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Anti-State Criminal Violence as Civil Defense

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ANTI-STATE CRIMINAL VIOLENCE AS CIVIL DEFENSE

by

Tyler S. Thomas

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree

of

MASTER OF ARTS

in

Political Science

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ABSTRACT

Anti-State Criminal Violence as Civil Defense

by

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Utah State University, 2020

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In this thesis, I developed a civil defense theory to explain anti-state violence orchestrated by organized crime. I first review the literature examining the causes of the onset and intensity of anti-state criminal violence. Structural, organizational, cultural, institutional, and state-centered theories have provided effective explanations for the violence, but are hampered by the assumption that criminal groups are only driven by economic and self-interested motives. I build on these theories by relaxing this assumption and putting forward a more nuanced explanation.

I argue that organized crime will be more likely to commit anti-state violence when state enforcement agents commit a serious grievance against the local population with whom the criminals share a social identity. I use process tracing to explore the
causal mechanisms that connect state sponsored violence with community grievance and anti-state violence by the Michoacán Family and its later iteration, the Knights Templar.

Using primary and secondary sources, I examine the social identities connecting criminals to local communities and how these social identities could lead members of organized crime to attack the state. The evidence gathered suggests that my theory provides a good pathway to explain anti-state violence, but is not exhaustive. I therefore end the thesis with a discussion on further research needed to better explain the role of social identities in this phenomenon.

(82 pages)
Anti-state criminal violence is a puzzle. Criminal organizations should avoid violent interactions with the state, yet in several countries like Brazil, Mexico, and Colombia there has been widespread anti-state violence orchestrated by organized criminal groups for the past 25 years. Why?

Building on existing literature, I develop a theory with which to explain anti-state criminal violence. I argue that organized crime is more likely to commit anti-state violence when state enforcement agents commit a serious grievance against the local population with whom the criminals share a social identity. I develop this theory using the case of the Michoacán Family, later known as the Knights Templar. I find that members of this group identify with their community and frame violence in terms of “defense” of said community. While not exhaustive, this study suggests that group identity is an important factor behind criminal anti-state violence.
# CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ABSTRACT</td>
<td>iii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PUBLIC ABSTRACT</td>
<td>v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF FIGURES</td>
<td>viii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. LITERATURE REVIEW</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goods and Service</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Criminal Capacities for Violence</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Violent Criminal Culture</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political-Criminal Nexus and Criminal Turf War</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State Repression</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. CIVIL DEFENSE MODEL FOR ANTI-STATE CRIMINAL VIOLENCE</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. METHODOLOGY</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Case Selection</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data Sources</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Process Tracing</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plan of Analysis</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. SOCIAL IDENTITIES OF THE MICHOACÁN FAMILY AND THE KNIGHTS TEMPLAR</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Rise of the Michoacán Family</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ties to Home and Kinship</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. HOW THE SOCIAL IDENTITIES OF THE MICHOACÁN FAMILY AND THE KNIGHTS</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TEMPLAR LED TO ANTI-STATE CRIMINAL VIOLENCE</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Federal Invasion of Michoacán</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Federal Police Violate Citizen’s Civil and Human Rights</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Military Violates Citizen’s Civil and Human Rights</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disruption of Sovereignty, the Drug Trade, and Social Welfare</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Civilian Disgust and Protest at Federal Abuse</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Criminal Disgust and Protest at Federal Abuse of Civilians</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Protective Ideology of the Michoacán Family and the Knights Templar</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Codification of the Ideology and the Rise of the Knights Templar</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Revolutionary and Christian Warrior Tradition</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure</td>
<td>Page</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------</td>
<td>------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5-1 Map of Michoacán, Mexico</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**LIST OF FIGURES**
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

The existence of massive anti-state criminal violence in countries like Mexico, Brazil, Jamaica, El Salvador, Iraq, Colombia, Italy, and Russia is a paradox. According to much of the current research, organized criminal groups are thought to be primarily motivated by economic profit, generated by the provision of illegal goods and services, economic predation, and the selling of protection. Lest they provoke the state into repressing and disrupting their lucrative activities, they should avoid attacking the state when possible (Bailey & Taylor 2009; Finckenauer 2005; Gambetta 1993; Schelling 1971; Skaperdas 2001). They should seek to optimize the political environment rather than dismantle it. They should choose to either hide their activities from the state or include state agents in their operations in the form of bribery (Lessing 2018).

Nonetheless, some criminal group launch massive attacks against the state. In countries such as Brazil and Mexico, these attacks have been conducted by hundreds of criminal soldiers in widespread guerrilla fighting, from the mountains of Mexico’s Michoacán state to the slums of Rio de Janeiro in Brazil (Grillo 2016, Lessing 2018). In Colombia during the late 1980s and early 1990s, anti-state criminal attacks took a particularly heavy toll on Colombian society as the Medellín Cartel targeted Colombian politicians in terrorist strikes which blew up cars and airplanes (Bowden 2001). Thousands of civilians have been killed as a result of these conflicts.

Building on existing approaches, I outline a theory that explains both the onset and intensity of anti-state criminal violence. Unlike other approaches, however, I
complicate the motivations and incentives of criminals, relaxing the economic and self-interested assumptions that create the anti-state violence paradox. I argue that organized crime will commit anti-state criminal violence when state enforcement agents commit a serious grievance against the local population with whom the criminals share a social identity. I illustrate this theory using process tracing to explore the causal mechanisms of anti-state violence. I use the Michoacán Family, later known as the Knights Templar, as my case study, situated in the Mexican state of Michoacán.

In what follows, I begin by reviewing the literature on the causes of anti-state criminal violence. Building on this literature, in the third chapter, I introduce my theory on the civil defense model. The fourth chapter outlines the methodological approach. The fifth chapter analyzes the social identity that connects criminals to the local population that could lead them to violence in defense of civilians. The sixth chapter analyzes the conflict of the Michoacán Family and the Knights Templar (MF/KT) with the federal government and how the social identities of criminals may lead to anti-state violence. The evidence suggests that the path I outline in this thesis is plausible and useful to better understand the drivers of anti-state criminal violence. I then conclude with a discussion on further research needed to confirm my theory.
There are five main approaches used to explain anti-state criminal violence: structural, organizational, cultural, institutional, and state-centered. These theories make important contributions to our understanding of the onset and intensity of anti-state criminal violence. I summarize them below.

**Goods and Services**

Structural approaches explore the impact of the value and nature of illegal goods and services on anti-state criminal violence. Scholars in this camp claim that anti-state violence is an inherent part of the business of organized criminal activity (Williams 2010). If illegal goods and services provided by organized crime, such as drugs, counterfeit products, and trafficking or protection services, are sufficiently valuable, criminals will be willing to use violence in order to control and protect them from state agents, as well as from other criminals (Reuter 2009). Moreover, some of these services require violence in order for organized criminal groups to signal to clients, victims, rival criminals and state agents that they can control markets, eliminate rivals, and enforce contracts (Castillo, Mejia, & Restrepo 2013; Durán-Martínez 2015; Gambetta 1996; Spence 2002).

Structural theories of anti-state criminal violence can explain why organized criminal interactions with each other and with the state will generally include more
violence than those of legal organizations (Grossman 1997; Paoli 2002). However, despite the often-substantial value of illegal goods and services, organized criminal groups are not equally violent (Friman 2009). Illegality does not necessarily breed violence (Kan 2012; Snyder & Durán-Martínez 2009). Nor do the value of goods generate violence (Durán-Martínez 2015; Shirk & Wallman 2015). While this approach may explain the tendency toward anti-state violence due to illegality and protectionism, it does not explain its onset or varying intensity (Andreas & Wallman 2009).

**Criminal Capacities for Violence**

Organizational approaches focus on the capability that organized crime has for anti-state violence and the vulnerability of the state (Williams 2009a). Violence results when organized criminal groups have a high capacity for violence (Brands 2009). The availability of weapons, recruits, and particularly specialists in violent behavior allow organized criminal groups to effectively use increased amounts of violence against the state (Brophy 2008; Campbell 2010; Dube, Dube, & Garcia-Ponce 2013; Grillo 2011; Hagedorn 2005; Lloyd 2007; Logan & Grayson 2015; Sampson 1993; Sullivan & Elkus 2008; Tilly 2003; Williams 2009a; 2010; 2012). Their ability to damage the state is further enhanced if it lacks the tools to suppress organized crime, either due to a lack of the resources required to project power throughout its territory or due to pervasive
corruption within the ranks of its agents (Durán-Martínez 2015; Metz 1993; Skaperdas 2001; Sullivan & Elkus 2008).

While successful in explaining intensity, this approach does not explain the onset of anti-state violence. Organized crime is not inherently eager to attack the state and those whom it protects (Williams 2010). The objectives of organized crime are assumed to be primarily economic, not political (Kalyvas 2015). As stated by Paul Kan, “The main goals for a criminal organization are the generation and accumulation of profit. High levels of violence associated with warfare can often hamper the achievement of these goals for criminals” (Kan 2009, 25-26). As long as the state engages in activity that allows organized crime to make money, such organizations have no incentive to violently challenge the state, regardless of its relative power. Indeed, it is often necessary for organized crime to work with state agents for their criminal activities to thrive (Flom 2019).

