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Lessons in Nonviolence from La Mora, Mexico

In Northern Mexico, three mothers were traveling in an SUV convoy from the independent Mormon community of La Mora to Chihuahua and onward to the U.S on Monday, November 4, 2019.¹ The convoy was ambushed by gunmen when six children were killed at point-blank range along with their mothers who were found with arms raised in signs of surrender. Eight children, ranging from infant to twelve-years-old, survived the attack. The murder rate in Mexico is reported to be at an all-time high as the decade long war on drug trafficking organizations continues. In 2019, it is estimated that there are ninety murders daily, and in 2018, there were 36,000 deaths linked to drug cartels.² The violent attack against the three mothers and their children is a horrific crime, however, it becomes a crime against humanity by having been executed within the context of on-going conflict. According to Article 7 of the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, a crime against humanity consists of a physical, contextual, and mental element.³ The physical component of the attack is murder, torture, and persecution. The context is that it occurred as part of the widespread and systemic violence that has overrun Mexico during the war with drug cartels. And, finally, descriptions of the attack have made it clear that the women and children were murdered with the knowledge that they were civilians.

The classification of the violent death of these civilians as a crime against humanity is essential because it changes where and how justice to these crimes may be found. While there

¹ Argen, David. (8 Nov 2019) "How an isolated group of mormons got caught up in Mexico's cartel wars." *The Guardian*. Accessed 10 Nov 2019. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/nov/08/mexico-american-mormons-drugs-cartel-attack>

² Lee, Briana, Danielle Renwick and Rocio Cara Labrador. (22 Oct 2019) "Mexico's Drug War." *Council on Foreign Relations*. Accessed 10 Nov 2019. Available at: <https://www.cfr.org/background/mexicos-drug-war>

³ United Nations. (10 Nov 2019) "Crimes Against Humanity: Background." *United Nations Office on Genocide Prevention and the Responsibility to Protect*. Accessed: 10 Nov 2019. Available at: <https://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/crimes-against-humanity.shtml>

are arguably many crimes against humanity in Mexico,⁴ what differentiates this crime from others is that the victims were all U.S. citizens. The immediate response from the U.S. to these murders has been a call for humanitarian intervention, or military action, against the cartels within Mexico.⁵ Military action may first appear to be a justified response to the events that have “shock[ed] the moral conscience of mankind.” However, it ignores a tradition of pacifism that is being practiced within the Mormon community and Mexico as well as the framework of response established by the Responsibility to Protect doctrine. By analyzing the background of the Mormon community in Mexico and the past and current practices of nonviolence within this community and Mexico, we may better understand why the U.S.’s call for military action is inappropriate, even in this case of extreme human rights violation.

The three women and six children that were murdered all held U.S. citizenship and were a part of the La Mora Mormon community in the Sonora region of Mexico. The first questions that many people have asked after these tragic events are why is there a Mormon community living in an area with known drug cartel violence? And, what were three mothers doing driving through the countryside unprotected with fourteen children? The answers to these questions have to do with history and religion. The official Mormon Church is located in Utah and called the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (LDS). When the church was founded in 1830 and polygamy, or plural marriage was encouraged, most famously by the church’s second leader Brigham Young who had fifty-one wives and fifty-six children.⁶ However, after the civil war, social concerns argued that polygamy was a form of slavery leading to a formal Supreme Court ban to plural marriage in 1878. This ruling was one of the first limitations to the freedom of religion that the U.S. had implemented and caused a schism within the LDS church. The official church outlawed polygamy, however, fundamentalist Mormons left the U.S. calling these laws religious persecution and leading to independent Mormon communities such as the one located in La Mora, Mexico. The spiritual practices in La Mora generally follow mainstream

⁴ Calderón, Laura Y., Kimberly Heinle, Octavio Rodríguez Ferreira, and David A. Shirk. (April 2019) “Organized Crime and Violence in Mexico.” *Justice in Mexico*. Accessed 10 Nov 2019. Available at: <https://justiceinmexico.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/Organized-Crime-and-Violence-in-Mexico-2019.pdf>

⁵ Reuters. (5 Nov 2019) “Nine Americans Killed in Mexican Ambush, Trump Urges Going War on Drug Cartels.” *NYTimes*. Accessed 10 Nov 2019. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/reuters/2019/11/05/world/americas/05reuters-mexico-violence.html?searchResultPosition=1>

