture or if need be kill drug lords who were at large often hiding in urban areas and protected by assassins and snipers. These operations required specialized combat skills in building assaults and the use of lethal force in closed, indoor confrontations.

These differences are important—the difference between activities which the military cannot square with its organizational makeup, its customary training and conditioning, from those it can. Those distinctions have a bearing on how observant the military can be in discriminating between those who are allegedly guilty from those who are innocent, applying standards of conduct that minimize hazards to the public even as it inflicts harm on the culpable. A military might be more easily

trained to conduct a mission within urban area that fits more comfortably with its traditional notions of soldiering, which gives it the ability to engage in limited combat and use of lethal force while observing the appropriate rules of engagement.

Indeed, training soldiers for various forms of urban warfare is common. Mexican soldiers have trained both in country (see below) and in the United States. Between 2006 and 2014, over 16,000 Mexican troops completed counternarcotics programs at U.S. military institutions, second only to Colombia (Security Assistance Monitor, 2014). Among the courses taken were asymmetrical conflict, counterdrug operations, urban operations, and counterintelligence (Conroy, 2014). Much of the training was overseen by the U.S. Northern Command (Northcom), which insists that it adheres to human rights standards. According to law, it must.<sup>1</sup> The 1997 Leahy Amendment demands that foreign soldiers they associate with not be involved in any human rights abuses (Security Assistance Monitor, 2014). In addition, the U.S. Army Field Manual for Infantryman (1993) makes clear that when an enemy is intermingled with a dense population, commanders must take special care to reduce collateral damage by protecting the public, separating and removing hostile forces from the surrounding population.

By contrast, it is very difficult to find any evidence of Mexican soldiers training for pure police work, even though they have been performing these functions for decades. In the 1990s, the government ordered the armed forces increasingly to supplant police forces, with cartel violence rising along with police corruption. Officers were called on to run police agencies, and by 1999, 37% of the army was embroiled in police, antinarcotics functions (Camp, 2005). But neither it nor any army in Latin America for that matter has a good record of knowing how to engage in police-like work without also trampling on the rights of citizens.

Consequently, though both police patrols and drug cartel leader assaults both occur within cities, the nature of the operations is dramatically different. Exposing those differences will throw into sharp relief the contrast between policing and soldiering and just how important compatibility between the military organization and the mission is to the ultimate success of the operation.

### *Case Selection*

Investigating two versions of an internal security mission has the advantage of enabling a test of the initial propositions. If the Latin American militaries are, to some extent, conditioned by their past, then once deployed on internal security missions, abuse practices should manifest themselves again, regardless of whether soldiers are on police patrols or hunting down drug lords. Mexico is not an outlier; its own military has been associated with human rights abuses in the past, and hence, we might expect a repeat of those practices in the contemporary period. Moreover, if most militaries are inclined to confront security challengers with maximum force, and have difficulty limiting collateral damage, this should hold true in the case of Mexico, for both kinds of operations under review here. To the extent that sharp

differences in treatment of innocent civilians are observed, depending on whether soldiers are assigned to police patrols or to high-value targeted operations, we could rule out general historical and ontological explanations.

Second, it could be argued that in countries with long histories of military-led counternarcotics operations, the armed forces have had more opportunities to correct bad practices of the past. Dating back to Operation Condor of the 1970s, the Mexican military has been active in suppressing opium and marijuana cultivation in the countryside (Craig, 1980). By 1985, 25,000 soldiers or 18% of the army were immersed in counternarcotic work (Camp, 2005). As drug trafficking organizations grew more formidable and violent, policies also shifted from countryside to the cities, from crop eradication to efforts to dismantle the criminal organizations and intercept drug shipments (Toro, 1995). One expectation that follows from this history is that by now, the armed forces should have learned how to conduct counterdrug operations in a humane way. To the extent they have not, peering into the two missions can throw light on what has gone wrong. Moreover, the period of inquiry (2006–2012) is during the contemporary democratic era, when the authoritarian regime and its practices should have become a thing of the past. Thus, we might expect firmer adherence to democratic standards across the board with a military under the control of elected civilian leaders.

