

The Zetas: gangster kings of their own brutal narco-state

In his final dispatch from the drug-fuelled war along the US-Mexican border, our correspondent profiles the deadly army which rules its territory through murder and ruthless intimidation of public officials – with the multibillion-dollar narcotics trade as its prize

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Gabriela was riding the Number 20 bus into Reynosa in north-eastern [Mexico](#) when the gang struck. Heavily armed men, faces hidden under ski masks, stormed on board, ordered its passengers off and swung the bus around to block a bridge, sealing off the route into the city.

"Although they wore ski masks, everyone knew who they were with their machineguns and uniforms," said Gabriela. This brazen display of strength was carried out by the Zetas, originally established as an enforcement wing of the narco-trafficking Gulf Cartel, but now a paramilitary militia in its own right, highly trained in combat and probably the most powerful drug-trafficking organisation in the world.

The cartel was founded in the 1970s but emerged in its modern form in the mid-1980s, led by Juan García Abrego (now in a Colorado jail) and thereafter Osiel Cárdenas Guillén, who founded the Zetas and who is now awaiting trial in Houston, Texas. The Zetas are now led by Heriberto Lazcano – "El Lazco" or "Z3" – wanted in both Mexico and the US. It is Lazcano and the Zetas who control the cartel's drug operations and exercise the savagery with which its power is enforced and its terrain expanded. Estimated by US intelligence to number about 4,000, its soldiers were recruited from the Mexican army's special forces units, some reportedly trained in the US, though this has never been proved. What has been proved time and time again is their deadly cogency. The cartel is the only one against which the Mexican president, Felipe

Calderón, has thrown his army's full might. So far, thanks to the Zetas, the cartel is winning.

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After two years of Calderón's military offensive against the cartels, and 20 years since their "federation" fell apart and they began fighting one another, no one can predict an outcome, but one partial result is clear: the cartel and the Zetas have held their terrain and are broadening it, despite the high-profile arrests of key members of the group such as Jaime González Durán, alias "El Hummer". A spokesman for Calderón, Alejandra de Soto, told the *Observer* that "the army is proud of what it has achieved in Tamaulipas" – where the Zetas are based – "there is relative peace in the area. It has been brought under control".

The crucial point about the "relative peace" in areas held by the Zetas is that it is a peace whereby the cartel controls every facet of life, is uncontested by its rivals and presides over an omnipresent reign of terror.

It is also punctuated by firefights and the brutal murders of police commanders who do not co-operate. Last week more than 20 men were arrested for the murder of the police commander of García, near Monterrey. A retired army general, Juan Arturo Esparza, was ambushed with a fusillade of fire and killed, said a message cited in the *Houston Chronicle*, for "disappointing the letter Z". Most of those arrested were police officers. Meanwhile, hundreds of officers dutifully turned out last week for the funeral of the state police commander in Veracruz, Casto Acevedo, reportedly killed by the Zetas for refusing to co-operate with them. His torso and mutilated limbs were stacked on a mattress and his severed head left nearby.

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Zeta territory is markedly different from the notoriously violent Ciudad Juárez, where the cartel pyramids have collapsed and criminal anarchy prevails. There, newspapers can report the nightly atrocities. In Zeta country, killing is less common and daily life appears normal – but it is governed by fear.

Moreover, the Zetas are expanding. Determined to control a corridor of their own through Central America to the cocaine production fields of Colombia, Peru and Venezuela, the Zetas have fought for and won control of most of the Gulf coast – as shown by recent massacres in Veracruz and Cancún, where they murdered an army general – and are fighting an all-out guerrilla war against the Sinaloa Cartel's cocaine farms in Guatemala. They are contesting a rival cartel, La Familia of Michoacán, for lucrative markets of Mexico City's endless suburbs. In a reported alliance with a cartel called the Beltrán-Leyva brothers, they are fighting for smuggling routes into Arizona.

Crucially, the Zetas hold their terrain absolutely and its location in north-eastern Mexico affords access to Houston, which the FBI, briefing the *Observer* last week, called "the hub city" for alliances with local gangs – the old "Texas Syndicate" and loose-knit "Tango Blast".

Of all Mexico's cartels, the Zetas are the most internationally connected, allied to their counterparts in the Italian syndicates, the 'Ndrangheta of Calabria, with ambitions in the European and African markets.

