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MEXICO

Lucky Luciano, Pablo Escobar, and Joaquin "El Chapo" Guzmán.

## The Geopolitics of Organized Crime

By Helke Enkerlin-Madero

With a presence in 55 countries, the Sinaloa cartel is among Mexico's largest corporations. The cartel's leader, Joaquín "El Chapo" Guzmán, appeared on the Forbes list of the world's most powerful people from 2009 to 2013 and likewise has made the publication's billionaire list, ranking number 701 in 2009. El Chapo has captured the imagination of the media and is admired by many in his home state of Sinaloa as an entrepreneur and self-made man. His business of drug trafficking has also unleashed a storm of criminal violence and terror throughout Mexico.

Like most Mexicans, Sergio Aguayo was surprised by the upsurge of criminal violence in the country during the last 10 years. This maelstrom led him to focus his research on the root causes of violence in Mexico. During a Fall 2015 talk hosted by the Center for Latin American Studies, the academic and human rights activist anchored his analysis in geopolitics and criminal history. Aguayo argues that to understand the roots of organized crime

and the ensuing violence, a comprehensive regional approach is essential.

His narrative rests on two central elements. First is the dynamic of the Caribbean basin. During the past century, this region has been the site of a circular flow of people, ideas, drugs, weapons, and money that ignores borders and has created the conditions for criminal violence. Like any other business, organized crime is driven by a profit motive. The second element of Aguayo's narrative focuses on the three key actors who understood the business of organized crime particularly well and drove its evolution in the region: Lucky Luciano, Pablo Escobar, and Joaquín "El Chapo" Guzmán.

### The Cuba Connection

Lucky Luciano, an Italian-American mobster operating in New York, is considered the father of organized crime. He transformed the Mafia by establishing a corporate structure, and in 1946, he convened a meeting

in Havana that Aguayo considers the symbolic moment when organized crime in Latin America and the United States became part of a single history. During this Havana Conference, attendees defined the logistics of narcotics smuggling in the Caribbean, establishing organized crime as an international venture at the same time.

In the 1970s, new U.S. legislation cracked down on organized crime, precipitating a shift in the center of power. Colombia's access to the Caribbean routes, coupled with the boom of cocaine consumption in the United States, made this South American country the natural successor. This transition marked the rise of Pablo Escobar, leader of the Medellín cartel. His organization was responsible for the vast majority of cocaine entering the United States, and at the height of its power, the Medellín cartel controlled a network spanning 12 countries. Escobar became the stuff of legend, the wealthiest criminal of all time with a personal worth of more than \$3 billion.

Escobar's execution in 1993 and the success of Colombian and U.S. law enforcement in fragmenting the cartels led to the decline of Colombian influence in the increasingly international business of organized crime. For Aguayo, the installation of a Cold-War-era radar system repurposed to blanket the entire Caribbean undermined the Colombian cartels and played a crucial role in who would succeed them.

### Making the List

With the Caribbean basin sealed to air traffic, Mexico became the only alternative route to the U.S. market. In 1997, most of the cocaine entering the United States came through the Caribbean; by 2009, 90 percent of it came over land via Central America and Mexico. Criminal violence followed the drug trade, with homicide rates rising in Mexico as they declined in Colombia.

Mexico's role as the new logistical center of the drug trade also brought about the rise of the final character in Aguayo's cast. He considers Joaquín "El Chapo" Guzmán to be the synthesizer of the legacies of Lucky Luciano and Pablo Escobar. Guzmán has proven to be a shrewd businessman. He has been at the head of the Sinaloa cartel for 35 years and maintained his business in the face of increasing countermeasures through ingenious strategies like his famous border tunnels.

Not only has Guzmán's business prospered, opinion polls that Aguayo has conducted in Sinaloa also show the amazing strength of the cartel's social bases. El Chapo has become an icon admired by Sinaloans, immortalized in popular music and in paraphernalia that highlight his ranking on the Forbes Billionaires List. Guzmán's escape in July 2015 from a maximum-security prison in Mexico — the second time he achieved this feat — solidified his status.

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The motorcycle in the tunnel through which Guzmán escaped Mexico's highest security prison.



Photo by Eduardo Verdugo/Associated Press.

The effects of his January 2016 recapture are still uncertain. The Mexican government has been mocked, rather than praised, for showcasing the feat as a triumph, and it has done nothing to improve public perception of Peña Nieto's presidency. Guzmán, on the other hand, remains a source of fascination, although the rather farcical details of his capture have perhaps tarnished his mythical outlaw image. The effect of his capture on the drug trade — which should be the central concern — has gone largely unreported.

### Where to Next?

Mexico will not be the epicenter of the drug trade and its related violence forever. Just as cartel operations switched from Colombia to Mexico because of transportation issues — or a multinational moves to a different country to lower production costs — the business of drug trafficking could shift again. Mexican drug trafficking organizations face ever-increasing pushback from the government, which increases their operating costs. It is this sustained strategy, rather than the capture of visible capos like Guzmán, that will eventually lead to their weakening. Aguayo's eyes are set on Cuba as the potential new center of organized crime. The island is increasingly open, geographically close to

the drug trade's most important market, and already part of the history of organized crime in the region.

Aguayo stressed that the same comprehensive regional approach necessary for understanding the dynamic of organized crime in Latin America is, likewise, the source of its solution. For drug trafficking organizations, there are no borders. If governments want to be successful in their fight against them, they must share this perspective, applying holistic policies. However, Aguayo considers it politically impossible for governments to come to an agreement regarding a truly joint approach to organized crime, at least for the foreseeable future.

He proposes that scholars should also follow the path of Lucky Luciano, Pablo Escobar, and El Chapo Guzmán and forget about borders. Criminal violence must be analyzed in an integrated and interdisciplinary way; it is essential to produce the tools for society to defend itself. Academia in the region has the challenge of generating the knowledge to confront the threat of organized crime.

Sergio Aguayo is a professor at the Center for International Studies at El Colegio de México. He spoke for CLAS on November 12, 2015.

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The heirs of gangster Meyer Lansky are suing for compensation for Havana's Riviera Hotel, shown in 1973.



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