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15 August 2019

MEX106302.E

Mexico: Drug cartels, including Los Zetas, the Gulf Cartel (Cartel del Golfo), La Familia Michoacana, and the Beltrán Leyva Organization (BLO); activities and areas of operation; ability to track individuals within Mexico (2017-August 2019)

Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada

1. Overview

InSight Crime, a foundation that studies organized crime in Latin America and the Caribbean (Insight Crime n.d.), indicates that Mexico’s larger drug cartels have become fragmented or "splintered" and have been replaced by "smaller, more volatile criminal groups that have taken up other violent activities" (InSight Crime 16 Jan. 2019). According to sources, Mexican law enforcement efforts to remove the leadership of criminal organizations has led to the emergence of new "smaller and often more violent" (BBC 27 Mar. 2018) criminal groups (Justice in Mexico 19 Mar.
2018, 25; BBC 27 Mar. 2018) or "fractur[ing]" and "significant instability" among the organizations (US 3 July 2018, 2). InSight Crime explains that these groups do not have "clear power structures," that alliances can change "quickly," and that they are difficult to track (InSight Crime 16 Jan. 2019). Similarly, in a telephone interview with the Research Directorate, an assistant professor from Sam Houston State University, whose research focuses on drug violence in Mexico, stated that it is difficult to keep track of splinter groups and their affiliations; a gang’s representation in another area may not be documented, as intelligence gathering in other territories is done discreetly (Assistant Professor 1 Aug. 2019).

2. Structure

2.1 Los Zetas

According to sources, Los Zetas began as an "enforcer" (InSight Crime 6 Apr. 2018) or armed (International Crisis Group 15 June 2017) gang for the Gulf Cartel [see section 2.2, Gulf Cartel] (InSight Crime 6 Apr. 2018; Business Insider 9 Feb. 2018; International Crisis Group 15 June 2017). They split off as an independent group around 2010 (Popular Science 25 Mar. 2014, 3; US 3 July 2018, 16-17; Business Insider 9 Feb. 2018). Sources report that since the arrest of high-level leaders, the group has dissolved into smaller local factions (InSight Crime 6 Apr. 2018; Business Insider 9 Feb. 2018). InSight Crime indicates that these splinter-groups or factions each have their own "operations, priorities and alliances" and that they rely on crime in their areas of operation for revenue (InSight Crime 6 Apr. 2018). Sources report the following splinter groups:

- Northeast Cartel (Cartel del Noreste) (InSight Crime 6 Apr. 2018; Excelsior 26 Nov. 2018);
- Zetas Old School (Los Zetas Vieja Escuela) (InSight Crime 6 Apr. 2018);
- Los Talibanes (Mexico News Daily with Reforma 15 Feb. 2019);
- Grupo Operativo Zetas (Justice in Mexico 19 Mar. 2018, 19; 14 Milímetros 28 Nov. 2018) and Grupo Operativo Los Zetas (14 Milímetros 28 Nov. 2018);
2.2 Gulf Cartel

According to InSight Crime, the Gulf Cartel used to be one of the most powerful gangs in Mexico, but has lost territory to rivals, including Los Zetas (InSight Crime 10 Mar. 2017; esglobal 28 June 2018). According to a US Congressional Research Service (CRS) report on organized crime and drug trafficking organizations in Mexico, analysts have reported that the structures of both the Gulf [drug trafficking organization] and Los Zetas have been decimated by federal action and combat between each other, and both groups now operate largely as fragmented cells that do not communicate with each other and often take on new names. (US 3 July 2018, 17)

Sources report the following factions:

- Metros (14 Milímetros 28 Nov. 2018; Excelsior 26 Nov. 2018);
- Rojos (14 Milímetros 28 Nov. 2018);
- Grupo Dragones (14 Milímetros 28 Nov. 2018);
- Les Fresitas (14 Milímetros 28 Nov. 2018);
- Ciclones (14 Milímetros 28 Nov. 2018; Excelsior 26 Nov. 2018);
- Los Pelones (14 Milímetros 28 Nov. 2018);
- Talibanes (14 Milímetros 28 Nov. 2018);
- Grupo Sombra (Excelsior 26 Nov. 2018);
- Grupo Pantera (Excelsior 26 Nov. 2018);
- Escorpiones (Excelsior 26 Nov. 2018);
- Group Operational R (Excelsior 26 Nov. 2018).

