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# Fleeing from Violence: Accounts of Forced Displacement in Central Mexico

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This article explores the nature and dynamics of criminal violence in central Mexico through the lived experience of internally displaced persons (IDPs) over the past ten years. First, the issue of internal displacement and the context of violence and drug-trafficking in Mexico is addressed, then reflections are made on the methodological, security and ethical challenges of doing fieldwork in contexts of violence. Three case studies are drawn upon to illustrate the complexities of violence, organised crime and state (in)action leading to forced displacement. Findings are analysed and framed as grey zones, uncertain and at times indecipherable and terrifying.

Keywords: case studies, central Mexico, grey zone, internally displaced persons, organised crime, violence.

After packing all day, we fell asleep, exhausted. Suddenly, about 3 a.m. I opened my eyes. It was the silence that awakened me, I realised that silence wasn't normal. I tried to turn on the light, but there was no electricity. I got up, opened the door and found the guards with pistols drawn. I asked them what was going on, they told me to get back into my room and not come out, we were being watched [...] [one of the guards] brought our children to our room. We spent the entire night like that, unable to sleep, the guards with their pistols ready. (Interview with Carolina, who was kidnapped with her children and released before going into internal displacement; 2018)

Little has been written about the internal forced displacement triggered by organised crime in central Mexico; this article addresses the challenges that arise in trying to understand the new scenarios resulting from the war on drugs started by the then president Felipe Calderon in 2006. These constitute a grey zone (Levi, 2004) where events are sometimes difficult to decipher, actors do not fall into neat binaries (good and evil, state and non-state), and contexts are in a continuous state of flux. For these reasons, organised crime – and the state's efforts to combat it – do not fall easily into conventional notions of armed conflict in Latin America, but rather constitute a new modality of conflict in Mexico and the Northern Triangle of Central America (El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala), reminiscent to some extent of the peak of the drug war in Colombia

in the 1980s. The article draws on three case studies to unpack the specific dynamics of violence which drove two families and one young man into internal displacement. The cases discussed illustrate the complexities of organised crime in central Mexico, the different actors involved and the impact on local people, creating contexts of uncertainty and fear and triggering forced displacement. Few studies exist which deal with criminal violence in central Mexico or criminal violence (Maldonado Aranda, 2012, 2013) and even fewer about the resulting forced displacement in this region (Hernández Soc, 2019). This article seeks to address this gap and to contribute to understanding organised crime and individual forced displacement in central Mexico.

## Criminal Violence and Forced Displacement

President Felipe Calderón declared a ‘war on drugs’ in 2006; this policy was continued by President Enrique Peña Nieto. The growing numbers of IDPs were not recognised by either government. By the time Andrés Manuel López Obrador came to office, violence had spiralled out of control. Homicides rose to a record high of 35,588 in 2019, including 1,825 women and 1,162 minors (Tourliere, 2020). The Human Rights Division of the Ministry of the Interior has documented 61,637 disappeared persons (97 percent between 2006 and 2019, the rest between 1964 and 2005). At the end of August, the National Search Commission reported 37,000 unidentified bodies and thousands of skeletal remains in medical forensic custody, as well as 4,974 bodies in 3,024 clandestine or common graves located between 2006 and mid-August 2019 (Díaz, 2019). Kidnappings and the murder or disappearance of relatives often trigger internal forced displacement.

Drug production and distribution have a long history in Mexico, dating back over a century in the northern state of Sinaloa with the opium trade, and marijuana entering the market from the 1940s in Michoacán (Rivera Velázquez, 2014), and in the 1970s in Guerrero (Pantoja, 2015; Hernández Soc, 2019). After the US government blocked routes through the Caribbean in 1982, Colombian drug-traffickers redirected cocaine shipments through Mexico to the United States. Drug-trafficking in Mexico was traditionally kept in check by the ruling Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI, Institutional Revolutionary Party) (Maldonado Aranda, 2012; Rosen and Zepeda, 2016), with some high-up government and party members, police and armed forces members receiving sizeable cuts. With ‘democratic transition’ in 2000 and the arrival in power of the National Action Party (PAN), this *modus vivendi* crumbled. In 2007, President Felipe Calderón’s war on drugs (Trejo and Ley, 2016) unleashed a spiral of violence which continues to date, shifting between regions, peaking, easing off and rekindling. Calderón’s strategy of targeting drug lords had the effect of fragmenting cartels and provoking internal disputes and it resulted in the expansion of small split-off groups. These in turn fought with the cartels to control the ‘territories’ of the drug cartels, known as ‘plazas’ (Fuerte Celis, Pérez Lujan and Córdova Ponce, 2018; Rodríguez Ferreira, 2016). The outcome was increased expenditure by all for armed operations, and organised crime diversified into many different activities, including extortions, kidnappings, pornography, human trafficking and smuggling (Buscaglia, 2014). PRI President Peña Nieto followed Calderón’s strategy, though less publicly. Since coming to power in January 2019, President López Obrador has sought to fight corruption and ‘huachicoleo’ (oil and petrol theft). He recognised in his first annual presidential speech on Independence Day in September 2019 that Mexico is suffering an unprecedented crisis in terms

