




RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Unbearable Uncertainty of Being on the Front Street-level Military in the Mexican War on Drugs

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Abstract

Since the so-called war on drugs began in Mexico in 2006, the military has been the leading actor in charge of the government's public security policy, undertaking tasks that should be carried out by the police. Analyses of this security strategy are based on quantitative methods and have focused on its results: e.g., an increase in the homicide rate or the committing of human rights violations. In contrast, based on in-depth interviews, this article explores the testimony of military personnel to understand what they experience in the field. Contrary to what the existing literature argues, which maintains that the military acts with a logic of war, this article shows that the situation is far more complex: they act in a scenario characterized by improvisation, facing the dilemma between acting and being accused of human rights or not acting and being accused of disobedience.

Keywords: military; street-level bureaucracy; sensemaking; war on drugs

Introduction

In 2010, General Galván, the then head of the Mexican Secretariat of National Defense (“Secretaría de la Defensa Nacional,” or SEDENA), reported that generals were reluctant to participate in operations against criminal groups due to a lack of a regulatory framework (Ballinas 2010). Six years later, his successor, General Cienfuegos, again acknowledged the urgency of regulating the military's actions by approving a legal framework to reduce uncertainty and unease within the Mexican army. According to these generals, soldiers face a dilemma: confront criminal groups and be charged with human rights violations or avoid confrontation and be prosecuted for disobedience (Carrasco 2016). These statements are relevant given that the military has been the protagonist of the public security strategy in Mexico since 2006 (Valdés 2013; Astorga 2015). This policy has been characterized by the opacity of the institutions involved, an increase in violence, and the committing of serious human rights violations.

The security strategy based on street-level military deployment—which Generals Galván and Cienfuegos alluded to—has been examined by researchers who have questioned the increase in homicide figures (Calderón et al. 2015; Atuesta and Ponce 2017), the use of lethal force during confrontations (Silva et al. 2017; Treviño-Rangel et al. 2022), the fact that this strategy has led to the fragmentation and evolution of criminal groups (Atuesta and Pérez-Dávila 2018), and the committing of human rights violations (Anaya 2014; Magaloni 2015). These studies suggest that the security policy has failed: rather than reducing violence, violence has instead increased year after year. These studies have focused on evaluating the performance of this policy based on its

impact. However, this analysis should also involve evaluating its implementation (Van Meter and Van Horn 1975), which have been largely ignored when analyzing the military strategy of combating organized crime. Focusing on the role of the soldiers allows us to understand how the security policy was carried out at street level (Lipsky 2010).

This article seeks to understand how the military acts on the ground, namely carrying out public security tasks. It explores the factors that, according to soldiers' arguments, guide their actions. We focus on the soldiers' descriptions of their experiences in the field: a reality in which they receive confusing orders to identify and combat an ambiguous enemy and where any citizen can potentially be a threat. In this context, according to the interviewees, both acting and failing to act have consequences: acting and risking violating human rights and failing to act and risking prosecution for disobedience. Therefore, the question that guides this analysis is: What are the characteristics and contexts in which soldiers act, and what are the situational factors that influence their behavior?

Most studies have ignored the analysis of military operators and their implementation on the ground. Rea and Ferri (2019) aim to understand soldiers' actions based on their testimonies. However, they focus on the training that soldiers receive and reduce them to actors who seem to have no agency, in other words pieces of institutional machinery, without recognizing how their actions in the field evolve based on circumstances.

To understand the military's point of view, this article is based on five semi-structured interviews conducted in May 2018 in a military base in Tamaulipas, the state with the greatest number of confrontations involving the Mexican army (Atuesta 2018). The interviews are analyzed using content analysis, which studies overt and latent messages and meanings in each context (Krippendorff 1990). We examine what soldiers say explicitly and implicitly in their testimonies, helping us understand how they, as members of an organization, make sense of reality and organize themselves to act (Hammersley and Atkinson 2009).

The findings of this article suggest that situational factors shape the military's decisions and actions in the field. For example, soldiers make decisions in a hostile context based on the ambiguous orders they receive, their training, and their sense of survival. Activists and experts claim that the military contributes to violence because it follows the logic of war. However, our results suggest a more complex situation: the military acts in a context characterized by improvisation, disorder, and the fear of consequences of acting or not acting.

This article contributes a primary analysis of military personnel to uncover how they act in the field. We analyze soldiers' actions during confrontations and hostile events in which their training is tested and questioned. In these situations, their behavior is improvised, and their actions are based on the logic of survival. These findings are relevant regarding public policy because we can observe how the military is carrying out the security strategy on the streets, independent of whether this policy was poorly designed (Correa-Cabrera and Payan, 2021). By analyzing the implementation of this policy, we can better understand why the militarization of public security has not produced the results expected, as many authors have already suggested (Magaloni 2015; Atuesta and Ponce 2017; Treviño-Rangel *et al.* 2022).

This analysis also sheds light on two major related conundrums and their respective academic debates: first, it contributes to the literature on drug wars since it helps to understand better the visible failure of combating drug trafficking through punitive and militarized strategies: far from what is believed, in practice, the military does not seem to be better prepared than ordinary police officers to confront organized crime. Second, this article contributes to the classic debates on police culture and policing that have been going on since the 1960s (Skolnick 1966). Throughout this research, we demonstrate how a "police culture" is created among the military, shaping how they behave: that is, the construction of their values and beliefs, and how those beliefs are shaped by their institution, practice in the field, and their perception of reality.