2.3 La Familia Michoacana

According to 14 Milímetros, a journalism website that reports on wars, La Familia Michoacana was founded by the now-deceased Nazario Moreno González (alias El Chayo) (14 Milímetros 28 Nov. 2018). The BBC reports that La Familia cartels have been "largely vanquished by vigilante groups," and that the remnants have formed smaller groups that still fight for control in Michoacán (BBC 27 Mar. 2018). 14 Milímetros reports that cells of the cartel include La Empresa (The Company) and La Nueva Empresa (The New Company) (14 Milímetros 28 Nov. 2018). According to the US CRS report, there is also a group called the New
Sources state that the Knights Templar (Los Caballeros Templarios) is also a splinter group of La Family Michoacana (InSight Crime 22 June 2017; US 3 July 2018, 20).

### 2.4 BLO

The Daily Beast, a US-based news website (The Daily Beast n.d.), reports that the BLO or Beltrán Leyva Cartel was formed by a pair of brothers who were sent to the Guerrero area by the Sinaloa Cartel in the early 2000s (The Daily Beast 14 June 2019). Similarly, InSight Crime indicates that the BLO, which split from the Sinaloa Cartel, is led by the Beltran Leyva brothers (InSight Crime 16 Feb. 2017). Sources report that since the arrests [or deaths (esglobal 28 June 2018)] of its leaders, the BLO has been weakened (InSight Crime 16 Feb. 2017; esglobal 28 June 2018). However, sources report that the organization continues to operate (14 Milímetros 28 Nov. 2018; InSight Crime 16 Feb. 2017), in part thanks to alliances with other groups, such as Los Zetas (InSight Crime 16 Feb. 2017). Sources report that splinter groups include Los Rojos (Felbab-Brown Mar. 2019, 14; The Daily Beast 17 July 2015; 14 Milímetros 28 Nov. 2018), Los Ardillos (The Daily Beast 17 July 2015; 14 Milímetros 28 Nov. 2018), Los Mazatlecos, El 2 mil, Los Granados, La Oficina, and the Cártel Independiente de Acapulco (14 Milímetros 28 Nov. 2018).

### 3. Activities and Areas of Operation

According to sources, rival factions fight for control of territory (Forbes 6 Nov. 2018; InSight Crime 16 Jan. 2019). The Los Angeles Times (LA Times) reports that cartel violence is less focused on drug trafficking routes and now mainly involved in competition over local drug trade territory (LA Times 30 Jan. 2019). However, Vanda Felbab-Brown [1], in her report on the Mexican criminal market, notes that drug smuggling "hubs" are still points of rivalry, as well as areas where drugs are cultivated, particularly poppy crops (Felbab-Brown Mar. 2019, 3, 7). Associated Press (AP) also notes that Guerrero is one of the main opium poppy growing areas, as well as a major site of confrontation between gangs for control of the drug and extortion trade (AP 18 Apr. 2018). According to Vanda Felbab-Brown, controlling areas of poppy cultivation, such as Guerrero and Michoacán, aids organized crime groups in gaining political capital (Felbab-Brown Mar. 2019, 15-16). Sources indicate
that kidnapping and extortion by small gangs are common in order to generate income (InSight Crime 16 Jan. 2019; Felbab-Brown Mar. 2019, 12). Sources further state that extortion is "widespread," targeting profitable businesses, including company owners and restaurant operators (Felbab-Brown Mar. 2019, 12; US 3 July 2018, 17). According to AP, mines in southern Mexico are targeted for extortion by gangs (AP 21 June 2019). Sources report that avocado farmers have been targeted for extortion in Michoacán (US 3 July 2018, 21) or theft, or the kidnapping of drivers (OCCRP 18 June 2019).

