

The Mexican Drug War Has Become A Hot Market for U.S. Weapons Sales

U.S.-Backed Programs Supplying the Firepower for Mexico's Soaring Murder Rate

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Felipe Calderón's Drug War Has Become Hot Market for U.S. Arms Trade

The dollar value of U.S. private-sector weapons shipments to Mexico in fiscal year 2009 exceeded the value of private arms shipments to two other major conflict regions elsewhere in the world, Iraq and Afghanistan, and even outpaced the value of arms shipped to one of the United States' staunchest allies, Israel.

U.S. private-sector suppliers shipped a total of \$177 million worth of defense articles — which includes items like military aircraft, firearms and explosives — to Mexico in fiscal 2009, which ended Sept. 30 of that year.

By comparison, over the same period, private arms companies in the U.S. shipped \$40 million worth of weapons to Afghanistan; \$126 million to Iraq; and \$131 million to Israel.

In fact, Colombia, the source of most of the world's cocaine and a major battlefield in the so-called war on drugs, received only \$30 million in private-sector arms shipments from the U.S. in fiscal 2009.

The onslaught of weapons that hit Mexico in fiscal 2009 via these legal commercial exports is multiplied even further by the thousands of additional illegal weapons that the U.S. Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF) allegedly allowed to cross the border into Mexico, unchecked, as part of what appears to be a seriously flawed operation known as Fast and Furious — which was launched in October 2009. 

This double whammy of deadly firepower pouring into Mexico through these U.S.-sanctioned programs also coincides with a major spike in Mexico's murder rate over the same period.

The revelation of Mexico's emergence as a leading market for the private-sector arms trade in fiscal 2009 surfaced after an examination of the most recently available figures for the State Department program that oversees foreign arms sales by U.S. companies.

Under that program, the U.S. State Department requires private companies in the United States to obtain an export license in order to sell defense hardware or services to foreign purchasers — which include both government units and private buyers in other countries. These arms deals are known as Direct Commercial Sales (DCS). Each year, the State Department issues a report tallying the volume and dollar amount of DCS items approved

for export and shipped — with the [most recent report](#) covering fiscal 2009.

Narco News [reported in March 2009](#) that the deadliest of the weapons now in the hands of criminal groups in Mexico, particularly along the U.S. border, by any reasonable standard of an analysis of the facts, appear to be getting into that nation through perfectly legal private-sector arms exports authorized under programs such as DCS.

Between 2005 and 2009, nearly \$60 billion worth of U.S. defense articles were exported globally by U.S. private companies via the DCS program, according to a recent Government Accountability Office ([GAO](#)) [report](#).

In addition to the \$177 million in defense hardware shipped by private U.S. companies to Mexico in fiscal 2009, some \$204 million in arms were shipped to Mexico in fiscal year 2008, according to DCS data compiled by the State Department. Now, war zones like Iraq and Afghanistan dwarfed Mexico in terms of DCS arms [shipments in fiscal 2008](#), with a total of \$3.8 billion collectively, but in terms of actual DCS arms shipments in fiscal 2009, according to the State Department data, Mexico beat out both of them — as private-sector arms shipments to Iraq and Afghanistan fell off sharply.

At the same time that hundreds of millions of dollars in legal arms shipments were crossing the border into Mexico through the DCS program, the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives, or the ATF, allegedly was allowing thousands of illegally purchased firearms to be smuggled into Mexico by warring narco-trafficking organizations.

As part of its Fast and Furious operation, launched in October 2009, some 2,000 or more firearms illegally purchased in the U.S. were allegedly allowed to “walk” (or be smuggled under ATF’s watch) across the border in a supposed effort by the federal law enforcement agency to target the kingpins behind Mexico’s gun-running enterprises, [ATF whistleblowers contend](#).

This flood of weapons, including high-powered assault rifles and even military-grade munitions, coursing into Mexico in fiscal 2008 and fiscal 2009 via the DCS program and ATF’s Fast and Furious seems to have been, in part, the catalyst for a huge spike in narco-related bloodshed in the country.

According to a report issued in February of this year by the [Trans-Border Institute](#) at the University of San Diego, narco-trafficking-related homicides in Mexico jumped from 2,826 in 2007 to 6,837 in 2008, and spiked again in 2009, hitting a record 9,614. In 2010, the homicide mark shot up to 15,273.

Those three years (2008-2010) account for the bulk of the nearly 40,000 drug-war murders since President Felipe Calderon of Mexico declared his war on the “cartels” in late 2006 and subsequently inserted the Mexican military into that battle.

WikiLeaks cables

It is clear that most of the guns allowed to cross the border under ATF’s Fast and Furious operation went directly into the hands of criminals, given those guns were purchased as part of criminal conspiracies being tracked by ATF.

However, even though [serious narco-corruption exists](#) within law enforcement and the

military in Mexico (the very parties who are the end-users of legally imported weapons), the path that DCS arms shipment diversions follow to the criminal world remains illusive.


The whistleblower Web site WikiLeaks, though, recently released a State Department cable, drafted in November 2009, that sheds some light on how these diversions seem to be carried out. But first, it's important to understand the path of DCS weapons shipped to Mexico.