⁶ Beres, Derek. (4 Sept 2017) “The Origins of Mormon Polygamy—and Its Spiritual Loophole.” *Big Think*. Accessed 10 Nov 2019. Available at: <https://bigthink.com/21st-century-spirituality/polygamy-mormon-church-plural-marriages>

Mormon teaching, however, they are more fundamental with some electing to practice polygamy while other families choose single marriage.⁷

These independent Mormon religious communities began to set down roots in the region at the turn of the twentieth century, many families mixing with locals and becoming citizens of Mexico. Currently, La Mora has a population of fewer than 1,000 people.⁸ Financially, the communities support themselves by living across both borders with male relatives work generally working in the oil fields of North Dakota to send money home to their families and relatives in Mexico.⁹ The women and children frequently traveled the road where the attack occurred and would be stopped by cartel checkpoints. Cartels would ask what they had with them, usually only with basic items such as honey or potatoes. The state did not enforce law and order within the region, the cartel did. And, the La Mora Mormon community developed a working relationship with the regional Sonora cartel. Residents did not lock doors or feel that they would be threatened. Mexico has a strict gun law making it very hard to buy a gun. Most guns arrive illegally from the U.S.¹⁰ But, the La Mora community defined itself as nonviolent and peaceful, deciding to rely on the strength of the local cartel.¹¹

La Mora's decision to remain peaceful even as violence increased within the region was not naive.¹² A decade prior, a teenager was kidnapped from the neighboring LeBarón Mormon

⁷ Sherman, Christopher. (6 Nov 2019) "Victims in Mexico killings trace their religious roots to early Mormon polygamy." *The Salt Lake Tribune*. Accessed 10 Nov 2019. Available at: <https://www.sltrib.com/religion/2019/11/05/victims-mexico-killings/>

⁸ Associated Press. (6 Nov 2019) "US Victims in Mexico Attack From Mormon Offshoot Community." *NYTimes*. Accessed 10 Nov 2019. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/aponline/2019/11/06/world/americas/ap-It-mexico-border-killings-religion.html?searchResultPosition=2>

⁹ Janzen, Rebecca. (6 Nov 2019) "Mormons in Mexico: A brief history of polygamy, cartel violence and faith." *The Conversation*. Accessed 10 Nov 2019. Available at: <https://theconversation.com/mormons-in-mexico-a-brief-history-of-polygamy-cartel-violence-and-faith-126493>

¹⁰ Guerrero, Jean. (30 April 2019) "Mexico's American Gun Problem." *KPBS*. Accessed 10 Nov 2019. Available at: <https://www.kpbs.org/news/2019/apr/30/mexicos-american-gun-problem-record-homicides-and-/>

¹¹ Sieff, Kevin. (7 Nov 2019) "How Mexico's cartel wars shattered American Mormons' wary peace." *The Washington Post*. Accessed 10 Nov 2019. Available at: https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/the_americas/how-mexicos-cartel-wars-shattered-american-mormons-peaceful-but-wary-existence/2019/11/07/92d42cdc-0021-11ea-8341-cc3dce52e7de_story.html

¹² Virella, Kelly. (5 Nov 2019) "What We Know About the Killing of the Mormon Family Members in Mexico." *NYTimes*. Accessed 10 Nov 2019. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/11/05/world/americas/family-killed-in-mexico.html>

colony.¹³ The family refused to pay the ransom, and the boy was returned. Soon after, an anti-crime activist and his brother were dragged from their homes and killed. However, the family has stated that they do regret that they stood up to the gunman, “If you pay one, you’re going to get ten more. It was a stance we had to take as a community.”¹⁴ As stated, these acts of violence against civilians are not the only examples of the thousands of crimes against humanity that have taken place in Mexico throughout the decade long cartel war. The women and children murdered in the most recent attacks were not armed and had identified themselves as civilians to assailants. The cartel that killed the women and children did so intentionally as a continuation of their agenda to create terror, persecute the population, and reveal the weakness of the state. Compounding the horror of the crime is that the women and children belonged to a nonviolent community living in Mexico to avoid religious persecution. Instead of calling for violence or revenge, the response from the La Mora community has been to raise concern for how to best help all of Mexico.¹⁵ Community leaders have tweeted, “Want to help? Focus on lowering drug consumption in U.S. Want to help some more? Stop the ATF and Gun Law loopholes from systematically injecting high powered assault weapons to Mexico...Please help.”¹⁶

