

# The Drug Lords of Mexico: Implications of Drug Trafficking on the Lives of Mexicans

Riya Parashar

Department of Political Science, University of Delhi, Delhi.

**\*Corresponding Author:** Riya Parashar, Department of Political Science, University of Delhi, Delhi.

**Abstract:** *The shared border between Mexico and the United States plays a significant role in facilitating drug production, trafficking, and consumption. Most illicit drugs destined for the United States are either produced in Mexico or transit through it, making the region a critical hub in the global drug trade. This strategic position has long attracted various criminal organizations that exploit the border's extensive and often difficult-to-monitor terrain to transport narcotics. In recent years, the growing involvement of organized criminal groups in drug trafficking has emerged as one of the most pressing public concerns along the Mexico–U.S. border. These groups have become increasingly sophisticated, employing advanced smuggling techniques and corrupting officials to maintain their operations. While the majority of drug-related violence remains concentrated within Mexico, it has raised serious concerns among U.S. policymakers about the potential “spillover” of violence into American border communities, threatening regional stability and public safety. This research aims to analyze drug trafficking from Mexico to the United States and to examine its impact on Mexican society. The paper begins with an overview of the Mexico–U.S. border, highlighting its geographical and political significance as a major point of transit and control. It then traces the historical development of drug trafficking in Mexico, exploring how shifts in policy, enforcement, and criminal networks have shaped the current landscape. Following this, the study provides an examination of the current dynamics of the drug trade, including major sources, trafficking routes, and the roles of different cartels. The analysis extends to the evolving landscape of violence and organized crime in Mexico, emphasizing the social and human costs borne by Mexican citizens, such as displacement, insecurity, and economic disruption. In addition, the research explores governmental initiatives aimed at curbing drug trafficking, assessing their effectiveness and limitations amid complex political and social challenges. Finally, it examines the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on drug trafficking networks, production, and distribution in Mexico, considering how global disruptions have altered trafficking patterns and law enforcement responses. By addressing these dimensions, the paper seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of the politics of drug trafficking in Mexico and its broader implications for regional security and bilateral relations.*

**Keywords:** Mexico, United States of America, Border, Drug Trafficking, Cartels

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The walls and the fences that divide the geographical locations of Mexico and U.S are becoming both a physical reality as well as a metaphor for the stark difference between the two nations. This U.S-Mexico territorial interface constitutes as one of the most complex and dynamic border regions of the world. It is the area characterized by the accelerated urbanization, rapid growth in population, socio-economic as well as political change. It portrays the contrast between the developed and the developing representing the economic and political differences from one side to the other side of the boundary. However, as argued by researchers, it is now a binational region determined by the growing integration and increasing levels of border co-operation between the two nations. The issues, problems as well as opportunities present at the border are emblematic to the nature of the U.S- Mexico relationship which has transformed dramatically. People living along the border share a great deal of history along with features such as economic integration, tourism, etc. “The challenges posed by an international boundary that draws into proximity two vastly different countries while simultaneously dividing local communities of great similarity represent a complex mix of economics, politics, culture, and language. Directly or indirectly, the international boundary affects the daily life of nearly everyone living near the border through its impact on economic and political relationships, family and social ties, and the shared natural environment”.

One of the most pertinent issues that both countries currently face is the impunity and the proliferation of the organized crime groups that are involved in drug trafficking. These cartels and organizations are often referred to as Transnational criminal organizations or TCOs. The Mexican drug cartel organizations (DCOs) have dominated the distribution and import of heroin, marijuana, cocaine, fentanyl as well as methamphetamine in the United States. Mexican authorities reported to seize nearly quintupled amounts of fentanyl during 2019-2020 as Mexico (along with China) became the leading distributor of the synthetic opioid called fentanyl. With the rise in the import of drugs from these drug cartels, the overdose rate of U.S escalated, setting a record in 2019 with more than 70% of overdose deaths involving opioids, including fentanyl. Apart from the smuggling of drugs, TCOs have been brazen with their illegal acts, increasing violence concurrently with the drug trafficking (Astorga, Luis; Shirk, David A. 2010). They are also seen to participate in crimes such as human smuggling, oil theft, extortion etc. The Mexican drug trafficking cartels have grown overtime due to the 'balloon effect' with changing market dynamics and governments, enforcement efforts displaced as well as redirected flow of drugs. Furthermore, due to globalization and the creation of a borderless world, the illicit non-sea actors such as the DTOs and the TCOs challenge the authority of the state. It is also the structure of the state institutions that influences the behavior of the drug cartels.

