



Mexican Emigration and a Failed State

The self-defense groups in Michoacán, Mexico

By Peter Andrews

The Mexican state of Michoacán tests the local effects of sustained mass emigration to the United States. Nearly half the state's native-born population lives in the United States. Although it's Mexico's ninth most populous state, with 4.5 million residents, it receives more remittances than any other.¹ With less than 4 percent of Mexico's population, Michoacán collects 10 percent of the dollars sent down from *El Norte*.

Michoacán also illustrates that Mexican emigration is not driven by poverty. States with the greatest outflow are not the poorest,² and the poorest states do not have high levels of emigration.³ What causes the exodus to the United States? Habit and custom, more than anything.

Michoacán, roughly the size of West Virginia, lies in the central-southwest of Mexico, a region from which many refugees fled north beyond the Rio Grande following the devastation left by the Mexican Revolution (1910-1920) and, later, the Cristero War (1926-1929), which spilled across this area.

High emigration states are located in this part of Mexico, and these early pioneer emigrants created the pattern of chain migration that continues to this day. Here, leaving for the United States is more a rite of passage than an economic necessity, something expected from many young men, following in the steps of a brother, father, uncle, or grandfather. Most of the newcomers arrive in the United States with a job, a place to stay, and a family-based social network in place.⁴

How has Michoacán fared after nearly a century of this mass emigration to the United States? It leads the country in the receipt of remittances, with \$2.2 billion in 2012, but at what price?

Michoacán: A Failed State

Michoacán is blessed with abundant arable land, a central location, and the country's largest deep-water seaport, Lázaro Cárdenas. But the endless procession heading to the United States has so distorted the labor market that the state imports workers, often children, from poorer states or Central America.⁵

No one wants to earn \$10 a day when his brother or cousin is making \$20 an hour in Los Angeles, Houston, or Chicago. By 2005, when remaining family members began streaming northward, state officials began to worry. They were alarmed that, after promoting the outflow for years, there would be no one left to receive the remittances. The 2010 national census found that almost 25 percent of residences in Michoacán were not occupied.⁶

George Grayson, professor emeritus at the College of William and Mary, argues remittances to Mexico from family members abroad, which total over \$20 billion a year, "help corrupt, spendthrift governors and mayors divert public funds that could be used to address critical needs of their poorest citizens."⁷ The idea is that, with so many middle- and lower-class families receiving dollars, governors and mayors can ignore pressing social problems and engage in wasteful and corrupt practices.⁸

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If Michoacán leads Mexico in emigration, we would expect to see a lot of this corrupt behavior. And we do.

Many of the officials in the administration of former Governor Leonel Godoy (2008-2012) are under investigation for fraud and embezzlement involving hundreds of millions of dollars.⁹ Godoy's brother, a former federal legislator, is a fugitive from the law, wanted for links to the state's dominant drug cartel (see below).

The costly renovation of Matamoros Theatre in Morelia, the state's colonial capital, provides another example. The project, launched in early 2009 at a price tag equivalent to \$15 million, was to celebrate the 100th anniversary of the Mexican Revolution in November 2010. The job is still not finished and officials are saying another \$8 million is needed. The last completion deadline mentioned was February 3, 2014, allegedly to honor the execution date of Independence hero Matamoros, but that date has now passed.¹⁰

Headlines in late January 2014 reported a \$500,000 fraud perpetrated by a federal legislator on some of the state's poorest citizens. The legislator's aide collected 2,000 pesos (\$150) from thousands of families, claiming the payment was required under a federal loan program.¹¹

At the same time, promoters of the state tourism sector were troubled over the fallout from a music video filmed in a historic government building featuring Melissa Plancarte, the flashy daughter of one of the local drug lords. She recently fled to the United States and is now giving interviews to Spanish language media. A federal senator from Michoacán is now in hot water after photos surfaced of her singing and dancing with Ms. Plancarte at what the press is calling a "narcofiesta."¹²

Many Mexican states suffer from drug cartel violence, but in Michoacán the local cartel, the Knights Templar (Templars), differs from their competitors in their penetration of all aspects of Michoacán society. Los Zetas in northeast Mexico were trailblazers in moving beyond drug trafficking into extortion, kidnapping, oil theft, and pirated goods, among other things. Moreover, Los Zetas thrived on torture, castrations, decapitations, and other forms of sadism.¹³ The Templars, who battled Los Zetas in Michoacán from 2006-2008, learned savagery from their adversaries and went from local operations to global commerce.