The Militarization of Mexico

In the early morning of July 2, 2020, at least six military vehicles followed a pickup truck down a busy avenue in Nuevo Laredo, Tamaulipas. During the chase, the soldiers fired about 100 shots. The pursuit ended when a military vehicle crashed into the truck, and despite the collision, the soldiers did not stop firing. Afterwards, army personnel inspected the vehicle, shouting: “He is alive, he is alive.” Another soldier responded, “Kill him, kill him, fucking kill him!” At the scene, the SEDENA reported that 12 civilians had been killed, all supposed members of a criminal group (Arredondo 2020). However, according to the National Human Rights Commission (“Comisión Nacional de los Derechos Humanos,” or CNDH), an autonomous institution that oversees human rights in the country, three of them were civilians previously kidnapped by alleged criminals (CNDH 2021).

These events represent part of the security strategy based on street-level military. Since the presidency of Calderón Hinojosa (2006–2012), the military’s participation in police activities intensified, and they became the primary agents in combating organized crime and drug trafficking (Valdés 2013; Astorga 2015; SEDENA 2012). In the subsequent governments of Peña Nieto (2012–2018) and López Obrador (2018–2024), the military has consistently participated in public security matters. In this context, not only did the number of military deployments increase from 49,650 in 2012 to 76,198 in 2020 (SEDENA 2021a), but also the so-called National Guard was created in 2019 as a civilian security institution but led in fact by the military (Pocoroba 2021). In sum, militarization in Mexico has been a project carried out regardless of the administration or political party.

The increased military involvement in public security contributes to the blurring of the border between the tasks of the police and the military (Weiss, 2011, 2012). Although previous literature has identified the similarities between soldiers and police officers, they have also raised concerns about their differences and the legal implications of giving police tasks to the military, including the committing of serious human rights violations (Campbell and Campbell 2010). The militarization of public security is a situation that is not only observed in Latin America but also in the United States with the police paramilitary units and the SWAT teams. In this sense, Shank (2020) argues “that beat cops so often look like troops is not just a problem of ‘optics.’” [. . .] the more militarized we allow law enforcement agents to become, the more likely officers are to use lethal violence against citizens. According to Shank (2020), civilian deaths have been found to increase by about 130 percent when police forces acquire significantly more military equipment. Then, the debate is wider and should consider the spectrum with civilian forces conducting security tasks on one side and the complete militarization of security on the other (Campbell and Campbell 2010).

Although the Mexican army formally incorporated norms to regulate their actions when carrying out police work (Guevara Moyano 2011), the military continues to violate human rights. These norms include the approval in 2012 of the Guidelines on the Use of Force (Directiva que Regula el Uso Legítimo de la Fuerza 2012) and the approval in 2014 of the Manual on the Use of Force (Manual del Uso de la Fuerza 2014). According to these regulations, the military must use their force proportionally and rationally to subdue and detain aggressors, always following human rights regulations; firearms must only be used in cases of a death threat (real or imminent) and, if people are wounded, medical attention must be provided. Yet these norms are rarely put into practice.

The issue of militarization, impunity, and human rights violations must be understood as part of a longer and more complex story. For most of the twentieth century, Mexico had an authoritarian regime in which the military, as in other Latin American countries, committed serious abuses against the civilian population: torture, forced disappearances, extrajudicial killings (Loveman 1999). But unlike what happened in other countries on the continent, such as Argentina, Chile, Guatemala, and El Salvador, Mexico did not have a real transitional justice process during its transition to democracy (Sikkink and Walling 2007; Treviño-Rangel 2022). In these countries, truth commissions or criminal investigations were deployed to try to find out the truth and bring about justice. In Mexico there was neither truth nor justice. As a result, the

military was never investigated, prosecuted, or sentenced for the serious human rights violations they committed in the past and was reincorporated into the new democratic regime as if nothing had happened. Although these violations have been reported by the CNDH, national, and international human rights non-governmental organizations, and relatives of the victims, the non-existent oversight and accountability regarding human rights violations by the military have accompanied the process of militarization of public security in the country.

Moreover, it is difficult to imagine such accountability in Mexico since the army has been loyal to the government regardless of the president in office. The activities of the military in civilian matters include repressing students' protests, attacking party opposition, political dissidents, and guerrilla movements (Bolis 1980; Dammert and Bailey 2007), and, fighting organized crime and narco-trafficking, holding positions within police forces, and heading security operations to combat criminal groups (Astorga 2007; Enciso 2010).

Finally, Mexico's growing militarization can be understood in the context of the rise of punitive populism in Latin America. In Mexico, as in other Latin American countries, large segments of the population share the perception that insecurity in the country is out of control. Hence, in these countries, different governments have created public policies that favor penal solutions: the increase in the severity of sentences. These measures are immediate, easy to implement, and appeal to voters, although their results are questionable, as they do not reduce crime. These "mano dura" policies are widely accepted by the population (Dammert and Salazar 2009).

This article focuses on the state of Tamaulipas, a strategic point because of its border with Texas (United States) and its coast in the Gulf of Mexico for conducting illegal business: the trafficking of weapons, substances, and people (Correa-Cabrera 2017). In 2005, the military was mobilized to combat criminal groups in the region through the *México Seguro* Operation (Astorga 2015). Since then, military presence in the state has intensified. From 2007 to 2019, Tamaulipas has seen the highest number of confrontations between military personnel and criminal groups (Figure 1) (SEDENA 2020a, 2020b), being the state where the most military personnel have been killed in anti-drug trafficking operations (SEDENA 2021b). It is worth noting that, although Tamaulipas shares a border with the United States, the behavior of soldiers in the state is not influenced by the US policies or the DEA oversight.