## 2. MATERIALS AND METHODOLOGY

1. This research is based on normative approach. The data collected is secondary data from: Articles and reports of multiple institutions such as the United Nations, Federal Bureau of Investigation, DEA;
2. Scholarly Articles published in various journals;
3. Reports researchers on Border Control, Drug trafficking;
4. Papers published by various organizations on the subject;
5. Internet Websites.

## 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### 3.1. Sources of Drug Trafficking

According to the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the South-West Border of the United States is the capital zone for the majority of drug trafficking into U.S. It is also the staging area for the distribution of drugs throughout the entire country. The drug seizure data collected by the El Paso Intelligence Centre (EPIC) presents that nearly 2,000-mile land border between U.S and Mexico is isolated and remote which provides smuggling opportunities for these Mexican TCOs and DTOs. It is also estimated that 18-40 billion dollars annually is transferred from U.S to the southwest border for the TCOs during the drug smuggling activities. Furthermore, the cost that the illegal drug trafficking imposes on U.S. has been established at approximately 70 billion dollars each year. The cash generated through these deals is used in part to corrupt the border officials, law enforcements, security forces etc. The increasing corruption in the police institutes led to the firing of more than 3,500 officers from the Mexico's Federal Police Department. The growth and networking of the TCOs and the drug cartels in both states has resulted in protection and even facilitation of the drop import in certain regions. According to the U.S Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA's) National Drug Threat Assessment, there are 6 Mexican cartels that import drugs in the United States of America- Sinaloa, Jalisco New Generation, Juarez, Gulf, Los Zetas and Beltran-Leyva Organization. During 2000s, the drug cartels that were the most dominant were Gulf Cartel, Juarez Cartel, Tijuana Félix Cartel and the Sinaloa cartel. The government of Mexico carried out various operations to contain these cartels, which in turn, led to increase in violence. As these cartels increased in size, they fragmented, hence creating the 6 important groups, (**Fig. 1**) which dominate the imports of drugs today.

1. The Sinaloa Cartel usually operates from Chicago to Buenos Aries with its power base in Mexico.
2. The Gulf Cartel operates in the Eastern states of Tamaulipas and Nuevo Leon.
3. Zetas, which was the former armed wing of the Gulf Cartel has now obtained new territory through Central America and Mexico.
4. The Juarez Cartel is entered in the northern city and continues to supply cocaine in countries such as Colombia.
5. The La Familia, which was designed by the Zetas to fight the Sinaloa Cartel now operates in

multiple Northern and Southern states.

6. Beltran-Leyva Cartel operates in the western and central states of Morelos and Guerrero.



**Fig 1.** Area of influence of drug cartels in Mexico

Apart from these cartels, Mexico also obtains drug supplies from countries like Bolivia, Peru, Colombia. In the 1990s, the DTOs of South America, like the Medellin and Cali Cartels, were known to supply drugs such as cocaine through Central America i.e mainly through Honduras and Mexico. For instance, the Cocaine of Colombian origin is imported in U.S through Mexico. According to the White House Office of National Drug Control Policy, the cocaine production increased over 8% from 2019.

There are financial incentives for the drug organizations to improve and protect their trade of drugs. Consequently, they have developed a struttred network of routes and organizations to decentralize the decision process making the illicit trade easier. These cartels have secure command and control centers as well as integrated work roles. Their well-structured network has, hence, made it easier to infiltrate the government organizations and law enforcements.

### 3.2. Violence and Criminal Landscape in Mexico

The violence in Mexico can be categorized into three factions. These are:

1. Intra-Cartel Violence
2. Inter-Cartel Violence
3. Cartel vs. Government Violence

The intra-cartel violence occurs among the organizations of the same syndicate whereas, the inter-cartel violence occurs between rival cartels. the violence initially begins due to alterations in the balance of power ichi contribute to fractionalization. The drug trade in Mexico goes hand-in-hand with violence. The level of intensity and severity of violence, however, has increased during the past decades. Since the early 2000s, there have been over 25,000 drug related killings in Mexico. The TCOs and DTOs also use violence as an instrument to undermine the public support for government's counter efforts to destabilize the drug trade. In addition to this, violence can be seen as a result of disruptive supply routes which leads to intense competition between the organizations. This is further stressed by members shifting alliances, feuds, cooperation with the government etc.

