

## Making Peace in Drug Wars

Over the past thirty years, a new form of conflict has ravaged Latin America's largest countries, with well-armed drug cartels fighting not only one another but the state itself. In Colombia, Mexico, and Brazil, leaders cracked down on cartels in hopes of restoring the rule of law and the state's monopoly on force. Instead, cartels fought back—with bullets and bribes—driving spirals of violence and corruption that make mockeries of leaders' state-building aims. Fortunately, some policy reforms quickly curtailed cartel–state conflict, but they proved tragically difficult to sustain.

Why do cartels fight states, if not to topple or secede from them? Why do some state crackdowns trigger and exacerbate cartel–state conflict, while others curb it? This study argues that brute-force repression generates incentives for cartels to fight back, while policies that condition repression on cartel violence can effectively deter cartel–state conflict. The politics of drug war, however, make conditional policies all too fragile.

Benjamin Lessing studies criminal conflict—organized armed violence involving non-state actors who do not seek formal state power. Prior to his graduate work at UC Berkeley, Lessing lived in Rio de Janeiro for four years, conducting field research on arms trafficking in Latin America and the Caribbean for non-governmental organizations including Amnesty International, Oxfam, and Viva Rio, Brazil's largest NGO.

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# Making Peace in Drug Wars

## *Crackdowns and Cartels in Latin America*

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*To my parents, for this life.*

*To Andy Kotowicz, for the music.*

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## Preface

*Complexo da Maré, Rio de Janeiro, August 17, 2016*

The first pages of a book like this are usually the last ones written, so it feels right to start (and end) it here in Maré. My earliest visits to this sprawling collection of *favelas* (slums) in 2003 opened my eyes to the absurdity of Rio's drug war, with its home-grown drug syndicates locked in a decades-long militarized conflict with brutal and corrupt police. It was here, talking with locals, that I began to understand the intertwined dynamics of violence and bribery driving and sustaining this conflict. It was here that I saw first-hand the capacity of enlightened state policy to radically transform those dynamics, mostly for the better. And it is here that I now see the tragic fragility of such policies and the terrifying resilience of this conflict.

Rio's residents have been cynically predicting for years that the "Pacification" strategy—a novel approach to policing that, since its rollout in 2008, vastly curtailed violence while re-establishing state control in some 200 favelas—would be dismantled once the 2016 Olympics ended. As I write, the Olympic flame is still burning, and many of the city's largest favelas are still Pacified, but here in Maré, the end of Pacification is in plain view. As we turn off Avenida Brasil at the entrance to the Nova Holanda neighborhood, gone is the army soldier who stood guard on my previous visit in 2015; in his place stands a teenager holding an AR-15 automatic rifle almost as long as he is tall, next to a makeshift barrier made from scrap I-beams. He looks us over through the windows we perfunctorily roll down, then waves us on with the barrel of his weapon. When our car cannot fit between the I-beams, he shouts and some nearby kids come and clear a path for us. A few blocks down the bustling street, on a busy corner, more armed youths stand around a large table stacked with small packages labeled "Crack Nova Holanda, \$2."

Except for the crack—drug syndicates used to prohibit its sale but eventually gave up—and the nifty new printed labels, the scene is indistinguishable

from my earliest visits to Maré. The lines demarcating gang turf might be invisible and the codes of behavior unspoken, but the openly armed presence of the traffickers leaves no doubt as to who holds the local monopoly on the use of force. Indeed, more shocking than the age of the traffickers or the sophistication of their operation is the fact that their presence is—for residents—unremarkable. Open-air drug markets are simply part of the landscape; nearby street stalls sell produce and cell phone accessories, while patrons of neighboring bars and beauty salons shoot the breeze. True, a house has collapsed from gunfire during a shootout with police the night before, and the cleanup efforts are creating a hopeless traffic jam on the narrow street. But this too echoes the dynamics of the past: the favela is at its most dangerous when the police enter it.