A glimpse of the road leading to the ranch where Osiel Cárdenas Guillén was born and raised near Matamoros – a few ramshackle buses and a corrugated-iron shack selling beer on the corner – demonstrates the cartel's humble origins, without the political connections enjoyed by others, and defining what has become its insurgent nature, which is shared only by La Familia.

Uncontested Zeta territory is hard to define, but correlates with the tropical Rio Grande valley, beginning with the relatively peaceful cities of Ciudad Acuña and Piedras Negras. After them, as the river flows, come the twin cities of Laredo and Nuevo Laredo. These are the prize, for the freight and rail running across the four road and one rail bridges into the US are the spinal cord of pan-American trade.

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Lorries arrive at the forwarding yards on the Mexican side bringing goods from Latin America and China, via the port of Lázaro Cárdenas, their loads shuttled across to be hauled on all over North America. The loads contain much of the 90% of narcotics consumed in the US, having arrived via Mexico. Within the US, the Zetas' influence is widespread – cells operating across the country, distributing drugs, their contacts laundering money through established banks and other channels.

At the Mexican army checkpoint and dusty truckstop called "El Veintiseis", 26km south of the border near Nuevo Laredo, an insect-bitten night at the Motel California and meals at the shacks by the road give some idea of how this happens. "Sometimes a container will be a *clavo*," said one truck driver, Antonio, referring to a vehicle chopped up to include hidden compartments. "Other times," said another over breakfast, "they just roll up with guns and say: 'Open the door!'" Then the drugs are put on board and the

lorries are forced to resume their journeys. The drivers complain that haulage companies' efforts to outwit the Zetas are inevitably met with counter-measures. "They give us GPS systems to make sure we don't go anywhere off the route, but some people are told to switch them off. They have special seals now but the bad guys know how to break them and make them look as before."

A local journalist confirms: "They do not ask. Sometimes they do it at the bridge itself. They make a spectacle of it – AR-15 automatics and ski masks, right there at the customs post – who is going to refuse them?" The journalist spoke off the record as a matter of course in Nuevo Laredo, where the local paper, the *Mañana*, is unable to report the Zetas' crimes, having been, in effect, instructed not to do so by the murder in 2004 of editor Roberto Mora García and grenade attacks against its offices followed by threats to the Cantú family which owns the paper. Publisher Ramón Cantú defends his position: "This war is not going to be won by a newspaper. I am responsible for the lives of my employees and their families and there are other things to report in this town." In a recent incident when the paper was considering coverage of a murder, the Zetas kidnapped two reporters. "What am I supposed to do?" asked Cantú. It is hard to find an answer.

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The Zetas' grip on Nuevo Laredo is so thorough, and their extortion rackets so pervasive, that they even shake down the women who deal in "ropa usada" – used clothes gathered at warehouses by the railway goods yards and Union Pacific depot on the Texas side and brought over for sale in front gardens. One woman said that the multinational billion-dollar gang extorts 8 to 16 US cents (4-9p) for every 100 pesos (£4.57) she makes.

Further downstream is Reynosa, heartland of the Zetas, where the militia's number two, González Durán, was arrested last November along with the biggest arsenal of weaponry ever seized by the Mexican army.

Here the Zetas are named euphemistically as "The Last Letter of the Alphabet", said Rebecca Rodríguez, who monitors abuses by the army, against which – to her outrage – the Zetas organise their own mass demonstrations. "They are not a social formation any longer, they are a militia," she said.

Just by discussing them, Rodríguez commits an act of bravery. "Look at us, how we live. None of us dare wear jewellery any more; the army and the narcos have taken to fighting it out across school playgrounds."

The Zetas exhibit themselves in town with brazen windscreen stickers such as that on a truck parked across the access road behind Rodríguez's office, with a crossed Kalashnikov emblem reading "Benvenido A Reynosa" – "Welcome to Reynosa". They display the sign of the cult they worship – that of "Santísima Muerte" – Most Holy Death – a hooded skeleton with a scythe, on their cars and mobile phone holders. And they make their presence felt with their periodic demonstrations of brutal force.