Theoretical Framework

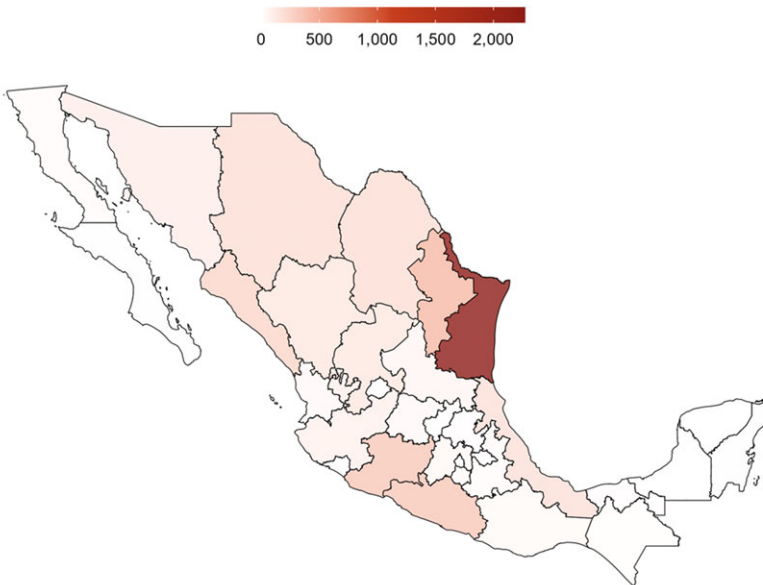
Soldiers can be understood as members of an institution, and as individuals with beliefs and perceptions who make decisions on the field. In this section, we use the sensemaking approach and the theory of street-level bureaucrats to understand how soldiers behave in Mexico when conducting public security tasks.

Sensemaking approach

Military actions have been studied from a sensemaking approach (Jensen 2009; Ben-Shalom *et al.* 2012; de Graaff *et al.* 2019; Padan and Ben-Shalom 2020). Weick (2001) describes sensemaking as the efforts bureaucrats employ to understand the environment when making decisions. In addition, bureaucrats have preconceptions and ideas that guide them in performing actions, visualizing the possible impacts that could result from their interventions. In the military, Jensen (2009) argues that sensemaking plays a central role in practice, as the decision on how to act is based on the context's circumstances and the goals to be achieved. Soldiers consider the action plans given by the organization they belong to (Weick 2001), but they also adjust these plans, especially when facing hostile situations (Ben-Shalom *et al.* 2012; Brown 2018). According to de Graaff *et al.* (2019) and Padan and Ben-Shalom (2020), when military personnel are in critical situations (e.g., combat zones), they engage in sensemaking processes based on their previous experiences, the predictions of consequences, and by considering the interpretations of their peers.

Number of confrontations of Sedena

By state, between 2008 and 2019



Source: Sedena (2020a; 2020b)

Figure 1. Number of Confrontations between SEDENA and Alleged Criminal Groups.

In these scenarios, their decision-making is heavily influenced by their analysis of the situation and the environment (Weick et al. 2005; Mills and Weatherbee 2006).

When action plans are obsolete or limited in disruptive situations (Schneider 1997), soldiers are encouraged to configure behavioral schemes that visualize and incorporate the circumstances of the context (Drazin et al. 1999). In these situations, soldiers' feelings, such as fear, anguish, or despair, also interfere in the sensemaking processes. According to de Graaff et al. (2019) and Padan and Ben-Shalom (2020), when military personnel are in combat zones, they engage in sensemaking processes based on their previous experiences, the predictions of consequences, and by considering the interpretations of their peers. The confusion that arises in confrontations makes it challenging to plan actions. Soldiers are usually involved in the "fog of war" (Holmes 2007), when their only alternative is to use their sensemaking to understand the situation and act according to the circumstances.

Thus, institutional plans are intertwined with information from the context to influence, reinforce, resist, or challenge the action (Grigoletto and Aquino 2019), and not doing so, could be associated with lack of participation in combat ("freezing") (Ben-Shalom et al. 2012) and the failure of the strategy (Brown 2018).

Street-level bureaucrats

As any other state institution, the military is a bureaucracy (Miewald 1970; Bolis 1980) with protocols, organizational schemes, and action plans (Jepperson 1999; Lascoumes and Le Galès 2014). In this bureaucracy, soldiers are responsible of implementing public policies at the street level, creating a gap between what the public policy indicates and what happens at the ground level (Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2000). This situation is intensified when performing tasks for which bureaucrats are inexperienced or untrained (Ben-Shalom et al. 2012), as in the case of the Mexican military performing the tasks of police officers.

Lipsky (2010) mentions the need to study bureaucrats' limitations, circumstances, and behaviors at the street level as they interact with citizens and carry out governmental strategies. These lower-level bureaucrats have relative autonomy, being far from the oversight of their superiors (Maynard-Moody and Portillo 2018). Although they are saturated with rules that regulate their behavior, they decide *in situ* what procedures to implement, what methods to use, and whom to target (Maynard-Moody and Portillo 2018). This means that street bureaucrats enjoy considerable discretion, which allows them the freedom to make decisions regarding the type, quantity, and quality of the policies they implement (Tummers and Bekkers 2014; Buvik 2014), including deciding which rules to follow and which to ignore (Prottas 1978; Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2000).

