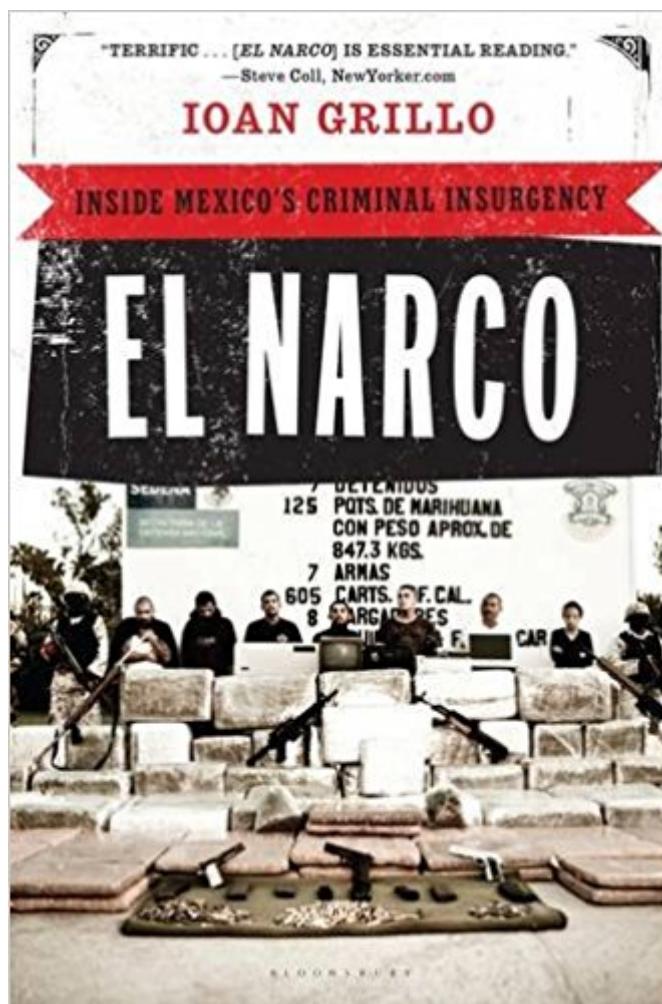


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El Narco: Inside Mexico's Criminal Insurgency



Synopsis

The world has watched, stunned, the bloodshed in Mexico. Forty thousand murdered since 2006; police chiefs shot within hours of taking office; mass graves comparable to those of civil wars; car bombs shattering storefronts; headless corpses heaped in town squares. And it is all because a few Americans are getting high. Or is it part of a worldwide shadow economy that threatens Mexico's democracy? The United States throws Black Hawk helicopters, DEA assistance, and lots of money at the problem. But in secret, Washington is at a loss. Who are these mysterious figures who threaten Mexico's democracy? What is El Narco? El Narco is not a gang; it is a movement and an industry drawing in hundreds of thousands, from bullet-riddled barrios to marijuana-covered mountains. The conflict spawned by El Narco has given rise to paramilitary death squads battling from Guatemala to the Texas border (and sometimes beyond). In this "propulsive ... high-octane" book (Publishers Weekly), Ioan Grillo draws the first definitive portrait of Mexico's cartels and how they have radically transformed in the past decade.

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Customer Reviews

"A propulsive account of the blood-soaked machinery of 'El Narco' ... Examining the trade's gunslinging culture, the motivations behind the continual ramping-up of violence, and some potential solutions to the problem, Grillo argues that America's hard-line rhetoric has failed--and that if a game-changing alternative is not implemented, the Mexican state could also fail. Given the savage chaos Grillo shows us in the country's streets and barrios, his arguments are as perceptive as his high-octane reportage."--Publishers Weekly "El Narco" is riveting, authoritative reporting from the