3.1 Los Zetas

Sources report that Los Zetas factions operate in the state of Tamaulipas (Forbes 6 Nov. 2018; Business Insider 9 Feb. 2018; 14 Milímetros 28 Nov. 2018). Sources also note Los Zetas presence in Nuevo León and Coahuila (Business Insider 9 Feb. 2018; US 3 July 2018, 12), among other states (US 3 July 2018, 12). InSight Crime describes Los Zetas as "limited to Mexico"; it "occupies a patchwork of territory across the country" and its "most critical areas are Tamaulipas and the Gulf Coast" (InSight Crime 6 Apr. 2018). According to Forbes, "[t]he current conflict in [Tamaulipas] stems from a fight for control of smaller geographic zones confined to single cities and their surrounding areas" (Forbes 6 Nov. 2018).

According to InSight Crime, alliances and disputes tend to be "more localized," due to the fragmented nature of the Zetas (InSight Crime 6 Apr. 2018). Sources indicate that Los Zetas rivals include the Gulf Cartel (InSight Crime 6 Apr. 2018; Forbes 6 Nov. 2018; US 3 July 2018, 16). Sources report that violence in Tamaulipas is fueled by fighting between splinter groups of the Gulf Cartel and Los Zetas (Forbes 6 Nov. 2018; Reuters 10 Jan. 2019) for control of cities such as Reynosa, Matamoros, Nuevo Laredo, and Ciudad Victoria (Forbes 6 Nov. 2018). Stratfor, a "geopolitical intelligence platform" (Stratfor n.d.), also reports fighting between Los Zetas factions (Stratfor 29 Jan. 2019).

According to the US CRS report, rather than drug smuggling, Los Zetas activities are focused on organized violence, including fuel theft, extortion, human smuggling and kidnapping (US 3 July 2018, 17). Forbes reports that kidnapping for ransom or revenge is common in Tamaulipas, with several incidents reported in the city of Matamoros (Forbes 6 Nov. 2018).
Sources indicate that Los Zetas or associated splinter groups have infiltrated police departments (Mexico News Daily with Reforma 15 Feb. 2019; Popular Science 25 Mar. 2014, 7). According to an article sourced from Mexican newspaper Reforma, as provided by Mexico News Daily, an English-language digital news publication that curates news from Spanish-language sources (Mexico News Daily n.d.), members of Los Talibanes were hired and working for the San Luis Potosí state police department, as well as the municipal police forces of Ciudad del Maíz, El Naranjo and Cárdenas (Mexico News Daily with Reforma 15 Feb. 2019). A 2014 article by Popular Science magazine on the communication network of Los Zetas indicates that Los Zetas infiltrated the police department in Nuevo Laredo, including their information network (Popular Science 25 Mar. 2014). Without providing further details, InSight Crime reports that Los Zetas infiltrated state governments in Tamaulipas and Veracruz (InSight Crime 6 Apr. 2018). Further and corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

3.2 Gulf Cartel

According to sources, the Gulf Cartel operates in Tamaulipas (US 3 July 2018, 12; 14 Milímetros 28 Nov. 2018; InSight Crime 10 Mar. 2017) and Quintana Roo (US 3 July 2018, 12; 14 Milímetros 28 Nov. 2018). Sources also indicate that it has appeared to be trying to regain control of Monterrey (InSight Crime 10 Mar. 2017) or that it has established dominance in Monterrey (Felbab-Brown Mar. 2019, 11). According to Reuters, in January 2019, 21 people were killed in a "suspected gang battle" between the Gulf Cartel and the Northeast Cartel (Reuters 10 Jan. 2019). Sources report that Gulf Cartel factions earn money through extortion and fuel theft (US 3 July 2018, 17; esglobal 28 June 2018) or charging money from people who pass through their areas of operation (InSight Crime 10 Mar. 2017).