By the end of 2013, the Templars supplemented their drug trafficking with control over the illegal extraction and sale to China of iron ore.¹⁴ The Templars also extorted every aspect of avocado and lime production within the state. "It's no use trying to convince them to demand less," said one local avocado farmer, "they know exactly how much you own. If you lie to them, they'll kill you or one of your family members."¹⁵ Eight unarmed farm workers were slaughtered in April 2013 when gunmen ambushed a convoy of vehicles returning from a meeting with state officials. At the gathering, a delegation of laborers had asked the state's interior minister for protection from the cartel.¹⁶

Terroristic violence has spiked in the state. The grenade attacks in Morelia on September 15, 2008, which killed eight people and injured scores, were the first acts of terrorism in modern Mexican history. Last fall, in a string of coordinated strikes, nine power stations were destroyed, leaving a million people in the dark.¹⁷

In the first two months of 2010, 21 decapitated bodies were found in Michoacán.¹⁸ Five more appeared on the outskirts of Morelia in late December, 2013.¹⁹ Last year, eight local politicians and six police chiefs were murdered, including a former mayor hacked to death with a machete just outside Morelia.²⁰

The son of the governor, Fausto Vallejo, has been linked to the Templars.²¹ The leader of the cartel is reputedly the brother-in-law of the state's interior minister.²² As mentioned above, the brother of former Governor Godoy is wanted by Interpol for alleged ties to the Templars.²³

But for the self-defense groups (SDGs), which began to form in early 2013, the last straw was the systematic rape of local schoolgirls. In a widely disseminated YouTube video, the leader of the local militias explains:

The situation got worse when these guys weren't content to just take all the money from everyone, and they started to attack the family unit. They started raping 11- and 12-year-old girls. In our local high school alone, and this is why I'm a member of the self-defense groups, in December 2013, 14 girls were raped. The problem gets real bad when they show up at your house and say, "I like your wife, I'll bring her right back. But while I'm gone with her, clean up your daughter, because I'll be taking her for a few days." And they don't bring her back until she's pregnant.²⁴

This horror gave impetus to the formation of the SDGs in Michoacán. The people had nowhere else to turn. Local and state office-holders, and many federal politicians, were either incapable of stopping the terror or were in collusion with the terrorists.

This is what returning Michoacán emigrants found when some moved back to the state they had abandoned, which was now ruled by the Templars and corrupt politicians. Some came back following the severe economic downturn in the United States. Others were deported for criminal behavior. Later, volunteers, some of whom had fought in Afghanistan, signed up with the SDGs to battle the Templars.

The Self-Defense Groups in Michoacán

By the end of 2013, the SDGs were taking control of towns and cities in Michoacán. In these campaigns, most local cartel leaders fled while the citizen militias seized cartel property and assets, including armored vehicles and a vast array of weaponry. Corrupt local police who did not flee with the Templars were disarmed and turned over to the army or federal police. Several mayors with ties to the Templars absconded rather than face the SDGs.²⁵

A recent review of the rise of the SDGs, and the important role returning emigrants play in the groups, can be found in a January 2014 *Washington Post* article titled “A Mexican militia, battling Michoacan drug cartel, has American roots.”²⁶

By February 2014, the SDGs had seized municipalities covering about one-third of the state’s territory.²⁷ Apatzingán, once considered the stronghold of the Templars, fell on February 8, 2014. With a population of 150,000, it is the largest city captured by the SDGs.

On January 15, 2014, the federal government appointed a security commission for the state, headed by a “czar” who “effectively erased the state governor, Fausto Vallejo.”²⁸ This act acknowledged what was undeniable: Michoacán was a failed state in need of outside intervention. Two weeks later, the federal security commission recognized the legal status of the local militias.²⁹

The Leader. Although the militias are governed by a committee, the undisputed leader of the movement is Dr. José Manuel Mireles. Dr. Mireles was born in southern Michoacán. He left with his family for the United States in 1992 after receiving a medical degree. In Modesto, Calif., he worked in a variety of jobs while volunteering with the American Red Cross.³⁰

He returned to his hometown in Michoacán in 2007, where he twice failed to win public office. He and others began the SDGs in 2013 for many of the reasons stated in the YouTube video above. Several of his family members were kidnapped or killed by the Templars.