**Violent Criminal Culture**

Cultural approaches argue that anti-state criminal violence is the result of the internal culture of organized criminal groups. Violence is understood as an acceptable and preferable solution for conflict. Frequent violence within a society can cause the collapse of societal norms against violent behavior (Bowden 2010; Buvinic, Morrison, & Shifter 1999; Williams 2010). The impact of this collapse carries over into organized criminal groups (Williams 2009a; 2012). A violent culture may also develop from within. For example, recruiting individuals who favorably view violent solutions to problems
into the group’s membership can lead to more violent behavior pursued by the group as a whole (Lloyd 2007; Logan & Grayson 2015; Weeks 2014; Williams & Godson 2002; Williams 2009a). This violent internal criminal culture can spread to other groups through imitation should their practices be deemed effective (Logan & Grayson 2015; Shirk 2011; Sullivan & Elkus 2008).

Cultural arguments help explain the intensity of anti-state violence. With a breakdown in societal norms against violent behavior, organized criminals may feel less hesitant to engage in it. Violence against state agents may be followed by reprisals and repeating cycles of violent revenge (Williams 2012). However, while this argument may explain a cultural feedback process whereby violent behavior gains acceptance as a solution to conflicts, it does not explain the onset of violence. Organized crime still has an incentive to avoid anti-state violence, and therefore should seek to avoid setting up a violent cultural feedback process.

**Political-Criminal Nexus and Criminal Turf War**

Institutional approaches examine the impact of breakdowns in the political-criminal nexus and of criminal turf wars on anti-state criminal violence. They initially explore the political-criminal nexus (Godson 2003; Williams 2010). Violence occurs when state protection agreements with organized criminal groups are disrupted, leading to a period of transitional violence as groups attempt to reestablish and persuade state agents to form new agreements (Freeman 2006; Grayson 2010a; Shirk & Wallman 2015; Trejo & Ley 2017). This breakdown may have many causes, such as the collapse of the
state or a turnover in democratic elections (Astorga & Shirk 2010; Dube et al. 2013; Kan 2011; O’Neil 2009; Rios 2015; Trejo & Ley 2017; Williams 2009b). Violence may become especially intense if organized criminal groups find the state hesitant to form new protection agreements with them. This can occur when newly elected officials see it as an electoral mandate to crush organized crime or when there is an increase in state agents who refuse to be corrupted into making new agreements (Shirk & Wallman 2015; Osorio 2013; 2015).

The breakdown in state protection agreements can also lead to criminal turf wars. Organized criminal groups, no longer under the protection of the state, may attempt to seize resources from other groups as they strive to protect their own (Trejo & Ley 2017). Criminals will sometimes attack the state in order to signal strength and resolve to their rivals (Calderón, Robles, Díaz-Cayeros, & Magaloni 2015; Durán-Martínez 2015; Lessing 2015; Spence 2002). This is particularly true when groups are suffering fragmentation and internal disruption, sometimes caused by state repression strategies (Calderón et al. 2015; Dickenson 2014; Shirk & Wallman 2015). Organized crime will attack state agents if they ally with rivals or compete in the provision of illegal goods and services (Bowden 2009; Grillo 2011; Kan 2011). Groups will also attack the state within a rival’s territory in order to trick it into repressing their rivals (Lessing 2015).

**State Repression**

State-Centered approaches explain anti-state criminal violence as the result of state repression (Williams 2010). The state attempts to repress organized crime when it
tries to destroy their criminal organizations, stop their criminal activities, and arrest or kill their members. State repression endangers criminal profits (Brands 2009; Grillo 2011; Kan 2011; Sullivan & Elkus 2008). Repression therefore gives criminal groups an incentive to engage in violence against the state, although this incentive can be altered using conditional rather than unconditional repressive strategies (Lessing 2018). When the state represses, organized crime responds with progressive strategies of non-violent lobbying and corruption, followed by violent lobbying and corruption in order to intimidate and convince the state and its agents to back off from enforcement (Beittel 2019; Brands 2009; Kan 2011; Lessing 2015; Lessing 2018; Mandel 2011; Schelling 1966; Sullivan & Elkus 2008; Thomas, Kiser, & Casebeer 2005).

Institutional and state-centered approaches explain both onset and intensity of anti-state violence. Building on these approaches, I propose an alternative pathway. All of the theories summarized above assume that criminals are driven by economic incentives solely. There is evidence, however, that they can have other incentives and motivations besides economic profit, such as a desire to show loyalty to their communities (Brewer; 2009; Carpenter 2013; Rodgers & Jensen 2008; Ward 2012). I believe that these other incentives can also lead to anti-state violence. I therefore relax the self-interested, economic assumptions of the literature to allow for a more thorough exploration of the causes of anti-state criminal violence.
CHAPTER 3

CIVIL DEFENCE MODEL FOR ANTI-STATE CRIMINAL VIOLENCE

I argue that organized crime will commit anti-state violence when state enforcement agents commit a serious grievance against the local population with whom the criminals share a social identity. In the following paragraphs, I explain what I mean by serious grievance and a shared social identity and their part in driving members of organized crime to attack state law enforcement agents.

Organized crime, in its purest form, is apolitical in motivation. Its objective is the generation of illicit profits. While it may involve itself in politics, this is mostly to maintain an environment in which it can maximize its revenue. This is often done by involving public officials and law enforcement in criminal activities (Kelly 2003).

However, while the generation of profit may be the central motivation for forming a criminal enterprise, it does not mean that its members are purely motivated by self-enrichment. For example, members of the Los Angeles-based street gang Mara Salvatrucha, commonly known as MS-13, join the group for a variety of non-economic reasons. Some join to obtain a sense of belonging. Others join for protection (Ward 2012). While wealth and material comforts may motivate some members, especially leadership, they do not necessarily motivate all members. Both economic and non-economic motivations may exist within the criminal organization.

I argue that an attachment to their local communities may motivate some criminals more or as much as personal self-enrichment. Members of organized crime
often work where they live. Some have grown up or lived among these communities for many years. They often have well-developed familial, filial, religious, ethnic, and cultural ties that connect them with their members. It is no surprise that they may naturally care for their communities and wish to preserve them and their members from harm. They may even see their criminal enterprises as opportunities to assist their local communities.

These social ties between the criminals and the local community are what terrorism analyst Marc Sageman calls “social identities” (Sageman 2016). These identities do not necessarily drive those who embrace them to violence against the state. In order to turn them into mechanisms for violent anti-state action, they must first be politicized (Sageman 2016). In other words, these identities and those who hold them must feel like their community is being harmed or is in danger of being treated unfairly. There must be a grievance committed against them or the threat of one. A grievance would politicize the identity and unite the community in action against the injustice, with individual members acting on behalf of the whole.

Grievances can often come in the form of political, economic, and human rights abuses committed by state actors (Mena & Hobbs 2010; Human Rights Watch 2011). Human rights abuses by state law enforcement agents during state-criminal war can be particularly impactful (Cavallaro & Monteiro 1996). For example, Brazilian police forces are notoriously violent in their conflicts with organized crime. Since the 1980s, Brazil has been engaged in an ongoing conflict with criminal groups. These groups have dominated the favelas (shantytowns) of major cities such as Rio de Janeiro. From time to time, Brazil’s heavily militarized police forces have raided the favelas, attempting to kill and
capture as many drug traffickers as they can (Lessing 2018). During these violent incursions, the police will often abuse the *favela* residents, whom they frequently view as enemies working with the drug syndicates (Lessing 2018).

This police mentality leads to high death tolls. In 2017, Brazilian police killed a total of 5,144 people in Brazil, up 20% from 2016 (Human Rights Watch 2019). Due in part to poor record keeping by Brazilian law enforcement, it is unclear how many of these killings were justified. According to the police ombudsman of São Paulo, who examined hundreds of such killings in the city, the police used excessive force in three-fourths of them, with at least some of the victims unarmed (Human Rights Watch 2019).

These abuses can result in the formation of a politicized us versus them mentality in the harmed communities, with law enforcement understood as the enemy. This is especially true when civilians perceive the violence and abuse to be indiscriminate, targeting civilians based on community membership, rather than selective, based on individual civilian behavior (Kalyvas 2000). In response to the threat, community members then proceed to ally themselves with those who share similar social identities against the injustices of the aggressor in common defense.

Once a social identity has been politicized, communities will often act and attempt to correct the injustice. They may do this through peaceful means, such as through public demonstrations and protests (Sageman 2016). However, some community members may not confine their political action to only peaceful methods. Some may
instead self-categorize themselves as soldiers who need to defend their community violently (Sageman 2016).

Violent action is particularly suited to members of organized crime. Criminals are engaged in enterprises outside the law. They are therefore already a target of state law enforcement, and while violence in defense of their fellow citizens might encourage more state repression, it is not a challenge with which they are unfamiliar. They also have the means to engage in violent action. Organized crime is often structured into hierarchies fashioned for pursuing common goals. Organized criminal groups also tend to be well-armed, with a culture already accepting of violent action to achieve goals. It is therefore not particularly difficult for organized crime to move into a new identity as community protectors willing to use violent action to discourage further abuse.

The adoption of this violent community protector identity can be particularly impactful if criminal leaders, as opposed to rank and file members, are those who adopt it. Leaders shape the social identity and norms of groups (Sageman 2016). If they begin to take on the role of community protector, many of their followers will likely adopt it as well. Even if many group members do not adopt the identity and ideologies of its leaders, a common occurrence in other violent non-state actor groups such as insurgents, this is not likely to matter much if the leaders are able to maintain control of their organization and its goals (Ribetti 2007).