of security and violence. He also publicly recognised that the results of his policy on curbing violence have so far been unsatisfactory, and that insecurity is his government's greatest challenge.

Violence in Mexico takes place in a context of deep inequality (Pearce, 2019), corruption and impunity (Buscaglia, González-Ruiz, and Prieto Palma, 2006). Significantly, inequality – rather than poverty – is often signalled as a key factor provoking social violence (Kreimer, 2010). Mexico is in the top 25 percent of countries with the highest levels of inequality (Esquivel Hernandez, 2015); studies also point to a correlation between inequality and violence in Mexico (Enamorado in Esquivel Hernandez, 2015: 35; Adams, 2012). Mexico also has the highest corruption perceptions among the 34 member countries of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2018) and in 2019 ranked 130 of the 180 countries evaluated, an improvement on 138 in 2018 (Animal Político, 2020). Mexico's high impunity rates reveal a weak judicial system.

## Internally Displaced Persons

Forced displacement across borders – as in the case of refugees and political exiles – has long been recognised and victims supported by the United Nations, governments and (inter)national non-government organisations (INGOs and NGOs). In contrast, internally displaced persons were not officially recognised by the UN until their Guiding Principles were issued in 1998, defining Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) as:

people forced to escape or flee their home or places of habitual residence [...] to avoid the effects of armed conflict, situations of generalised violence, violations of human rights or natural or human-made disasters, and who have not crossed an internationally recognised State border' (E/CN.4/1998/53/Add.21998: 5).

Forced displacement is widely known as a result of the 6.2 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Syria, 4.5 million in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and 7.7 million in Colombia respectively (UNHCR figures). Internal displacement is not a new problem in Mexico; people have been forced to move within Chiapas due to religious intolerance (Casillas, 1988) and in the wake of the Zapatista uprising (García de León, 2002). There has also been displacement resulting from land disputes in Oaxaca and Chiapas (Mestries, 2014), and from natural disasters, in many regions. However, forced displacement arising from organised crime and drug-trafficking is a more recent phenomenon, falling within the context and economic interests of late capitalism (Paley, 2015). These instances of forced displacement, as well as the action taken to combat them, are all embedded in and benefit from globalisation (Calveiro, 2012; Rosen and Zepeda, 2016). Drugs, human bodies and guns move across countries and continents.

The Norwegian Refugee Council's Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC, 2020) currently reports 345,000 IDPs in Mexico; and in their 2019 report the Comisión Mexicana de Defensa y Promoción de los Derechos Humanos (the Mexican Commission for the Defence and Promotion of Human Rights, CMDPDH, 2019) had registered 346,945 persons. In contrast, official surveys carried out by the Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía (INEGI, the National Statistics and Geography Institute) found 1.55 million people had moved house due to perceived violence and insecurity in 2012 alone (Consejo Nacional de Población (the National Population Council, CONAPO, 2019). Clear criteria and detailed information would be needed to establish how many of these are IDPs.

President Andrés Manuel López Obrador's position concerning internal forced displacement has been contradictory, as it has with human rights in general. On the one hand, López Obrador's government has recognised forced displacement as a national problem, and Congress, at the time of writing this article, is in the process of passing a law to prevent and provide reparations for IDPs. On the other hand, violence has spiralled out of control in various regions of Mexico (InSight Crime, 2019) due to the fragmentation of organised crime, internecine turf disputes and diversification of criminal activities (including kidnappings, extortions and human trafficking), and violence carried out by the state (Moon and Treviño-Rangel, 2020). López Obrador's strategy of creating a militarised National Guard to combat organised crime has met with much criticism (InSight Crime 2018) as it suggests a militarisation of security. Given that some high-up and specially trained members of the military (Correa-Cabrera, 2017) have become drug-traffickers – Los Zetas being the most obvious example – this raises questions about the president's military strategy. In other words, at the same time as recognising human rights violations, President López Obrador has called in the (notorious) army as his main support to ensure security and fight against organised crime.