3.3 La Familia Michoacana

La Familia Michoacana, or factions thereof, including Los Caballeros Templarios, operate in the Tierra Caliente region (Stratfor 29 Jan. 2019, 4; US 3 July 2018, 12). Sources indicate that the two groups operate in Michoacán (US 3 July 2018, 12; InSight Crime 22 June 2017). According to the US CRS report, fragmented
cells of La Familia Michoacana remain active in trafficking, kidnapping, and extortion in Guerrero and Mexico, as well as methamphetamine production and smuggling, and trafficking marijuana and cocaine (US 3 July 2018, 20). Sources state that the Caballeros Templarios engage in extortion, drug trafficking (InSight Crime 22 June 2017; US 3 July 2018, 21), methamphetamine production, and illegal mining (US 3 July 2018, 20-21). Los Caballeros Templarios [and La Familia Michoacana (US 3 July 2018, 21)] also target avocado farmers in Michoacán (US 3 July 2018, 21; OCCRP 18 June 2019); tactics include kidnapping and hijacking shipments (OCCRP 18 June 2019).

3.4 BLO

According to sources, BLO has alliances with organizations like Los Zetas (InSight Crime 16 Feb. 2017; Wilson Centre n.d.; US 3 July 2018, 19). Sources state BLO's reach has declined due to the arrests of many of its leaders (InSight Crime 16 Feb. 2017; US 3 July 2018, 19). Sources state BLO continues to operate in Sinaloa, Guerrero and Morelos, among others (14 Milímetros 28 Nov. 2018; US 3 July 2018, 19). The Daily Beast reports that in Guerrero, a [splinter group], the Ardillos, have expanded beyond drug trafficking to garner revenue from kidnapping, human trafficking, extortion and vehicle theft (The Daily Beast 14 June 2019). Desert Sun, a news source belonging to the USA Today network, reports that fighting for control of Guerrero, including Chilapa, between the Rojos [BLO splinter group] and the Ardillos has included recruitment, guarding roads into town, and targeting community members who refuse to cooperate (Desert Sun 8 Mar. 2019). According to the US CRS report, Los Rojos use kidnapping and extortion to generate revenue (US 3 July 2018).

4. Ability to Track Individuals Outside Areas of Operation
4.1 Communication Systems

According to the 2014 Popular Science article, Los Zetas set up a communications network across Mexico using cameras and radios, allowing them to monitor "ever[y]" aspect of their drug trafficking network, and communicate covertly (Popular Science 25 Mar. 2014). According to a DEA agent quoted by the same source, "'[i]t essentially linked all the different members of the cartel—the people
doing the trafficking and the people doing the protection—so there was a communication between them" (Popular Science 25 Mar. 2014). Sources indicate that this system allowed Los Zetas to monitor drug trafficking within Mexico, into Guatemala (Popular Science 25 Mar. 2014; Wired 27 Dec. 2011) and along the border with the US (Popular Science 25 Mar. 2014). The Popular Science article indicates that the network was used to plan attacks and seize territory held by other groups (Popular Science 25 Mar. 2014). Other sources state that its primary purpose was surveillance (Wired 27 Dec. 2011) or "off the grid" communication (Stratfor 13 Sept. 2011). According to the Popular Science article, the network could be managed remotely, connecting members from different areas to coordinate and communicate about operations (Popular Science 25 Mar. 2014).

According to sources, police raided the telecommunications network in 2011, dismantling infrastructure and seizing hardware (Popular Science 25 Mar. 2014; Wired 27 Dec. 2011; Stratfor 13 Sept. 2011). According to Popular Science, the gang re-installed the equipment (Popular Science 25 Mar. 2014, 6). The Assistant Professor stated that the Zetas communication network was dismantled but "sophisticated networks" are being "reconstituted" (Assistant Professor 28 May 2019).

The 2014 Popular Science article further explains that Los Zetas use ground-level informants, such as taxi drivers, food vendors, and police to gather information (Popular Science 25 Mar. 2014). Sources state that Los Zetas employed hundreds of lookouts (also called halcones) providing them with radios [and cellphones (Popular Science 25 Mar. 2014)] to relay information about the presence of authorities (Popular Science 25 Mar. 2014; Wired 27 Dec. 2011) or other gang members (Popular Science 25 Mar. 2014). The Daily Beast similarly reported that Los Ardillos use radio transmissions to communicate (The Daily Beast 14 June 2019) and that Los Rojos were using halcones as informants, including taxi drivers (The Daily Beast 17 July 2015).