The studies of the army understanding soldiers as street-level bureaucrats illustrate how the military uses broad discretion when interpreting given orders and how they adjust, negotiate, or depart from the objectives of action programs—mainly war missions in foreign countries (Johnsson 2017; Kalkman and Groenewegen 2019; Ekhaugen 2021). In Mexico, the situation and performance of soldiers are different, as they conduct police duties not included in their training and face national citizens, not an external threat.

These perspectives—sensemaking and street-level bureaucracy—are complementary, as both recognize bureaucrats as part of the organization, but also as agents who act independently and interact with contextual circumstances to make decisions: the former by identifying the environment as a significant factor in decisions made at the street level, the latter by describing the freedom of discretion they use in the field.

In sum, we use the sensemaking approach to explain the behavior of soldiers when the situation they face is different than the one described in their previous training, or when, in confrontations, the orders they received are unclear or inexistent. In these situations, the military understand the environment based on their previous experiences and beliefs to make decisions in the field. In other circumstances, soldiers' behavior is explained not only by their reading of the environment but by the discretion they imposed in their actions beyond the orders received. In this sense, soldiers act as street-level bureaucrats conducting security tasks regardless of their commanders' orders or the existent normativity.

Methodology

This article focuses on five interviews conducted in March 2018 in Tamaulipas with military personnel, specifically, a private soldier, three sergeants, and a lieutenant.¹ Participants were recruited using the snowball technique (Atkinson and Flint 2001) following three inclusion criteria: 1) having been active in the armed forces; 2) preferably being “rank and file” officers (e.g., first and second sergeant, corporal, and soldier); and 3) having participated in security operations. All military personnel interviewed were over 18 years of age and born in different geographic areas of the country; most joined the military for income. All were informed about the aims of the study, its implications, and the use of the information. In other words, the standard informed consent procedure was followed. The interviewees voluntarily agreed to participate in the study, and their identities were kept anonymous throughout the research process through pseudonyms. In addition, portions of the interviews were redacted so as not to jeopardize the safety of the participants.²

¹In total, 11 interviews were conducted, but six of them were conducted in Mexico City and Oaxaca with retired military personnel.

²In 2018, when we conducted our research, our institution did not have an Institutional Review Board (IRB), so we were not required to submit our project for IRB approval. However, being aware of the importance of Ethics and Human Research, we conducted our research according to ethical standards followed in research of this nature. This documentation (participants' consent, policy for treating of personal information and minimisation of risks) is available upon request.

The interviews lasted between one to two hours; interviewees were asked about their training; their behavior in confrontations; their relationship with their colleagues, the institution, and civilian authorities; and the peculiarities of carrying out tasks for which they were not trained. The interviews were transcribed, and the qualitative analysis program “Atlas.ti” was used to organize the information.

We are aware that the small sample size of our interviews does not allow us to generalize our findings, so our study lacks external validity for both Tamaulipas and Mexico. However, it is not our intention to generalize the results but to understand how soldiers on the ground make decisions based on their specific context and commands received. In this sense, this is an exploratory study. The sample used for this research was intentionally selected (Cortés et al. 2008) to choose “rank and file” soldiers deployed to a highly violent context (often with confrontations with criminal groups). The sample is not random and it is spatial and temporarily specific to contextualize the war against organized crime from the perspective of some soldiers deployed to Tamaulipas. In sum, it is a “convenience sample”: it relies on available subjects who are not easily accessible (Lune and Berg 2017).

To corroborate our findings, we complement our analysis with documentation provided by the CNDH investigative reports (known as “Recommendations”) on cases of human rights violations perpetrated by state agents to analyze the army’s performance during security operations and the consequences of military decision-making on the ground. We found and analyzed 15 Recommendations that happened in Tamaulipas between 2006 and 2023 on the CNDH’s website.

Analysis of the Results

On the one hand, we use the sensemaking framework to explain (i) military training and (ii) soldiers’ experiences in confrontations and when using their firearms. On the other hand, we use the perspective of street-level bureaucrats to explain (iii) the soldier’s relationships with the army and their superiors, whom they identified as “the commanders”; and (iv) their ideas about human rights.

We also categorize the CNDH Recommendations into these four categories to complement the military interviews (Table 1). This classification was based on the Recommendations provided by the CNDH’s exhaustive investigation, but not necessarily on the soldiers’ testimonies. This clarification is needed because, in most cases, the victims’ narratives and the CNDH’s conclusions differ from the descriptions of the facts provided by the soldiers, who normally denied having perpetrated human rights violations.

Explaining the Behavior of Soldiers Using the Sensemaking Approach

During security operations, the context and the environment influence soldiers’ decision-making and actions. For instance, firearms are used not only in the face of real threats (aggressions by a criminal group) but also when the military identifies civilians as enemies and acts immediately without existing potential threats. When analyzing the CNDH Recommendations, soldiers justify their actions by changing the stories and claiming suspicious behaviors in disruptive or conflictive situations.

For instance, Recommendation 35/2008 (2008) describes abuses committed by the military in the face of civilian mistrust in Reynosa, Tamaulipas. According to the SEDENA, the military was at a checkpoint and fired their weapons to repel an instance of aggression by a criminal group. As a result, one person died, and another was injured. However, the CNDH investigation determined that the civilians were not carrying weapons, and the soldiers, in their attempt to stop the civilians’ vehicle, used their firearms excessively, killing one of the civilians and seriously injuring his companion.