Finally, this study affords us an ability to observe potential differences between service branches. Perhaps the main difficulty is that the army, with a blemished human rights record in years past, has again been asked to perform counterdrug missions, with predictable results. It might be the case that the navy and its marine units in particular could perform the same operations more humanely. Its training regimen is different, its immersion in counternarcotics operations is more recent, and it thus carries less harmful historical baggage along with it. In fact, it had built up a reputation as a force more respectful of human rights. But is this reputation warranted? By comparing the two services conducting the same kinds of operations during the same time period, we can test the proposition.

*Military police patrols.* In March 2008, Mexican President Felipe Calderón (2006–2012) launched Operation *Conjunto Chihuahua*, sending 2,026 soldiers along with 425 federal police into Ciudad Juárez. By June of that year, another 1,400 soldiers would arrive and 5,000 more in March 2009 (Herrera, 2009). Quartered at the 20th Motorized Cavalry Regiment, soldiers would emerge to patrol the city streets in coordination with the federal and municipal police. Military units accustomed to training and operating together were broken up. Two, perhaps three soldiers at most would accompany every policeman, as they fanned out across the 6 districts and 150 sectors that divided the city. Central command and control would remain in the hands of the armed forces (Herrera, 2009).

It was clear practically from the outset that the military patrols were not only ineffectual but were resulting in abuses. Not more than 18 days into the operation, the National Commission on Human Rights (Comisión Nacional de Derechos



Humanos, CNDH) started receiving complaints about army personnel from Ciudad Juárez' 76th Infantry Battalion. CNDH investigations revealed a pattern of disturbing conduct: breaking and entering, robbery, arbitrary arrest and detention, torture, and other forms of cruel and degrading treatment along with forced disappearances (Meyer, 2010). Frustrated at not being able to find cartel operators, the soldiers would implicate anyone, forcefully extracting confessions out of them so that they could demonstrate results. It is revealing that by November 2008, military sources themselves were already admitting that their actions would have to be more precise and based on greater intelligence (La Reforma, 2008), a goal never achieved.

One of the main objectives of this army surge was to reduce the violence and killing that had gripped this city. But after a year of military occupation, the homicide rate actually increased from 130 to 191 per hundred thousand, making Ciudad Juárez one of the two or three most dangerous cities on Earth. By January 2010, in an admission of failure, the government announced that security for Ciudad Juárez would be placed in the hands of the federal police, as army units were pulled back to guard international crossings, airports, and roads leading into the city.

These problems were not limited to Ciudad Juárez or to the army. There has been a documented pattern of abuse at the hands of navy personnel. Of its 57,000 seaman and marine infantry, the navy deploys, on average, some 10,000 for countercrime operations. The navy was asked to take over all police functions in Monterey in 2012 and has had a sizable presence in the state of Veracruz (El Norte, 2012). In June and July 2011 alone, *Human Rights Watch* (2013) documented 20 cases of enforced disappearances by the navy in the states of Nuevo León and Coahuila, characterizing these abuses as a *modus operandi*. A marine convoy would arrive at an apartment building looking for "suspects," claiming that a citizen had filed an anonymous denunciation. The navy would close off nearby streets, and wearing masks and bulletproof vests, they would violently raid an apartment without warrants, stating they were looking for member(s) of an organized crime group. Without presenting any evidence or formal charges against alleged suspects, they would haul them off to a military installation for questioning (Human Rights Watch, 2013). Once there, they would be subject to torture and other forms of cruel treatment in order to pry confessions out of them. Sometimes, those suspects would never resurface, their names filed under "disappeared." These scenarios match many others in terms of chosen methods of operation, suggesting that the abuse was not the work of renegade officers but rather sanctioned by higher-ups as part of an authorized regional operation (Human Rights Watch, 2013).

Navy patrols, like those of the army, reflect the inherent difficulties in placing soldiers in the role of cops; they systematically violate the rules of engagement that pertain to law enforcement: necessity (react violently only when attacked violently), proportionality (scaling responses to the intensity, duration, and magnitude of the aggression), rationality (take nonlethal measures first and don't provoke), and, most importantly, discrimination (separate out those who are violent from those who are not; United Nations, 1979). They have little patience for cultivating community

**Table 1.** Mexico's National Commission on Human Rights: Complaints, Cases, and Victims of Army and Navy Abuse, 2006–2014.