The violence in Mexico due to the drug trafficking has led to 'spillover violence' in the United States. Spillover violence refers to planned and deliberate attacks by the DTOs and TCOs on U.S. assets. U.S. assets usually include important government officials, civilians as well as institutions. For instance, the BA, also known as the Barrio Azteca, a street gang used by the Juarez Cartel was linked to drug

trafficking, extortion, assaults and even murders in the United States. The FBI and the DEA made more than 54 arrests from the gang as well as seized various items of evidence.

The drug trafficking related crimes are often described as ‘parasitic’ for the civilians in Mexico as it also degrades a sense of security of the citizens since the DTOs and TCOs have significant territorial influence in all parts of the countries with their drug production hubs and the trafficking routes. According to the Global Conflict Tracker, there have been more than 200 drug trafficking cells with approximately 150,000 estimated number of deaths due to organized criminal violence from the DTOs and TCOs. Despite the regional concentration of the deaths in the country, the fear of violence has been widespread. Recent surveys have shown the citizens of Mexico migrating to a more preferred location in order to prevent the threat of violent behavior from the drug cartels. The violence has also impacted the social as well as economic well-being of the citizens as it affects the human capital, local labor market outcomes and financial investment decisions. Violence has also created a threat to possession of property and work insecurity. Violence due to drug trafficking has increased migration costs as cartels aim to dominate areas which prevent residents from moving easily.

One of the significant issues that have come with the drug trafficking is the threatening of law enforcement personnel’s and officials. One such instance can be seen with the appointment of General Mauro Enrique Tello Quinone’s as the head of public security in Cancun in 2009. Soon after his appointment, him along with 2 others were killed by the members of Zetas drug cartel. In May of 2009, a reporter for a Mexican journal was also killed after being threatened by the drug cartels.

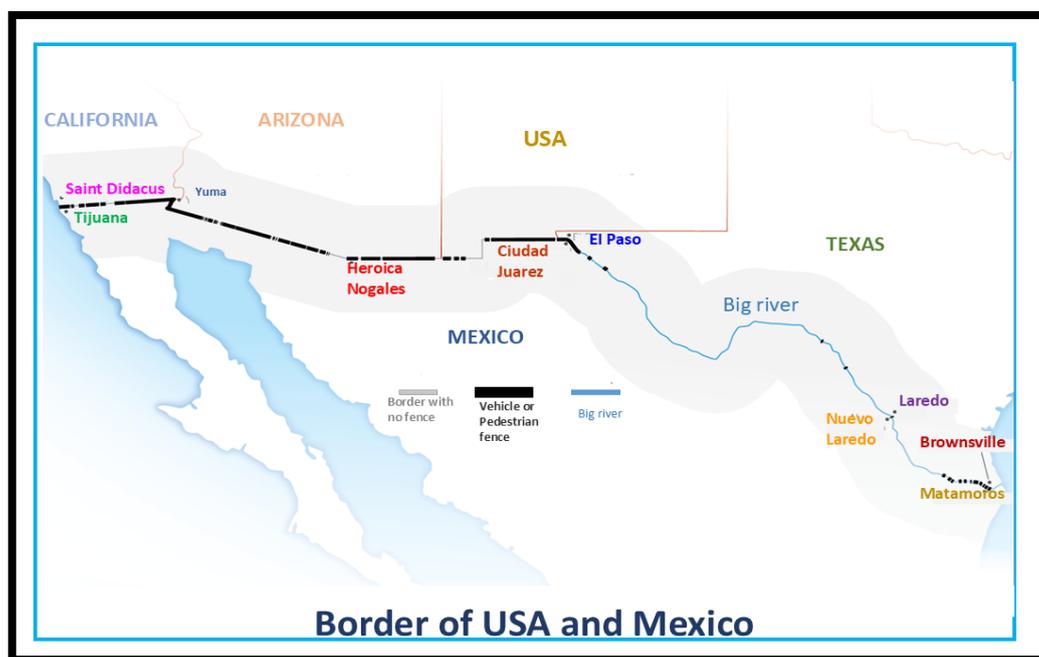
### **3.3. Initiatives Taken By the Authorities to Curb Drug Trafficking**