front lines of the Mexican drug wars. What's happening there has explosive potential consequences for every American, and Ioan Grillo's book shows you why."--Dan Rather, Founder and Anchor, HDNet's "Dan Rather Reports." "" "It is hard enough to report the facts of Mexico's crazy death spiral of drug violence. Ioan Grillo goes much, much deeper. He explains why El Narco threatens the soul of this beautiful country. He tells us how we got here.""--"William Booth, bureau chief for Mexico, Central America, and the Caribbean, "Washington Post" "Not since Elaine Shannon's "Desperados" has a book shown us the lawless horrors of the drug war with the kind of gripping human detail that confronts us in "El Narco." Ioan Grillo explores that world as deeply as few journalists have dared, but he also examines it artfully and broadly: he puts the tragedy in a rich historical context that indicts not only Mexican and Latin American politicos but [analyzes how] Mexico came to control drug trafficking, how it spreads, and what can be done about it...This excellent work packs the punch of Roberto Saviano's "Gomorrah," an exploration of the Italian Mafia, which also displays the fruits of direct reporting bolstered by intensive interviewing."--"Booklist" (starred review) "'El Narco' is riveting, authoritative reporting from the front lines of the Mexican drug wars. What's happening there has explosive potential consequences for every American, and Ioan Grillo's book shows you why."--Dan Rather, Founder and Anchor, HDNet's "Dan Rather Reports." "" "It is hard enough to report the facts of Mexico's crazy death spiral of drug violence. Ioan Grillo goes much, much deeper. He explains why El Narco threatens the soul of this beautiful country. He tells us how we got here.""--"William Booth, bureau chief for Mexico, Central America, and the Caribbean, "Washington Post" "Not since Elaine Shannon's "Desperados" has a book shown"Graphic and fast-paced history"--"Mother Jones" "" "Effectively [analyzes how] Mexico came to control drug trafficking, how it spreads, and what can be done about it...This excellent work packs the punch of Roberto Saviano's "Gomorrah", an exploration of the Italian Mafia, which also displays the fruits of direct reporting bolstered by intensive interviewing."--"Booklist" (starred review) "'El Narco' is riveting, authoritative reporting from the front lines of the Mexican drug wars. What's happening there has explosive potential consequences for every American, and Ioan Grillo's book shows you why."--Dan Rather, Founder and Anchor, HDNet's "Dan Rather Reports". "" "It is hard enough to report the facts of Mexico's crazy death spiral of drug violence. Ioan Grillo goes much, much deeper. He explains why El Narco threatens the soul of this beautiful country. He tells us how we got here.""--"William Booth, bureau chief for Mexico, Central America, and the Caribbean, "Washington Post" "Not"Grillo's book is terrific--full of vivid front-line reporting; diverse interviews; a sense of history; a touch of social science; clarifying statistics; and realistic reviews of what might be done to improve things, none of it easy. It is

essential reading."--Steve Coll, *NewYorker.com* "Grillo takes advantage of his sources to provide insight on the drug war from nearly every angle, from the American government's longstanding attempts to stifle trafficking there to the national history that underpins much of the current narco culture... The book is a useful corrective to the common American idea that Mexico is just one big homogenous bloodbath south of Texas. ... filled with the sort of unforgettable details to which only a reporter who has been on this beat for years would be privy."--*Boston Globe* "Graphic and fast-paced history"--Mother Jones "" ""El Narco" achieves something unattempted in the English-language reporting on the Mexican drug war: it lays out in clear terms the contours of a world that has existed for years and only grown more barbaric as it's graduated to "war" status. Since that world is right next door, it's high time that English-language readers are able to learn just what makes it tick."--*Bookforum* "The strength of "El Narco" lies in its shoe-leather reporting; Grillo interviews everyone from a former cartel assassin to DEA agents to grieving families, snitches, pot and poppy farmers, illegal immigrants and gangbangers. He's the sort of journalist who'll pop into a plastic surgery clinic or taqueria if it turns up on a list of cartel-linked businesses, just to see what he can see. Writers this knowledgeable about the subject and with no particular ax to grind are rare."--*Salon* "Ivan Grillo delivers the first authoritative and comprehensive examination of the unprecedented mafia violence that has taken so many lives, shaken the Mexican state and spooked the Americans...this is the book to read to understand the homicidal madness just

Ivan Grillo has covered Mexico since 2001 for top newspapers, magazines, and TV stations in the U.S. and the UK. He reports for *Time* as well as producing presentations for PBS, ABC, and Channel 4 (UK). He regularly appears on radio and TV, commenting on Mexican crime and other issues. He has witnessed police and military operations, mafia killings and major drug seizures; he has discussed the drug war with two Mexican presidents, three attorneys general, and the U.S. ambassador to Mexico, among others.