The same could have been said of most of Rio's nearly 1,000 favelas, from the mid-1980s until as recently as 2007. Then, Pacification changed everything. Surprise police incursions aimed at arresting or killing as many traffickers as possible were replaced with pre-announced occupations and, eventually, a permanent "Pacifying Police Unit" (UPP) trained to respect residents' rights. Traffickers learned to give up their turf peacefully, some fleeing to other favelas, some staying to carry on the drug trade on new terms imposed by the state: no public selling and no use of firearms. To even the skeptics' surprise, the largest and most heavily armed favelas in Rio—places dominated by drug syndicates for more than a generation—were quickly and often bloodlessly Pacified within a few years.

Maré's turn came late: occupation by army troops—the first step of the Pacification process—was finally announced in March 2013. I visited a few days before the occupation, at the urging of a friend who runs an NGO here: "You are not going to believe it." The traffickers were all gone. The street-corner tables were abandoned, the checkpoints too. "The traffickers were running around yesterday, loading up kombis with arms and whatnot. Then they all split," one resident told me. Such was the reputation of the Pacification program that Maré was Pacified without firing a shot, without, incredibly, even being occupied. That evening, as we drove through the usually heavily armed dividing line between two syndicates' turf, we turned off our headlights and rolled down our windows as always, but nobody was there to scope us out and wave us through. It was eerie.

Soon the army took up its posts, but the promised UPP unit never materialized to relieve them. For the next year and a half, Maré was in limbo, occupied by troops that the army had grudgingly agreed would stay at least until the 2014 World Cup. On a visit in 2015, the strategic points of entry and exit were still guarded by uniformed soldiers, looking understandably bewildered. These young men from across Brazil, many from the rural interior, had shown up for mandatory military service and inexplicably been sent to conduct something akin to counterinsurgency in a dense mega-slum on the periphery of their country's most famous city. They were neither eager

nor equipped to actively fight the drug trade, and a strange cohabitational arrangement coalesced, with traffickers moving off into the narrow streets where army vehicles could not go. A filmmaker friend who shot a documentary in Maré during this period told me that every day, her team would first get approval from the local army commander, then from the local drug boss.

The army announced its impending departure from Maré in 2015. The state government, facing severe resource constraints and rising crime in middle-class, non-favela neighborhoods, canceled the Maré UPP. Instead, policing practice reverted to its old ways: occasional incursions by heavily armed patrols, based outside the favela. Before long, the traffickers were back in control.

Life in Maré goes on, and not all for the worse: new schools have opened; my friend's NGO has expanded, inaugurating a branch in the rival gang's turf; citizen groups have continued to become more vocal about police abuses and politicians' broken promises, to some real effect. But as we drive out of Maré tonight, past the new generation of heavily armed teenagers in flip-flops patrolling both sides of the turf line, it is hard not to fear for the post-Olympic future of this city.

"Maré" means "tide" in Portuguese, fitting for a place that stands as Pacification's high water mark. Pacification came this far and no farther; how far it will now recede remains unclear. Traffickers have returned to attacking state forces in the larger favelas, making a mockery of the very term "Pacification"; public support has dwindled; and the strategy's formulator is retiring. Amidst Brazil's political crises and Rio's post-Olympics budget shortfalls, it is easy to imagine the entire program collapsing. Skeptics had long predicted this; to them, Pacification epitomized the old Portuguese expression *para inglês ver*—"for the English to see"<sup>1</sup>—creating Potemkin favelas for the media, NGOs, and most of all international visitors, that would inevitably crumble once the eyes of the world were off Rio.

The skeptics are wrong; Pacification was and remains more than a façade. The policy significantly curtailed a costly and murderous urban drug war, and has gone further than any predecessor in bringing some semblance of normalcy and rule of law to the city's more than one million slum residents. Pacification's advances are real, not least because they have shown what is possible. Its current malaise flows from the profoundly vexed politics of drug war, offering an opportunity to learn and, one hopes, help make the next reform more resilient.

To explain why Pacification initially succeeded where thirty years of crackdowns failed, yet soon stalled and now faces potential rollback, this book delves into the interplay among policymakers, police, and cartels. It takes a comparative approach, looking beyond Maré and Rio to other cities, countries,

<sup>1</sup> The expression apparently dates back to England's imposition of anti-slavery laws on the Portuguese empire in the early nineteenth century. In 1831, Brazil signed a law freeing its slaves, but it was just "for the English to see," and slavery continued in practice until 1888.

and time periods. While Rio's conflict was abating, cartel violence in Mexico escalated almost beyond belief, eclipsing even Colombia's harrowing drug war throughout the 1980s. These conflicts have all proven incredibly destructive and impossible to solve through force alone. Policies like Pacification, however imperfect and hard to sustain, offer real hope.