The government of Mexico has relied on armed forces and deploying troops to combat the problem of drug trafficking and eradication of the production hub of drugs. Apart from this, they have initiated other counter-drug operations and utilized military personnel’s and soldiers in maintenance of functions and day to day activities. In order to reduce the violence, importance has been given to domestic public security. However, the militarization in the domestic sphere has also ushered violations of human rights and has even escalated the level of conflict in certain regions. Mexico spends approximately 4 billion dollars annually on combating drug trafficking. During the presidential rule of Vicente Fox, approximately 2,000 arrests relating to drug trafficking were carried out. President Vicente Fox declared, "I am confirming an all-out war on pernicious criminal mafias". The law enforcement and the military officials of Mexico reported an increase in destruction and seizures of drugs such as Heroin (17%), Marijuana (37%) and Methamphetamine (78%) in 1999 to 2000. There was also a 31% increase in the seizure of cocaine. During the rule of Felipe Calderon, the government of Mexico made sustained efforts in resolving organized crime, especially the drug cartels. In order to counter the violence and the corruption within the police department, he deployed military in the most violence-plagued areas. He launched ‘Operation Limpieza’ also known as Operation Clean Sweep to clear out the high-ranking federal officials who were working with the drug cartels. It resulted in the arrest of dozens of officials and led to several judicial reforms. Apart from this, the authorities have taken several initiatives to curb the problem of drug trafficking. For instance, the SWB Initiative which attacked Mexico-based DTOs by targeting their command centers. This initiative started in 1994 and has been active since. The Bulk Can Seizures was also an initiative which used the cash proceeds which were obtained from the illegal drug flow to obtain investigative leads and data. In 1992, Federal Bureau of Investigation established ‘Safe Streets Violent Crimes (SSVC) Initiative’ to combat violent gangs by identifying the drug cartels behind them. In U.S. under President Obama’s rule, the Attorney General Holder, Department of Homeland Security (DHS) Secretary Napolitano, and Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP) Director Kerlikowske released ‘National Southwest Border Counter narcotics Strategy’ to stem the flow of illegal drugs from Mexico as well as to reduce the crime associated with drug trafficking. The United States is perpetually engaged in efforts with the Mexican government to provide training, equipment and information that can help the authorities to investigate and prosecute the most powerful drug cartels in Mexico. One such examples of aid provided by the U.S to Mexico is through the Mérida Initiative. From 2008 to 2012, 1.4 billion dollars was provided to Mexico in the form of U.S equipment, training and other assistance. Currently, according to the date presented by the Global Conflict Tracker, the United States of America has provided 43.3 million dollars in foreign assistance in 2021 to Mexico to help fight the drug cartels. The collaborative partnership between the two nations has resulted in significant accomplishments in fight against the drug cartels. One such accomplishment could be seen in 2000 when the Mexican Navy and the U.S Coast Guard seized approximately 2.25 metric tons of

cocaine off the Mexican coast. In addition to operations and reforms against the drug trafficking, the Mexican authorities have also declared anti-corruption a priority. U.S also deploying manpower to its Southwest border to prevent border overflow of possible violence and drug trade from the TCOs and DTOs. In early 2020, U.S Secretary of State designated former Nayarit Governor Roberto Sandoval Castañeda (of PRI party) and for corruption in state assets and accepting bribes from the certain DTOs and TCOs.

### 3.4. Effects of Covid-19 on the Drug Trafficking and Cartel Operations

The outbreak of the Coronavirus Disease in 2019 has had significant effects on the illicit drug flows. Due to the early covid lockdowns, the slow container trade and the port activity caused temporary shortages in the material used to make drugs such as fentanyl. Methamphetamine etc. Multiple reports indicated how Mexican drug cartels stockpiled on resources and cash due to the uncertainly brought by the global pandemic. It also resulted in various high-profile seizures in 2020 which, however, indicated that the money and drugs continued to flow along the U.S-Mexico borders Fig.2.



**Fig 2.** Border of USA and Mexico through which drugs flow from Mexico to USA

Mexico saw significant decline in the opium cultivation as well as heroin production in 2020. Despite the reduction in the production, the criminal activities and violence due to Mexican Drug Cartels and TCOs did not diminish. A U.S. Department of Homeland Security report of 2020 argued Mexican cartels to be a threat to U.S homelands due to their territorial influences along the South-West Border. With the onset of the pandemic, Mexico saw an increase in the range of criminality by the smaller cartels. There is an increase in inter-cartel violence to dominate certain transportation routes and corridors. Along with this, crimes such as homicides, robbery have also increased from the TCOs and DTOs' side. Many reports present the argument that these cartels exploited the pandemic for their personal gains of profit as well as territorial gain. This resulted in economic contraction of approximately 8% during the outbreak of Coronavirus in 2020.