While my main argument is that members of organized crime adopt a protector role out of a sincerely held social identity and affinity with local communities, it is also possible for criminals to adopt this protector role for instrumental reasons. Whether
criminals share an identity or affinity with local communities or not, acting as if they did can provide many benefits. The adoption of the protector role may help maintain organizational cohesion, recruit new members from the local community and win over skeptical civilians. Even if the protector identity is instrumental, it is prudent for criminal groups to adopt in order to establish themselves securely within the communities where they operate and effectively resist the incursions of rival criminal groups or the repression of the government.

However, the question of identity versus instrumentality need not force us to understand members of organized crime as only having one motivation and not the other. They may be motivated by both. A criminal may wish to protect the community he cares about, while at the same time understand and use the instrumental benefits of the protector identity to benefit himself. Ultimately, identifying what the motivation is for the adoption of the protector identity is less important than recognizing whether or not the identity is being adopted.

Having adopted a protector identity, organized criminal groups may now proceed to engage in anti-state violence. The violence, however, cannot merely be defensive in nature. The reason for this is that defensive violence is the violence that results when criminals are caught engaging in illegal activities. Rather than run or hide, they fight the law enforcement agents who have caught them at their work. The point of this violence is to decrease their monetary losses and protect themselves, not to protect civilians through avenging or deterring attacks (Lessing 2018). The violence engaged in by organized
crime must be offensive in nature, the hunting out and ambushing of state agents in order to avenge civilian abuse and deter its occurrence.
In order to develop this theory, I use process tracing to explore the causal mechanisms that connect this protector identity to anti-state violence in the case of the Michoacán Family and its later iteration as the Knights Templar, located in Michoacán (Mexico).

Case Selection

Organized crime is present in several countries throughout the world. I therefore had many candidates from which to choose my case. To ensure the availability of recent sources, I decided to select an organized criminal group in a country that is currently experiencing large-scale criminal-state conflict. With an ongoing conflict, often described as an insurgency, that has left 62,000 people missing and 150,000 dead since 2006, Mexico was a good country from which to select my case (Beittel 2019; Grillo 2011; Philips 2020).

There are at least nine major organized criminal organizations operating in Mexico: the Tijuana/Arellano Felix Cartel, the Sinaloa Cartel, the Juárez/Carrillo Fuentes Cartel, the Gulf Cartel, Los Zetas, the Beltrán Leyva Cartel, the Michoacán Family, the Knights Templar, and the Cartel Jalisco – New Generation (Beittel 2019). In order to study the causal mechanism and demonstrate my theory’s plausibility, I selected a
pathway case, one which clearly shows the causal mechanism—the Michoacán Family or (as parts of it were later known) the Knights Templar (Gerring and Cojocaru 2016).

The Michoacán Family, situated in the Mexican state of Michoacán, announced its presence in September 2006. Unlike some organized criminal groups, such as the Zetas, the Michoacán Family perceived itself as more than an organized criminal group. Some of its members saw themselves as community defenders, duty bound to protect Michoacán’s inhabitants from the predations of other criminals. In response to its violence, the federal government launched a campaign to destroy it in December 2006.

In the midst of its war with the federal government, the group broke apart and, after a short civil war, reformed itself as the Knights Templar. The Knights Templar were a more extreme version of the Michoacán Family. It claimed the protective mantle of the Michoacán Family (Grillo 2016; Lemus 2015). However, it also added to it, adopting imagery and symbols that increased their affiliation with a protective identity, in this case that of Templar Knights, evoking the Medieval Christian order tasked with protecting pilgrims and sacred sites and artifacts in the Holy Land. Indeed, the Knights’ own explanation for the split and reformation of the Michoacán Family was to eliminate predatory elements of their organization so as to better complete their protective mission.

As a result, both the Family and the Knights were made up of similar leadership and personnel. This close association has led some researchers, such as Falko Ernst, to make no distinction between the organizations, referring to both of them as the Knights Templar in his 2015 study (Ernst 2015). Lest an analysis of the Family be less effective by excluding the Knights or vice versa, I include both to ensure a comprehensive
analysis. I also include both to help show the increasingly protective positions claimed by the personnel and leadership throughout their conflict with the federal government. I chose the Family and the Knights (MF/KT) because they demonstrated a strong “social identity” and lashed out against the state. The MF/KT is perfect to delineate the causal mechanism that connects these two variables.

**Data Sources**

Most of my data comes from scholarly sources. Much comes from scholar Maldonado Aranda’s paper *Stories of Drug Trafficking in Rural Mexico: Territories, Drugs and Cartels in Michoacán*. I also draw on the work of several other scholars such as George Grayson, from whom I collected public declarations made by the Michoacán Family in his work, *La Familia Drug Cartel: Implications for U.S.-Mexican Security*, as well as the work of the Tribal Analysis Center, which provided me with copies of the Knight’s code of conduct, *Code of the Knights Templar of Michoacán*. I particularly draw on the work of Falko Ernst, especially his dissertation on the Knights Templar, *From Narcotrafficking to Alternative Governance: An Ethnographic Study on Los Caballeros Templarios and the Mutation of Organized Crime in Michoacán, Mexico*.¹ Much of this scholarly work is first-hand data, composed from the personal observations of researchers as well as collected from extensive interviews with civilian, state, and criminal informants.

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¹ Ernst is a Senior Analyst at the International Crisis Group. He specializes in Mexican organized crime. He has conducted significant research on Mexico’s state-criminal conflict through extensive interviews with criminal, state, and civilian informants. He often serves as a commentator in national and international media.
informants, among them high-profile criminal figures as Nazario Moreno and Servando Gómez.

I also draw from the work of journalists, particularly that of Ioan Grillo and William Finnegan. Both of them covered critical moments of the conflict between the MF/KT and the federal government on the ground in Michoacán. Their data is also first-hand, and mostly comes from Grillo´s work *Gangster Warlords* and Finnegan´s article for *The New Yorker*, “Silver or Lead.”

Besides scholarly and journalistic works, I also collected data from social media and music sources. I analyze some of the Facebook profiles of suspected members of the Michoacán Family and the Knights Templar. I also analyze the lyrics of several narco-ballads, songs which describe and often glorify the exploits of Mexican drug traffickers.

**Process Tracing**

I use process tracing to analyze my case. Process tracing is the “Systematic examination of diagnostic evidence selected and analyzed in light of research questions and hypotheses posed by the investigator” (Collier 2011). I have selected process tracing so that I can better understand the processes behind my theory.

If my theory is correct, I first expect to find social identities uniting members of the MF/KT to the Michoacán people. I should observe the criminals and the local people connected through identities such as socio-economic status or place of origin. I should also observe this connection proudly embraced by criminals and observable in their
public statements, choice of music or entertainment, and their overall self-image. This evidence provides the foundation for my theory on anti-state criminal violence.

I next expect to find these social identities politicized by a serious grievance or grievances enacted by state agents. This is also a necessary piece of evidence, as without it there would be no abused civilians for criminals to avenge or defend. If I am right, I should observe state agents abusing Michoacanos, either through human rights violations or political or economic interference.

I expect the social identities to be politicized by the grievance(s). If I am right, I should observe public demonstrations and protests, as well as statements of civilians and criminals condemning the abuse while demonstrating an adversarial relationship with state agents. Once again, this evidence is necessary for my theory.

Once the social identity is politicized, I expect to find members of organized crime adopting a protective identity toward the Michoacán people. If I am right, I should observe the criminals making public statements, devising rules for members, and expending time and money to benefit their fellow Michoacanos. This evidence is not necessary for my theory, as it is possible for members of the MF/KT to have adopted a protective identity without making it public. They could simply demonstrate this role through deed, attacking state agents to avenge civilian abuse or deter aggression without saying anything about it. Nonetheless, evidence that they have accepted a protective role
through their words, imagery, their music preferences, and what they spend their time or money on, increases the plausibility that they have done so.

Finally, I expect criminals to attack state agents to avenge or deter state abuse of civilians. If I am right, I should observe criminals attacking the state, not simply defending against its incursions disrupting their criminal operations. Specifically, I should observe them attacking unpopular state forces. I also expect to find statements or other evidence from criminals demonstrating that the attacks are intended to protect or avenge civilians.

If observed together, these expectations suggest that criminal organizations are sometimes driven by their social identities to attack the state. This does not mean that they are always driven by these identities. Rather, these identities help us to better understand anti-state criminal violence, providing another pathway to its enactment.