In the pages to come, I analyze these conflicts using the tools and language of contemporary political science; I develop concepts, defend claims, and draw conclusions. But readers should not let the image of life in Maré, and the fundamental perversity of this conflict, out of sight. Millions of citizens, often the most vulnerable among us, live in the crossfire of an endless war whose original purpose—protecting people from the effects of certain drugs—seems lost in the ashes. We can, we must, do better.

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## Abbreviations and Acronyms

ADA	Amigos dos Amigos [Friends of Friends drug syndicate] (Rio de Janeiro)
AR	Auto de resistência [“Act of resistance”, term for police killings of civilians] (Rio de Janeiro)
AUC	Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia [United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia, paramilitary group] (Colombia)
BOPE	Batalhão de Operações Policiais Especiais [Police Special Operations Battalion] (Rio de Janeiro)
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency (United States)
CISEN	Centro de Investigación y Seguridad Nacional [Center for Research and National Security] (Mexico)
CV	Comando Vermelho, <i>alias</i> Falange Vermelha [Red Command drug syndicate] (Rio de Janeiro)
DAS	Departamento Administrativo de Seguridad [Administrative Department of Security] (Colombia)
DEA	Drug Enforcement Agency (United States)
DFS	Dirección Federal de Seguridad [Federal Security Directorate] (Mexico)
DTO	Drug trafficking organization
<i>La Familia</i>	La Familia Michoacana [The Michoacán Family Cartel] (Mexico)
FARC	Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia [Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, rebel group] (Colombia)
FBI	Federal Bureau of Investigation (United States)
GAFES	Grupo Aeromóvil de Fuerzas Especiales [Special-Forces Airmobile Group] (Mexico)

*Abbreviations and Acronyms*

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GPAE	Grupamento de Policiamento em Áreas Especiais [Policing in Special Areas Unit] (Rio de Janeiro)
LSN	Lei de Segurança Nacional [National Security Law] (Rio de Janeiro)
M-19	Movimiento 19 de Abril [19 <sup>th</sup> of April Movement, rebel group] (Colombia)
MAS	Muerte a Secuestradores [Death to Kidnappers, militant group] (Colombia)
NSA	Non-state actor
NRI/OBIVAN	Observatorio Internacional de Violencia Asociada a Narcotráfico [Narcoviolence Research International]
PAN	Partido Acción Nacional [National Action Party] (Mexico)
PC	Policía Civil [Civil Police] (Rio de Janeiro)
PCC	Primeiro Comando da Capital [First Command of the Capital prison gang] (Rio de Janeiro)
PDT	Partido Democrático Trabalhista [Democratic Labor Party] (Rio de Janeiro)
<i>Los Pepes</i>	Personas Perseguidos por Pablo Escobar [Persons Persecuted by Pablo Escobar, armed group] (Colombia)
PF	Polícia Federal [Federal Police] (Rio de Janeiro)
PGJ	Procuraduría General de Justicia de la Ciudad de México [Office of the Attorney General of Mexico City] (Mexico)
PGR	Procuraduría General de la República [Office of the Attorney General] (Mexico)
PM	Polícia Militar [Military Police] (Rio de Janeiro)
PMDB	Partido do Movimento Democrático Brasileiro [Party of the Brazilian Democratic Movement] (Rio de Janeiro)
PRD	Partido de la Revolución Democrático [Party of the Democratic Revolution] (Mexico)
PSDB	Partido da Social Democracia Brasileira [Brazilian Social Democratic Party] (Rio de Janeiro)
PRI	Partido Revolucionario Institucional [Institutional Revolutionary Party] (Mexico)
PT	Partido dos Trabalhadores [Workers' Party] (Rio de Janeiro)
<i>Sometimiento</i>	Sometimiento a la justicia [Voluntary submission to justice, government policy] (Colombia)
SSP	Secretaría de Seguridad Pública [Public Security Secretariat] (Mexico)
UPP	Unidade de Polícia Pacificadora [Pacifying Police Unit] (Rio de Janeiro)