Jason Greer, public affairs officer for the Bureau of Political-Military Affairs at the Department of State, told Narco News previously that "all firearms licenses approved by [the State Department] for commercial resale in Mexico are exported to the Ministry of Defense (MOD), Mexico."

Greer added:

The MOD is the import authority for firearms and is also responsible for licensing of Mexican firearms dealers. Upon receipt of the firearms, the MOD transfers the firearms to the end-user authorized on the [State Department-issued] export license.

The Mexican [Ministry of Defense](#), of course, oversees the Mexican military. In fact, a reading of Mexico's [firearms law](#) reveals that the Defense Ministry has a monopoly on approving and overseeing all licenses, sales, transport and storage of arms and munitions in Mexico, whether for private-sector players or other government units — including municipal, state and federal law enforcement units.

So, if you are a smart narco-trafficker, and they are smart, it might pay to spread some money and influence around Mexico's Ministry of Defense, or to have your people inside the organizations that are the ultimate recipients of the weapons (such as Mexico's local, state and federal security forces) to assure the necessary diversion of firearms to your cause. 

And it is that latter scenario that the State Department cable released by WikiLeaks earlier this month reveals is likely the scenario in play. Essentially, the cable establishes state-level government employees, such as the police — many of whom are on the payrolls of narco-trafficking organizations — as the weak link in the DCS chain.

Following are the key passages from [the cable](#), drafted on Nov. 30, 2009, which reveals that the ultimate destination of an assault weapon found at a crime scene — one of a batch of more than 1,000 rifles shipped via the DCS program — was the "government" in the Mexican state of Michoacan.

Blue lantern coordinators [who are charged monitoring DCS weapons shipments] requested that Poloff [political officers] investigate the circumstances surrounding the recovery of an U.S. licensed AR-15 rifle from a Mexican crime scene and substantiate the chain of custody from the supplier to the end user. The investigative branch of the Mexican Attorney General (PGR CENAPI) used E-trace to determine that the last legal point of sale was [U.S.-based gun manufacturer] Bushmaster International, LLC. Realizing that the recovered weapon was part of a USG [U.S. government] licensed [DCS] sale, Bushmaster notified the State Department.

... This investigation tracked the chain of custody for the weapon through the

following entities: the U.S. supplier, the U.S. manufacture representative in Mexico, the Mexican customs-broker, the Mexican Army, and the State Government of Michoacan.

... On the basis of this **and similar cases**, [emphasis added] it is not evident that government officials at the state [level in Mexico] apply strict enforcement measures to track the chain of custody of weapons once SEDENA [Mexico's Secretariat of National Defense, which oversees the Army] transfers them from its custody to the custody of state officials. Given the lack of accountability for weapons once they arrive at the state level, U.S. law enforcement agencies have fair reason to worry that a number of weapons simply "disappear."

... Post believes both the USG and the GOM [government of Mexico] need to take a more systematic approach to tracking weapon transfers to the state level and beyond to the final end user. We support the Blue Lantern Coordinator's proposal that his office bundle, according to region, the cases of firearms recovered from crime scenes. Mission Mexico's ICE and ATF Attaches would then approach the Mexico Attorney General PGR's International Relations Office with a list of the serial numbers of confiscated weapons that had been transferred to state authorities and request a fuller accounting for how these weapons ended up in the hands of criminals. ...

And yet another case of DCS weapons shipments coming under the scrutiny of State Department investigators is revealed in a separate set of U.S. Embassy cables made public by WikiLeaks.

In one of those cables, released on April 4, the State Department's Defense Trade Controls Compliance office orders a review of a shipment of rifles and ammunition "of significantly heavy caliber" that had been directed to "the presidential guard, or **Estado Mayor** Presidencial [emphasis added]."

The [cable notes](#) that the Estado Mayor "has never previously been party to a U.S. export license for firearms or ammunition."

"This check is to confirm receipt of these defense articles and verify security of the items," the cable states.

The end result of that check is not known, because follow-up cables have not been made available, at least at this point, by WikiLeaks.

However, [another State Department cable](#) released by WikiLeaks on Feb. 21 of this year points out that "a mid-level Mexican Army major was arrested in late December 2008 for assisting drug traffickers and providing them with limited information about the activities and travel plans of Mexican President Felipe Calderon."

That Mexican Army major, according to the State Department cable, had been "assigned to the **Estado Mayor** [emphasis added] ... the unit responsible for protecting Mexico's president, to secure the periphery around the president's location" — and the same unit that had acquired the high-powered ammunition through the DCS program.

Narco News queried officials with several think tanks in Washington, D.C., who have expertise in the arms trade or organized crime in Mexico, to get their read on DCS arms diversions in Mexico.

Andrew Selee, director of the [Wilson Center's](#) Mexico Institute, was asked if he believed that the diversion of licensed U.S. arms sales to criminal elements in Mexico is a major problem.

His response: "It's an intriguing point."

Matt Schroeder, director of the Federation of American Scientists' [Arms Sales Monitoring Project](#), replied to the same question by saying:

I know of no specific reports of diversion of firearms and other weapons sold under a DCS license, but I also have not conducted research specifically on that topic.

When asked to comment on the evidence contained in the State Department cables released by WikiLeaks, Schroeder said the Arms Sales Monitoring Project does "not post, cite or comment on WikiLeaks cables."

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