



Los Zetas

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Los Zetas is the criminal [mercenary army](#) for [Mexico's Gulf Cartel](#).^{[1][2][3][4]} The group was founded by former [Mexican Army elite soldiers](#) and is now formed by ex-federal, state, and local police officers, as well as ex-Kaibiles, bringing a total force of over 4000 men.

Los Zetas are now led by [Heriberto "El Lazca" Lazcano](#) and are considered by the [Drug Enforcement Administration](#) (DEA) as probably being the most technologically advanced, sophisticated and violent of [paramilitary](#) enforcement group.^[5] Los Zetas have expanded their negotiations to the rest of the world, now having deals in Italy with the 'Ndrangheta.^[6]

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Los Zetas

Dates of operation	1999–present
Leader	Heriberto "El Lazca" Lazcano
Active region(s)	Mexico

Etymology

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The group's name *Los Zetas* is given after it's first leader, Lieutenant Arturo Guzmán Decena, whose [Federal Preventive Police radio code](#) was "Z1".^[1] a code given to high-ranking officers.^{[2][3][4]}

History

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In the late 1990s, the Gulf Cartel leader, [Osiel Cardenas Guillen](#), wanted to track down and kill rival cartel members as a form of protection. He began to recruit former [Mexican Army's](#) elite Grupo Aeromóvil de Fuerzas Especiales (GAFE) soldiers, originally trained in [counter-insurgency](#) and locating and apprehending [drug cartel](#) members. It is believed that they were originally trained at the military [School of the Americas](#) in the [United States](#)^{[8][9]} and by other foreign specialists of the [United States](#), [France](#) and [Israel](#). They were trained in [rapid deployment](#), [aerial assaults](#), [marksmanship](#), [ambushes](#), small-group tactics, intelligence collection, [counter-surveillance](#) techniques, prisoner rescues and sophisticated communications.

Cardenas Guillen's top recruit, Lieutenant Arturo Guzmán Decena, brought with him approximately 30 other GAFE deserters enticed by salaries substantially higher than those paid by the Mexican government. The role of Los Zetas was soon expanded, collecting debts, securing [cocaine](#) supply and trafficking routes known as *plazas* and executing its foes, often with grotesque savagery.^{[2][5]} After the [Mexican Army](#) killed Guzmán in November 2002 and captured his second-in-command, Rogelio González Pizaña on October 2004, [Heriberto Lazcano](#) ascended to the leadership of the paramilitaries. In response to such aggressive efforts on the part of the Zetas to defend and control its smuggling corridors to the [United States](#), the rival [Sinaloa Cartel](#) established its own heavily-armed enforcer gang, [Los Negros](#). The group operates in a similar fashion to the Zetas but with less complexity.

Upon the arrest of Gulf Cartel boss, Osiel Cardenas Guillen in 2003, it is believed Los Zetas began transporting their own drug shipments through former Gulf Cartel routes^[4] and made a collaboration pact with the Beltran Leyva brothers gang to head the cartel.^{[10][11]}

Organization structure

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Los Zetas have set up camps in which to train recruits as well as ex-federal, state, and local police officers. In addition, they have invited into their ranks ex-Kaibiles from [Guatemala](#). Current estimates place Los Zetas around 4000 members strong, which includes several rogue [Kaibil](#) members. Los Zetas' training locations have been identified as containing the same items and setup as GAFE training facilities, it is also further believed the group employs the same internal organizational structure.

Los Zetas are primarily based in the border region of [Nuevo Laredo](#), with hundreds more throughout the country. In Nuevo Laredo it is believed they have carved the city into territories, placing lookouts at arrival destinations such as [airports](#), [bus stations](#) and main roads.^[3] In addition to conducting activities along the border, they are visible throughout the Gulf Coast region, in the Southern states of [Tabasco](#), [Yucatan](#), [Quintana Roo](#), and [Chiapas](#), and in the Pacific Coast states of [Guerrero](#), [Oaxaca](#), and [Michoacán](#), as well as in Mexico City.^[12] Evidence also indicates that they may be active in Texas, other U.S. states^[13] and in Italy with the 'Ndrangheta.^[6]

Tactics

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The group is extremely well armed, they wear [body armor](#) and some wear [Kevlar](#) ballistic helmets; their arsenal includes AR-15 and AK-47 rifles, MP5 submachine guns, 50 cal. machine guns, [grenade launchers](#), surface-to-air missiles, [dynamite](#) and helicopters.^[5] They are known to operate with modern [wiretapping equipment](#) and purchase the [cellular phone](#) codes of their intended targets directly from the phone companies and providers.^[citation needed]

Los Zetas is known to operate with a higher tactical degree than the local authorities, often uniformed as [Federal Preventive Police](#) and driving similarly labeled vehicles. During one shootout against law enforcement the group employed [grenade launchers](#) and 50 cal. machine guns.^[2] The group has been linked to monitoring and [kidnapping](#) of journalists, and the murder of rival cartel members and their families.^[3] Los Zetas gang has been known to hire local gangs such as the [Texas Syndicate](#), [MS-13](#) and [Hermanos de Pistoleros Latinos](#) to carry out [contract killings](#).^{[3][14]} Often, Los Zetas operate while There are several other Los Zetas groups in addition to commandos:

- Los *Halcones* (The Hawks) keep watch over distribution zones and use [2 meter radio band](#).
- Las *Ventanas* (The Windows) comprise bike-riding youngsters in their mid-teens who whistle to warn of the presence of police and other suspicious individuals near small stores that sell drugs.
- Los *Mañosos* (The Tricky Ones) acquire arms.
- Los *Leopardos* (Leopards) are prostitutes who slyly extract information from their clients.
- Dirección* (Command) are approximately 20 communications experts who intercept phone calls, follow and identify suspicious automobiles, and even accomplish kidnappings and executions.^{[5][15]}

Los Zetas are involved in myriad criminal activities. They have branched out into kidnappings, murder-for-hire, extortion, money-laundering and human smuggling. For security purposes, Los Zetas have adopted a cell-like structure to limit the information that any one member of the organization knows about his associates.

Law enforcement raids

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Following a joint investigation, titled Operation Black Jack, by the [ATF](#), [DEA](#), [ICE](#) and the [United States Department of Homeland Security](#) (DHS) through the [FBI](#), two Zeta [safe houses](#) were identified and raided, recovering over 40 kidnapped individuals.^[3]

On October 26, 2008, the *Washington Times* reported of an [FBI](#) warning that the Zetas' cell in Texas are to engage law enforcement with a full tactical response should law enforcement attempt to intervene in their operations;^[16] their cell leader has been identified as Jaime González Durán (*The Hummer*), who was arrested on November 7, 2008 in the border city [Reynosa](#), [Tamaulipas](#).^[17] In this operation, three safehouses in Reynosa were raided by elements of the Mexican Federal Police and Mexican Army, yielding the largest weapon seizure in the history of Mexico; it consisted in 540 [rifles](#), 287 [grenades](#), 2 *M72 LAW* rocket launchers, 500,000 rounds of ammunition, 67 [ballistic vests](#) and 14 sticks of [TNT](#).^{[18][19]}

Cartel alliances

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While in prison, the head of the [Tijuana Cartel](#), [Arellano Felix](#) and Gulf Cartel leader [Osiel Cardenas](#), forged an alliance against the [Sinaloa Cartel](#) and its ally the Juarez Cartel. As a result, the cartels are now largely aligned into two blocks, some which support the [Gulf Cartel](#) and others which support the [Sinaloa Cartel](#).^[20] It is these two blocks that are involved in the massive and violent turf wars which are currently being carried out in northern Mexico.

La Familia Michoacana

The Sinaloa Cartel

The [Sinaloa Cartel](#) began to contest the Gulf Cartel's domination of the coveted southwest Texas corridor following the arrest of Gulf Cartel leader [Osiel Cardenas](#) in March 2003. **The Federation** is the result of a 2006 accord between several smaller drug cartels; it is led by [Joaquin "El Chapo" Guzman](#), Mexico's most-wanted drug trafficker.

The Juarez Cartel

[Vicente Carrillo Fuentes](#) heads the [Juarez Cartel](#). The cartel had become factionalized between groups loyal to the Carrillo family and groups loyal to Guzman Loera's Sinaloa Federation.

The Tijuana Cartel

The cartel of the Arellano-Felix family, the [Tijuana Cartel](#) was once among Mexico's most powerful but has fallen on hard times, thanks to the arrests of several top capos. The cartel entered into a brief partnership with the [Gulf Cartel](#). It has been the frequent target of Mexican military confrontations and might be breaking into smaller groups.

The Gulf Cartel

The [Gulf Cartel](#), based in Matamoros, [Tamaulipas](#), has been one of Mexico's two dominant cartels in recent years. It is strengthened by its armed wing Los Zetas. The cartel leader [Osiel Cardenas](#), was extradited to the U.S. in 2007 and is currently awaiting trial in Houston.

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See also

[edit]

- Mexican Drug War
- Illegal drug trade
- Kaibiles
- United States–Mexico border
- Mérida Initiative

External links

[edit]

- The Evolution of 'Los Zetas,' a Mexican Crime Organization *ⓘ*
- NarcoNews.com - *Zetas Burn Media's Script in War on Drugs* *ⓘ*
- FBI Assistant Director's Statement to the U.S. House of Representatives on Zetas *ⓘ*
- 2005 Washington Times - *Ex Troops Aiding Drug Traffickers* *ⓘ*
- MS-13 Current News and Analysis *ⓘ*

<div>▼ • • •</div> <div>Mexican Drug War (2006-present)</div>	
Participants	Juárez Cartel • Sinaloa Cartel • Gulf Cartel • Tijuana Cartel • Los Negros • Los Zetas • La Familia • Mexican Army • Mexican Air Force • Mexican Navy • Federal Investigations Agency • Federal Police
People	Édgar Eusebio Millán Gómez • Osiel Cardenas • Ramón Arellano Félix • Joaquín Guzmán • Vicente Carrillo Fuentes • Miguel Ángel Félix Gallardo • Ismael Zambada García • Miguel Treviño Morales • Edgar Valdez Villarreal • Ernesto Fonseca Carrillo • Heriberto Lazcano • Juan José Esparragoza Moreno • Ignacio Coronel • Jorge Eduardo Costilla •
See also	Timeline of the Mexican Drug War • Mérida Initiative • Narco submarine • Project Gunrunner • War on Drugs • Operation Solare • Operation Xcellerator