Year	Army	Army	Army	Navy	Navy	Navy
	No. of Complaints	No. of Cases	No. of Victims	No. of Complaints	No. of Cases	No. of Victims
2006	182	0	0	n.a.	1	41
2007	375	4	35	n.a.	0	0
2008	1,230	10	13	n.a.	1	1
2009	1,791	30	84	n.a.	1	2
2010	1,415	21	38	198	6	7
2011	1,695	24	93	495	6	10
2012	1,503	15	43	418	6	45
2013	811	3	19	370	7	51
2014	642	1	22	374	1	2
Totals	9,644	108	347	1,855	29	159

Note. n.a. = not available. Adapted from: Comisión Nacional de los Derechos Humanos, "Recomendaciones," <http://www.cndh.org.mx/Recomendaciones>.

relations, and thus, lacking accurate information on suspects, they are quick to apprehend, accuse, and assault without evidence.

As shown above, there have been many thousands of complaints registered with the CNDH against armed forces personnel since 2006, though as indicated, only a fraction resulted in official cases, meaning that the Commission had investigated to the point it could corroborate that human rights violations had indeed occurred (Table 1).

Although the number of complaints has declined, since 2012 that does not necessarily indicate improved performance on the part of soldiers. It is equally likely that this is a function of troops withdrawing from numerous metropolitan areas and thus having less contact with the public. And the military's face-to-face contact with the citizenry—unfiltered by adherence to law and standards of humane conduct—was and is at the heart of the problem.

It might be suggested that the soldiers could, in theory, engage in humane counter-crime patrols if human rights courses and programs had been incorporated into the military academies and embedded into the training regimens. This argument will not hold for the simple reason that the army and navy have for well over a decade, implemented a range of courses, workshops, and seminars devoted precisely to that subject. The Mexican Secretariat for Defense (Secretaría de la Defensa Nacional [SEDENA], 2006) back in 2006 indicated that all of the army academies had required programs of study devoted to human rights and international humanitarian law. Outside the classroom, the Secretariat has held numerous human rights-related seminars, conferences, workshops, and awareness sessions, with personnel from the Red Cross and the High Commissioner of the United Nations participating.

Combined, all of these pedagogical experiences have reached some 99% of army and air force personnel, according to ministerial reports (SEDENA, 2011). The navy wrote a human rights manual for its forces in 2002, which specifically prohibits their forces from making civilians the object of their attacks, even on the pretext that culpable individuals had infiltrated the population (Secretaría de la Marina, 2002). Since 2001, the navy says it has administered some 48,000 courses, workshops, and seminars dedicated to human rights. At its *Heroica Escuela Naval*, all majors are required to take a course in their first cycle of studies, titled “Individual Guarantees and Human Rights.” In 2008, the Naval Secretariat (Secretaría de la Marina) created an Office of Human Rights, and since 2011, some 30,709 cadets have completed a course in human rights offered by Mexico’s Human Rights Commission (Secretaría de la Marina, 2012).

Naturally, these depictions may be embellished and the figures exaggerated and should be taken with a grain of salt. Nonetheless, there is considerable evidence that efforts have been made to expose soldiers to the principles of human rights appropriate conduct. One has to wonder about the accumulated impact of these educational experiences on institutions that by 2014 were still being charged with abuses. Were the lessons not imparted consistently, correctly, and forcefully enough? Or were they not sinking in, because there was too much of a disconnect between the norms imparted and the manner in which soldiers are accustomed to operating? And if indeed there was a disconnect, the question then becomes, did the same divide exist when it came to high-value targeted operations?

*High-value targeted operations.* Beginning in earnest under President Vicente Fox (2000–2006), special force battalions were set up to carry out high-impact, result-oriented operations aimed at capturing or killing drug lords. Defense ministry intelligence agents began to investigate the operations and structure of the cartels and plot strategies to apprehend cartel leaders, efforts that bore fruit for the first time in 2001, with the capture of mid-level cartel operators and then, in 2002, with the arrest of Benjamin Arellano Felix, Head of the Tijuana cartel (Sierra Guzmán, 2003). Since then, an impressive number of cartel leaders have been arrested or killed.

