

**GOVERNANCE,  
DEVELOPMENT, AND SOCIAL  
INCLUSION IN LATIN AMERICA**

Series Editors: Rebecka Villanueva Ulfgard  
and César Villanueva

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**ORGANIZED  
CRIME,  
FEAR AND  
PEACEBUILDING  
IN MEXICO**

**Mauricio Meschoulam**



Governance, Development, and Social Inclusion  
in Latin America

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*There are a number of people without whom I cannot understand the mere concept of peacebuilding. My team at the Mexico Research Center for Peace saves the world every day through its work. My three daughters and my son remind me that peace happens every day, not on the other side of the planet, but at home. And my wife is the compass that returns me to the north every time I drift off. She is the eight and thousand pillars of peace I aspire one day to become.*

## SERIES EDITORS' PREFACE

During the last few years, it is fair to say that the predominant image of Mexico abroad is one of violence, and violence conducted by organized crime or the drug-cartels, in particular.<sup>1</sup> But often, foreign media seem to be much less interested in asking questions about how it really feels to lead a life in the midst of anxiety, fear, and insecurity. Peace seems like a utopian dream, whereas the condition of peacelessness has become everyday experience for millions of Mexicans. In fact, the year 2017 saw the highest number of homicides in twenty years,<sup>2</sup> and it can well be argued that violence has come to dominate the public agenda.

In this timely and original work, Mauricio Meschoulam is taking us through a series of separate, yet interconnected and to a certain extent accumulative, studies of the social construction of fear and its psychological and social consequences for peoples' perceptions of insecurity and

<sup>1</sup>See, for example, César Villanueva, "Imagen de México en el mundo 2006–2015", Universidad Iberoamericana, 2017, ISBN: 978-91-639-2258-9; Anabel Hernández García, *Narcoland: The Mexican Drug Lords And Their Godfathers*, Editorial Verso, 2014; Edgardo Buscaglia, *Vaciós de poder en México: Cómo combatir la delincuencia organizada*, Debate, 2013. David Agren, "Mexico maelstrom: how the drug violence got so bad", *The Guardian*, December 26, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/dec/26/mexico-maelstrom-how-the-drug-violence-got-so-bad>.

<sup>2</sup>Eli Meixler, "With Over 29,000 Homicides, 2017 Was Mexico's Most Violent Year on Record", *TIME*, January 22, 2018, <http://time.com/5111972/mexico-murder-rate-record-2017/>.

distress. Tying two fundamental aspects of peace: fear of violence and its potential repercussions on Mexico's social and democratic development, this significant contribution by Meschoulam to the national and international debate has its strength in pinpointing, through detailed empirical analysis, how peacelessness is felt by many Mexicans, on the one hand, and by critically examining the role of media for the construction of fear regarding violence, and how it relates to the prospect for development and public policies with the objective to foster social inclusion and building peace, on the other.

The reader will follow five qualitative/quantitative studies conducted during the period 2011–2017, comprising hundreds of questionnaires plus in-depth interviews with around 200 people from different parts of Mexico (cities and countryside) and all social classes (informal workers, officials, academics), ages (young people above 18 years of age, adults, elderly people), and sectors (public officials, private employees), inquiring about the psychological and social effects of violence in their everyday life.

An original take is precisely the cautious discussion around terrorism understood in theoretical terms as well as concrete reality in relation to the type of violence exercised by the drug-cartels. As Meschoulam points out, it is not appropriate to equate Mexico's drug-related violence with terrorism, especially not the one most people have in mind today, Islamic State or Al Qaeda, but rather practices and modes of exercising violence systematically that bears resemblance to terrorist tactics (quasi-terrorism). The symbolic aspect of violence becomes a key component of the analysis in this book. For instance, the spread of fear through media reporting about drug-cartels' violent actions, which is of interest here, can often lead members of society to experience post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptoms, thereby extending the circle of victims far beyond the immediately affected ones. Accordingly, this work includes one chapter (Chapter 4 co-written with Dr. Jose Calderon-Abbo) drawing on a study conducted in 2011–2012 examining precisely PTSD-related symptoms among participants. This is a strong motivation of Meschoulam: "to raise the issue of the 'other' victims of violence—its psychological casualties in the wider population—and have it included on the national agenda" (see Chapter 4 Abstract).

The theoretical-analytical framework draws on literature from different disciplinary strands ranging from negative and positive peace, terrorism and violence, traditional mass media and new social media, to studies in perceptions and victimization, among others. All the separate studies

tie in with this framework in different ways, forming a complex mosaic of intimate feelings of hundreds of Mexicans, but in reality they may count in the thousands, if not million people, of fear of violence and state of peacelessness.

