

# Security in Latin America

This is a source for analysis, interviews, and commentary on security in Latin America. Herein you will find rumors, the results of off the record interviews, and information you'll not find in international or United States news media.

Wednesday, January 14, 2009

## Inside Los Zetas

On the last day of 2008, Mexico's El Universal paper published an interesting summary entitled "*Los Zetas por dentro*". Its author had obtained a document prepared by the Mexican PGR (Attorney General), based on interviews conducted with former members of Los Zetas. As someone who has followed this group for some time, I was pleased to learn something new.

Many understand that the Los Zetas is a well organized drug trafficking organization, formed by members of a group of Mexican soldiers who deserted their unit, known as the *Grupo Aeromóvil de Fuerzas Especiales* (GAFES).

The GAFES deserters, totaling around 40 men, stuck together and offered their services to the Gulf Cartel, and Osiel Cárdenas, specifically. But once he was extradited around two years ago today, Heriberto Lazcano, aka *El Lazca*, took absolute control of Los Zetas. The group slowly but surely took complete command and control over all of the drug trafficking corridors formerly operated by the Gulf Cartel, primarily the plazas from Nuevo Laredo to Matamoros, across the border from Brownsville, Tx in the lower Rio Grande Valley.

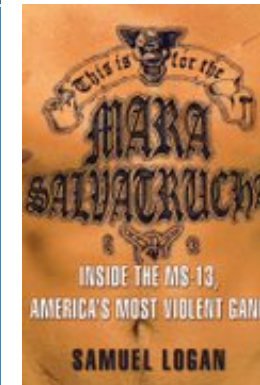
When El Lazca took over the Gulf Cartel's operations, Mexico experienced a cascading moment in the country's drug trade. For the first time in Mexican history, we had a military unit operating like a drug trafficking organization (DTO). In Mexico, it's normally the other way around.

And based on what we know from Colombian history, when you have a disciplined military unit operating as a DTO, it's very hard to dislodge entrenched soldiers. **The Zetas differ in one very important aspect: they are willing to take the Mexican military head on** – and so far, the Mexican military has, at best, disrupted only a fraction of the group's operations.

The men who stuck with El Lazco, who were part of the original Zetas, are referred to as the *Zetas Viejos* within the DTO. They are the men who work as commanders and operate from command/control positions in the group's various hard points within its



My first non-fiction narrative



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drug trafficking network. One very clear example is Miguel Triveño, aka *El 40*, who runs the Nuevo Laredo plaza – perhaps still the most lucrative drug trafficking corridor in the Americas.

El 40 and El Lazco clearly are Zetas Viejos. They are also known as *Cobras Viejos*, or *L Viejos*. Logically, the younger recruits, and next down in the line of command, are called *Zetas Nuevos*. These men include Mexican military deserters, former policemen, family members of Los Zetas, and – most notably – men trained within the Guatemalan Special Forces, known as *Kaibiles*. The Zetas Nuevos operate on the frontlines, take orders only from the Zeta Viejo commander they serve under, and act with the utmost brutality and lethal force.

These are the guys you read about when there's a story that claims two trucks pulled up to a stopped car and unloaded a full clip into the target – overkill. Their calling card includes lots of brass bullet casings littered on the ground, kidnap and torture, decapitation, disfiguration, and in some cases very professional "double-tap" styled assassinations. In this regard, they differ little from the enforcers who work for La Familia, the Beltran Leyva brothers, or the Tijuana Cartel.

But where the Zetas differ, I think, is again with the military order that reigns throughout the organization and the crisp, clean nature of many of the group's operations. There are documented cases of paramilitary training for new Zetas, especially those with little to no military experience. Training camps dot the landscape in Tamaulipas and Nuevo Leon, hidden within large acre ranches.

The Cobras Nuevos, or *L Nuevos*, form the next level down the chain of command. These are the men who serve the Zetas Viejos directly as bodyguards. When the Zetas Viejos travel, they take a trusted contingent of gunslingers, and those men are the Cobras Nuevos. According to the PGR, sometimes Zetas Nuevos join them as the drivers to back up the Cobra Nuevos. They are all armed with one long barrel rifle, likely automatic, and a sidearm.