While there is a sparse but growing literature on forced internal displacement in Mexico (Mestries, 2014; Pérez, 2014; Salazar Cruz, 2014; Mercado Mondragón, 2016; Rubio Díaz-Leal, 2016; Rubio Díaz-Leal and Pérez Vázquez, 2016; De Marinis, 2017, 2019; Salazar Cruz and Álvarez Lobato, 2018; CMDPDH, 2019), very little has been written specifically on the displacement of individuals and families. Séverine Durin (2012, 2018, 2019) has explored the forced displacement of families in north-east Mexico, some crossing the border to Texas and others resettling in other regions in Mexico. Cantor (2014) refers to individuals and families having become displaced as a result of extortions, as well as conflict between cartels. Salazar Cruz (2014) describes the different kinds of displacement, and analyses press articles in order to identify some of the main difficulties faced by IDPs. There is a bit more coverage of individual and family IDPs in non-academic publications: testimonial accounts published by the Mexican Commission for the Defence and Promotion of Human Rights (CMDPDH) (2019), brief references in the National Human Rights Commission (CNDH) 2016 report, and in United Nations and INGO reports. Next to nothing has been written about internally displaced individuals and families in central Mexico.

Some authors have divided the north of Mexico into regions in order to analyse the specific dynamics of organised crime, such as 'the Golden Triangle' (Sinaloa, Chihuahua and Durango), and what Séverine Durin calls 'the Northeast' (Tamaulipas, Nuevo León and Coahuila). Others, such as Fuerte, Lujan and Córdova (2018) organise their information according to the plazas, in which they analyse drug production and distribution. Yet others, like Rodríguez Ferreira (2016) divide regions into clusters, comprising groups of municipalities within a particular state or across state boundaries. Central Mexico in this article refers to states as far south as Guerrero from which people have been forcibly displaced and as far north as Querétaro, where many IDPs relocate. Strategic drug-trafficking routes run through central Mexico, as do other networks of organised crime (Peña González, 2014).

## **Methodological, Ethical and Security Challenges**

It is probably no coincidence that little has been written in Mexico about internally displaced individuals and families as opposed to groups. Whereas groups of displaced

people are more visible and tend to organise publicly to pressure governments to act on their behalf, displaced individuals and families usually do not wish to be found, out of fear, and many do not even conceive of themselves as IDPs. This makes fieldwork particularly challenging. Simply to identify IDPs and be granted an interview – despite the fear and mistrust necessarily involved – is in itself an achievement. In this research, it was not possible to use conventional criteria such as gender, age, place, social status and race to identify potential research subjects. Rather, IDPs were identified through personal contacts, although this rarely had a snowball effect given people's unwillingness to talk. Initial fieldwork in Querétaro in July 2018 is a case in point: one scheduled interview was cancelled, one IDP asked for her interview not to be taped. Of the four remaining interviewees, only one successfully contacted a cousin also willing to speak. All interviewees had previous contact with the local university colleague who contacted the IDPs.

That said, in most of the fifteen in-depth interviews conducted to date, IDPs spoke freely and their accounts were sometimes emotionally charged; (re)telling their experiences seemed to help them make sense of events. It was clear early on that rather than being asked direct questions, IDPs preferred to give their own accounts and that empathic listening could open up a space for them to share experiences they usually had to hide or suppress in their daily interactions. The process is more akin to testimony-gathering than formal interviews; this makes close comparisons between narratives difficult, although, when possible, information was verified through press analysis. Testimonies emphasise the relational or what Jelin (2002: 30) refers to as a 'testimonial trace'. Here the researcher, through listening, becomes a witness to accounts of events (De Marinis, 2019: 50), a 'witness to testimony rather than a witness to trauma' (Wake, 2009: 88). This arguably lessens the risk of re-victimisation, as control shifts from the researcher to the person giving testimony, who makes choices about what to disclose and when to remain silent. Being able to speak, when silence is the norm, was expressly valued by some, as a way of processing traumatic events.

