

THE EVOLUTION OF LOS ZETAS IN MEXICO AND CENTRAL AMERICA: SADISM AS AN INSTRUMENT OF CARTEL WARFARE

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Los Zetas deserted from Mexico's elite special forces known as Airborne Special Forces Group in the late-1990s. Higher pay, access to drugs, and better food enticed the 31 khaki-clad turncoats to become bodyguards for Osiel Cárdenas Guillén, the kingpin of the Gulf Cartel headquartered in Matamoros, across the Rio Grande from McAllen, Texas. The paranoid Cárdenas acquired the nickname of "The Friend Killer" because he ordered triggermen to pursue and execute real and imagined foes believed to be plotting his demise. Although the tough-as-nails Zetas formed protective circles around their boss, an informer revealed his whereabouts. This betrayal enabled the military to capture the drug czar on March 14, 2003.

Ezequiel "Tony Tormenta," Eduardo "El Coss" Costilla Sánchez, and Gregorio Saucedo Gamboa, as the organization's decisionmaking troika, were disoriented, all the more so because they fell under attack by the Sinaloa Cartel, headed by the notorious mafioso Joaquín "El Chapo" Loera. In helping fend off the invaders, the bloodthirsty Heriberto "The Executioner" Lazcano Lazcano emerged as the head honcho among Los Zetas, who, like a cadre of Frankensteins, gradually turned with a vengeance on their Gulf Cartel masters. They entered into situational alliances with the rival Beltrán Leyva Organization (BLO), former allies of the powerful Sinaloa Cartel. With mixed success, the paramilitaries sought to import cocaine from Colombia.

Thanks to instruction from ex-Kaibiles, the Guatemalan army's savage commandos, Los Zetas acquired training in butchering victims—with an emphasis on chopping off heads, performing castrations, and skinning bodies. An especially apt student of these macabre techniques was Miguel Ángel "El 40" Treviño Morales, who, like "The Executioner," evinced characteristics of sadistic personality disorder (SPD). This psychosis involves aggression, manipulation, and "getting off" on manipulating and inflicting unspeakable pain on others.

Like the dominant Sinaloa Cartel, Mexico's traditional narco-traffickers emphasized the economic aspects of their trade. With the exception of "The Friend Killer," the Gulf Cartel also stressed profitability over gratuitous bloodshed. The increasing tendency of Los Zetas to brutalize their quarry was bad for business and further strained Gulf-Zeta relations.

Guillén never taught Los Zetas the drug business. While attempting to import narcotics, they thrived on forging the reputation as the meanest, leanest, ghastliest criminal outfit in the Americas. After years of decapitations, a single incident may only make local news. To ensure broad print and electronic media coverage, these agents of Satan behead multiple enemies and arrange their bodies in a way convenient for TV camera operators and newspaper photographers. In December 2008, Los Zetas captured and executed eight army officers and enlisted men

in Guerrero, a violence-torn, impoverished southern state. Pictures of the headless cadavers lying side-by-side flashed around the world on television and YouTube. Los Zetas have also become adept at employing Google, Facebook, Twitter, and other social media to alert authorities and the general public to their viciousness.

They mastered the preparation of a “guiso” or “stew.” The simple recipe entailed plunging a tortured child or adult into a pig cooker or 55-gallon oil drum, dousing the body with gasoline, and setting their quarry on fire. In July 2009, they assaulted the home of the police chief in the south-central state of Veracruz. Within 5 minutes, they blasted their way into the house and murdered the law enforcement official, his wife, their son, and a police officer. They then torched the residence, incinerating the remaining three children, all girls. No wonder the White House labeled them a global menace comparable to the Camorra secret society in southern Italy, the Yakuza mob in Japan, and the Brothers’ Circle of Eastern Europe.

Apart from psychological sickness, Los Zetas employ gruesome artifices to gain “cartel cred” – that is credibility that they will carry out whatever act is necessary to achieve their goal. For instance, they may inform a physician who runs a profitable clinic that he needs their protection for, say, \$25,000 a month. The doctor will either relocate his practice or comply, knowing that failure to pay will mean that his 6-year-old son may be kidnapped, sliced and diced, and dropped on his parents’ doorstep. Their brutality discourages deserters, and, ironically, assists their recruitment of youngsters, who gravitate to the toughest band of brigands in the country.

Mexico’s marines, a branch of the navy, has removed the dominant leaders from the scene: they killed “The Executioner” Lazcano (October 7, 2012) and captured “El 40” Treviño Morales (July 15, 2013). In the aftermath of these actions, the ever-more balkanized, cruel Zetas have assumed a lower profile. Younger men and women, often unknown to law enforcement agents, continue to use the organization’s diabolical reputation to achieve goals. This image has facilitated their diversification into felonious ventures that include extortion, murder for hire, kidnapping, human smuggling, loan-sharking, dealing in contraband, money laundering, gunrunning, and stealing gasoline, explosives, and strong solvents such

as xylene and toluene taken from *Petróleos Mexicanos* (PEMEX), the hugely corrupt state oil monopoly, to use in cooking meth.

Their venality has also helped in throwing open the door for entry into Central America and other regions where they work with established gangs and crime families. Guatemala has become a haven for the miscreants, who have incurred the wrath of security forces, the military, the United States, and the Sinaloa and Gulf cartels. In March 2012, the Guatemalan officials reported the capture of the Zeta chieftain in the country, Gustavo Adolfo Colindres; however, this arrest did not abate the bloodletting. A study released by the National Economic Research Center found that firearm-related homicides in Guatemala over the previous 10 years had soared 82 percent. This figure is nearly double the global average of 42 percent, and above Central America’s relatively high average of 70 percent. Los Zetas, the Sinaloa Cartel, and scores of other deadly groups have turned Guatemala into a Tennessee-sized killing field. The U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration has described Los Zetas as possibly “the most violence, sophisticated, and technologically advanced of these paramilitary groups.”

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