Popular Science reports that the Zetas were monitoring social media feeds and accounts, as well as using mapping software to track authorities (Popular Science 25 Mar. 2014). Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.
Further information, including on the communications systems of other drug cartels, could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

4.2 Ability of Cartels to Track People

According to the Assistant Professor, cartels use family networks and private investigators to track people, as well as property records in the US and Mexico and placing GPS trackers on cars (Assistant Professor 28 May 2019). Similarly, Texas Monthly, a magazine covering issues such as politics, the environment, industry, and education (Texas Monthly n.d.), reports that an attorney with ties to drug cartel leaders, who had been providing information to the US government, was located by means including a GPS tracker on his car and cameras in his neighbourhood (Texas Monthly Oct. 2018). The Assistant Professor stated that a large debt or a personal vendetta could motivate a gang to track someone outside their area, and that gangs can use "corrupt law enforcement agents" to obtain information about people they pursue (Assistant Professor 1 Aug. 2019). Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

The Assistant Professor stated that in order to extend their influence beyond their areas of operation, cartels rely on the "representation" they have in other areas (Assistant Professor 28 May 2019). For example, Justice in Mexico, a US-based initiative [housed at the Department of Political Science and International Relations at the University of San Diego (Justice in Mexico Apr. 2019)] that "works to improve citizen security, strengthen the rule of law, and protect human rights in Mexico" (Justice in Mexico 19 Mar. 2018, 28), reports that the Jalisco New Generation Cartel (Cartel Jalisco Nueva Generación, CJNG), a splinter group of the Sinaloa Cartel, has developed "strategic alliances" with groups in other regions, including Los Zetas and Gulf Cartel splinter groups along the Gulf Coast (Justice in Mexico 19 Mar. 2018, 1, 18-19). According to Insight Crime, Los Zetas have "made numerous temporary alliances" with Familia Michoacana and the BLO (InSight Crime 6 Apr. 2018). The US CRS report also notes that the BLO has alliances with "elements of Los Zetas" and that La Familia Michoacana was "[f]ormerly aligned with Los Zetas before the group’s split from the Gulf [Cartel]" (US 3 July 2018, 19).
5. Targets

5.1 Forced Recruitment

Sources report that larger gangs can "consolidate splintered criminal networks" (Justice in Mexico 19 Mar. 2018, 1) or seek alliances or intimidate others into joining them, targeting smaller groups and younger traffickers (Felbab-Brown Mar. 2019, 8). Sources report on forced recruitment of children and teenagers to work for criminal organizations (InSight Crime 17 July 2019; AFP 18 Nov. 2017; US 13 Mar. 2019, 33), often as lookouts, in drug transportation or cultivation, as well as involving them in violent crimes; according to InSight Crime, there is an increase in this forced recruitment (InSight Crime 17 July 2019). Sources report that young people may be killed if they refuse to join the cartel (AFP 18 Nov. 2017) or if the criminal organization thinks the "minor has exposed them" (InSight Crime 17 July 2019). The Assistant Professor stated that refusing to be recruited can motivate a cartel to track the person outside the cartel's area of influence (Assistant Professor 28 May 2019). Factors such as being a "military- aged" male, and having tattoos puts someone at risk of being targeted by cartels, either for recruitment or out of concern that he may belong to a rival gang (Assistant Professor 28 May 2019). AP reports that, according to a state security spokesman, in April 2018, "'criminal gangs had pressured [nine families in Guerrero], kidnapped and tried to forcibly recruit them'" (AP 18 Apr. 2018).

5.2 State Authorities

Sources indicate that organized crime organizations "seek to dominate and intimidate local politicians" and "control local administration budgets" (Felbab-Brown Mar. 2019, 13) or "infiltrate[e] local governments and law enforcement" (CNBC 27 June 2018). Sources report that in the period leading up to the 2018 presidential election, over 100 politicians were killed (CNBC 27 June 2018; Global News 27 June 2018), and that criminal organizations target those who they believe will not support or allow their activities (CNBC 27 June 2018) or "political candidates whom they don't trust, or whom they believe pose a threat to existing arrangements with corrupt government officials" (Global News 27 June 2018). According to Justice in Mexico, the homicide rate for mayors in 2018 was nine times that of the general population.
Global News reports that 120 politicians were killed between September 2018 and June 2019, of which 18 were mayoral candidates (Global News 27 June 2018).