Fieldwork in contexts of violence presents many challenges and creates a number of dilemmas and ethical concerns for the researcher (Nordstrom and Robben, 1995; Maldonado Aranda, 2013; De Marinis, 2019; Jones and Rodgers, 2019). As some of the interviewees are easily identifiable, there is an 'imperative to anonymise those being studied in ways that often go beyond standard ethnographic practices' (Jones and Rodgers, 2019: 306). Names have therefore been changed, places and dates often omitted and personal details disguised.

Ethical dilemmas also arise in writing about certain IDPs. Three interviews involved a self-declared 'mercenary', a member of a vigilante group and the son of a politician: all three could contribute to the negative stereotyping of IDPs. While these specific people (may) have done 'bad' things, motivations include structural poverty, taking up arms to defend themselves against organised crime and lack of government response. Jones and Rodgers (2019: 303) argue that making choices 'is not always an option, especially in violent circumstances', or rather the range of choices is limited. Is it politically convenient, especially in contexts of local xenophobia, to write about IDPs who are not 'clear-cut victims'? These cases present a more complex account, challenging black-and-white binaries of 'victims' and 'victimisers'. Following Nordstrom and Robben (1995: 10), voice is given to 'the puzzling contradictions of lives perturbed by violence'. This gives a more nuanced and sometimes surprisingly contradictory account of the dynamics of violence and organised crime taking place in Mexico today. State and non-state actors do not always behave as expected or mandated by their institutional missions. State impunity and corruption is rife. Members of the armed forces may or

may not help citizens in situations of violence and political party members may be involved in kidnappings and torture, as the interviews suggest.

One way of exploring these complexities is by using a case-study approach. This provides a more complex, holistic comprehension of conflict and violence at the margins of the state (Das and Poole, 2004). A case-study approach also offers insight into organised criminal activities and their impact on individuals and the wider community, and the cases discussed here epitomise certain aspects of violence taking place in central Mexico in recent years. This in turn provides the reader with a deeper understanding of a sample of motives that lead to forced internal displacement to other states in Mexico.

### *Chronic Violence as a Way of Life*

Linda Green (1999) writes about 'Fear as a way of life'. The context of this first case might be described, rather, as 'violence as a way of life'. It describes how everyday violence in Tierra Caliente (comprised of municipalities in Guerrero and bordering Michoacán) and how locals deal with the possibility of family members becoming victims to violence, such as extortions, kidnappings, killings and forced displacements. Marcos's testimony illustrates this facet of violence.

Marcos moved to Tierra Caliente in Guerrero and opened a local grocery shop with his wife. At first, although one of his neighbours and best clients was the local drug-trafficker, things were calm: 'he wasn't pretentious, or armed, or someone who got into fights' (interview with Marcos, 2018). This situation changed with the arrival first of the Familia Michoacana and then the Caballeros Templarios (Knights of the Templar). Armed strangers began to appear in town, and brawls, as well as internecine killings, multiplied. One day there was a shoot-out and the local drug-dealer was kidnapped by members of the Familia. His 25-year-old son tried to rescue him but was shot dead.

Extreme levels of violence meant that trade dropped off, and the only bank in town closed down. Local businessmen were forced to pay 'derecho de piso', monthly extortions. Then they started to be kidnapped; Marcos, much against his will, was prevailed upon by his wife to raise the sum of 50,000 pesos (£2,100) to pay the cartel. Violence spiralled when the army arrived to combat the criminal groups. Shoot-outs became frequent and occasionally cars were set alight; Marcos likened it to a war-zone. Shopkeepers were asked to help the army out with information. Many did not comply out of fear, but Marcos bought a disposable mobile to contact the army major when he had information. Others followed suit. A particularly aggressive leader of the Familia Michoacana was put in charge of local operations, and kidnappings increased, mainly of cattle breeders and farmers known to grow marihuana. The Familia also coerced *campesinos* into growing marihuana instead of corn.

In mid-July 2013, Guerreros Unidos (United Warriors) moved in, attempting to wipe out the Familia Michoacana. Local youth were used as *halcones* (lookouts). First they began extorting money from shopkeepers, then kidnapping them. A family friend was kidnapped and his family was told he would be sent back in pieces if they did not pay the £84,000 ransom. He was released after his relatives raised about £29,000 in cash and kind, including cars. Upon release he immediately left town with his family, advising others to do the same. Marcos and his family were packing, planning to leave the following Monday. The next day, he saw many *halcones* passing by. They opened up the shop as usual, although they realised they were under surveillance. His wife was downstairs looking after the shop and Marcos was upstairs feeding their baby, when he heard his

wife saying that he was not at home and begging not to be taken away. Marcos raced down the stairs and was able to grab the pistol a young man was pointing at his wife. As there were many armed men in the shop, Marcos gave himself up voluntarily, to keep his wife and children safe.