Across the Rio Grande, in the burgeoning Texan city of McAllen, a businessman with family roots in the area for 150 years said that not only had the Zetas sealed off the bridges around Reynosa, but international bridges into the United States as well.

"The Americans do nothing, the press says nothing, but they do it to show us all – this side and that – that they can control traffic across the border. I get a call sometimes, ahead of time, telling me, 'Get what you need shipped over before noon, we're shutting it down.'

"On this side, it is different, if you owe them in any way, if you have accommodated them or borrowed money, they will shake you down. If you are outside the system, you are OK. Soon, I think, working in this way they will grow up, they will become licit, rather than illicit, businessmen. But the fact is that no president of any municipality along the border can govern his town without some deal with the Zetas, some form of accommodation."

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But life in Zeta terrain continues. In Reynosa the first day of this month, Mexico's Day of the Dead, was a resplendent occasion, families flocking to the cemeteries to clean the graves of their recently deceased, to pay musicians to sing them ballads and to picnic beside the headstones. At an international cultural festival in Matamoros, where most fear to tread, an Irish dancing troupe called Rhythm of the Dance was hugely enjoyed by an audience dressed as though for the opera in Milan. It happened at the Teatro de la Reforma, across the road from a restaurant at the back of which the old-time gangland boss in Matamoros, Juan Guerra, used to preside.

He was a breeder of racehorses and the restaurant has a picture of his favourite horse and Stetson hat on the hoarding. Guerra's nephew was Juan García Abrego, founder of the modern Gulf Cartel. In honour of Guerra, you suppose, the restaurant is respectfully renamed Don Juan's. The service is impeccable, but the dead eyes of the man behind the bar terrify, with a glare of steel and ice.

Amexica: War along the Borderline, by Ed Vulliamy, will be published next year by the Bodley Head, London; Farrar, Straus, Giroux, New York; and Tusquets, Madrid

1. Miguel Ángel Treviño, known as Zeta-40, or just 40, was never in the military. But he became useful to the Zetas for his experience moving contraband across the border. http://www.nytimes.com/2012/06/13/us/drug-money-from-mexico-makes-its-way-to-the-racetrack.html?_r=0
2. El hermano mayor de los Treviño, Juan Francisco, fue procesado en 1995 por intentar traficar kilos de marihuana. José y Miguel Ángel estaban involucrados, pero no fueron inculcados por falta de pruebas
3. "There's no way all the money he's putting into that ranch came from being a brick mason. It's just not logical," said a person familiar with Zule Farms. http://www.nytimes.com/2012/06/13/us/drug-money-from-mexico-makes-its-way-to-the-racetrack.html?_r=0
4. Ramiro Villarreal, criador de caballos, declare que presenció un asesinato del Z-40

http://www.mysanantonio.com/news/local_news/article/Zetas-brutality-bred-informants-4469695.php#item-38489

<http://www.mysanantonio.com/search/?action=search&channel=news%2Flocal&inlineLink=1&searchindex=gsa&query=%22Miguel+Trevi%C3%B1o+Morales%22>

<http://www.mysanantonio.com/news/local/article/Zetas-cartel-boss-wanted-in-U-S-nabbed-in-4667038.php>

<http://www.mysanantonio.com/default/article/Witness-describes-Zetas-influence-4439751.php>

<http://www.mysanantonio.com/search/?action=search&channel=news%2Flocal&inlineLink=1&searchindex=gsa&query=%22Jos%C3%A9+Trevi%C3%B1o+Morales%22>

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En julio de 2013, fuerzas mexicanas capturaron a Miguel Ángel Treviño, el cuarenta, con ocho rifles y dos millones de dolares en efectivo. Según Vigil, pocos etas viejos se opusieron al ascenso del 40 por su conducta violenta. Su captura fue el primer gran golpe de Peña Nieto

His brother and right hand, Omar, known by the call sign “El 42,” once bragged to a U.S. informant that the gang leader had killed more than 2,000 people, 385 of them U.S. citizens, according to a search warrant filed last year in federal court in North Texas.

The informant “asked ‘42’ why he kept count of the murders,” the affidavit reads. “[Omar Treviño](#) told (the informant) that they just kept a record of it.”

<http://www.mysanantonio.com/news/local/article/Zetas-cartel-boss-wanted-in-U-S-nabbed-in-4667038.php>