The free flow of information and freedom of expression are a cornerstone in modern, liberal democracies. Last year, Mexico was ranked as the most dangerous country not being at war for journalists to exercise their profession (Iraq and Syria faring worst).<sup>3</sup> Violence against journalists is present all over the country—and especially in those communities or regions revealing the strong grip of drug-cartels on local communities or corruption ties between drug-cartels and politicians. The assassinations of Miroslava Breach (March 2017) and Javier Valdez Cárdenas (May 2017) provoked outrage in society, but there are way too many voices being silenced... Since the year 2000, as many as 131 professional journalists have been executed in Mexico, and at least 52 violent attacks have been plotted against mass media compounds, since 2006.<sup>4</sup> Impunity is the currency for many of these crimes. Thoughtfully, Meschoulam problematizes the role of media as sources of information (“news”) regarding drug-related violence, by asking significant questions: How can media be better at not exposing viewers/readers to strong sentiments of fear, distress, and psychological shock? How can media renegotiate their ethical principles on producing and disseminating information while they also operate under the market logic, but faced with the growing need for taking serious actions to prevent society from being exposed to negative news that may be conducive to PTSD symptoms and deepen the sense of powerlessness? How can a nation reformulate policies to facilitate the construction of peace, by engaging society at large (and through media) in the recognition of its own failures in the national security strategy? Drawing on testimonies and reflections emanating from all the separate studies, Meschoulam makes a call for media to adopt a more responsible approach in this regard.

<sup>3</sup>Elana Beiser, Committee to Protect Journalists, “In absence of fresh military conflict, journalist killings decline again”, December 21, 2017, <https://cpj.org/reports/2017/12/journalists-killed-iraq-crossfire-murder-mexico.php>.

<sup>4</sup>Pedro Zamora, “Impunidad en asesinatos de periodistas en México es de 90%: CNDH”, *Proceso*, 2152, January 25, 2018, <https://www.proceso.com.mx/520006/impunidad-en-asesinatos-de-periodistas-en-mexico-es-de-90-cndh>.

This book must not be seen as a recollection of negative testimonies of a broken nation, but as a forward-looking analysis of the possibilities of changing the patterns of violence and resourcing to community healing. By outlining public policy recommendations for building peace and development, fostering social inclusion, and consolidating democracy in the country, especially rooted in local and community activities, Meschoulam provokes a debate beyond the gridlock mentality and shows a sign of optimism, so necessary these days. As it may be obvious to the reader, this analysis of the Mexican case can also be of interest for other countries, especially in the Central American region (where the drug cartels have considerable influence in societies), but also Argentina, Brazil, and Colombia, where the power of violence seems to dominate the public agenda.

As a concluding remark, it is relevant to refer to Amartya Sen's view of violence in society and the possibilities of changing the situation, via culture: "With suitable instigation, a fostered sense of identity with one group of people can be made into a powerful weapon to brutalize another...The art of constructing hatred takes the form of invoking the magical power of some allegedly predominant identity that drowns other affiliations, and in a conveniently bellicose form can also overpower any human sympathy or natural kindness that we may normally have".<sup>5</sup> The editors of this series, along with the author, propose that under the world of violence, what is really needed is a clear understanding of the importance of peace in newly democratic countries. Thus, we also propose the recognition of the reasoned public voice, in consonance with sound social policies, which in the best of the worlds may lead to free societies from the ghost of violence.

Mexico City, Mexico  
April 2018

Rebecka Villanueva Ulfgard  
César Villanueva

<sup>5</sup>Amartya Sen, *Identity and Violence: The Illusion of Destiny (Issues of Our Time)*, W. W. Norton, 2006, p. XV.

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## CHAPTER 1

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# Introduction

**Abstract** In this chapter, Meschoulam explains why peace is not only the absence of violence and how the subject should be assessed from its positive angle as well, i.e., not only what peace is not, but what peace is composed of. Meschoulam refers to the eight pillars of peace as they are outlined by the Institute for Economics and Peace, and explains how these concepts are related to the objective and subjective well-being of citizens. The author notes that this book attempts to connect two central aspects of peace: fear of violence and its potential repercussions on the country's social and democratic development.