El Narco is a gripping history of the Mexican drug cartels. Grillo is an expert on the drug cartels and their history. Although Grillo is British he seems to have spent much of his life covering the cartels. A Mexican writer who penned such an exhaustive history would probably have been killed. Perhaps because Grillo writes in English, he has not been targeted. In the United States we have a number of euphemistic wars. We have wars on poverty and cancer. President Richard Nixon was the first to proclaim the war on some drugs. In Mexico the drug war is not a euphemism. Tens of thousands of people have died in Mexico as a result of the drug cartels, many of them killed in

horrible ways. Years ago, when the Mexican PRI political party was still solidly in control of Mexico, I traveled in Mexico on several occasions. I have also known many Mexican people in the United States. The Mexican culture and people are not a culture that I would think of as being capable of extreme barbarity. Yet *El Narco* is a story of the extreme barbarity that has warped Mexican society. The barbaric acts that the Islamic State has become infamous for, beheading, mass execution and exploitation of women, may have been pioneered by the drug cartels. *El Narco* is an account of a failed state that is unable to resist the drug cartels. *El Narco* is a story of the complete corruption of the Mexican state, on a Federal level and, especially, on a local level. Mexicans sometimes lay the blame for the drug war on the United States, which is the source of the vast amounts of money that flow into the drug cartels, corrupting Mexican society. There is obvious truth in this assertion. But this river of illegal money does not necessarily lead to the mass barbarism of the drug cartels. Grillo recounts that tens of thousands of South American migrants have been kidnapped and held for ransoms of \$1000 or so. The fate of some of those kidnapped have been mass graves. The river of illegal money does not necessarily lead to thousands of torture killings. As Grillo points out, cultures are unique. Mexico is not the same as Columbia. The barbarity and corruption of the cartel insurgency in Mexico cannot be entirely blamed on external forces. There was a time when the Mexican government made sure that serious crime did not impact the tourist areas. Those days are over. Gun battles have taken place in all of the major tourist areas, either between the drug cartels or between a cartel and the Federal government. Scaring away tourists may not matter much to the Mexican economy anymore since the flow of money from drugs is larger than tourism. The Mexican government also seems to be powerless to do anything about the violence. I visited Ensenada last year. I will never step foot in Mexico again. When I was traveling through Ensenada the tour guide pointed to a seaside housing development. She said that the houses cost hundreds of thousands of dollars and many belonged to Americans. Buying expensive real estate in a compromised state like Mexico seems to be either an act of ignorance or denial ("the drug war will not affect me"). The narco insurgency (as Grillo describes it) is easy to ignore since on the surface Mexico seems like a functional second world country. Stores sell international brands like Samsung and people go about their day to day lives. Until the narco insurgency reaches out and touches your life. Grillo writes about the narco cartels branching out from narcotics into kidnapping and protection. In the cities where the cartels are active, according to Grillo, businesses are forced to pay a "tax" to the cartels. The thought experiment that I suggest for a North American who has or is thinking about buying real estate in Mexico is this: If someone comes to you and tells you that you will be paying a monthly "mordida", what recourse do you have other than paying? Going to the police will probably