Marcos was held barefoot in one of the toilets of a chapel near town. He later discovered that the owner of a local diner was being held in the other toilet. Marcos described at length the ransom negotiations; his kidnappers were asking for £42,000. His captors would beat him before handing him the phone to talk to his wife and dictated what he was to say. 'They were just kids; their guns were almost as big as they were' (interview with Marcos, 2018). They identified themselves as *Guerreros Unidos*. That night young women arrived and there was a raucous party. The following day someone finally took Marcos some water and leftovers.

That afternoon, another armed group arrived to attack them. The *Guerreros Unidos* leaders were no longer there, just the kids. When shooting broke out the kids ran away. The young man who had brought the water came back and untied the hostages and the three ran down the hill in the opposite direction from the rest. 'If we'd run to the left, I wouldn't be here to tell the tale' (interview with Marcos, 2018). While running down the hill, it dawned on Marcos that their pursuers would think that he and the other kidnapped man were part of the criminal group. By then the young man, realising that the military was after them, had fled. Marcos tied himself up again, telling the other to do the same. They waved white handkerchiefs and told the soldiers they had been kidnapped. The soldiers called Marcos's wife, identifying themselves as the Ministry of Defence, asking her if he had been kidnapped. His wife answered no, her husband had not been kidnapped. The same happened with the diner-owner. The soldiers asked the major what they should do; Marcos explained to the soldiers that their wives were being threatened not to say a word. The wives' ordeal continued when they were taken back to their homes. In Marcos's case, his father came to the door instead, holding his son's photograph to identify him and said he had indeed been kidnapped. Marcos told his father to give the soldiers fizzy drinks and food. He also asked the soldiers to escort his family out of town. They agreed to leave at dawn the following morning. As well as Marcos's family, his wife's mother, brothers and their families fled. The soldiers escorted them as far as Iguala. Marcos's case was unusual, in that the army went to their rescue. He puts it down to the actions his wife had taken on his behalf and the fact that the local mayor had asked the army to intervene.

The case illustrates the extortion and kidnapping of local businessmen in Tierra Caliente, Guerrero, as well as non-local criminal groups disputing control of territory. In this case, the army was defending the local elite and the mayor was not colluding with organised crime. The case also highlights the damage caused to the local economy, and the involvement of young men, some local, in the criminal groups' lower echelons. Marcos and his family lost everything, although it was relatively easy for them to start anew. In Tierra Caliente violence has become chronic, with the involvement of large drug cartels, smaller criminal organisations and local groups, or *paramilitares* (Taussig, 2001), paralysing the capacity of resistance of the local inhabitants and communities.

### *Local Politicians, Organised Crime and the State*

Enrique's story tells of a different set of circumstances. Aged seventeen at the time of the interview (2018), he became an IDP in 2016, settling in another state in Mexico after an incident in which he was obliged to defend his parents' property. However, a previous

event in 2012 better illustrates the dynamics of violence in a port in central Mexico. Enrique said he wanted to talk ‘as these things should come to light’ (interview with Enrique, 2018). His father was a politician, a *chapulín* (grasshopper), referring to politicians who hop from one political party to another, with no ideological commitment). His father always said that politics was a way to get rich quick and then one had to get out as fast as possible. Violence had become intense in the port, and as a member of local government, he had had to act as a mediator – which in practice entitled him to cuts from the drug-traffickers – and as an arbitrator in the division of the plaza between the large and small cartels. This time the cartels failed to reach an agreement, as the small, local groups wanted a greater share. After decapitated heads on spikes appeared in front of a local government department, Enrique’s father decided to resign as a candidate for public office just before the upcoming elections. The family moved to a new house from one day to the next, no explanations given; his father seemed fearful.