**Keywords** Peace · Positive peace · Peacebuilding · Fear · Democracy

Mexico is not a country at peace. While this has been the case for many years, the situation continues to deteriorate. According to the Global Peace Index (Institute for Economics and Peace [IEP], 2017), Mexico has not only gone down several notches on the scale, but peace levels have declined consistently in the years leading up to the writing of this book. Peace, however, is not merely the absence of violence (Alger, 1987; Galtung, 1985). In other words, we tend to define it by what it is not and consider it merely the condition of being free of war and violent conflict. We do not always appreciate, for example, the active components of peace—the ones that create and help maintain peaceful

conditions. According to the IEP (2016), peace has a negative angle or aspect, as well as a positive one. Negative peace—that which must not exist, in order for a society to be considered at peace—is the absence of violence as well as the absence of fear of violence. Positive peace, on the other hand, is “the presence of attitudes, institutions and structures that create and maintain peaceful societies” (IEP, 2016, p. 4). Research conducted by the IEP has revealed eight key areas or indicators that are present in the world’s most peaceful societies. Referred to as the eight pillars of peace, or the DNA of peace, they are: “(a) A well-functioning government; (b) Equitable distribution of resources; (c) Free flow of information; (d) Good relations with neighbors; (e) High levels of human capital; (f) Acceptance of the rights of others; (g) Low levels of corruption, and (h) A sound business environment” (IEP, 2016, p. 52).

Research indicates that the most peaceful societies perform well in most of these areas, while less peaceful ones display weaknesses in the majority of them (IEP, 2016). Similar arguments have been put forward by such authors as Alger (1987, 1990), Ekanola (2012), and Galtung (1985), who explains that several conditions, both objective and subjective, must be met for a society to be deemed peaceful. Objective conditions include physical safety, material prosperity, and social harmony, while subjective ones are issues like the emotional well-being of the members of the society in question.

Among other things, this means that the more fear experienced by a group, the further it is from achieving peace. In addition, the repercussions of this type of situation do not stop at violence and its psychological effects but have a tangible impact on other spheres, such as a country’s prospects of democratic development and governance.

Starting off with these ideas and aided by research conducted in Mexico by the Mexico Research Center for Peace (Centro de Investigación para la Paz México, AC.; CIPMEX), this book attempts to connect these two central aspects of peace: fear of violence and its potential repercussions on the country’s social and democratic development.

Part of the research and information contained herein has already been published separately, but this is the first time it has been brought together with a view to offering readers a more complete picture, one that goes from components of the peace theory to terrorism and the fear associated with criminal violence, while also encompassing personal experiences, everyday conversations, and the role of the media confronted with the violent circumstances that currently prevail in Mexico.

It concludes with public policy recommendations and suggestions aimed at various sectors of society.

Chapter 2 begins with a brief discussion of the literature on terrorism and problematizes different definitions of this type of violence. The intention is to determine the extent to which conditions of fear can impact lack of peace (peacelessness) in a given society, with direct consequences for democracy, inclusion, and governance. To this end, discussion will focus on: (a) the connection between stress, fear, democracy, and inclusion; (b) the connection between these conditions and obstacles to respect for human rights; (c) the circles that encourage fear and lack of democracy and development to breed and feed off one another, and (d) the direct impact conflict, and specifically victimization, has on democratic development and citizen participation.

Chapter 3 asks to what extent the situation in Mexico—where criminal violence has been escalating since 2006—can be compared to that of societies that come under frequent terrorist attacks. The crux of the debate is whether or not certain events that have occurred in the country can be classed as terrorist or quasi-terrorist acts or whether they are merely terrorist tactics being employed by criminal organizations. The evolution of violence associated with such organizations in Mexico and the use of strategies that aim not only to commit but also to publicize this type of violence will be addressed here. Peripheral to this debate are the psychosocial repercussions of organized crime suffered by the population, which are precisely what tie this chapter in with the fourth.

Chapter 4 was co-written with Dr. José Calderón-Abbo, psychiatrist and addictionologist, clinical faculty at Louisiana State University (LSU), who specializes in stress and trauma and is based on a study conducted by the research team he spearheaded in 2011–2012 and that the author of the book belonged to. The study investigated symptoms suggestive of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) among the Mexican population due to violence associated with organized crime, which, unfortunately, turned out to be substantial. Rather than academic journal publication, the aim of the study was to raise the issue of the “other” victims of violence—its psychological casualties in the wider population—and have it included on the national agenda. This chapter discusses the findings and some of the recommendations the team made at the time to attempt to mitigate the psychosocial effects that were detected.

Drawing on some of these findings and based on a conceptual framework rooted in social constructivism, the author has joined CIPMEX in