## 4. CONCLUSION

The history of drug trafficking in Mexico can be seen as a case of adrift of social controls. The Drug cartels of Mexico are one of many organized criminal groups and consequently the biggest threat to not only Mexico but to the United States as well. The efforts to combat the crimes and violence attached to the drug trafficking have born less than satisfactory results. However, the respective authorities of Mexico as well as the United States of America continue to fight the battle of drug production and imports. According to multiple governmental and global reports, accomplishments in the field of drug trafficking can be measured by the eradication and disruption of the distribution networks and drug production hubs. Despite of continuous aid and strengthening go the anti-drug enforcements; it is still

unclear whether the illicit drug trading has been diminished due to the efforts made by the authorities. It is important to note that the even though the main challenge is to prevent and eradicate the drug trade, problems such as violence, especially spillover violence in U.S need to be considered as well.

### REFERENCES

- [1] Ganster, Paul. 1998. "The United States-Mexico Border Region: An Overview." *Photogrammetric engineering and remote sensing* 64(11): 1077–84.
- [2] Finckenauer, James O, Joseph R Fuentes, and George L Ward. 2007. "Mexico and the United States: Neighbors Confront Drug Trafficking." *United Nations Activities* 20: 1–9.
- [3] Anderson, Joan B, and James Gerber. 2007. "Fifty Years of Change on the US-Mexico Border: Growth, Development, and Quality of Life."
- [4] Beittel, June S. 2015. "Mexico: Organized Crime and Drug Trafficking Organizations." *Congressional Research Service* 3.
- [5] Astorga, Luis, and David A Shirk. 2010. "Drug Trafficking Organizations and Counter-Drug Strategies in the US-Mexican Context."
- [6] Laffiteau, Charles. 2011. "The Balloon Effect: The Failure of Supply Side Strategies in the War on Drugs." *Academia. edu* 1: 1–18.
- [7] Lamothe, L, and A Nicaso. 2001. "Bloodlines." *The Rise and Fall of the Mafia's Royal Family*. Toronto.
- [8] Medel, Monica, Yongmei Lu, and Edwin Chow. 2015. "Mexico's Drug Networks: Modeling the Smuggling Routes towards the United States." *Applied geography* 60: 240–47.
- [9] Hartmeier, Peter. 2018. "The Economic Impact of Drug Trafficking in Mexico." *Research Gate*, [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/330468273\\_The\\_Economic\\_Impact\\_of\\_Drug\\_Trafficking\\_in\\_Mexico](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/330468273_The_Economic_Impact_of_Drug_Trafficking_in_Mexico).
- [10] Dudley, Steven S. 2010. *Drug Trafficking Organizations in Central America: Transportistas, Mexican Cartels and Maras*. Woodrow Wilson International Centre for Scholars, Mexico Institute.
- [11] Beittel, June S. 2012. "Mexico's Drug Trafficking Organizations." *Trends in Organized Crime* 15(1): 64–74.
- [12] Medel, Monica, and Francisco Thoumi. 2014. "Mexican Drug 'Cartels.'" *The Oxford handbook of organized crime*: 196–218.
- [13] Morris, Stephen D. 2012. "Corruption, Drug Trafficking, and Violence in Mexico." *The Brown Journal of World Affairs* 18(2): 29–43.
- [14] Argueta, Otto. 2013. "Drug-Trafficking and Governance in Central America." In *Handbook of Central American Governance*, Routledge, 198–215.
- [15] Garzón, Juan Carlos, and Ana María Rueda. 2020. "Latin America and the Caribbean: Complicity and Legacy of a Long War." In *Research Handbook on International Drug Policy*, Edward Elgar Publishing, 72–93.
- [16] Goodman, Colby, and Michel Marizco. 2010. "US Firearms Trafficking to Mexico: New Data and Insights Illuminate Key Trends and Challenges." *Woodrow Wilson International Centre for Scholars, Mexico Institute and University of San Diego Trans-Border Institute, Working Paper Series on US-Mexico Security Cooperation*.
- [17] Nelson, Benjamin F. 1998. *Drug Control: Status of Counternarcotics Efforts in Mexico: Statement of Benjamin F. Nelson, Director, International Relations and Trade Issues, National Security and International Affairs Division, Before the Subcommittee on National Security, International Affairs, and Criminal Justice, Committee on Government Reform and Oversight, House of Representatives; and the Caucus on International Narcotics Control, US Senate*. The Office.
- [18] Beittel, June S. 2013. "Mexico's Drug Trafficking Organizations: Source and Scope of the Violence." *Congressional Research Service* 41576.
- [19] Andreas, Peter, and Timothy Snyder. 2000. *The Wall around the West: State Borders and Immigration Controls in North America and Europe*. Bloomsbury Publishing PLC.
- [20] Gerber, James. 2024. *Border Economies: Cities Bridging the US-Mexico Divide*. University of Arizona Press.
- [21] Rios, Viridiana, and Kevin Sabet. 2008. "Evaluating the Economic Impact of Drug Traffic in Mexico." *Unpublished working paper. Department of Government, Harvard University*. [www.gov.harvard.edu/files/Rios2008\\_MexicanDrugMarket.pdf](http://www.gov.harvard.edu/files/Rios2008_MexicanDrugMarket.pdf).
- [22] Corchado, Alfredo, and Tim Connolly. 2008. "Analyst: US Anti-Drug Aid Proposal Could Heighten Violence in Mexico." *Dallas, US*.
- [23] Bunker, Pamela L, Lisa J Campbell, and Robert J Bunker. 2019. "Torture, Beheadings, and Narcocultos." In *Narcos Over the Border*, Routledge, 145–78.
- [24] Sullivan, John P, and Samuel Logan. 2010. "Los Zetas: Massacres, Assassinations and Infantry Tactics." *HomelandI. com* 24.