Several days after Enrique’s father had resigned, he was kidnapped. He was driving his car with Enrique’s younger sibling when several white vans stopped him. His father thought initially that they were municipal police, though the vehicles were unmarked and the men were not wearing uniforms. He was told he was going to be charged with fraud. The heavily armed men forced his father out of the car on a busy road. He was taken to the public prosecutor’s office and then put in prison. His mother paid a substantial sum and her husband was released on bail. As he was leaving, heavily armed men pulled up and kidnapped him again right outside the public prosecutor’s office.

After a three-day silence, Enrique’s mother received a call demanding an £84,000 ransom. She quickly got this sum together and was given instructions where to meet up with the kidnappers. Upon arrival, she handed over the bag of money, asking that they deliver her husband. When she became hysterical, a man aimed his machine-gun at her vagina, warning her that if she shouted again, or even moved, they would shoot. She froze. A person came up to tell her that her husband was a son of a bitch as he had turned his back on them in full campaign, just two weeks before the elections. He had been kidnapped by members of his own political party; his father recognised his captors. He was later told that the plan was to have him killed in prison. After the initial plan of having him imprisoned failed, his assailants had decided to make a profit from the ‘traitor’.

Enrique’s mother handed over the money. She saw her husband, bound, his nose broken and face swollen. He had not eaten and was very weak. Several men came out and said they were now asking for another £252,000. If she did not pay up, they said, they would hand him over in buckets. Enrique’s mother sold various properties and made other attempts to raise the money. At this point, Enrique confessed he was ashamed of what came next. A friend of the family advised his mother to ask for the help of someone powerful; this turned out to be a drug lord. The kingpin said he knew her husband, that they were friends. He knew where he was being held, and how much ransom was being demanded, and said that he would fix it. He made a radio call and minutes later vans appeared full of armed men. Enrique, his mother and siblings were taken to a safe house. Days later his mother received a call to turn on the television: thirty people had been killed, including government officials, his father’s captors and cartel members. His father was released. Soon after the drug lord was arrested by the federal police. Enrique was taken into hiding with his siblings at an aunt’s house.

This second case reveals greater complexities of violence and the murky relations between drug cartels, local organised crime, politicians, the police, and the justice system at state (rather than national) level. Here ‘there is no outside anymore’ (Taussig, 2001:



23), no clear boundaries between the state, the justice system, politicians and drug cartels. Non-state actors are undermining the rule of law through illegal activities, prying open interstices in the margins of the state (Das and Poole, 2004).

### *Criminalisation of Social Activism*

The final case is far more complex and, in some parts, extremely sensitive. In a five-hour interview with two human rights workers, Carolina and her husband Antonio spoke about events several years previously. Antonio received a baffling, threatening phone call early one morning, and was told to look out the window. Below six white vans were parked, full of armed men with tattoos – commonly used by cartels and organised crime – dressed in a kind of uniform. The caller first identified himself as a member of the federal police, but later as a major in the notorious Jalisco Nueva Generación Cartel. Antonio was told to pay a fine and withdraw a legal complaint against a mining company. He had no idea what they were talking about. He was told that if he refused, he and his family would be kidnapped. The caller gave precise details about many of his extended family members and told him that his family in the United States could afford to pay the supposed £21,000 fine. Antonio went as instructed to an office that was clearly not a federal police office, followed by several armed men, and was effectively removed from the scene.

Meanwhile, Carolina received another telephone call and was told to leave the house with her pre-adolescent children. She was made to collect all their mobile phones; her kidnappers had each child's name and phone number. Carolina could see her captors at a distance, but they spoke to her on a radio and mobile phone. The leader told her to take a taxi, and not to be a 'smart-arse' or they would kill her. As she passed one of the vans with armed men, 'a man lowered his window and said "this is me"; he stared at me, and I thought, 'oh god, this isn't a game'" (interview with Carolina, 2018). Carolina stopped a cab; three vans went in front of the taxi and the one with the leader behind. They went down a main street to a closed-down building. Armed men from two of the vans alighted; some stayed controlling the building's entrances and exits, others stood in front of the window where Carolina and her children were being held. Several captors were in the adjoining room with a glass wall. She was ordered to take out the Sim card from each child's mobile phone and her own.

To protect her children, Carolina made a triangle out of the three beds and placed them in the middle. With what sounded like a megaphone, she was ordered to bring the children into view. Realising that her captors could see and hear everything, Carolina tried to locate the cameras, and was told not to look further as there were no cameras, that they had another kind of technology. One of her captors said he was an ex-marine but now a member of the Jalisco Nueva Generación Cartel. Carolina was questioned at great length by different people, always by phone. They already had detailed information about her activities, but they also asked her about different social movements, in particular about the leader of an anti-mining movement. Carolina's fear grew when she realised from the interrogation that these men were professionals. One captor was different; he told her he would look after them and that they would come out alive.