**Plan of Analysis**

In order to develop my theory, I need to show the social identities connecting members of the MF/KT to Michoacanos, grievances enacted by state agents, the politicization of the social identities, the adoption of a protector identity by members of the MF/KT, and their subsequent attacks against state forces. I therefore begin my analysis by examining these social identities. I then proceed to analyze the conflict between the MF/KT with the Mexican federal government. I provide some background information before exploring state grievances, the politicization of the social identities, and the adoption by criminals of a protector identity. I then explore the nature of the
MF/KT’s anti-state violence. I conclude my paper discussing the limitations of the available evidence, and how future research could improve upon my work.
The Rise of the Michoacán Family

The Michoacán Family first announced its presence in September 2006 by dumping several heads on a dance floor in Uruapan, Michoacán (Aranda 2013). The Michoacán Family was made up of criminals, home guard, and local vigilante units and arose in response to the alleged predatory criminal Zetas and other criminal groups (Aranda 2013; Ernst 2015; Finnegan 2010). Highlighting the injustice suffered by Michoacanos, leader Nazario Moreno wrote that, “My state was being subjugated, robbed, and humiliated by a dangerous group of professional delinquents… whose cruelty was incomparable in the annals of narcoviolence… (and whose) savagery… was so that they devastated and imposed terror” (Cited in Ernst 2015, 164). Declaring that “Our sole motive is that we love our state and are no longer willing to see our people’s dignity trampled on” and supported by local people, the Family proceeded to drive out the Zetas and other criminal groups and to establish itself as the most wealthy and powerful criminal group in Michoacán (Aranda 2013; Finnegan 2010; Grayson 2010b, 101; Grillo 2016).
Ties to Home and Kinship

Members of the MF/KT called Michoacán home. It is where they grew up. It is where their friends lived. It is where their families have lived for perhaps generations. This is particularly true of the rough and isolated southern region of the state, known as the Hot Land. Many criminals shared the low socioeconomic background of the community they operated in (Ernst 2015). Proud of their local heritage, they highlighted their connection to the area and its people. In a paid advertisement in two Michoacán newspapers, the Michoacán Family answered the question they posed to their fellow
Michoacanos, “Who Are We?”, by stating that they were “Workers from the Tierra Caliente (Hot Land) region in the state of Michoacán” (Grayson 2010b).

This connection to the local appeared in official organizing documents. In the *Code of the Knights Templar of Michoacán*, a handbook of rules written for the Knights Templar, it stated the group’s ongoing patriotic purpose. “The Order foments patriotism, expressed in pride in one’s own land and its achievements and the awareness of its place among nations and the duties towards all mankind” (Tribal Analysis Center 2013, 7). Patriotic feeling and its encouragement were listed as not peripheral, but key aspects of what it meant to be a Knight Templar.

This pride and sense of connection to the local has also been observable in *narcocorridos*. *Narcocorridos* are ballads about the exploits of drug traffickers. The songs are often written for traffickers with flattering descriptions of their deeds. These songs therefore grant us a glimpse into how they like to personally identify. What comes out is that they strongly favor identifying as proud Michoacanos. The song, *La Familia Michoacana*, stated that the group was “100% Michoacanos” (Los Tucanes de Tijuana 2010). In the song, *Los Caballeros Templarios*, the singer declares, “I feel proud of my Michoacán homeland… I am from Apatzingán…I am from the Hot Land” (Los de la A 2017a). The song, *Soy Michoacano*, describes the life of a criminal proud to be from Apatzingán, Michoacán, living like a king while fighting federal police and soldiers (Los de la A 2017b). Where these criminals were from was important to their identity. It should therefore be no surprise if this identity influenced their behavior, occasionally
sidelining the profit motive in behalf of more altruistic motivations regarding the defense of home and family.

This connection to Michoacán and the Hot Land as home was particularly relevant in the naming of the Michoacán Family. Leader José de Jesús Méndez said in an interview with federal police that, “The idea [for the name] was based mostly because of our people and town. Which is why we called it the Family” (Truth Witness 2017).

Another leader, Nazario Moreno, wrote in his memoir, *They Call Me the Craziest One: The Diary of An Idealist*², that, “I decided to give it this name since already by definition family is a concept that refers to a homogenous group, to a same social class, to a culture, tradition, same blood, same lineage, same interests, and equal objectives and goals” (Cited in Ernst 2015, 161). The name demonstrated a devotion to home.

The top leadership of the MF/KT was closely connected to Michoacán. The two top leaders of the Michoacán Family were Nazario Moreno and José de Jesús Méndez. Both leaders were from Michoacán, with Moreno hailing from the Hot Land and Méndez coming from La Guardia (Ernst 2015; Truth Witness 2017). Leaders make formal and informal rules for their groups to follow and act as role models for group members. As long as both Moreno and Méndez remained enthusiastic about their home communities, then even a lack of enthusiasm by some members would not matter too much in dampening the overall affiliation of the group.

Ties of home and kinship connected members of the MF/KT with Michoacán and

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² I used Ernst’s dissertation to obtain quotes from Moreno’s book. I was unable to acquire anything from the book otherwise as it is mostly found in Mexico and has been declared illegal to own by the Mexican government. Ernst had to acquire the book directly through a criminal informant at much personal risk to himself.
its people (Ochoa & Torres 2012). They shared common social identities. These identities provided members of organized crime with incentives beyond self-interested economic profit. These more complicated incentives are necessary for understanding why organized crime may engage in anti-state violence, as it broadens our understanding of their motivations.
CHAPTER 6

HOW THE SOCIAL IDENTITIES OF THE MICHOACÁN FAMILY AND THE KNIGHTS TEMPLAR LED TO ANTI-STATE CRIMINAL VIOLENCE

The Federal Invasion of Michoacán

In 2006, Mexican President Felipe Calderón won the presidency after a close election. Perceiving a mandate to crack down on organized crime from the Mexican people, he decided to start his war on crime in Michoacán, noting the power of the Family and its aggressive use of violence in clearing Michoacán of the Zetas and other rival criminal groups (Grillo 2016). The Mexican Army, Navy, and Federal Police swarmed into Michoacán in December 2006 to stop the crime and violence (Aranda 2013; Finnegan 2010).

Federal forces seized weapons, drugs, and engaged in shootouts with the Family (Grillo 2016). Hundreds of the Family’s agents were arrested (Grillo 2016). Despite offers by the Family to end the fighting, the campaign only grew in intensity (Grillo 2016). This was especially true after two grenades were thrown into an Independence Day celebration in Morelia in 2008, which killed 3 people and injured 111 (Aranda 2013). Despite the claims of the Family to have had nothing to do with the attack, and the confession of Zetas admitting responsibility, federal forces continued to aggressively pursue them (Aranda 2013; Grillo 2016).
Federal Police Violate Citizen’s Civil and Human Rights

Despite claims to the contrary by some Mexican security officials, the federal invasion of Michoacán was not a clean one (Grillo 2016). Both the Federal Police and the Mexican military engaged in widespread abuse of the Michoacán population. The Federal Police were particularly brutal. They would often arbitrarily detain people (Wolfesberger 2017). They would often steal and damage property when conducting investigations (Ernst 2015; Finnegan 2010). According to some civilians, Federal Police also engaged in extrajudicial executions. Such was alleged in two incidents that resulted in the death of at least 50 civilians in 2015 (Human Rights Watch 2015). This behavior was not unique to Michoacán. As Calderón recruited and dispatched officers throughout the country to fight his war on the drug cartels, complaints of human rights violations increased, from 136 in 2007, to 802 in 2012 (Meyer 2014). Their behavior left Michoacanos furious. As one informer remarked, “Look at that, the government, and one would suppose that they are supposed to protect” (Ernst 2015, 215).

The Federal Police used torture as a method of interrogation. According to one police officer, it was frequently used on the front lines to extract information. He claimed not to have wanted to get involved with the torturous methods of his colleagues at first. However, he eventually buckled and joined in, somewhat comforted by the fact that everyone else seemed to be doing it. The police used this information to arrest suspected criminals (Grillo 2016). What seemed ignored by the police was whether the data gleaned
from tortured prisoners was trustworthy or not, and if it led to the arrest and torture of innocent civilians rather than the targeted criminals they claimed to seek.

**The Military Violates Citizen’s Civil and Human Rights**

While the Federal Police maintained the worst reputation, the military also soiled its own throughout the Michoacán campaign. Beginning with the invasion in 2006, Mexican military personnel extorted people, using the many roadblocks they set up across the state to do so (Finnegan 2010). In their determination to find criminals, they harassed civilians in the street, threatened them, seized their property, and beat them (Ernst 2015). They often sought suspects in total disregard for the safety of civilians, from whom they demanded accusations (Ernst 2015). “Within six months, Mexico’s human rights commissioner had received more than fifty complaints from Michoacán residents of soldiers beating them with rifle butts or torturing them” (Grillo 2016, 271).

The abuse by members of the military could be particularly cruel after suffering an attack by organized criminals. According to reporter Ioan Grillo,

In one horrific incident, four teenage girls described soldiers taking them to a base and beating and raping them over several days. A medical examiner confirmed
the assaults. The attack happened shortly after the ambush that killed the five soldiers. Maybe this was the soldier’s revenge. (Grillo 2016, 271)

As the war dragged on, the military continued to rack up an increasing tally of abuses against the Michoacán population. According to the Mexican National Human Rights Commission,

From 1 December 2006 to 17 May 2008, 634 complaints were filed against soldiers in Michoacán, including 250 for the improper exercise of public functions, 221 for illegal searches, 182 for cruelty, 147 for arbitrary detentions, 85 for theft, 41 for threats, and 32 for intimidation. On 27 October 2008, the annual report by the president of Michoacán’s Human Rights Commission affirmed that cases of torture had surged 300 per cent in one year. (Aranda 2013, 60)

With the widespread abuse of civil and human rights, it became difficult for citizens to trust federal forces. Rather than trust, the Federal Police and military mostly succeeded in encouraging hostility.

