

## **THE ZETAS IN NORTHERN COAHUILA**

The significance of northern Coahuila in the geopolitics of organized crime in northeastern Mexico is worth analyzing. Tamaulipas is close to the northern region of Coahuila, making it a natural area of operations for both criminal organizations. Our analysis has three strands: firstly, we will examine the region's geographical importance for criminal activities; secondly, we will provide a brief history of such activities, particularly the establishment of the Zetas in northern Coahuila; and finally, we will assess some aspects of the Zeta's presence in the region.

### **The region's importance**

Although the Zetas have recently been a constant presence in many municipalities of Coahuila, to the point of becoming the dominant cartel across almost the entire state, the organization's operations in the north of the state are particularly important. We will focus on Piedras Negras, as the most important municipal district, both demographically and due to its connections with the rest of the region and as a border point adjacent to Eagle Pass, Texas.

Piedras Negras is a tactical location for several reasons: it provides access to an important 512-km (320-mile) stretch of border between Coahuila and the United States, over which drugs, money, weapons, people, and other products can be smuggled between Coahuila and Texas. In fact, previous research has confirmed the regional concentration of criminal businesses in Piedras Negras;<sup>70</sup> the city is connected with other towns, such as Saltillo, Monterrey, Nuevo Laredo, Monclova, or Acuña, which makes it a strategic point for coordinating criminal activities in the north of Mexico.

Notably, Piedras Negras is close to Nuevo Laredo (in the state of Tamaulipas), a city considered the capital for the Zetas, as the organization's main operational hub in Mexico. The cities are approximately 177 km (110 miles) apart, just a couple of hours drive at an average speed of 90 km/h (55 mph).

Finally, the expansion of the Zetas to Piedras Negras can be seen as a logical move: it is the nearest mid-sized city, and a large concentration of Gulf Cartel members were already established in several cities near Nuevo Laredo, such as Reynosa, Matamoros, Monterrey, or Victoria. Therefore, an expansion towards the Piedras Negras and Acuña area represented less risk and effort. We should recall that, in the first years of the organization, the leaders of the Gulf Cartel limited the Zetas' drug-dealing activities, especially keeping for themselves mainly the border crossings at Matamoros and Reynosa.

In short, Piedras Negras became one of the key cities within the Zetas' structure. This is confirmed by the roster of criminals who, at some point in their criminal careers, held positions of authority in the city and went on to become influential players in paradigmatic events in the organization (for further reference, see *State of Neglect*). Examples of these notorious figures include Miguel Ángel Treviño Morales, alias Z-40, one of the main Zeta leaders; Salvador Alfonso Martínez Escobedo, alias "La Ardilla" (the Squirrel), implicated in the massacre of migrants and the disappearance of people in San Fernando, Tamaulipas; Marciano Millán Vázquez, alias "Chano," a high-ranking operator of the Treviño Morales family during the Zeta Revenge in 2011, and Carlos Antonio Ramírez Rodríguez, alias "El Flako" (the Skinny One). And Heriberto Lazcano Lazcano, most important leader in the Zetas' history, was shot dead in the municipality of Progreso, between Piedras Negras and Monclova.

## **The Zetas' arrival in northern Coahuila**

So far we have focused on the Zetas' national dynamics, from their beginnings as a key factor in the Gulf Cartel's internal succession dispute until their consolidation as its armed wing and its territorial expansion. We will examine criminal activity in northern Coahuila from this perspective, concentrating on the Zetas' arrival and subsequent control over the area.

Northern Coahuila's strategic geographical location has meant that over the years it has been constantly used several criminal groups. For instance, during the era of alcohol prohibition in the United States, it is well known that Piedras Negras's bars were magnets for recreational tourists from the US. The business was so successful that investors from the region built a whiskey distillery to supply Piedras Negras, smuggling surplus production to the United States.<sup>71</sup>

The Gulf Cartel has been the criminal organization with the longest-running presence in Coahuila. Records trace its presence in the north of the entity state back to 1982, with the arrival "Los Texas,"<sup>72</sup> a criminal gang led by Guillermo Martínez Herrera, alias "El Borrado" (the Erased One), and Omar Rubio Pardo. However, other criminal organizations are also known to have been established in the region, such as the Juárez Cartel, the Milenio Cartel, and the Sinaloa Cartel. For instance, from 1993 until the early 2000s, Acuña and Piedras Negras were some of the crossing points for drugs produced by the Milenio Cartel, which they sent to the United States through a cell known as "Los Michoacanos." The Juárez Cartel facilitated this activity, as they controlled those border crossings.<sup>73</sup>