Table 1. Categorization of the Interviews and Recommendations Based on Their Content

Theoretical Framework	Sections	Interviews	CNDH's Recommendations
Sensemaking	Military training vis-à-vis the context	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Institution (the army) • Military training • Context 	
	Confrontations and use of firearms	Use of firearms	035/2008, 036/2010, 051/2018, 71VG/2022, 95VG/2023, 119VG/2023, 131VG/2023
		Confrontations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Beginning • Deployment • End
Street-level bureaucrats	Relationship with “The commanders”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Institution (the army) • Superiors 	035/2008, 036/2010, 060/2011, 029/2012, 051/2018, 037/2020, 119VG/2023, 131VG/2023
	Normativity and regulations	• Human rights	071/2008, 060/2011, 029/2012, 181/2022, 16VG/2018 (Case 6), 105VG/2023

Another example is Recommendation 36/2010, which describes when the military shot at a vehicle in which a family was travelling in Ciudad Mier; two children died, and five people were injured. The military claims that the family was in the crossfire when they were in a confrontation with a criminal group, but, according to the CNDH, the military altered the scene to make it look like a confrontation.

The constant suspicion soldiers have about civilians is increased by the “fog of war” situation they face when the “enemy” is not easily identified. In these situations, soldiers are in a waking state that could only be reduced by conducting processes of sensemaking that allow them to define how to proceed in a confrontation (Ben-Shalom *et al.* 2012). In the interviews, the military did not share stories when they mistakenly confused civilians. Although we cannot corroborate their testimonies, analyzing them gives us information to understand why they act as they do and draw conclusions about their behavior.

Military training vis-à-vis the context

In shooting practice, soldiers are taught how and at whom to shoot with their high-caliber weapons. Among the training exercises (which are standardized in all military zones), the practice of shooting at static objects and moving silhouettes stands out: soldiers are trained to differentiate between the silhouettes of civilians and hitmen, to shoot the latter and protect the former. Lieutenant Alfonso mentions that “[t]he soldier is trained for war, the soldier is trained to kill [...] our exams are not to shoot at the foot, they are to shoot at the chest, at the face.”

Soldiers’ work in Tamaulipas is concentrated in neighborhoods, boulevards, and peripheral areas. While the training is helpful, the characteristics of the conflict and the population density in semi-urban regions make it difficult to apply what they have learned into practice. The situations described in the military’s manuals are not even close to the events they experience in the real world, nor to the real hitmen they must face. In most cases, the manuals are obsolete, and they must use the process of sensemaking to understand the situation by entering a “logic of survival” (Weick 2001) where civilians could be criminals in disguise. For this reason, Lieutenant Alfonso describes the manuals as nonsense:

The manuals say that you must use verbal commands to stop a person who is armed. I tell you honestly: it's a big stupidity because someone who is armed [or] drugged, is not going to respect you, and you are not going to wait [...] for them to shoot at you to [...] repel aggression.

Moreover, these manuals do not include the presence of civilians who are not involved in the hostilities. This factor prevents the military from effectively using firearms to defend themselves against attacks. For example, Sergeant Isidoro recounts a situation when he and his troops were chasing a pickup truck on the road; as they were approaching the truck, the drivers began shooting at them. However, they could not respond to the attack because many civilian vehicles were around.

The interviewed soldiers agreed that their training should mimic the situations observed in the street, considering the semi-urban contexts where they are deployed. In this sense, the experience of being in the field provides information not only on the characteristics of the context but also on how to make instant decisions in hostile moments. In other words, their experiences train soldiers how to deal with reality.

Military behavior while in confrontations

In May 2017, Sergeant Francisco was on patrol with his troops. Nearby, a garage gate opened, and all the soldiers were alerted. Experience has taught them that attacks can come from anywhere. A commander said: "Don't shoot, it's a family." The van pulled out, and seconds later, its crew opened fire with their weapons on the soldiers. It was not a family. Someone shouted, "Take cover!" and the exchange of gunfire began. Sergeant Francisco fell to the ground, got up, fired his weapon, and headed for his truck. When he arrived, a soldier told him: "They had already shot them." Sergeant Francisco did not understand who he was referring to and thought of his comrades.

They began chasing the van, and they continued shooting at each other. On the way, the van's tires began to come apart, as the military usually targets these vulnerable areas when they notice armor plating on a van's body. The van stopped and the soldiers saw that the criminals were taking a family out of the van: a woman with children. The sergeant arrived with his troops and started shooting at the criminals. When the confrontation ended, three criminals were lying dead on the asphalt, and the family had left the scene. One of the soldiers interviewed narrated this story, illustrating how confusing the situation was and how difficult it is to make decisions during a confrontation.

Sometimes, the military has more clarity about the situation and the actions to be taken. This was the case of Sergeant Jorge's during his first confrontation. They were at a ranch on the city's outskirts. There was much noise because people were shooting, running, and shouting and, above all, because of the military helicopter, whose job was to instruct the soldiers on the ground: move forward, stop, shoot. This helicopter also warned the soldiers when they had to take cover to avoid the shots it fired from the air.

They had prior information about the place (the headquarters of a criminal group), the spatial delimitation of the combat (a ranch), the possible distinction between soldiers and armed civilians (those not in uniform were hitmen), and the indications from the helicopter to the military on the ground (advance, stop, take cover, shoot). However, this appears unusual: most of the confrontations narrated by interviewees suggest that the fight against organized crime is typically characterized by uncertainty and confusion. The soldiers mentioned that in confrontations, it is difficult to identify from where and from whom the aggression comes; then, when they go out on patrol, they feel constantly vulnerable and in a permanent state of hypervigilance, as the threats are always potential and imminent. In their view, if they are not in a defensive position and able to act immediately, they could be killed.