Then the leader was back on the line. Carolina could hear a computer printing working, and between insults, he said they now knew why she was there. Carolina surmised that this meant there were people further up, that these were only middlemen. They knew everything about Carolina, Antonio and their families. At one point she was warned not

to make a legal complaint afterwards as ‘we have people working in the public prosecutor’s office’.

The federal police secured their release having tracked another mobile phone, unknown to her captors, in Carolina’s handbag. Hours later, Carolina did go to the public prosecutor’s office to make a complaint, but the official did not write down what she said. When she remonstrated, he took out his mobile phone and played the same message she had heard when kidnapped.

Skipping the details of the harrowing time they spent before they were relocated as internally displaced, this account picks up the harassment the family suffered several years later, when they were living in a remote village in another state. Carolina and Antonio had not completely given up their human rights work and had just returned from a trip to the south. One of their children, on her way back from a local shop, was assaulted by men on motorbikes. She was injured while resisting capture. Her parents were unsure whether this was an attempted femicide or was politically motivated. The following day another of their children was attacked while at college in a town nearby, was brutally battered and robbed, and had their computer smashed by the assailants.

Many details have been omitted that could identify these human rights workers. Most striking in this case is the number and diversity of state and non-state actors apparently involved (Gerlach, 2010). Organised crime here seems to be acting in the interests of others. Carolina and her husband realised that they had been targeted for their anti-mining activities and that the mining company was involved. State authorities appear to be colluding or at best negligent. The intervention of one federal police officer was crucial to their security. The family was still under surveillance three years after the initial kidnapping.

The case brings up numerous unanswered questions: the lack of understanding of what was going on, who was behind it and who the immediate assailants were. These unanswered questions contributed to a sense of defencelessness, fear, and a form of insecurity that could not be planned for or anticipated. As Judith Zur points out: ‘Identifying guilt or innocence through traditionally legitimate or legal means is supplanted by terror; social and legal structures collapse, leaving everyone feeling insecure’ (Zur, 1998: 76). Fortunately, in this case, several human rights NGOs supported the family, providing solidarity and enabling them to analyse things more clearly. They also advised on security measures.

## **Understanding Violence in Central Mexico**

How do the previous IDP case studies shed light on different dynamics of violence and organised crime in central Mexico over the past decade? This violence contrasts with that generated by dictatorships and internal armed conflicts in Latin America during the last half of the twentieth century, although it is equally deadly (Cantor, 2016). In the earlier conflicts there were generally clear-cut divisions between insurgents seeking revolution and social transformation on one side, and on the other, the government, military, security forces and often the paramilitaries. These lines are now blurred. The use of violence by non-state actors is prompted by their quest for profit (Paley, 2015; Rosen and Zepeda, 2016; Correa-Cabrera, 2017), not by ideals of transforming society.

Blurred boundaries draw us to Primo Levi’s notion of the grey zone. Levi writes:

The world into which one was precipitated was terrible, yes, but also indecipherable: it did not conform to any model; the enemy was all around but

also inside, the ‘we’ lost its limits, the contenders were not two, one could not discern a single frontier but rather many confused, perhaps innumerable frontiers [...] (Levi, 2004: 83)

This grey zone resembles Michael Taussig’s (2001) notion of the loss of boundaries between state and non-state actors in parts of Colombia, in particular with regard to the ‘paras’ (paramilitaries) who at different times seem to be working for the state, for local businessmen or for themselves. The notion of the grey zone in central Mexico and other parts of the country describes the shifting roles of state and non-state actors, in particular the police, the justice system (Volpi, 2018), private enterprise, political parties and organised crime. The public domain is deeply imbued with state impunity, corruption and (un)reported crime rates, creating an arena of confusion and uncertainty. Even politically astute human rights’ defenders struggle to understand what is going on and who their assailants are. While some IDPs can ‘read’ the local context based on a general understanding of (non-)state actors operating in their municipalities, criminal dynamics in larger towns and cities are more complex, more (non-)state actors are involved, and alliances amongst (in)direct perpetrators of violence are often not transparent or expected (Trejo and Ley, 2016; Vázquez Valencia, 2019).