Local newspapers report that in April 2018, six police officers were shot after attending to families who were threatened by criminals in Guerrero (Milenio 2 Jan. 2019; AP 18 Apr. 2018). According to the Daily Beast, in Guerrero, the Ardillos have killed individuals involved in Indigenous community police groups (policías comunitarias, also called comunitarios) that aim to protect communities against cartel violence (The Daily Beast 14 June 2019). The same source quotes the director of the Mount Tlachinollan Center for Human Rights in Guerrero as stating that “[t]he activists and leaders are killed to send a message to the rest of the community” (The Daily Beast 14 June 2019). Similarly, the US Department of State's Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2018 states that Indigenous people in "isolated regions" were forced by cartel members to "perform illicit activities or face death" (US 13 Mar. 2019, 33).

5.3 Journalists

According to Justice in Mexico, the homicide rate for journalists in Mexico is three times higher than that of the general population (Justice in Mexico Apr. 2019, 37). Other sources similarly state that journalists are at risk of being killed, including by drug cartels [or drug traffickers] (CPJ 3 May 2017, 6, 18; BBC 12 June 2019). US Country Reports 2018 states that organized criminal groups used physical violence in retaliation for information posted online by journalists, bloggers and social media users (US 13 Mar. 2019, 17). Similarly, Freedom House states that "gangs have targeted bloggers and online journalists who report on organized crime, issuing threats and periodically murdering online writers" (Freedom House 29 Jan. 2019). Sources report that there is impunity for the killing of journalists (CPJ 3 May 2017, 6; BBC 12 June 2019; Article 19 2 Nov. 2018).

5.4 Homicides

Sources report an increase in the homicide rate (Forbes 6 Nov. 2018; Felbab-Brown Mar. 2019, 4; Justice in Mexico 19 Mar. 2018, 1), one cause of which is the splintering among criminal groups (Felbab-Brown Mar. 2019, 4) or disputes between
factions (Forbes 6 Nov. 2018; Justice in Mexico 19 Mar. 2018, 1). Sources report that it is inexpensive for gangs to have someone killed in Mexico (International Crisis Group 15 June 2017; LA Times 30 Jan. 2019; Assistant Professor 28 May 2019): approximately US$100 (Assistant Professor 28 May 2019) or US$50 or a small amount of drugs (LA Times 30 Jan. 2019). The Assistant Professor stated that making a complaint to a state authority against a gang would lead to pressure to drop the complaint and "almost certainly" lead to death if the individual did not comply (Assistant Professor 1 Aug. 2019). Further information, including cases of individuals hired by gangs to kill targeted persons, could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

This Response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Research Directorate within time constraints. This Response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim for refugee protection. Please find below the list of sources consulted in researching this Information Request.

Note

[1] Vanda Felbab-Brown is a senior fellow in the Foreign Policy program at the Brookings Institution, which is a "non-profit organization devoted to independent research and policy solutions"; she is "an expert on international and internal conflicts and nontraditional security threats, including insurgency, terrorism, organized crime, urban violence, and illicit economies" and has conducted fieldwork and research in Mexico (Felbab-Brown Mar. 2019, 27).

References


Assistant Professor, Sam Houston State University. 1 August 2019. Telephone
interview with the Research Directorate.

Assistant Professor, Sam Houston State University. 28 May 2019. Telephone interview with the Research Directorate.


InSight Crime. 6 April 2018. "Zetas." [Accessed 22 July 2019]


Additional Sources Consulted

Oral sources: associate professor of political science who studies organized crime and human trafficking in Mexico; professor of political science who conducts research on organized crime and drug trafficking in Latin America; researcher who works on Mexican drug trafficking organizations.

Internet sites, including: The Advocates; Animal Político; Amnesty International; Council on Foreign Relations; Delayed Gratification; ecoi.net; El Sol de México; El Universal; The Guardian; Human Rights Watch; Journal of Strategic Security; La Silla Rota; The New York Times; UN – Refworld; Washington Office on Latin America.

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