**Disruption of Sovereignty, the Drug Trade, and Social Welfare**

The violation of citizen’s human and civil rights was not the only way in which the federal government injured the Michoacán population. The federal government intervened and disrupted state and local government, often in violation of the Mexican constitution (Aranda 2013; Finnegan 2010; Ochoa & Torres 2017). They also disrupted the economy and social welfare of the state, as both the drug trade and the welfare projects of the MF/KT, discussed later in the chapter, had assisted in bettering both
Federal disruption was understandable. The drug trade was illegal and the members of the Family and the Knights were criminals. Also understandable was federal distrust of state and local government, which had been so infiltrated by criminal agents that both state and local police forces often assisted them in attacking federal forces (Grillo 2016; Ernst 2015). Nonetheless, such incidents would have only added to the perception among Michoacanos that they were being persecuted.

Federal forces committed serious grievances against the Michoacán population. The Army, Navy, and Federal Police frequently violated their human and civil rights. They damaged the economy and eliminated the popular welfare activities of the MF/KT. They violated the constitution, and interfered in state and local politics. These grievances provided the catalyst for the politicization of the social identities shared by Michoacanos and members of organized crime.

**Civilian Disgust and Protest at Federal Abuse**

The abuse by federal forces led to dissatisfaction and hostility among Michoacanos. The population felt discriminated against; stigmatized as criminals (Ernst 2015). One informant stated that,

> When there wasn’t that much government, it was better… there weren’t that many deaths… and there was more work… and we never had an aggression by them, by the person(s) they [the government] call organized crime, in fact I call them all
organized crime, the government itself… today it’s like you watch out more for
the federals (Federal Police) than for them. (Ernst 2015, 216)

In a group discussion led by researcher Falko Ernst on which was the greater evil, the
federal government or the Knights Templar, a participant replied, quickly backed up by
the other participants, that “If I had to choose, here the f* ing Templars, and there the
fucking government… which one do you want to have taken out? I’d say a thousand
times the government…” (Ernst 2015, 216). According to a Michoacán politician, the
campaign had “ruined the economy in the Hot Land and shattered the community's social
peace” (Finnegan 2010). For some Michoacanos, the federal government lost its claim to
being a legitimate source of protection and assistance.

The poor reputation of federal forces was not limited to adults, but also spread to
children. Falko Ernst, visiting an Apatzingán schoolroom conducting research on both the
Michoacán Family and the Knights Templar, noted this when examining some drawings
and activities of fifth graders.

Tellingly, the role of the aggressor was clear in the drawings: It was the little men
with the PF’s (Federal Police) typical dark blue uniforms that do the shooting and
killing. During the break, the schoolyard became the stage for the apatzingense
version of cops and robbers. In Caballeros v Federales, the latter are the bad guys.

(Ernst 2015, 213-214)

Whether children or adults, Michoacanos had little confidence in federal forces.

The Michoacán public demonstrated its dissatisfaction through protest. For
example, on 12 December 2010, 500 residents of Apatzingán demonstrated in the streets.
They were protesting the presence of Federal Police officers. The demonstration was sparked by a three-day battle which left residents trapped in their homes. The battle resulted in the death of 11 people, including an 8-month old baby. Angry citizens waved signs in the streets, demanding the withdrawal of federal forces (AFP 2010). A similar demonstration occurred in the town of Nueva Italia. Sparked by the robbery and vandalizing of a house during a police search, citizens poured into the streets and called for the withdrawal of the Federal Police (Finnegan 2010). The citizenry tired of the alleged protection offered by the federal government and its police forces.

**Criminal Disgust and Protest at Federal Abuse of Civilians**

The federal campaign infuriated the MF/KT and its leaders. Nazario Moreno expressed his disgust at the attacks and attempts to ruin his and his organization’s reputation in his memoir, stating that,

> What I wanted to do was realize a humanitarian and generous work, and in return, the government and some media exhibit me… as a dangerous narco, initiating a cruel and relentless persecution against me in the entire country, but fundamentally in my beloved state of Michoacán. (Cited in Ernst 2015, 160)

According to Moreno and the MF/KT, while they were busy serving Michoacán, the federal government abused it. They accused President Calderón and his party of having captured the state and used it to “victimize and abuse innocent civilians under the pretext
of ‘national security’, refusing to create order… and of actively colluding with the Zetas” (Ernst 2015, 164).

In response, the MF/KT assisted civilians protest and document the abuse, encouraging them to film federal forces abusing civilians and sending them the phone number of Mexico’s National Human Rights Commission (Ernst 2015). It also condemned the abuse. In a public statement distributed through flyers, banners, blogs, radio stations, newspapers, and national and international news agencies in 2010, the Family lashed out at the federal government for its treatment of the Michoacán citizenry. It stated that,

The federal government has continued to expose its inabilities and commenced a type of witch hunt against the innocent civilians of Michoacán. Using the excuse of trying to do away with our organization, they have committed countless assaults against our civil society. They have broken into and looted homes, they have murdered and raped both men and women and have invented testimonies of alleged protected witnesses that have caused our prisons to become filled with innocent people charged with crimes which were never committed. (Ovemex 2010)

After making this bitter accusation, the Family offered to disband. They made the offer on condition that the federal government would promise to protect the Michoacán people
and cease their abuse (Ovemex 2010). The federal government, justifiably suspicious, ignored the offer and continued the conflict.

The social identities connecting the local population to members of the MF/KT were politicized by federal abuse. Michoacanos lost confidence in federal protection and viewed the federal government as an enemy to be confronted rather than an ally. While the response of some Michoacanos to the injustice was to resist through protest, some, such as members of organized crime, may have moved toward a more aggressive response. Instead of protest, they adopted the role of community protector, a role accepted by some Michoacanos in the absence of adequate state protection.

**The Protective Ideology of the Michoacán Family and the Knights Templar**

There is evidence that the MF/KT adopted a protective identity toward Michoacán. Much of this stems from the early days of the MF/KT and the behavior of their rival criminal group, the Zetas, in the early 2000s. The Zetas had spurned positive relationships with the Michoacán people and abused them (Aranda 2013; Ernst 2015). They established protection rackets in the drug trade and extorted licit businesses (Ernst 2015). They also supported a local market for drugs, encouraging addiction, particularly
meth addiction (Finnegan 2010). The MF/KT justified its conflict with the Zetas in terms of providing protection to Michoacanos from their abuse.

One sign of the MF/KT’s protective identity was the development of an ideology. Leader Nazario Moreno believed that, in the words of one of his favorite authors, the Christian evangelist John Eldredge,

A man must have a battle to fight, a great mission to his life that involves and yet transcends even home and family. He must have a cause to which he is devoted even unto death, for this is written into the fabric of his being. (Eldredge 2001, 141)

One cause for which the MF/KT seemed determined to demonstrate their dedication to was the protection of Michoacán. In one of its first public statements, the MF/KT declared that its mission was to

Eradicate from the state of Michoacán kidnapping, extortion in person and by telephone, paid assassinations, express kidnapping, tractor-trailer and auto theft, home robberies done by people like those mentioned, who have made the state of Michoacán an unsafe place. Our sole motive is that we love our state and are no longer willing to see our people’s dignity trampled on. (Grayson 2010b)

A key part of the ideology of the MF/KT was the need for Michoacán to be safe from its enemies. Its declared mission was to provide this safety.

However, their ideology allegedly went deeper than only protecting Michoacán. Nazario Moreno claimed that he saw his group as a “social movement,” one which he wished to unite with “all the isolated social struggles developing in Mexico and other
countries… to make one sole, powerful, and inexorable social earthquake which would once and for all liberate all the peoples of the world” (Cited in Ernst 2015, 151). It was meant to “make society egalitarian and end injustices and … renovate the legal structures maintaining the poor… (in) misery and the rich well defended in their immense wealth (Cited Ernst 2015, 163). Moreno ensured that his recruits were exposed and indoctrinated in this ideology, sending them to training camps where, besides learning combat and other necessary trafficking skills, they received ideological training through seminars and the reading of required books such as his own work, Pensamientos, as well as the works of evangelical Christian authors.

It is of course possible that this protective ideology was simply propaganda, hardly accepted at all by either criminals or civilians alike. Many Michoacanos questioned the sincerity of the criminals (Ernst 2015). While there is evidence that the MF/KT did try to limit the exploitation of local communities by its members, the effort was not always successful (Ernst 2015; Grayson 2010b). There were also members of the MF/KT that seemed limited in their ideological motivations. They saw their protective role as much more instrumental than identity-based. For example, leader Servando Gómez explained the motivation for developing good relations with the civilian population to be more about the civilians protecting them than the other way around.

If I treated them badly, they would put a bullet in me, they would betray/report me… It's like if you have a family, a wife… you treat her badly and they won’t respect you, she’ll leave you or, just the same, put a bullet in you… without the
support of the people, without them protecting us, we would have never have lasted this long. (Ernst 2015, 171)

Such a sentiment is far from the altruistic sense of duty claimed by the MF/KT to motivate its members.

Nonetheless, there do appear to be members of the MF/KT that fully believed in their claimed sense of mission of providing protection. Not least of these is Nazario Moreno, who, as noted by Ernst, frequently appeared to express frustration at Gómez’s more pragmatic approach to civilian relationships (Ernst 2015). The welfare of civilians was not simply a means to an end, but an end worthy in and of itself.