Rather than deepening an analysis of the multifaceted nature of violence (narrated in the above case studies), the gaze in this section turns to the resulting fear and terror that violence evokes. This is at once personal and collective. As Linda Green points out in relation to war-torn Guatemala:

I came to realise that terror’s power, its matter-of-factness, is exactly about doubting one’s own perception of reality. The routinisation allows people to live in a chronic state of fear behind a façade of normalcy, even while that terror permeates and shreds the social fabric [...] (Green, 1999: 60)

Terror also intensifies the dismantling of local state and non-state institutions such as schools, clinics and banks, making its inhabitants feeling insecure (Zur, 1998: 76). Oslender (2008) speaks of the ‘geographies of terror’ that create arbitrary boundaries producing a state of confusion and mistrust, as certainties about self, place and relations with others plummet.

Indeed, it is the very unpredictability of acts/practices of violence that go beyond people’s capacity to understand that heightens fear and terror (Taussig, 2001). This is apparent in the case of the human rights workers, whose kidnapping is indecipherable, thus difficult to name, given the number of different state and non-state actors involved, as well as the obvious collusion of the state with both organised crime and a Canadian company. Human rights NGOs in Mexico City were crucially important for the state activists on three counts. They provided solidarity and concrete steps for displacement. They scrutinised what had happened, who were the likely actors involved. Finally, they provided guidance around new ways of acting, security measures and logistic support. Being able to name what had happened to them as a family, while not overcoming trauma, helped – at least for the adults – the indecipherable to become legible.

Another strand of the analysis refers to the state itself. Rather than seeing this as a ubiquitous and monolithic sum of institutions, a more thought-provoking approach studies the shifting, uncertain space in the margins of the state (Das and Poole, 2004). This, accompanied by the increasing fragmentation and privatisation of the state’s security and justice systems (Sieder, 2011; Correa-Cabrera, 2017) also enhances an understanding of the blurred boundaries and uncertainty in the public sphere. This

approach takes us away from the deeply orientalist views of ‘weak’ or ‘failed’ states (Sieder, 2011), where local and national state formations are measured up to western standards of democracy, and allows us to understand ‘the many different spaces, forms, practices through which the state is continually both experienced and undone through the illegibility of its own practices, documents, and words’ (Das and Poole, 2004: 9–10). It also allows us to comprehend the embeddedness of organised crime in certain state institutions, its influence on political parties and the ‘lack of access to justice of most citizens’ (Sieder, 2011: 5).

## Conclusions

This article has focused on examining different manifestations of violence in central Mexico through the testimonies of IDPs. I have not sought to document the different stages of forced displacement (flight, resettlement and possible return), but rather, through a case study approach to explore the narratives of IDPs, to apprehend ‘the indecipherable’, and to fathom the different grey zones and scenarios at the margins of the state where violence has become a way of life. The article also sheds light on the various actors involved in specific contexts and moments in time and portrays a grey zone of non-state actors, together with state institutions and politicians, where state and municipal governments can be negligent, active or passive accomplices to organised crime.

Through the case-study approach, three distinct scenarios of violence emerge. The first case highlights a three-tiered expression of organised crime – the national cartels, which control the middle-sized crime organisations, which in turn are in charge of local youths who have turned to organised crime in their communities.

The second case study portrays the entangled relationships between corrupt politicians and drug cartels, the weave of state and non-state actors, the collusion between the judiciary and organised crime, as well as the grey zone between political parties, organised crime and the state.

Finally, the third case study illustrates ‘the indecipherable’, the terrifying lack of logic and incapacity of usually savvy social activists, where reference points are destroyed, and vulnerability is especially acute as regards the activists’ children. In this case there is blatant collusion between state and non-state actors, and the silent workings of foreign mining companies, which permeate a grey zone in the shadows.

Violence in central Mexico, as elsewhere in the country, along with its different guises and manifestations, continues to be an unresolved challenge for the López Obrador administration. The newly formed national guard has further contributed to the militarisation of the country and this strategy has still to be evaluated. In this context, the most likely scenario is that internal displacement, of individuals and their families as well as groups of IDPs, will continue to increase. While academics have given more attention to the violence caused by narco-traffickers and organised crime, more in-depth research is needed to place the issue of IDPs on the map.

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## *Fleeing from Violence in Central Mexico*

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