

MEXIDATA . INFO

Special 031609 Logan

Monday, March 16, 2009

The Evolution of 'Los Zetas,' a Mexican Crime Organization

By Sam Logan

- *From the original 31 members, the Mexican organized criminal faction Los Zetas has grown into an organization in its own right, operating separate from the Gulf Cartel and just as violent*

Between the first of the year and mid-March, 2009, the Mexican criminal organization most commonly known as "Los Zetas" has been busy. Members of this group have been linked to a death threat delivered to the president of Guatemala, a grenade thrown into a bar in Pharr, Texas, the death of a high-ranking military general in Cancun, and a fair share of the organized crime-related deaths registered this year in Mexico.

Many journalists and analysts who write about Los Zetas still refer to this group as the enforcement branch of the Gulf Cartel. This was a true description when the original 31 Special Forces soldiers abandoned the Mexican military to protect a young, upcoming leader of the Gulf Cartel, Osiel Cardenas Guillen. But today the Zetas have evolved into a separate entity with its own agenda. And it doesn't take orders from the Gulf Cartel.

The original 31 "Zetas" saw to it that at least another ten men were trained. Members of Los Zetas, along with Cardenas, bribed, threatened and cajoled local and state police to assist with that protection detail. In most areas where the Gulf Cartel operated, local and state police formed the outer rings of a four or five ring-deep security detail for Cardenas and other top leaders of the Gulf Cartel. The Zetas remained at the inner rings, providing close protection support, and acting on the wishes of Cardenas and their leader, Arturo Guzman Decenas, known as Z1, and the man for whom Los Zetas was named.

But that was in 2003, when the Mexican Defense Ministry separated out Los Zetas as the most formidable death squad to have worked for organized crime in Mexican history. At that time there were perhaps some 300 members of Los Zetas: 30 or so original military deserters and the men they trained. Across the landscape of Mexican organized crime, no one could compete. These men were intelligence specialists and experts with a number of different types of weapons and operational tactics.

In many ways, these men innovated paramilitary tactics in use by organized crime today. Many agree that these men raised the bar in the Mexican criminal underworld, forcing Cardenas' rivals to find former military soldiers of their own, just so they could compete.

Until Cardenas' extradition to the US, where he has awaited trial in Houston, Texas since January, 2007, members of Los Zetas guarded the Gulf Cartel's most important sections of turf, especially Nuevo Laredo, where in 2005 many

observed the initial escalation of violence that has so many worried today.

But the dominance of Los Zetas couldn't last. Over time, many of the original 31 have been killed, and a number of younger, ambitious men have filled the vacuum, forming something that resembles what Los Zetas used to be, but still very far from the professionalism and efficient style of the original Zetas.

The term Los Zetas, some argue, has been turned into a brand name – a calling card used to control businessmen and politicians deemed useful to further the advances of either the Gulf Cartel, the new Zetas Organization, or even smaller groups who have capitalized on the name brand but have very little connection to the Gulf Cartel or the Zetas Organization.

Los Zetas vs. the Zetas Organization

"Most of the original Zetas are gone, but the legacy of the Zetas still lives on," Jose Wall, Senior Special Agent with the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives told ISN Security Watch. He added that the current version of the Zetas carries a "more brutal mindset" and apart from military and police deserters relies on a force of regular guys who have very little training with no future and no job to speak of.

Ralph Reyes, chief of the Mexico and Central America division for Global Enforcement at the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), echoed Wall's sentiments. Reyes pointed out in a recent phone call that one of the factors that have always separated the Zetas from other armed criminal groups in Mexico is their willingness to engage in firefights.

That is partially why most of the original 31 Zetas are either in custody or dead. What followed in their wake is called the Zetas Organization by an intelligence officer in the US who focuses on Mexican organized crime and spoke with ISN Security Watch, but asked not to be named. The Zetas Organization, he agrees, is very powerful in its own right and beholden to none, not even the current leaders of the Gulf Cartel. Unlike Los Zetas of old, the Zetas Organization operates more like a network comprised of isolated cells that all maintain control over a certain slice of turf between the US/Mexico border from El Paso east, moving south along Mexico's eastern coast, south through Veracruz, and east through Tabasco, and into the Yucatan peninsula.

"Back in the PRI days, the rule of the game was different," Dr. George Grayson, a Latin American politics professor at The College of William and Mary in Virginia, US, and a senior associate at the Washington-based think tank Center for Strategic and International Studies, told ISN Security Watch. "Now the members of the Zetas are young and mean, and they don't take orders from anyone."

The men and women who form part of this network likely number in the thousands. They operate a range of illicit businesses from the regular extortion of street vendors to charging other groups for passage through their territory, to gun and drug smuggling, human smuggling, kidnapping for ransom, money laundering and the operation of a vast network of illegal businesses.

Surrounding this organization is a larger than life myth, a sort of Zeta brand name that some criminals use just to scare their targets, explains Howard Campbell, professor of anthropology at the University of Texas at El Paso.

"The Zetas have become something of a myth like Pancho Villa," Campbell said, adding, "their origins are obscure, and no one knows how many there are."

The Zetas' Intelligence Networks

Part of what made Cardenas so powerful as an organized crime boss was his ability to smooth talk people into working for him. Like everyone else in his line



of work, he didn't hesitate to offer bribes, but unlike others he was able to maintain a very well organized network of individuals who serviced him and his Zetas with a constant flow of information.