Beyond leadership, there are also members who truly appeared to buy into the mission. For lower ranking members, life was often difficult. A lower ranking officer noted, speaking of his daily life as a Knight Templar, that,

In the mountains, things get rough. One has to carry food, water and things like that. Sometimes you get tired of living like that, wandering around. You have to hang out with commandos and people who are very strict. That stresses you out. Our salary is very low, we don't earn much... When the situation is difficult, when we are in a battle or something it can be two or three months without any time off. (Ernst 2019)

Despite the difficult lifestyle, he said that he felt that what he was doing was right. He explained, “But the thing is, one is fighting for a just cause” (Ernst 2019). He said that he joined the group because, “There were people who were damaging the community. They killed a lot of people; they were killing innocents and stuff like that. They didn't let
people into the city to do errands, things like that” (Ernst 2019). Reflecting on the purpose of his group, he stated that “It is about defending the state (of Michoacán), and because they come and want to do things their way, selling drugs and stuff…and …kidnapping, they do whatever they want. That is why we are at war with them” (Ernst 2019). It therefore seems likely that this protective ideology did inspire some members to endure the hardships of the trafficker lifestyle.

It is also fair to note that even members who hold to Gómez’s more pragmatic instrumental approach are still incentivized to defend Michoacán communities from the depredations of the Zetas, other criminal groups, and the federal government. There are many benefits that can accrue to an organization that adopts a protective role. An official protective role can assist with establishing discipline, recruiting new members, and gaining civilian support. Even if members do not sincerely buy into the protector identity, the actions of their group and its statements identifying them as protectors should lead them to behave as such anyway. This is especially true if the group depends on non-criminal Michoacán civilians to help protect it and its criminal activities. Civilians may expect a return of the favor, which may therefore lead even a pragmatic or selfish criminal to attack enemies who abuse civilians in order to demonstrate their commitment.

The Codification of the Ideology and the Rise of the Knights Templar

Following the alleged death of Nazario Moreno at the hands of Federal Police in December 2010, the cohesion of the Michoacán Family was temporarily shattered (Aranda 2013; Grillo 2016). It split into two factions, one led by Jesús Méndez and the
other secretly by an alive Nazario Moreno. Both sides claimed to have turned on the other for having betrayed the traditions of the Michoacán Family, by preying on the local population through kidnapping and extortion (Ernst 2015; Grillo 2016). Moreno succeeded in defeating Méndez, who was soon captured by federal forces (Ernst 2015; Grillo 2016). With the organization now under his firm control, Moreno reorganized it and named it the Knights Templar, after the Medieval Christian warriors who devoted themselves to protecting visitors to the Holy Land as well as its sacred sites and relics.

The Knights Templar embraced the protective ideology of the Michoacán Family (Martinez 2012). Conversations with its leaders revealed a continued sense of responsibility for the social order of Michoacán, with leaders frequently referring to themselves as the government (Ernst 2015). The group also frequently referred to leadership as pastors (Ernst 2015). Such a title connected them and their responsibilities, at least rhetorically, to religious leaders responsible for the spiritual well-being of their congregations. The Knights Templar codified this ideology to better help members internalize the protective role. It also would have helped signal to civilians their desire to be allies.

The Knights Templar codified their mission and general rules of conduct in a booklet called the *Code of the Knights Templar of Michoacán*. Regarding the group’s sense of mission and purpose, the booklet stated that it was, “To protect the inhabitants and the sacred territory of the free state, sovereign and secular of Michoacán” (Tribal Analysis Center 2013, 1). Each member had to believe in God and serve him and his neighbor. They were commanded to fight against materialism, injustice, and tyranny.
(Tribal Analysis Center 2013). They were to defend the moral values necessary for the sustenance of society (Tribal Analysis Center 2013). Finally, they were to “always fight in protection of the oppressed, the widow and the orphan,” as well as to protect the civil rights of man, “recognizing the right of peoples and nations to govern themselves” (Tribal Analysis Center 2013, 5-6). The Knights Templar were supposed to protect Michoacán physically, spiritually, and politically.

The handbook demanded that members were to avoid predatory behavior. The code stated that members were “strictly prohibited” from engaging in kidnappings to obtain money (Tribal Analysis Center 2013, 14). It stated that they were never to kill for money (Tribal Analysis Center 2013). Any killing had to be authorized by the highest authorities in the organization (Tribal Analysis Center 2013). Finally, the code stated that, “No woman should fear anything of a Templar, nor his words nor actions. No child should suffer this fear either. No man should fear a Templar, on the contrary he should feel his protection” (Tribal Analysis Center 2013, 8). The Knights were to always remember their duty as protectors and never to become predators, especially of their fellow Michoacanos.

The code also suggested that members were to provide assistance, starting with those in their home communities. This extended beyond simply providing spiritual, physical, and political protection. The code stated that, “Where there is weakness, the Templar should bring his force. Where there is no voice, the Templar should raise his. Where poverty is greatest, there the Templar should distribute his generosity” (Tribal Analysis Center 2013, 20). They were to provide welfare to those in need. They were to
be advocates for the disadvantaged in society. While such lofty sentiments are surprising and were an aspiration infrequently achieved in a group accustomed to murder, extortion, and other corrupt practices, they nonetheless did appear to be influential in the care that MF/KT members demonstrated to those considered their kin and comrades.

A Revolutionary and Christian Warrior Tradition

Besides a protective ideology, members of the MF/KT also saw themselves as a part of a long tradition of revolutionary and Christian warriors. This association is notable throughout their messaging, training, imagery, and pastimes. A good example of this in writing comes from Moreno’s memoir. In a closing note written after his alleged first death in 2010, his comrades wrote that he died for a cause worth dying for akin to revolutionary characters such as Emiliano Zapata, Francisco Villa, and Che Guevara (Ernst 2015). Often, revolutionary messages such as this would appear in group training and were obviously intended to be adopted into the identities of members. For example, Moreno expected his soldiers-in-training to watch the film Braveheart, which tells the story of the Scottish rebel William Wallace in his fight against the English tyrant Edward Longshanks (Grillo 2016). However, instead of defending Scotland from English tyranny, Moreno’s men were to protect Michoacán from the predations of its enemies (Grayson 2010b).

Revolutionary and Christian warrior imagery was also frequently used, particularly by the Knights Templar. For example, in a video created by leader Servando Gómez, his desk was littered with revolutionary images. It included a book titled Che y
*Fidel* alongside large pictures of Che Guevara, Emiliano Zapata, and Francisco Villa (Martinez 2012). Examining the Facebook pages of members, or at least those who admire them, I found images of Knights Templar from the Middle Ages dominating pages alongside images of famous revolutionaries and of men armed with weapons, occasionally shown honoring religious belief or family in some way. Images of San Nazario, the folk saint image of the allegedly dead Nazario Moreno as a defender of the poor, also frequently appeared. One image I found suggested that among some the affiliation with the original Knights Templar was deeper than I had thought, as it commemorated the death of the final Grand Master of the Templar Order, Jacques de Molay in the year 1314 (Facebook accounts of Gallito Aguilar, Luis Daniel Gomes Carrillo, Camarrillo Cesar Julio, & Daniel Carrillo 2020).

The self-image of MF/KT members as revolutionary warriors was particularly notable in the infamous narcocorridos. The music often depicted leadership heroically. For example, Nazario Moreno is described as a reluctant warrior fighting against rival criminal groups and a federal government concerned only about protecting the interests of the rich and preying on his people (El Komander 2011; Quintero 2017). His role as a narcotics trafficker was downplayed, and his connection through common cause with Mexican and Latin American revolutionary figures such as Fidel Castro, Che Guevara, Francisco Villa, José María Morelos, and Emiliano Zapata were highlighted (Plancarte 2014; Quintero 2017). Narcocorridos painted members of the MF/KT as both revolutionary and protective of their homes.
Fighting Crime and Providing Community Services

Armed with their grandiose ideology and protective attitude, the members of MF/KT provided their Michoacán communities with services. These services occupied their time and money, and they were quite willing to dedicate much of both toward their provision.

One service that they offered was security and the safeguarding of public order. A former governor of Michoacán, Lázaro Cárdenas Batel, described how the MF/KT would introduce themselves into communities.

I would get a call afterward from the mayor. Ten pickup trucks full of armed men had arrived at the municipality. The local police could do nothing. They were outgunned. But the criminals were very respectful. They would tell the mayor ‘We want to work here. There will be no trouble, no crime, no drunkenness, nothing.’ Then they would take over the town, and enforce their rules. If a boy hit his mother, they would punish him and dump him in the plaza for people to see. If he did it again, they would kill him. It was a strategy to gain popular sympathy, and it worked. (Finnegan 2010)

While many Michoacanos were not necessarily ecstatic about the law and order offered by the MF/KT, they often found it to be fair and were willing to tolerate it in the absence of better security (Ernst 2015).

Members of the MF/KT investigated and punished a wide variety of crimes. They promised to end extortion and kidnapping (Finnegan 2010). In the city of Zitácuaro, they
promised to end loan sharking (Finnegan 2010). They investigated and punished robbing, raping, and other anti-social crimes (Ernst 2015; Grillo 2016).