These targeted operations do have certain similarities with urban patrol operations. First and foremost, they take place mostly in cities and sometimes resort areas. Many of the cartel heads prefer to take up residence—sometimes numerous residences—in comfortable urban dwellings. Drug lord assaults have occurred in population centers of 300,000 or more, such as Nuevo Laredo, Matamoros, Veracruz, Tijuana, Cuernavaca, and San Luis Potosí. Cartel members can and do blend into the population. Even when they make their presence known, they are not easy targets, since thousands, perhaps tens of thousands, of innocent civilians are situated close by. Second, because of the urban geography, soldiers are operating in close quarters and in proximity to places of residence and business. Third, they come heavily armed, and the chances that innocent civilians could be inadvertently harmed are ever present. This is especially so since cartel leaders are surrounded by men

**Table 2.** Mexican Military Missions: Commonalities.

Dimension	Military Police Patrols	Military High-Value Targeted Operations
Urban operations	Yes	Yes
Dense population	Yes	Yes
Use of lethal force	Yes	Yes
Direct military contact with public	Yes	Yes
Potentially high risk of collateral damage	Yes	Yes
Prior human rights education	Yes	Yes

equipped with an arsenal of high-powered rifles, submachine guns, and even grenades. That means the military must come equally prepared, and the lethality of the confrontation could get quickly out of hand, jeopardizing all those in the immediate area. Where violent, criminal elements are interwoven into the fabric of an urban society, responders must combine military-like power with police-like circumspection. As told, that is a balance that is awfully hard to achieve.

Fourth, soldiers make direct, intentional contact with the public. In the days leading up to an assault, they may be gathering information from neighbors. The day of the assault, they may have to request that residents quickly vacate their homes and then direct them to secure places where they are kept under guard. If public contact is, as has been suggested, a huge risk factor for the armed forces, if soldiers have difficulties acclimating themselves to an environment where they must calmly and patiently interact with the population, then certainly high-value targeted operations should be prone to serious missteps. And yet, the forces called upon to seek out cartel leaders, like those on police patrols, took required courses in human rights, which should have sensitized them on how to interact with civilians. The commonalities between these two types of missions are shown in Table 2.

The differences with urban patrols are sizable, however, and those differences help explain how targeted operations can be carried out with substantially less risk to the unarmed population than can police patrols. Cartel leaders are public figures. While they may move in the shadows, they would not have climbed to the top of their organizations in complete obscurity. Their names are known and, at times, so are their faces. There may or may not be photographic evidence, but the army and navy almost always know who they are looking for. That is a far cry from the urban patrol operations that cast a wide net, lurching aimlessly in the dark. Moreover, cartel leaders are presumed and usually proven criminals. They have often served time, they have criminal track records, and, if not, they have notorious reputations. They are commonly thought to having sanctioned countless murders and massacres and, indeed, would not have risen to the top of their syndicates without having done so. Thus, there is little doubt about their culpability, and that easily earns them the label “enemy.” This is key, because it resonates with the armed forces *raison d’être*; they are trained to hunt down enemy forces. And because they can pinpoint the

target, they can also make a clear separation between the “bad guys and the good guys.” This ability to discriminate should allow them to mitigate harm to the surrounding population.

If the military knows who it is they are after, finding out where they are is a more complicated challenge. Obviously, the most wanted have been adept at avoiding detection and capture for some time, which compels careful intelligence gathering and reconnaissance work on the part of the security forces and agencies (Admiral Carlos Ortega Muñiz, personal (e-mail) communication, November 29, 2014).<sup>2</sup> Intercepting cell phone communications, wiretapping phone lines, finding informants, and then studying the movements and habits of a criminal are all part of a long, methodical, sometimes painstaking process of discovery. Thus, it is almost always the case that dramatic drug lord captures, and assassinations have been preceded by weeks if not months of careful planning, enabling the armed forces to ultimately pinpoint their target. High-value targeted assaults can, in other words, carefully discriminate between violent offenders of interest and nonviolent bystanders, placing them in stark contrast to the indiscriminate and ad hoc, military police-like patrols.