The next level down is where we get into the Zetas' money laundering and business operations. A nation-wide network of men are in place with the sole purpose of covering up all the illicit business operated by members of Los Zetas. It's not clear in the article, but it makes sense to consider that each Zeta Viejo operates his own group of business owners and accountants. Within the Zetas DTO, the members of this group are appropriately referred to as *productividad*.

The lowest members within the Zetas DTO chain of command are called *halcones*. These men serve as the eyes and the ears of Los Zetas wherever they may be. I've read stories that recount how in states like Tamaulipas, where Los Zetas have complete control, the halcones stand on overpasses that cross major highways just to take note of the traffic flowing in and out of town. These men likely work in business, politics, at bars, at hospitals, anywhere, and everywhere. These men are likely part of the Mexican "blue collar" infrastructure that keeps the country running. Makes me

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think of the movie *The Fight Club* – these guys are everywhere.

In addition to potentially thousands of halcones and members of the productividad who operate **both in Mexico and in the United States**, we can't forget that the Zetas Viejos have any number of police commanders, politicians, high-level businessmen, judges, lawyers, military soldiers and mid- to high-level commanders, etc. on the payroll.

All that information funnels through the Zeta intelligence network, and is likely the principle reason why no man who betrays this group is safe in Mexico or the United States, or anywhere really. It's very much like when Pablo Esobar in Colombia would send his assassinations to kill people who tried to flee from him in Spain, Russia, or even Turkey.

The Zetas' counter intelligence organization has no peer in the Americas, and it begins with the halcones. Like most intelligence organizations, gathering information is easy, shifting through it to make sense of what's important and what's not is where the work gets tricky.

Obviously, this network is not without faults. A high-level Zeta leader has already been captured this year. Miguel Angel Soto Parra, who oversaw Zeta activities in central Mexico, is now in custody. He will likely join some of his other Zeta Viejo buddies caught last year, and join the list of those to be extradited to the US.

The bottom line, however, is that the Zetas is a well trained, well informed, and absurdly rich organization that will take more than the Mexican military to bring down. We tend to focus on just the top members, but when you consider all the levels within the organization that I've described above, the whole Zeta DTO expands into a massive criminal organization that likely employs thousands in a country where finding a legitimate job is very difficult, if not next to impossible in today's economic climate.

It will be very interesting to watch how Mexico's organized criminal map unfolds in 2009. I'll make one safe prediction: Los Zetas will still be around in 2010, and quite possibly beyond Calderon and Obama's respective administrations.

Posted by Samuel Logan at [8:09 AM](#)

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 Christopher said...

Very nicely written article. I've been interested in Los Zetas for quite some time as well now. It is indeed amazing how these guys operate. The sheer brutality of their executions, the "up yours this is our country"-attitude... In a way I'm actually a bit fascinated by them. (I am a bit of a rebel, can't help it either... :))

But, as you state in your article, things will only get more nasty from here on, and from what I've been reading and watching I can only tell that both Mexico and the US are facing very hard and difficult times when it comes to drugrelated crime. The US gov. has recently sent out an internal note warning border patrol in the southern states that narco-crime will seriously rise, narcotrafficking organized and operated by Los Zetas.

On the other hand, as you state as well, in an economical climate like Mexico's, it isn't that hard to see why people support or join Los Zetas. What makes me wonder most, is how and when the US will respond, and why they haven't already done so. It is clear that Los Zetas are expanding there working area to the US, and I can imagine that law enforcement over there will go ballistic.


Sure, we have drugrelated crime over here (Belgium, Europe) as well, but not on that level, and I doubt we will ever see this kind of drug-related crime in Europe.

Eitherway, I'm definitely going to be checking your blog on a regular basis, it is pretty hard to find decent info about the Zetas that's written in English, unfortunately I don't master the Spanish language you see.

If you want to talk (well, actually I want to talk to you more about the Zetas) : c.k.2936@gmail.com

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Keep it up, and expect another visit sometime in the near future.

Greetings, K

4:58 PM

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