Beginning of the confrontation

Sergeant Isidoro described the beginning of a confrontation when one of his colleagues said: “There are two armored trucks.” As they followed them, the criminals inside the pickup trucks shot at them. On a different occasion, Sergeant Jorge and his troop identified a pickup truck that came out of a dirt road. When they got close to it, the driver evaded them. This made the soldiers even more suspicious, and when they came close again, they were shot at by the criminals inside the vehicle.

The military has implemented practices that seek to reduce the chances of being attacked, not only aimed at their self-protection but also to show their power and to intimidate their enemies. For instance, Sergeant Jorge, during a pursuit of criminal groups—without the hitmen having fired—fired shots into the air so that the hitmen felt intimidated and felt the pressure (and the power) of the army. Private Luis mentions that he likes to fire warning shots close to the suspects:

If they don’t respond to the warning is because they are not armed, because [. . .] they are always going to respond to an aggression, always [. . .] they are never going to let themselves be caught, you shoot just a little [. . .] and they start shooting back.

Unfolding the confrontation

The military also experiences the same pressure during confrontations with criminal groups that Sergeant Jorge seeks himself to exert on the hitmen. Those interviewed say they also experience fear, nervousness, panic, and “adrenaline.” According to the soldiers, this adrenaline can have two possible effects during combat: it can trigger a state of alertness, or it can produce physical or mental paralysis. In the first case, the adrenaline drives soldiers to become more involved and encourages them to shoot to mitigate their fear. However, this effect could also blur their judgement and make them forget about the consequences of their actions, for instance, if they can no longer control the “instinct to kill,” as Sergeant Francisco mentions.

The second and opposite effect of adrenaline is the physical or mental paralysis it can cause, leading soldiers to feel “blocked,” which could jeopardize troop safety as soldiers cease to be functional during a confrontation with criminal groups. Soldiers who experience this kind of “mental paralysis” can become unaware of their surroundings, become defensive, and, out of confusion, fire shots reactively: “the fear [a soldier] feels can also kill,” explained Sergeant Jorge. Private Luis describes the situation as follows:

The shooter (the soldier in the tower of the military vehicle) kept telling us “Hey, don’t panic, don’t panic because if you panic, you’ll freak out and you will not be able to shoot, and if this happens we’ll all be fucked” [. . .] the shooting started, and we got out, from there we “blocked” since there were several of us who had just come out of training.

The confusion experienced by soldiers during confrontations is not only caused by the adrenaline but also because, sometimes, they could not locate where the gunfire is coming from. Sergeant Francisco describes this confusion:

I put the gun in the window [of the van] [. . .] I leaned it against the door and tried to locate the enemy, but I couldn’t see anything [. . .] my partner, the shooter, turned back and said: “they’re shooting at us from the rear” and when he said “rear” we started to hear the shots louder and louder as if they were shooting burst fire, so we turned around [. . .] and started to repel the aggression.

Besides the adrenaline and the confusion in a confrontation, soldiers sometimes feel at a disadvantage against criminals, either because they have superior weaponry, because the military

usually does not know well the cities that they are patrolling, or because, unlike criminals, the military must, in principle, respect the law and cannot simply do whatever they want. Sergeant Jorge used a metaphor to explain this situation: the military are hares, and the hitmen are hunters.

The End of the confrontation

After a confrontation, Sergeant Isidoro was in shock. He got out of the vehicle to find out how his colleagues were doing, and, at that moment, he felt all the adrenaline, the nervousness, and the fear. The soldiers talked among themselves and concluded that if the hitmen's vans had stopped, they would have killed them because they were out of ammunition and their weapons were jammed from so much shooting. That day, the sergeant chain-smoked a whole pack of cigarettes, one after the other.

The interviewees said they often carry out reflective exercises post-confrontation. The reflections focus on retaining or rejecting the actions they took during the confrontation, based on hypothetical scenarios: "Imagine, if we had been hit with one of those weapons, well, or if we had not been prepared; you start to let your imagination run wild" (Sergeant Isidoro). These reflections are also linked to feelings of guilt. This is the case with Sergeant Francisco, who did not identify where the aggression came from, and when the confrontation ended, he said to himself: "How could I not locate where the shots came from? [. . .] why didn't I locate the aggressors?" Sergeant Francisco had to be reminded of his behavior in these conversations because he could not remember them himself. Other soldiers prefer to adopt a more reserved attitude, not mentioning what they did or did not do during an attack, to avoid being questioned and scolded about what they had done.

According to those interviewed, the military's retrospective exercises focus on evaluating their performance and the consequences of their actions in the short and long run. Soldiers consider it traumatic to participate in confrontations. Lieutenant Alfonso points out that being in constant combat with criminals has caused him to be in a state of psychosis, defensive and tired. However, others described how these activities are normalized after some time: "Everyone has experienced confrontations with criminals. You arrive [at the barracks], you go to sleep as if nothing had happened" (Soldier Luis).

Soldiers' thoughts about death are recurrent, especially in relation to family: four of the five soldiers interviewed have wives and children and financially support their households. They did not mention desertion as an option, although the desertion rate in the military has increased in recent years (SEDENA 2023). However, according to their testimonies, the income received by the military to support their families is why they do not want to start over as civilians. As Sergeant Francisco points out: "It could be that one day you could be hit by a bullet [. . .] I have my family; if something happens to me or if I don't take care of myself, who is going to take care of them?" The death of a soldier generates feelings of sadness, helplessness, despair, anger, and revenge among their colleagues. The killing of a squad member can provoke rage—a rage to kill (Forero et al. 2018). Isidoro concludes:

If they tell us that they killed a colleague, we are the ones who get angry because [. . .] we feel impotent [. . .]. The *sicarios* [. . .] are going to shoot us all [. . .] sometimes we get angry because we have seen a funeral, [. . .] and yes, the truth is [. . .] we feel sad.