The La Mora Mormon community’s nonviolent response to cartel violence in Mexico has precedence beyond the teachings of their religious community. Nonviolent civil movements became internationally known as Mexican’s protested the government’s inability to guarantee peace and security to its citizens. Specific actions, such as the “Movements for Peace with Justice and Dignity” and “No + Sangre” modeled their protest techniques after Gandhi’s non-violence teachings. In 2014 these strategies were internationally tested when forty-three students in teaching training went missing on their way to a peaceful demonstration in Mexico

¹³ Argen, David. (8 Nov 2019) “How an isolated group of mormons got caught up in Mexico’s cartel wars.” *The Guardian*. Accessed 10 Nov 2019. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/nov/08/mexico-american-mormons-drugs-cartel-attack>

¹⁴ Argen, David. (8 Nov 2019) “How an isolated group of mormons got caught up in Mexico’s cartel wars.” *The Guardian*. Accessed 10 Nov 2019. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/nov/08/mexico-american-mormons-drugs-cartel-attack>

¹⁵ Sieff, Kevin. (7 Nov 2019) “How Mexico’s cartel wars shattered American Mormons’ wary peace.” *The Washington Post*. Accessed 10 Nov 2019. Available at: https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/the_americas/how-mexicos-cartel-wars-shattered-american-mormons-peaceful-but-wary-existence/2019/11/07/92d42cdc-0021-11ea-8341-cc3dce52e7de_story.html

¹⁶ Chappell, Bill. (6 Nov 2019) “Mormon Family Mourns Their Dead in Mexico, Calls For U.S> To Rein In Its Guns.” *NPR*. Accessed 10 Nov 2019. Available at: <https://www.npr.org/2019/11/06/776859069/as-mormon-family-mourns-their-dead-in-mexico-calls-for-u-s-to-rein-in-its-guns>

City.¹⁷ While their remains have not been located, investigations have blamed “corrupt local political and police officials as well as higher-ups in the Mexican military and government and the drug gangs.”¹⁸ The brutality of the student massacre made international headlines, but, rather than lead to humanitarian intervention, has inspired Mexicans to increase their commitment to nonviolent protest. As Gandhi wrote “the power of nonviolence is in its dynamic condition means conscious suffering. It does not mean meek submission to the will of the evil-doer, but it means the pitting one’s who soul against the will of the tyrant.”¹⁹ To date, protestors continue to argue that nonviolence is the key to change.²⁰ If protestors practice violence instead of nonviolence, the government is able to justify the use of force against demonstrators. In a country where violence is prolific, the choice to practice nonviolence in the knowledge of future civilian casualties is powerful. Examples such as the massacre of students and the slaughter of Mormon civilians are horrifying, however reports detailing the killing of “approximately 300 men, women, and children in the the northern municipality of Allende and nearby towns, and the disappearance, torture and murder of 150 individuals inside a prison” demonstrate that the crimes against humanity being perpetrated in Mexico are occurring in collusion with the government and police officials.²¹ The La Mora Mormon community and nonviolent protestors in Mexico are united in cultivating their power to impact change by focusing on revealing the truth and not responding with force.

The U.S. immediately reacted to the killings of the Mormon women and children with an offer of military intervention. The proposal was made as a response to the horror of the events and declined by the Mexican President. Since then, additional arguments for why the U.S. should implement military action against the cartels have been made. Cases include: “that cartels should be designated as terrorist organizations,” that “cartel-controlled areas in Mexico

¹⁷ Garcia-Navarro, Lulu. (21 Oct 2018) “What Happened to Mexico’s Missing 43 Students in ‘A Massacre In Mexico.’” *NPR*. Accessed 10 Nov 2019. Available at: <https://www.npr.org/2018/10/21/658900014/what-happened-to-mexicos-missing-43-students-in-a-massacre-in-mexico>

¹⁸ Garcia-Navarro, Lulu. (21 Oct 2018) “What Happened to Mexico’s Missing 43 Students in ‘A Massacre In Mexico.’” *NPR*. Accessed 10 Nov 2019. Available at: <https://www.npr.org/2018/10/21/658900014/what-happened-to-mexicos-missing-43-students-in-a-massacre-in-mexico>

¹⁹ Gandhi, Mahatma. “The Power of Non-Violence.” *MkGandhi.org*. Accessed 10 Nov 2019. Available at: <https://www.mkgandhi.org/momgandhi/chap22.htm>