Members of the MF/KT were draconian in their pursuance of crime and punishing criminals. Often, they would make their victims’ punishment public to humiliate them. In one instance, in the town of Zamora, “The mob made a line of alleged criminals march through the main street in the evening. They had no shirts, showing deep whip marks on their backs, and carried signs admitting their crimes” (Grillo 2016, 261). For serious crimes, alleged criminals were often brutally executed in public fashion.

One example is the abduction of an alleged rapist from a police convoy who was, the following day, found crucified on a street sign, his genitals cut off and stuffed into his mouth as a warning to other rapists – “eso me pasó por violador” [this happened to me for [being a] rapist] – attached to his chest with ice picks. (Ernst 2015, 183)

While claiming to protect Michoacanos, members of the MF/KT did not shy away from committing human rights abuses in pursuit of their idea of order.

Despite the brutality, there was some local support or at least acceptance and toleration for this alternative justice system (Grillo 2016; Ochoa & Torres 2012). Some noted that it did help lower some forms of crime. An informant stated that “there used to be a lot of rape, but not anymore…” (Ernst 2015, 185). While civilians were not necessarily pleased with the harsh methods of the MF/KT, some found them to be more
effective than the imperfect work of local police (Ernst 2015; Finnegan 2010; Ochoa & Torres 2012).

Similar to their crime fighting efforts, members of the MF/KT also assisted residents protecting their property. They acted as a debt collection service. “If people were owed money, they could go to the Family, who made sure they got paid… If people didn’t cough up, the cartel would take their houses and force them into exile” (Grillo 2016, 261). A Michoacán schoolteacher explained that if you needed a debt collected, you could go to the MF/KT and it would help you collect on it. The police often cooperated, dropping off debtors to the MF/KT which then ensured the payment of the debt (Finnegan 2010). While true that a third of the debt was usually taken as payment for its assistance, the very threat of criminal enforcement would have deterred debtors from reneging and would have helped Michoacanos regain lost money without having to make a call (Finnegan 2010).

The MF/KT claimed to take special care of vulnerable members of their communities. This was particularly true of women, whose protection the Knights Templar demanded in their official code of conduct (Tribal Analysis Center 2013). Alleged wife-beaters were threatened and punished. Husbands were sometimes forced to stay in relationships, or to pay alimony or give up real estate to their wives in instances of separation and divorce (Ernst 2015). Such actions aligned well with the MF/KT’s stated objective of providing protection and assistance.

The MF/KT promised to protect Michoacán communities from drugs. This may seem like a contradiction. Drug trafficking was its main source of revenue after all.
However, while the MF/KT had no ethical qualms with shipping and selling drugs in the United States, it did when it came to local communities. It opposed the sale and consumption of the most dangerous drugs in Michoacán, particularly meth, whose selling and consumption it banned throughout the state (Grayson 2010b). While surprising, local Michoacanos confirmed the truth of it (Grillo 2016). Part of this might have been due to the personal experiences of Nazario Moreno, who had suffered from addiction earlier in his life and did not want his fellow Michoacanos to go through the same experience (Grillo 2016). This drug strategy was in stark contrast to that of the Zetas, who had been all too happy to encourage the use and selling of meth and other drugs in the local Michoacán market.

For those who did fall into the snare of drugs and alcohol, the MF/KT provided the opportunity for rehabilitation. According to leader Servando Gómez, “We go to communities and we assemble all the rateros (low-life criminals) and the drug addicts and we give them chats, we even use psychologists to give them chats… we put them in seminars” (Ernst 2015, 176-177). Some Michoacanos were pleased with these rehabilitation programs. One woman, who had been concerned about her 16-year old son, explained that,

He was spending all of his time on the street… he was drinking all the time, he was on the wrong path… they locked him up a couple of times for longer times and then they put him to work… they gave him courses with psychologists and everything… they do exercises of self-reflection, they make them open up and tell their life stories… they make them see that they have to (live together) with their
families… that they must behave well at home… el señor (the local boss) really cares about them… (Ernst 2015, 176-177)

With their anti-drug efforts frequently well-received, the MF/KT proceeded to set up rehabilitation centers and programs throughout Michoacán, with some of them granted official non-profit status (Ernst 2015).

These rehabilitation centers were not devoid of abuse and violence. One young man recounted his experience with one of these programs. He and a group of other young men were taken to a warehouse outside of town. In between prayers and the studying of inspirational Christian works, they were forced to watch videos in which MF/KT members tortured, mutilated, and decapitated people. They were threatened with the same if they failed to shape up their lives (Ernst 2015). Once finished, the MF/KT hosted celebrations for those it now deemed fit to return to their communities.

Besides stopping major crime and addiction, the MF/KT attempted to stop minor crimes and public nuisances as well. Members punished traffic violations and public drunkenness. They cracked down on excessively loud behavior, banning music after certain hours (Ernst 2015). An extreme example was their reaction to donkeys roaming freely in the town of Holanda. They claimed that they did not want the animals running loose, invading people's property and eating their plants. They warned the owners to control them. However, the owners mostly ignored them. Eventually, they were able to
clear the streets of the donkeys. However, they accomplished this self-appointed task by killing them all (Ernst 2015).

The MF/KT enforced its regime using a wide range of methods. It usually started out with talks. If talking to the delinquents failed to change their behavior, then members would usually move on toward physical punishment and public humiliation (Ernst 2015). They might apprehend someone and become extremely threatening. An informant explained, “For instance, when a muchacho offends and steals something or so… in a van they drive him around in a plastic bag, they kick him… pour cold water on him and drive him back and forth through the ranch” (Ernst 2015, 183). Sometimes delinquents were apprehended and held prisoner for days or weeks. They were often blindfolded, beaten, threatened with decapitation and dismemberment, and forced to endure mock executions (Ernst 2015).

The MF/KT supported civil society and community projects. It built volleyball courts and auditoriums (Finnegan 2010). It built schools and clinics (Ernst 2015). It assisted in co-financing popular housing projects (Ernst 2015). It even helped protect national resources. For example, the regional logging industry was poorly regulated. The MF/KT confronted and fined legal and illegal loggers for deforestation (Finnegan 2010). While it is possible that the MF/KT fined them simply to make more money, it is not
impossible to see this as a protective action, as time invested in drug trafficking would have been much more profitable than fining loggers.

The MF/KT hosted parties and other celebrations for the people of Michoacán. Indicating the central plaza of the city, an Apatzingán newspaperwoman explained that “We used to see the leaders of the Family here all the time” (Finnegan 2010). They would come through on horses in the evening. El Chayo (Nazario Moreno) rode a Percheron with a braided mane. That horse was worth three million pesos. They threw huge parties, with beautiful floral arrangements. Guest artists. Everybody came and danced. El Chayo is very gallant, very polite. Not too tall. He has a strong presence. (Finnegan 2010)

On Mother’s Day some local bosses provided feasts and parties for moms. On Children’s Day some would provide toys and parties with clowns (Ernst 2015). Some bosses would take responsibility for hosting the Fiesta del Pueblo, a holiday commemorating the founding of a community (Ernst 2015). The MF/KT took great care to honor the traditions and holidays that were important to its members and fellow Michoacanos.

Besides their ability to throw great parties, members of the MF/KT also provided social welfare. This was particularly appreciated by local politicians. They provided medical assistance (Ernst 2015). One Michoacán politician explained that, “If you were sick and had no money, they’d take you to the hospital and pay for medicine” (Finnegan 2010). They would provide people with food, either at discounted prices or for free (Ernst 2015; Finnegan 2010). They would also help people acquire items for improving their
ability to work, such as agricultural machinery (Ernst 2015). This welfare assisted the often poverty-stricken Michoacanos live better lives.

**Avoiding Injurious Behavior**

Members of the MF/KT generally avoided behavior damaging to their local communities. When the Zetas dominated the region in the early 2000s, they often engaged in predatory behavior, such as extorting local businesses. Things changed after the MF/KT drove them out. An Apatzingán politician explained that she had talked to the group’s leaders, helping them to understand that forcing small businesses to pay protection money would seriously damage the local economy. Unlike the Zetas, who did not have local loyalties or connections, the MF/KT agreed. Extortion in the community ended, as well as activities such as kidnapping for ransom (Finnegan 2010).

The responsiveness of the MF/KT to local community needs earned praise (AFP 2010). Even Mexican President Calderón admitted the friendliness and generosity of at least some of the criminals (Grillo 2016). As noted by one local politician, “everybody here has sympathy with the Michoacán Family” (Finnegan 2010). Later, the Knights Templar would codify this avoidance of injurious behavior as a rule in their handbook on personal conduct (Tribal Analysis Center 2013).

The claim that MF/KT members avoided injurious behavior can be challenged however. There are in fact many documented instances of MF/KT agents abusing the Michoacano population that they allegedly protected. For example, in the town of Zitácuaro, Michoacán, MF/KT members kidnapped and extorted members of the
community for money. Unsurprisingly, some Michoacanos did not buy into their moralism or alleged desire to protect their local communities (Finnegan 2010). The MF/KT also monopolized the drug trade and taxed those involved in it, eliminating some of the freedom that once existed in drug trafficking (Ernst 2015). Some locals were convinced that the MF/KT killed people just to kill them (Ernst 2015). How do examples of abusive conduct make sense if at least some of the MF/KT were sincere in desire to be community protectors?