Understanding soldiers as street-level-bureaucrats

Apart from the excessive use of lethal force during operations, the military uses its discretion to commit abuses by entering homes, carrying out arbitrary detentions, planting false evidence, and torturing civilians. These behaviors are observed in Recommendation 71/2009 (2009), in which soldiers arbitrarily decided to accuse civilians without consulting their superiors. The event

happened in 2008 in Miguel Alemán, Tamaulipas. The military claimed to detain a driver for carrying a firearm. They argued that the civilian indicated he was guarding a building with illicit objects. The soldiers then went to the building, seized the objects, and arrested four individuals. The victims' statements, however, contradict the military account. They attested that they were working on a ranch when the soldiers entered and forced them to move to another ranch. There, the soldiers already had a person detained with drugs and weapons, and the military intended to involve the other civilians in the seizure. Subsequently, the civilians were subdued, beaten, stripped naked, and taken to a military base.

Soldiers' testimonies shared in the interviews corroborate that, in some circumstances, they use discretion to address conflictive situations. This discretion allows them to navigate their relationship with the commanders and to balance the trade-off between committing human rights violations and being punished by disobedience for not getting their work done.

The Commanders (“Los Mandos”)

When the soldiers spoke about “the commanders” it was unclear what kind of superiors they were referring to. The perception of these commanders is that they are far removed from street-level policing activities and, hence, do not value the work done by soldiers. Soldiers also blame the commanders for giving orders that expose them to hostile situations. For instance, patrolling on foot without the possibility of using the vehicles as shields if attacked. They complained that, in case of a confrontation, the commanders prefer not to send more soldiers to assist them to avoid more deaths and thus reduce the death toll. As Lieutenant Alfonso mentions:

The top commanders say it is due to lack of training [because] in less than five months [...] we have had four dead and more than 14 wounded, [but] we are [...] in places where [criminal groups] are fighting and [...] in a war there are wounded and dead on both sides. [...] This unit [...] has had more than 90 attacks in less than a year [...] so I say, [...] there are few casualties because I think we have managed to bring down more than 100, 150 criminals and seize weapons and illicit merchandise.

The military personnel interviewed believe that commanders treat the soldiers as if they were dispensable. Further, they do not trust them, as they suspect that the troops obtain information—about points of sale of substances, for example—by torturing criminals or because they work for criminal groups. In turn, the military troops have the same suspicions about the commanders, believing *they* are allied with organized crime groups. To avoid problems with their superiors, the best formula is to keep records of every order and receive the order in writing in case they need the evidence (Sergeant Jorge).

It is possible to identify two types of commanders from soldier interviews. On the one hand, the office-based commanders who are dedicated to administrative tasks and demand strict adherence to military protocols, who are seen as ignorant because they are inactive in the field. As Lieutenant Alfonso explained “[that the people who made those manuals], have never been in situations like the ones we are experiencing right now in the country.” Soldier Luis believes these commanders are “cowards” because they avoid patrolling and try to stay safe behind a desk.

On the other hand, there are the commanders in the field with whom troop members have a tense relationship. For example, some “lazy” commanders seek to avoid conflict and prefer being stationed in a visible part of the city. Others are more active and choose to patrol conflict-heavy neighborhoods, and are interested in making seizures or confronting criminal groups.

The relationship with the field commanders also contributes to the soldiers' discretion. When orders are confused or contradictory, soldiers decide whether to follow or ignore them. For soldiers, these orders are often contradictory, confusing, and misleading. For example, the commanders tell soldiers that if there is a problem, they will back them up, but in the end, “the

commanders [...] will wash their hands” of the situation, says Sergeant Isidoro. Sergeant Jorge commented that these commanders in the field also “grant them leeway: if you shoot in a confrontation [...] I’m going to support you. So, shoot [...] with all that you have, go out and take advantage of it.” But, in the end, the soldiers feel like they are on their own.

According to Sergeant Isidoro, the so-called freedom soldiers have, granted by commanders, are a double-edged sword. If soldiers act freely but get into trouble, they will be turned into the authorities for investigation and punishment.

Human rights

As previously mentioned, prosecutions of the military are rare in Mexico, and mechanisms to oversee and create accountability regarding human rights violations are almost non-existent. However, in recent years, the press and NGOs have focused on these violations, publishing evidence and videos and requiring accountability from the army (Arredondo, 2020; Juárez et al., 2018). In response, the commanders have tried to regulate how soldiers act and encourage fear of human rights violations.

Among the military, “human rights” is a current topic that always looms over their behavior. Sergeant Jorge mentions:

you can’t let yourself be carried away by that instinct to kill [...] or “I’m going to torture the aggressor” [...] Once you have captured [the detainees] [...] it’s better to follow the law and respect human rights [...] because nowadays [...] there is a lot of respect for human rights: if you commit some kind of arbitrary act [...] you get into trouble.

Lieutenant Alfonso argues that if a military member deprives someone of life or liberty, “it is a very serious crime that can lead to 60 or 70 years in prison” and, as he explains, the entire chain of command “have to assume legal responsibility.” As a result, those interviewed mentioned that “human rights” present several obstacles to their work. For instance, they cannot obtain information from detained *sicarios*, nor can they defend themselves adequately against an attack because they can be accused and prosecuted for “abuse of authority.”