A profile notes: “Mireles said his experience in California had showed him that good government was possible in his homeland. ‘I learned that you live better if you have better elected officials. In the United States, the police are honest, the tax system is not corrupt. Here, it is all crap,’ he said.”³¹

The Spokesman. The official spokesman for the SDGs is Estanislao Beltrán, nicknamed “Papa Smurf” for his resemblance to the cartoon character. Originally from the same region as Dr. Mireles, Beltrán relocated to the United States and spent many years working in El Paso, Texas, where he still has family. “I learned [in Texas] we can do much better,” he says. “We are the same people, but we have to change the system, hold these so-called leaders accountable, or this will never end.”³²

The SDGs have a number of active Facebook pages, the principal one being “[Valor Por Michoacán SDR](#)”. This page keeps readers up to date on the advances of the militias and exposes corrupt politicians and members of the community with links to the Templars. The page often contains Second Amendment/NRA-type rhetoric directed against Mexico’s strict gun ownership laws.

“El Americano”. Along with Dr. Mireles, one of the founding members of the SDGs is Luis Antonio Torres. Although born in the United States, his family is from southern Michoacán. Before moving to Michoacán in 2013, he owned a small used-car business in California. In 2012, the Templars kidnapped Torres during a trip back to his family’s hometown to deliver a vehicle. His family was forced to sell real estate to pay the \$150,000 ransom.

When asked by a journalist, “You could be in the United States living a secure life [as a U.S. citizen]. Why are you here?” he responded:

*Because if you don't join, what is your family going to think? That when they needed you the most you were not there by their side? They have spent a lifetime living here in Michoacán. Although I might have been born in the United States, at heart I'm Michoacano. My family is here, my brothers.*³³

“**La Bonita**”. The highest ranking female member of the SDGs is known only as “La Bonita,” the Pretty One. Born in Michoacán, she spent 15 years working in retail in the United States. She returned home to manage a fashion boutique. She later joined the militias when she “got tired of the extortion and rape and seeing her neighbors and friends disappear.”

She is a member of the self-defense committee, the voting body that decides policies for the groups. She fights “to have a country free of the trash the cartels bring. I have two daughters and I don't want them to grow up in this environment,”³⁴ she says. She is the only woman who fires a weapon during battles with the Templars.

Conclusion

SDGs have appeared in other Mexican states, with some looking to Michoacán as their model.³⁵ One expert now believes that “the possibility of a general social uprising in Michoacán, one that would spread to other regions of the country, is real.”³⁶

In 2006, former President Calderón launched a militarized war against the drug cartels by sending thousands of military and federal police officers to his native state of Michoacán. Six years later, newly elected President Peña Nieto sent thousands of additional troops to the beleaguered state. But the terror continued.³⁷

In less than one year, the SDGs in Michoacán accomplished more than the Mexican government during the previous seven blood-soaked years. The Templars are now on the run in Michoacán, abandoning territory they once dominated. The militias are now returning land and other property taken at gunpoint by the thugs.³⁸

Most scholars believe that Mexican Independence from Spain (1821) was delayed until middle-class mestizos in the Rio Lerma Valley developed a national political consciousness. The wealthiest class (*criollos* of pure Spanish ancestry), centered in Mexico City, had no interest in change and was content with the status quo. The poorest indigenous Indians lacked a political consciousness.³⁹ The Rio Lerma Valley and surrounding areas include much of central-southwest Mexico, the region with highest emigration rates, as discussed above.

For almost a century Michoacán led Mexico in exporting citizens to the United States. It now has the distinction of being the only Mexican state ruled by a federal “czar” appointed to bring an end to the barbarous conditions that haunt the state.

Some observers view mass emigration to the United States as a “safety valve” that prevents a violent upheaval by the impoverished, who comprise 40 percent of Mexico's population of 115 million. But what if, rather than thwarting an uprising, the exodus creates conditions that facilitate narco-terrorists and their allied kleptocrats? Instead of lobbying Washington, D.C., to accept more immigrants, Mexican leaders should consider encouraging the return of their fellow citizens to correct some of the persistent problems plaguing the country.

End Notes

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- ¹⁶ H. Nelson Goodson, [“Ten Lemon Picking Workers Dead, 17 Injured After Leaving Labor Rally In Michoacan”](#), Hispanic News Network, April 13, 2013.
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