Finally, the forces that the Mexican Government has brought to bear on the cartel leaders have been specially trained for those purposes (Defensa.com, 2013). For example, the navy has deployed a marine infantry and parachutist battalion created in 1992 as an elite force held in reserve for high-impact counternarcotic expeditions. They have also deployed special forces (Fuerzas Especiales del Golfo and Fuerzas Especiales del Pacífico). Formed in 2001, they have been specifically trained in urban combat, building assaults, and closed, indoor confrontations. They are graduates of the Center for Specialized Marine Infantry Instruction and Training, which puts the marines through an arduous, 11-month-long training regimen, where only one in three makes it through to completion. And as mentioned, the Pentagon has trained thousands of Mexican soldiers in urban, irregular, and asymmetric warfare. By contrast, most army and navy units sent on joint patrols with the police were not specialized nor adequately trained. And for reasons already stated, it is unlikely a program dedicated to molding soldiers into cops would have succeeded. In short, targeted high-value operations of this sort can be designed and framed in ways that fit more comfortably with missions soldiers are cut out for. Mission differences are shown in Table 3.

With these differences in mind, it is argued that the targeted assaults on cartel leaders should pose a lesser risk to the public than do the urban patrol operations. The military can treat a high-value target operation as if it was a military mission. Mindful of who they are going after, the military forces assigned to targeted drug lords can direct their explosive force at the enemy—the crime leader, not his neighbors. They have no need to treat those in the vicinity as hostile or suspicious; they are neither. Based on actual intelligence, not rumors and hearsay, they have identified the culpable party, and all that remains is to make the arrest. They can do so in a manner that avoids harm to others, because they have made the physical and mental

**Table 3.** Mexican Military Missions: Differences and Results.

Dimension	Military Police Patrols	Military High-Value Targeted Operations
Clear enemy identification	No	Yes
Discriminate enemy from innocents	No	Yes
Prior mission-specific training and planning	Limited	Extensive
Operate as military unit	No	Yes
Use of accurate, actionable intelligence	No	Yes
Mission–profession compatibility	Low	High
Mission success	Low	High

separation between the enemy and the innocent. What is the evidence? Have, in fact, cartel leader assaults resulted in fewer civilian casualties and human rights abuses?

*Evidence from high-value targeted cases.* Arturo Beltrán Leyva, along with his four brothers, headed up the cartel that goes by the family’s name. It controlled lucrative drug trafficking corridors in Northeastern Mexico, it hired thugs to carry out murder contracts, and it was connected to the assassination of law enforcement officers, including the federal police chief in 2008. By early 2009, Arturo Beltrán Leyva had made it onto the Drug Enforcement Administration’s (DEA) list of the top 11 most wanted Mexican fugitives, and the Mexican Government had offered a 2.1 million reward for his capture. On December 16, 2009, the navy tracked Leyva to a luxury condo in Colonia Lomas de la Selva, an upper-class neighborhood of Cuernavaca, not too far from the residence of the Governor of Morelos. Marines quickly established a perimeter around the building, in an operation involving some 400 soldiers. From Mi-17 helicopters, 200 paratroopers descended by rope to the rooftop, while hundreds more positioned themselves in nearby buildings. Leyva refused orders to submit to arrest, at which point the marines moved in. After an intense firefight that lasted 2 hr, and which included the use of grenades by Leyva’s forces, 11 criminals were apprehended, and 6 were killed including Leyva. One infantryman was fatally shot, and several others were wounded (El Universal, 2009). This was the navy’s first major operation against a drug lord, and its stunning success had much to do with its close collaboration with the U.S. DEA, the Pentagon, and other federal agencies all of whom provided the navy with valuable intelligence on the whereabouts of this and other cartel leaders. Beginning with the takedown of Leyva, the marines would go on to establish a reputation for mounting dangerous assaults with great cunning, acumen, and sophistication. This vignette was chosen because it illustrates what would become a pattern of Mexican military conduct in the years ahead—a veritable *modus operandi* for the navy and army alike.