Soldiers say that “human rights” contribute to society stigmatizing the military without understanding the complex context in which soldiers operate. Sergeant Isidoro mentions that the military is “the bad guy in the movie.” Sergeant Jorge exemplifies this:

Human rights limit us a lot because [...] if you shoot more than 8 [or] 10 shots at a body, it is an abuse of authority and that’s where the problem comes in. But, in a confrontation you’re shooting, you’re not going to know if that same body [...] was shot eight times. But human rights come to tell you “no, you’ve already fired,” you’re going to jail for having committed an “abuse of authority.” So, what do you say? I’d rather not shoot in a confrontation, or I’d rather not work.

Jorge also mentions that they can no longer get information from the “*halcones*” (hawks) anymore because now “if you use this information, they take it badly. ‘Who gave you the information? Did you torture him, did you beat him? It is better not to get involved in that anymore.’” However, Private Luis declares that he still beats up suspects: “the people we find, even if they are ‘*halcones*’, well, we beat them up,” and justifies his actions by thinking how many of his colleagues have died because of them.

To avoid problems related to “human rights,” the soldiers mentioned being aware of the legal frameworks that, in theory, should regulate their behavior by keeping the protection of human rights in mind. For Private Luis: “We are always attached to human rights because [...] investigations take place immediately, and you pay for what you have done.” In this sense,

Sergeant Francisco argued that “now you can’t touch them or hit them [the detainees] because if you hit them, after a while, they complain and now with the new penal system there are cross-examinations and [. . .] even if it’s not true, they [say] ‘they tortured me, they hit me.’” For this reason, according to the military interviewed, human rights serve to protect *sicarios*. However, they believe that people who have a criminal record or are involved in illicit activities have lost their human rights, as Sergeant Jorge explained: “If it is a drug trafficker, they have no human rights. Because they don’t respect your life.”

Some interviewees believe that another way to protect themselves is to kill the suspects and tamper with the crime scene: “If you don’t want problems, you have to make it look real [. . .] if you are going to kill someone [be sure] the forensic expert does not say that you shot him at point-blank range” (Sergeant Isidoro). According to Suárez-Enríquez and Meyer (2017) and Juárez *et al.* (2018), the practice of altering crime scenes is a recurrent behavior which, alongside false statements, soldiers use to hinder and divert investigations by civilian authorities.

Moreover, the fear that runs through the troops of being prosecuted for “human rights” has been exaggerated. The number of convictions has been minimal when there have been criminal actions against military personnel for human rights violations. According to Suárez-Enríquez and Meyer (2017), between 2012 and 2016, the Attorney General’s office launched 505 investigations into these crimes, earning only 16 convictions—a success rate of 3.2 percent. But here is the contradiction: why in the interviews do soldiers feel that they cannot act freely because they can be punished if military prosecutions are not common? Then the answer is related to what was explained in the previous section. Commanders’ orders are confusing and when an accusation is made, soldiers feel they are on their own without having the support of their superiors. As consequence, the probability of prosecution is greater for low-ranked soldiers than for their commanders.

The military portrays themselves as victims of “human rights” because they cannot “extract information from the detainees” or “defend themselves in confrontations” as they would like. From the testimonies gathered, it is possible that these complaints from the military are because they use torture as an interrogation method and commit extrajudicial executions during confrontations. Moreover, their belief that suspects lose their human rights when they engage in illicit activities expresses soldiers’ feelings about alleged criminals and justifies their willingness to violate human rights in the field.

Conclusions

For this study, five military personnel were interviewed in Tamaulipas, Mexico—one of the states with the highest confrontations between army personnel and criminal groups. Based on the literature on sensemaking and street-level bureaucrats, military personnel were conceptualized as agents who, as part of an institution, also enjoy a certain degree of independence and make decisions according to their circumstances. The analysis of the testimonies provides a more complete picture of the decisions and actions they take during the operations they carry out when patrolling the streets. Specifically, the interviewees described what factors influence their behavior, not only structural elements related to their institution, such as obeying manuals and protocols, but also contingent factors, such as their relationship with their superiors, the interaction with civilians, and the confusing circumstances of the context. It is also evident in their testimonies that they are tired of participating in a seemingly endless war.

According to these testimonies, there is a contradiction in norms and practices between how they should act according to the rules and the actions that should be taken. They point out that they are at a disadvantage with their aggressors because they must follow the rules, take care not to violate human rights, and protect civilians. In addition, the military’s relationship with “the commanders” and “human rights” is, from their perspective, an obstacle to carrying out public security work, which in principle belongs to the police, not to the army. Previous research on

military action from academic and civilian organizations suggests that military personnel act based on the war training they receive (Silva et al. 2017). However, according to the interviews, this article suggests that soldiers operate in a scenario characterized by improvisation, disorder, and the dilemma between being accused of violating human rights or being punished for disobedience. In hostile or unclear situations, street-level bureaucrats make risk calculations about different factors in their environment. Among the military interviewed, the most important factor does not seem to be the training they receive but their survival, which involves shooting at anything that moves.

Before concluding, it is perhaps important to clarify that sensemaking or street-level bureaucrat's theories cannot fully explain why some military personnel commit unspeakable atrocities, such as torture. Nor, for decades, has this been explained by criminological or sociological theories that have tried to clarify the perpetration of mass atrocity: well-known theories based on the personality or ideology of the perpetrators, on the "banality of evil," or on the commission of what are known as "crimes of obedience." Yet, we hope that this article can help to shed light on this conundrum, which in Mexico involves the suffering of many people and, at the same time, the never-ending militarization of the country.

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