First, some of the abuse might have occurred because not every community in Michoacán fully qualified as being a part of the local community that the MF/KT had sworn to protect. According to journalist William Finnegan, “In the Hot Land, … the Family definitely has a social base. The Army and the federal police sent in by Calderón are seen as hated occupiers. In Zitácuaro, at the eastern end of Michoacán, the Family is the hated occupier” (Finnegan 2010). Therefore, rather than indiscriminately abusing members of their own community, members of the MF/KT were selectively abusing those outside of it.

This difference between the Michoacanos in the Hot Land and Zitácuaro appears to have had something to do with social class. As one Michoacán politician explained, speaking of Zitácuaro, “They are seen as rich there” (Finnegan 2010). It is not a surprise if richer Michoacanos were placed outside of the rural and poor identity that connected many members of organized crime to their fellow Michoacanos (Ernst 2015). Therefore, members of the MF/KT may still have thought of themselves as protectors of their local
communities, even if their image of the local did not extend to all people and communities in Michoacán in practice as one may be led to believe by their messaging.

Second, some of the abuse, especially indiscriminate abuse that failed to distinguish between local community members and outsiders as targets of criminal acts, may have resulted from the changing ranks of the membership. This is particularly true of the Knights Templar. As noted previously, one incentive for the Zetas to engage in predatory behavior toward the local population was their lack of connections to Michoacán (Finnegan 2010). While the Knights Templar were originally composed of local Michoacanos, this changed due to the war. A local informant explained that many of the original leadership had been arrested or killed (Ernst 2015). They were replaced with outsiders who were often much more willing to abuse and coerce local people and to use their power arbitrarily to benefit a shrinking number of benefactors (Ernst 2015). It may have been this change in membership and their abandonment of a protective identity which ultimately led to the group’s rejection by its former supporters and its fall from power at the hands of rival criminals, vigilante groups, and federal forces as citizens grew less tolerant of the increasingly indiscriminate abuse.

It is also possible that some MF/KT members abused civilians because the MF/KT had insufficient mechanisms for punishing indiscipline. The inability to discipline members is a trait that has been observed in some other non-state actor groups (Humphreys & Weinstein 2006). Members may be particularly incentivized to abuse civilians if their organization does not need civilian financial support, which as drug traffickers, the MF/KT members often did not. However, there is evidence that the
MF/KT was able and willing to discipline members. Members were punished for failure to abide by group standards (Ernst 2015). For example, several MF/KT members were accused by non-criminal civilians of having stolen goods from them. After verifying their guilt, the MF/KT returned the stolen goods, lectured the perpetrators, and then executed them (Grayson 2010b).

Finally, it may be that the MF/KT was driven by strategic necessity to engage in more indiscriminately abusive behavior in order to maintain itself (Wood 2010). For example, it is possible that U.S. law enforcement efforts, such as “Project Coronado” which resulted in the arrest of 1,200 people, disrupted MF/KT distribution networks enough that they turned to predatory activities to sustain their cash flows (Grillo 2016; U.S. Department of Justice 2009). This by no means suggests that members desires to protect their communities were insincere. If they believed their organization to be a community benefit, then temporary injurious action toward the community to help them continue their long-term protection and money-making efforts would have been justified. A protective identity may therefore have continued within the organization even if more predatory and indiscriminate abusive behavior became increasingly common.

The evidence that the MF/KT had adopted a protective identity of Michoacán does not prove that this identity had an empirical impact on anti-state violence. Such kind of water tight evidence (what Collier (2011) calls a “smoking gun”) is hard to find. Nonetheless, it is persuasive enough to suggest it certainly influenced it. Members were willing to use time and money to serve their communities. They engaged in violence against abusive criminal groups that damaged the community. In the case of those
members who reformed their faction of the Family into the Knights Templar, they tried to destroy half of their former organization for allegedly failing to protect the community. They followed this up by adopting the use of symbols and formal rules intensifying their commitment to a protective identity. It would not be surprising to find members once again acting on this identity, attacking federal forces to avenge abuse or deter its future occurrence.

**Anti-State Violence**

The MF/KT was unlikely to only pursue peaceful means to discourage federal abuse of civilians. Well-armed and organized, it was in an excellent position to use violence to discourage, deter, and avenge it.

The MF/KT aggressively attacked federal forces. Using guerrilla tactics, members ambushed and killed police, soldiers, and marines (Aranda 2013; Ernst 2015). They were frequently successful, sometimes killing high-ranking officers (Aranda 2013). Some of these attacks have been large-scale assaults requiring extensive coordination. One such attack involved simultaneous assaults on 16 Federal Police stations (Aranda 2013). Some attacks have involved hundreds of criminal soldiers (Grillo 2016). These attacks often resulted in high casualties, although these were downplayed by the federal government. One criminal informant went so far as to claim that 50 Federal Police officers had been
Some of these attacks targeted particularly unpopular forces. A Michoacán politician described one such attack against a unit of Federal Police staying at a hotel. There was a big group of federal police staying there...Fifty, sixty guys. They weren’t popular. They were always around, with their guns. People were afraid to go near the hotel. Then there was a big attack, in July, when the Family was attacking the federals all over Michoacán... The federals left the next day. Now they camp at the airport. (Finnegan 2010)

As unpopular forces often gained this reputation through abusive conduct toward civilians, these attacks may have been intended to avenge the abuse or deter its future occurrence.

Unpopular forces were increasingly made up of Federal Police. Stung by the involvement of soldiers in abusive conduct, some military leaders sought to repair the damage by ceasing their aggressive crackdowns on organized crime (Ernst 2015). According to one soldier, superiors told them that, “the war on drug trafficking was a fight amongst brothers” and to remember that they “all are Mexicans.” This often meant that units were told to stand down until action had subsided somewhat (Ernst 2015, 210). Having worked out at least tacit understandings with some of the military leadership, the MF/KT was able to focus its efforts on the Federal Police.

Some of the violence did appear to deter federal agents from abusing the population. A civilian informant stated that the abusive conduct of Federal Police had
decreased “ever since they (meaning members of the MF/KT) killed a bunch of them” (Ernst 2015, 215). Whether this was intended or not is unknown. The MF/KT is oddly silent in explicitly stating that its violence is intended to deter or avenge federal abuse of civilians. If not explicit, the MF/KT has nonetheless implied as much, demanding that Federal Police officers leave the state and that they respect Michoacanos if they also wished to be respected (Ernst 2015; Grayson 2010b).

There is plenty of evidence that the MF/KT engaged in extensive anti-state violence. It was offensive, not defensive in nature. It often targeted unpopular state forces, forces that often gained their negative reputation through their abuse or hostility toward civilians. There is even some anecdotal evidence that this anti-state violence deterred federal abuse of civilians. While the evidence provided bolsters my theory’s plausibility, it is far from conclusive. Due to the anecdotal nature of some of the evidence, and because there are other good reasons for offensive anti-state violence, further research into the decision-making process and motivations of organized criminals is needed.
The MF/KT’s position as Michoacán’s most powerful criminal organization ended as its interactions with the local population became increasingly predatory (Heineman 2015; Grillo 2016; Kennedy 2019). In response, citizens formed self-defense groups and, together with rival criminal groups and federal forces, broke the MF/KT’s hold on Michoacán, capturing and killing the leadership (Grillo 2016). While the MF/KT continues to exist as the Knights Templar, it is in a notably diminished form.

I began this paper with a review of the literature on anti-state criminal violence. These approaches are limited, as they assume that criminal anti-state violence is primarily a function of self-interested, economic motivations and incentives. I relaxed these assumptions, presenting a civil defense model as another explanation for both the onset and intensity of criminal anti-state violence. I argued that organized crime will commit anti-state violence when state enforcement agents commit a serious grievance against the local population with whom the criminals share a social identity. I used the Michoacán Family and the Knights Templar to study causal mechanisms of anti-state violence.

I found my theory plausible. Members of the Michoacán Family and the Knights Templar shared common social identities with local civilians. The abusive conduct of federal forces politicized these identities, resulting in hostility and protest from civilians and from the MF/KT. The MF/KT adopted a protective identity toward Michoacán and its people. Finally, the MF/KT engaged in widespread offensive violence against the
federal government, often targeting unpopular forces. The MF/KT occasionally implied that this violence was intended to protect civilians. There is some anecdotal evidence which suggests that it may have also deterred abusive federal conduct toward civilians.

That the MF/KT attacked federal forces is beyond dispute. Some of it may even have served as a deterrent. However, I lack the evidence sufficient to confirm that at least some of it was to protect the Michoacán population by avenging and deterring federal abuse. Even more explicit public statements claiming attacks were to protect civilians from the federal government would be insufficient. Such statements may have only served as propaganda and had no empirical impact on their anti-state violence. As noted in the literature review, there are also other reasons that could explain anti-state criminal violence. The evidence gathered for this thesis, however, suggests that it is at least plausible that some of this violence was to protect civilians.

I suggest two avenues for future research. First, collect private criminal information not intended for public consumption, such as email correspondence between criminals. Criminals are more likely to demonstrate their motivations and decision-making processes honestly when they are not incentivized to put on a show for civilians. Second, check to see if there is a correlation between anti-state criminal violence and the abusive conduct of state forces, controlling for both the degree to which state forces repress organized crime and the corruption of state forces. If organized criminal groups attack state forces to discourage their abuse, then this should play out in a quantitative analysis with obvious empirical results.
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