What is also of note in this operation was the navy’s treatment of civilians. Sailors went patiently door to door to evacuate residents in the apartment complex, moving them to a nearby gymnasium kept under guard. Despite the violence and intensity of

**Table 4.** Mexican Military Kingpin Operations, 2007–2012: Criminal and Civilian Casualties.

Year	Army Operations			Navy Operations		
	No. of Operations	Criminal Deaths	Civilian Deaths	No. of Operations	Criminal Deaths	Civilian Deaths
2007	3	2	0	0	0	0
2008	8	0	0	0	0	0
2009	21	0	0	2	6	0
2010	3	0	0	2	5	0
2011	16	1	0	4	0	0
2012	11	4	0	7	3	0
Totals	62	7	0	15	14	0

Note. Data culled from numerous Mexican and foreign newspapers and news Web sites. Unless otherwise noted, source is Mexican: *El Diario*, *La Prensa* (NY), *El Latino* (USA), *El Norte*, EFE News Services, *Reforma*, *Univisión*, *El Mundo*, *El Universal*, *El Paso Times* (USA) *El Mercurio* (Chile), *Agence France-Presse* (France), *El Nuevo Herald* (USA), *Brownsville Herald* (USA), *Mural*, *Notimex News Agency*, *Daily Mail Reporter* (UK), *La Opinión* (USA).

the confrontation with Leyva's forces, there were no reports of civilian casualties (Grayson, 2013). Was this just an isolated case of good fortune? To find out, 77 army and navy cartel leader operations from 2007 to 2012 were analyzed, which is shown in Table 4.

As many high-value target operations were identified as could be found. While this is not a complete list for these years surveyed, it is close to it. For each operation, web-based newspaper sources were consulted, looking for the most detailed coverage available. In most cases, two articles were compared to each other to insure that there was sufficient information. Reports indicated parallels to the Leyva operation: Drug lord targets and their assassins were clearly identified; specially trained, well-armed army and marine units were involved in the hunt, heavily outnumbering the cartel enforcers; and weeks or months of planning and intelligence gathering preceded the operations. What is most striking about the results is the complete absence of civilian casualties, given the number of operations conducted, their urban locations, and the potential dangers involved in confronting such criminals. The fact is some of these cartel leaders were captured without firing a shot, which explains the low number of criminal casualties. But where there was shooting, there was no collateral damage either. Suspects were cornered, but not before residents were removed from the scene.

These results were cross-checked against another source: findings of the National Commission on Human Rights. A sample of the 121 investigated cases (see Table 1) of human rights abuses, including deaths, committed by army and navy (marines) personnel between 2007 and 2012, was examined. In no instance, were any violations reported having occurred during a high value target operation. Abuses took place entirely during patrols or at checkpoints. Clearly, the Beltrán Leyva case was not exceptional, and the Mexican armed forces have figured out how to conduct targeted operations in ways that do not place innocent civilians at risk.

They did so because, as hypothesized, their operations were consistent with soldiering. While far removed from the conventional battlefield, these missions could be designed and framed in ways that played to the strengths of soldiers trained in combat and specially trained for urban combat. There was congruence between the mission and what the army and navy were organizationally equipped and indoctrinated to do. That in itself is no guarantee that human rights standards will be upheld. They still had to take particular care to avoid inflicting unintended harm on the surrounding population. The absence of civilian casualties suggests they did, but why? Why could soldiers adhere to human rights protocol during high-value targeted operations and not during police patrols? It is likely that successful targeting, based on extensive preparation and intelligence gathering, allowed them to concentrate their efforts and, if need be, firepower, on the identified criminal elements only, sparing residents in the neighborhood the ordeals suffered during the more indiscriminate patrolling operations detailed earlier. There was no need to lash out by inflicting wider scale punishment on the innocent, out of some sense of frustration. Discriminating between enemy and the innocent allowed them to avoid all kinds of measures that could have endangered persons not related to the crimes.

## Conclusion

The results of the study support the assertion that not all counterdrug, internal security operations are the same. When army or navy personnel are asked to work jointly with law enforcement in urban patrols designed to hunt for criminal elements, they have to make difficult, unrewarding behavioral adjustments that ultimately prove frustrating and counterproductive. The same difficulties present themselves for army and marine units; there are no discernible service branch differences. When by contrast, they can search for criminals within the framework of a military-like operation, they can deploy familiar skills while following rules of engagement that allow for civilian protection. The contrast brings into focus the difference between policing and soldiering. It is the difference between operations that cannot be reconciled with desirable professional practices, standards, and proclivities from those that can.