- [25] Moloeznik, Marcos Pablo. 2013. "Organized Crime, the Militarization of Public Security, and the Debate on the 'New' Police Model in Mexico." *Trends in organized crime* 16(2): 177–94.
- [26] Chabat, Jorge. 2002. "Mexico's War on Drugs: No Margin for Maneuver." *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 582(1): 134–48.
- [27] Walker, Lee Jay. "Daily Archives: April 10, 2010."
- [28] Walker, S L. 2001. "Fox Draws a Bold Line in the War on Drugs." *The San Diego Union-Tribune* 26: B1.
- [29] Placido, A P, and L K Perkins. 2010. "Drug Trafficking Violence in México Implications for the United States." *Washington DCUS Senate Caucus on International Narcotics Control Department of Justice*.
- [30] Cook, Colleen W, Rebecca G Rush, and Clare R Seelke. 2008. *Merida Initiative: Proposed US Anticrime and Counterdrug Assistance for Mexico and Central America*.
- [31] NIDA. 2008. "Treatment Approaches for Drug Addiction." *NIDA Info Facts*.
- [32] Finckenauer, James O, Joseph R Fuentes, and George L Ward. 2007. "Mexico and the United States: Neighbors Confront Drug Trafficking." *United Nations Activities* 20: 1–9.
- [33] Nieto, Elia Socorro Díaz, David Israel Contreras Medina, and Roberto Tuda Rivas. "Leadership and Organizational Sustainability."
- [34] Pargiter, Tamsin. 2016. "Understanding Cartel Violence in Mexico: Mapping the Many Dimensions of Cartel Violence."
- [35] Gomez, Camilo Tamayo. 2020. "Organised Crime Governance in Times of Pandemic: The Impact of COVID-19 on Gangs and Drug Cartels in Colombia and Mexico." *Bulletin of Latin American Research* 39: 12–15.

### AUTHOR'S BIOGRAPHY



Riya Parashar is an Assistant Professor at Deshbandhu College, University of Delhi, and a PhD scholar in the Department of Political Science at the University of Delhi. Her doctoral research examines the politics of mercenaries, and the role of international organisations in contemporary conflict. Her broader academic interests span international security, political economy, agrarian and environmental politics, postcolonial theory, historical sociology, and global governance. She has taught undergraduate courses on democracy, political theory, international relations, and personality development. Her work adopts interdisciplinary approaches to understanding power, conflict, and political–economic transformations.

**Citation:** Riya Parashar. "The Drug Lords of Mexico: Implications of Drug Trafficking on the Lives of Mexicans". *International Journal of Political Science (IJPS)*, vol 12, no 1, 2026, pp. 7-13. doi: <https://doi.org/10.20431/2454-9452.1201002>.

**Copyright:** © 2026 Authors. This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.