be ineffective since they may be working for the people shaking you down. An even worse scenario could be that you or someone in your family is kidnapped. Grillo has terrifying and tragic accounts of Mexican families who have had a family member kidnapped. Being an North American is does not immunize you from crimes like this. The Mexican government bitterly objects to the characterization of Mexico as a failed state. While Mexico will probably never reach the level of failure that Somalia has, the rule of law, which is the foundation of a functioning state, has failed in the Mexico described by Ioan Grillo. The United States and Mexican governments do manage to capture or kill drug lords. What El Narco makes clear is that as each drug lord is taken out, a new one takes their place. As the South American cocaine producers and the Mexican Narcos have become more efficient, the cost of drugs had dropped. The billions that the United States DEA spends combating drugs has had no effect in the decades since President Nixon first declared the start of the War on Drugs. El Narco is not only a history of violence but a history of massive policy failure. At the end of El Narco Ioan Grillo writes that the only thing that has succeeded in reducing the money that the cartels take in is the legalization and decriminalization of Marijuana. Medical Marijuana is available in a number of states and several states have legalized it. As this has happened, the market for smuggled Marijuana has started to dry up. Ioan Grillo's book El Narco is well worth reading. For those who would prefer an accurate fictional account, I highly recommend Don Winslow's books The Power of the Dog and its sequel The Cartel. Don Winslow's book so closely follow the events recounted in El Narco that they could be labeled historical fiction.

Violence in Mexico as a result of the drug trade has boomed in the past ten years. Estimates are of 160,000 dead in the past ten years, with a million displaced. This includes years of averaging 20,000 dead. This violence is concentrated in the North, where cartels move drugs over the border in an operation that earns them an estimate \$30 billion a year. That number makes it the second largest international contributor to Mexico's economy, ahead of remittances and behind oil. All of this information is difficult to track, as drug businesses aren't in the open. Grillo does a great job of going in-depth on it however. Every section of the drug industry is examined, from history to drug culture. Violence has grown as the government has fought to contain it, as narcos stepped up to the challenge of increased enforcement. Today there are even ex-military branches fighting against the Mexican government. There is debate over whether or not these groups are insurgents or simply gangsters. It is clear however that the drug war has no signs of slowing. Increased enforcement will not work. Drug abuse in countries like Iran is still rampant, despite harsher penalties than the US would ever allow. Now is the time to move towards decriminalization or legalizing less harmful

substances, as the prohibition has been a massive failure, especially South of the border.

In the last five years or so, the horrific violence across the Rio Grande has made headlines in the USA. There are articles about seemingly random gun battles in major cities, executions of drug "players," police, and even journalists covering the story. The book "El Narco" provides historical context and gripping reporting about this terrible situation. The reader learns that the "Mexican drug trade" for the US started with the smuggling of opium across the border to fuel the needs of Chinese workers in the 19th century. In the 1960s, the rise in marijuana consumption led to importation of this drug. The successful Federal (US) efforts to shut down Florida as a route for Cocaine smuggling in the 1980s led to use of Mexico, with its large border, as the alternative pathway. The book also explains how and why the violence has escalated so dramatically in the last few years, stemming in part from the end of one party political rule, and perhaps more importantly, the morphing of police/soldiers in Mexico from passive players (taking bribes) to active players, culminating in the rise of the Zetas, an almost unbelievably brutal drug organization. Like any good reporter, the author provides telling details. A graphic example involves the take down of a major drug kingpin in an operation which resulted in fatalities amongst the soldiers/police who did the job. Gunmen from the kingpin's organization infiltrated the funeral of one of the soldiers, and murdered several family members. That is the way the game is played South of the Border. My one (minor) criticism concerns the final chapter, in which the author provides suggested approaches which might help stem the violent tide. These ideas (e.g., decriminalization/legalization of pot, more outreach in the poor areas to give youth alternatives to the drug "trade") are worthy of more explanation and analysis than provided in the book. Overall, an excellent book on a very important topic, and well worth the time.

This is a really well written and interesting book. Contrary to some reviews, I do not find that the text is disorganized- it seems to retain its cohesion throughout the book. I particularly enjoyed the history of narcotics trafficking in Mexico that the author provided. It is amazing and frightening that these cartels have managed to do what they have done in Mexico.

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