The research clearly shows that when soldiers are on missions which are compatible with their institutional and professional makeup, they can resort to lethal force *and* avoid collateral damage. The key lies in the ability and desire to carefully discriminate between enemy targets and innocent civilians. By contrast, the findings also indicate that more military experience with policing does not appear to have yielded markedly different results. The assignment is as awkward, burdensome, distasteful, and as dangerous to civilians today in democratic Mexico as it was before during the authoritarian period. It turns out that even with a human rights education under his belt, a soldier does not perform well when asked to assume the role of an officer of the law.



The method for apprehending high-value targets, not to mention their stunning success, cannot be readily replicated for patrol operations. And so, civilians who are not at risk during the high-value targeted operations will be at risk during military patrols. Thus, this study's findings do not lend support for Mexico's overall counterdrug strategy, since military police-like operations continue, with all of the inherent risks associated with those endeavors.

What the case study comparison suggests is that there are justifiable doubts about the feasibility of transforming soldiers into cops, especially in high-threat security environments. Instead, soldiers should do soldiering, and so long as that is the case, they can engage in urban, counternarcotics assignments with considerable acumen, discretion, and humaneness. The findings of this research should have relevance beyond Mexico. Any nation with a high-risk domestic security environment characterized by organized criminal elements and ill-prepared police forces faces similar predicaments. The political pressures to call in the armed forces will be great, especially as crime rates soar. But soldiers will not be able to take over all aspects of the counterdrug operation for reasons told.

What of the police themselves? Can they seize control of the drug war, freeing themselves of dependence on the military by developing new tactical units, or perhaps joining in multiagency task forces, as they do in the United States? There are two principal problems associated with this. The first is corruption. Unfortunately, the Mexican police have been not only thoroughly outgunned by the drug syndicates, but demonstrably complicit in their criminal activities. Poorly educated, equipped, and paid, police have too easily succumbed to the mix of cartel coercion and bribery. The government will not commit resources to create new internal units unless or until the police first clean house and then markedly improve recruitment, training, and career incentives. The second problem is that cooperation between different police departments within Mexico's three-tiered system (municipal, state, and federal) is unlikely. Mutual competition, mistrust, and resentment poison the relations between the different police forces. For instance, the municipal police of Ciudad Juárez reserved their harshest judgments not for the armed forces who intervened during Operation Conjunto Chihuahua, but for the federal police, who moved in to replace them.<sup>3</sup> These critical views of higher tiered police forces are shared by the cops of Tijuana (Justiciabárometro, 2015) and, undoubtedly, other city police forces as well.

One alternative, already contemplated by several nations including Mexico, is the deployment of what may be called a hybrid force (Pion-Berlin & Trinkunas, 2011). Answerable to no other security force, with its own chain of command and dedicated personnel, the hybrid force is often described as one with a military character and police sensibilities. Its soldier cops would be trained in basic combat but also equipped to conduct themselves as law officers capable of operating in population centers where caution is needed. Ideally, the hybrid unit would be forged from the ground up, a *sui generis* organization that carried none of the historical baggage associated with preexisting police forces. It would have its own legal foundation,

structure, hierarchy, mission, commanders, recruits, academies, training regimens, and salary scales. These hybrid forces could confront cartels and criminal gangs while sparing the police and military the ordeal of reconfiguring their forces to deal with new situations. It remains to be seen whether countries have the resources and political will to create such forces on a national scale.

### **Declaration of Conflicting Interests**

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### **Funding**

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### **Notes**

1. What is not known is the extent to which those who attended the various U.S. training sessions actually put into practice the human rights principles they learned.
2. According to its former head of intelligence, the Mexican navy is particularly adept at operations security (OPSEC), which is the protection of information that could be used by an adversary. It involves taking of measures to forestall the enemy's exploitation of friendly information.
3. By a large margin, 49–12%, municipal police in Ciudad Juárez rate federal police intervention in their jurisdiction worse than army intervention. See Justiciabárometro (2011).

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