For a while the Zetas were considered the best-informed paramilitary force in Mexico. But once Cardenas left Mexico to face justice in Houston, he took with him the connections to a large number of individuals who spoke only to him, successfully ripping out a large section of the Gulf Cartel's tightly woven intelligence network.

"Osiel's extradition broke up networks, and the Zetas now intimidate rather than bribe," Bruce Bagley, chairman of the Department of International Studies at the University of Miami, told ISN Security Watch.

One of the original Zetas, Heriberto Lazcano, aka "El Lazca," and Cardenas' brother, Ezequiel Cardenas Guillen, aka "Tony Tormenta," took over control of the Gulf Cartel in January 2007, and have been able to keep the organization together until today, according to Ricardo Ravelo, a Mexican journalist who has closely followed Mexican organized crime for the Mexican news weekly *Proceso*.

Yet they have not been able to rein in the growing network and name that grew out of the time when Los Zetas were the most feared death squad in Mexico.

The Gulf Cartel still maintains a robust intelligence network across Mexico and deep into the US, especially in Houston and Dallas, and in cities located across the southeast and well into the mid-Atlantic and northeast, but it does not compete with the networks maintained by the old guard of drug traffickers, and Cardenas' rivals like "El Chapo" Guzman who has kept his decades' old networks in play.

Today, the Gulf Cartel relies more on intelligence gathered from a broad group of less sophisticated sources, argues Grayson. "Street vendors buy from the Zetas or they are killed," Grayson explained in a recent phone call with ISN Security Watch.

"They operate a very well developed grass roots network," he added, echoing a 31 December article published by the Mexican daily *El Universal*. Entitled "Inside Los Zetas," the article explained how small-time shop owners, men who stand on highway overpasses, and a regularly updated list of local and state politicians and police officers all serve as look outs and informants for the Zetas Organization.

Grayson also explained that the Zetas are not as focused on high-level, federal politicians, preferring to keep close ties with local and state officials. "If they do go after a high-level politician, it's only to make sure they control him when he comes back to the state level to become governor or something similar," Grayson said.

Crossing the Border

Nevertheless, the Zetas Organization remains a formidable criminal faction, operating both in Mexico and, to an extent, inside the US. Rumors of training camps continue to circulate, and there is proof that this organization knows how to amass weaponry. In November 2008, Mexican military soldiers seized from a Gulf Cartel safe house in the Mexican border state of Tamaulipas the largest cache of weapons ever discovered in Mexican history: over 500 firearms, including .50 caliber Barrett sniper rifles, rocket and grenade launchers, assault rifles and over a half-million rounds of ammunition.

At the time of the discovery, many analysts in the US considered the cache as a bold statement of what the Gulf Cartel intends to do. Some headlines even read that the Zetas "prepared for war."

Speculation about highly trained members of Los Zetas crossing the US border to hunt down and kill civilian targets seemed to be confirmed when a group of men dressed like a Phoenix police SWAT team entered a house and killed a Jamaican drug trafficker in June 2008.

Police in Birmingham, Alabama, who responded to a multiple homicide in a suburban apartment complex in August 2008, suspected Zeta involvement in the death of a number of Mexican men, found with their throats cut. Money and drugs in the apartment were not disturbed. Police in Georgia suspected Zeta involvement when they discovered that a man had been bound and tortured in the basement of a house near Atlanta.

Yet in none of these cases have authorities publically confirmed that members of the original Zetas carried out these hits, often referred to as "account adjustments" in Mexico. While it remains unlikely that Mexican members of the Zetas Organization cross the border to maim and kill rivals, there is strong evidence that connects Mexican organized crime with a robust and widespread prison gang population in both California and Texas.

The Barrio Azteca and Texas Syndicate prison gangs are most likely the Zeta operatives inside the US. There may also be some links to the Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13), as well as other, smaller groups. Yet these groups are contractors, hired for one job, maybe two, explained the intelligence officer. But there is little to no evidence to suggest that these groups operate on some sort of retainer, or use the Zeta name to spread fear inside the US.

Back in Mexico, however, the Zeta Organization has become more and more of a headache, both for the Mexican government and for the organizations' rivals.

During a conference call on 6 March with journalists, US Senator John Cornyn said that the Gulf and the Sinaloa drug trafficking organizations – including, presumably, the Zetas Organization – could together muster an army of some 100,000 guns. Compared to the 130,000 troops within Mexico's regular army, it appears that Mexican organized crime is powerful enough to topple a nation, but Campbell, speaking to the cyclic nature of Mexican organized crime, warned against making such assumptions.

"There's a system of cartel infiltration in the government for its own benefit, and this system has been going on for 50 years," Campbell said.

"This short term, sensationalistic treatment [of Mexican drug trafficking organizations] is not going to ruin the US or overthrow the Mexican government."

This article was originally published at [ISN Security Watch](#) (03/11/09). The International Relations and Security Network (ISN) is a free public service that provides a wide range of high-quality and comprehensive products and resources to encourage the exchange of information among international relations and security professionals worldwide.

[Sam Logan](#) is an investigative journalist who has reported on security, energy, politics, economics, organized crime, terrorism and black markets in Latin America since 1999. He is a senior correspondent for [ISN Security Watch](#), and editor of [Southern Pulse – Networked Intelligence](#). He is the author of ***This is for the Mara Salvatrucha: Inside the MS-13, America's Most Violent Gang***, forthcoming from Hyperion in the summer of 2009. For issues related publications go to <http://www.samuellogan.com/publications.html>.

Reprinted with permission from ISN