²⁰ Eulich, Whitney. (21 Nov 2014) “Keeping the peace: Mexico protesters say non-violence is key to change.” *The Christian Science Monitor*. Accessed 10 Nov 2019. Available at: <https://www.csmonitor.com/World/Americas/2014/1121/Keeping-the-peace-Mexican-protesters-say-non-violence-is-key-to-change>

²¹ TCR Staff. (15 May 2018) “Mexican Drug Cartels, Officials Collude in ‘Crimes Against Humanity’: Report.” *The Crime Report*. Accessed 10 Nov 2019. Available at: <https://thecrimereport.org/2018/05/15/crimes-against-humanity-committed-by-drug-cartels-and-officials-in-mexico-report/>

are in fact de-facto narco-states,”and that “the cartels have invaded and occupied U.S. territory.” All of these arguments acknowledge that there is a problem and that the problem is impacting the U.S. However, they also fail to look to other critical connections and solutions. Specifically, the killings of the U.S. citizens of the Mormon community are being used as an example to argue for the militarization of foreign policy, instead of engaging in frameworks focused on the protection of human rights, such as the Responsibility to Protect doctrine. Endorsed by all United National member states during the 2005 World Summit, the R2P doctrine focuses on how states are responsible to protecting its populations against genocide, ethnic cleansing, war crimes, and crimes against humanity. To do so, the R2P doctrine outlines three pillars of action: 1) Responsibility of the state to protect populations from atrocious crimes, 2) Responsibility of international community to assist individual states in meeting this responsibility, and, 3) In failing to meet these responsibilities, the international community is guided by the UN Charter.²² R2P is vital because it shifts the ethical focus of a state’s sovereignty and establishes the international community as having preventive and reformative responsibilities such as preventing mass atrocity through “diplomatic engagement, economic assistance, rule-of-law reform, and the building of inclusive political institutions.”²³ By doing so, the entire international community is made morally responsible for any crimes and atrocities that are committed when they could have acted to prevent them.

Additionally, what types of intervention are used by the international community may differ and could include military intervention.²⁴ Military intervention does not only have ethical consequences but may also lead to more significant geopolitical conflict with motives beyond the humanitarian, which is why the R2P mitigates its implementation through the UN Charter. The U.S.’s immediate call for militarization entirely ignores R2P as an international norm and casts the U.S. as the victim of cartel crime instead of the Mexican civilians.

The on-going brutality of violence and repeated crimes against humanity in Mexico provide a clear argument for why militarization is inappropriate even when atrocities occur. The case against intervention argues that “people get the government that they deserve and are willing to fight for.”²⁵ The violence in Mexico is attributed to cartels but also rooted in the state. International militarization may fight one side of the problem, but the corruption within the system will remain and be strengthened. Nonviolent protest allows for self-determination and

²² King, Jennifer. “Humanitarian Intervention and the Problem of Genocide and Atrocity.” *The Routledge Handbook of Pacifism and Nonviolence*. Ed. Andrew Fiala. Routledge: New York, 2018. p.158

²³ King, Jennifer. p.159

²⁴ King, Jennifer. p.160

²⁵ King, Jennifer. p.154

autonomy by revealing the persistent truth of the situation within and surrounding Mexico. The crimes against humanity that have been committed in Mexico may engage the Responsibility to Protect doctrine in that the “wider international community has a responsibility.” For example, identifying asylum seekers, refugees, and immigrants to the United States from Mexico and Central America as illegal and criminalizing them parallels the U.S. previous actions during WWII in refusing to grant asylum to thousands of fleeing Jews.²⁶ Additionally, the challenges with violence and drugs that Mexico is facing will not go away until the United States acknowledges the truth of its liability. In their grief, La Mora community has been able to articulate what change needs to happen to create positive impact: if you want to help, lower the drug consumption in the U.S. and restrict the sale of high powered assault weapons. Both actions are nonviolent and leave the international military at home. As the R2P is a new doctrine, it remains untested. The conflict in Mexico offers an opportunity for the international community to normalize nonviolent response and mediate collaborative conflict resolution. Additionally, nonviolent protests and response to chronic violence and crimes against humanity provide a powerful example for how nonviolent protest is a better response to extreme human rights violations than militarization. However, the international response to the crisis in Mexico and the failure to utilize all options, such as R2P, prior to military intervention may instead serve to highlight persisting inequities in international law and the defense of human rights.

²⁶ King, Jennifer. p.163

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