Various criminal organizations struggled for dominance in the area for decades, until the Zetas secured the control for their parent organization. Between 2003 and 2005, the Sinaloa Cartel fought the Gulf Cartel—present in the zone thanks to the Zetas—for supremacy in the cities of Acuña and

Piedras Negras. Sergio Villareal Barragán, alias “El Grande,” led the operation when he was the Sinaloa Cartel’s “jefe de plaza” for the Laguna region, which includes part of the states of Coahuila and Durango.<sup>74</sup>

The Zetas took control of the region between 2004 and 2005, and the criminal group started to consolidate its presence in the region in the early 2000s. The Zetas imposed themselves through its usual method of extreme violence and intimidation. Alfonso Cuéllar stated that local criminals had no choice but to cooperate or face the consequences, which included the disappearance and death of family members.<sup>75</sup>

In parallel, they worked to gain the local people’s support. For instance, after a tornado in 2004 the Gulf Cartel—the Zetas’ parent organization at the time—offered assistance to residents of the Villa Fuente neighborhood in Piedras Negras.<sup>76</sup> Various newspapers also reported how toys were distributed under the name of Osiel Cárdenas Guillén at a Zetas’ Children’s Day party in Acuña on April 30, 2005.<sup>77</sup>

Over time, firstly by working with the Gulf Cartel, and later independently, the Zetas managed to secure a regional monopoly of most criminal activities, setting up local networks to strengthen its position in the area; the Zetas co-opted local authorities in northern Coahuila, for example, ensuring them a certain degree of protection during their operations. Evidence of this can be seen in Zetas’ control over the Piedras Negras prison (Centro de Reinserción Social, CERESO), which became self-governing. As described in detail in *The Zeta Yoke*, this jail was used for various killings and the disposal of bodies, in the acquiescence of the prison authorities.<sup>78</sup>

## **Occupation of the region**

Although the first Zeta members in northern Coahuila came from other states, in time the criminal organization gradually integrated local criminal cells and recruited new members from various municipalities in the region. An investigative report shows how, after their arrival in Piedras Negras, the Zetas started to create networks in the San Judas barrio in the Mundo Nuevo neighborhood; several regional leaders would later emerge from this area.<sup>79</sup>

The trend is also clear given the number of mass disappearances in northern Coahuila in March 2011, during the Allende Massacre, or what we prefer to call the Zeta Revenge. The leading participants came from notorious families in the region, in particular Héctor Morena Villanueva, alias “El Negro,” and José Luis Garza Gaytán, alias “La Güichina” or “El Güichín.”<sup>80</sup> Thus the Zetas’ recruitment process searched for alliances and close relationships with prominent members of society, politicians and businessmen in the region, who helped the criminal group to establish its presence in the region. This high-profile event also shows how part of the Zetas’ consolidation strategy in the region involved recruiting corrupt policemen and public officials, who received money in exchange for providing information and protection. This allowed a series of blatant criminal acts to be committed under the noses of local public officials.

The Zetas worked to extract resources from a controlled territory, involving themselves in several criminal markets, such as kidnapping, extorting businesses and nightclubs, small-scale drug-dealing, selling stolen fuels, stolen coal, people-trafficking, weapons-trafficking, illegal alcohol sales, operating illegal activities in nightclubs, and racketeering on behalf of local criminals.

The border crossings in Coahuila, together with Nuevo Laredo, gave the organization access to drug-smuggling routes, taking delivery of drugs

and weapons, just like the activity of Alfonso Cuéllar and José Vázquez at the border crossing between Piedras Negras and Eagle Pass.<sup>81</sup> As a final but important note, their control of northern Coahuila was so comprehensive that both of Heriberto Lazcano's successors, the brothers Miguel and Omar Treviño Morales, moved around the region in total freedom. Moreover, as detailed in *The Zeta Yoke*, they used the Piedras Negras prison to protect themselves from the Marines and to hold parties, making their own use of a publicly funded facility.<sup>82</sup>

The organization's eventual fate in the region is unclear, especially after the series of decisive events outlined above. In other words, despite our inability to pronounce on the group's possible evolution, we can begin by assuming that the accumulation of events affecting the organization—such as the deaths of important leaders, the arrests of significant members, the trials in the United States, and the Mexican authorities' national and local strategy—have radically altered the picture of organized crime in northern Coahuila. Much work therefore remains pending in this aspect of the investigation, and we hope to be able to present our findings during the third phase of the research.