

**Los Zetas and La Familia Michoacana Drug Trafficking Organizations
(DTOs)**

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Abstract

This paper illustrates to the readers that a new breed of criminals of Drug Trafficking Organizations (DTOs) exists in Mexico today and reaches their tentacles into the United States. Two of these (DTOs) are Los Zetas and La Familia Michoacana.

The Zetas were exposed originally by a decedent leader of the Gulf (DTO) by the name of Cardenas Guillen. Guillen chose his top recruit, Lieutenant Arturo Guzman Decena. Decena brought with him 30 deserters from the Mexican Military, Grupo Aeromovil de Fuerzas Especiales (GAFES). These individuals were hired for the sole purpose to kill off his competition of other (DTOs) in Mexico. Presently, these two former partners have splintered and now exist as enemies vying for more control of drug territory.

The La Familia is a fanatical faith based (DTO) who emerged on the scene back in 2006 in a Uruapan, Mexico discotheque. After discharging firearms into the ceiling, they ordered the patrons to lie on the floor. They then tossed five decapitated heads on the floor. The heads were wrapped in plastic. They call this their "Divine Justice" (Grayson, 2010).¹

. According to DiBacco (2009):

La Familia Michoacana's Mission is the following:

"Who are we? Common workers from the hot lands region in the state of Michoacan, organized by the need to end oppression, the humiliation to which we have constantly been subjected by people who always had power...Our sole motive is that we love our state and are no longer willing to see our people's dignity trampled on (P-6)."²

This criminal organization is one of the largest methamphetamine (Meth or Ice) distributors and producer in the United States.

Lastly, this paper will also demonstrate what tactics by law enforcement are most effective in dealing with (DTOs) such-as Project Coronado), used by law enforcement back in October of 2009.

¹ Grayson, G.W. (2010). Mexico: Narco-violence failed state, p-197, Transaction Publishers, New Jersey

² DiBacco, A (2009).Non-State violent actors, p-6

I. Introduction

When Felipe Calderon assumed office as President of Mexico on December 6, 2006, he made a pledge to the citizens of Mexico and the world that his government and his military would commit to tens of thousands of military troops, sailors, marines, and federal police in a tireless effort to eradicate the drug trafficking organizations (DTOs) in Mexico (Grayson, (2010)).³

This paper will address two of those most infamous and dangerous (DTOs) located in Mexico today, Los Zetas and La Familia Michoacana.

• Los Zetas

During the late 1990's Osiel Cardenas Guillen, the leader of the Gulf (DTO), wanted a means to protect his business and himself by killing his rival (DTO) competitors. His means behind his goal was to recruit a special group of the Mexican Army Special Forces selected from the Grupo Aeromovil de Fuerzas Especiales (GAFES) soldiers. These elitists had special killing tools that Cardenas was in the market for his criminal organization. This special force was originally trained in a military School of Americas located in Fort Benning, Georgia and trained for special operations by specialists from the United States, Israel, and France. Their training modus operandi was counter-insurgency and the apprehension and locating drug trafficking members (Grayson 2008).⁴

³ Grayson, G.W. (2010). Mexico: Narco-violence failed state, p-195, Transaction Publishers, New Jersey

⁴ Grayson, G.W. (2008, May). Los Zetas: The ruthless army spawned by a Mexican drug Cartel, E Notes: Foreign Policy Research Institute, p-2, Retrieved on May 23, 2010, from <http://www.fpri.org/enotes/200805.grayson.loszetas.html>

The Zetas are highly trained in the following sophisticated surveillance and counter-surveillance:

According to Longmire (2009):

“Reportedly trained at Fort Benning, Georgia, in special tactics, surveillance and counter surveillance, urban warfare, prison escape, hostage rescue, explosives use, and high-tech communications. This training, in addition to virtually unlimited funding and an arsenal akin to a small army, makes Los Zetas one of the most formidable enforcement groups in Mexico (p-1-2).⁵

The leader of the Gulf (DTO), Cardenas Guillen, chose his top recruit by the name of Lieutenant Arturo Guzman Decena. Decena brought with him 30 deserters from the (GAFES) who had been lured their by salaries that were significantly higher than the Mexican government’s salaries. The Zetas’ role had been expanded by the Gulf (DTO) to collecting debts, securing cocaine quantities, and plaza (zones) which are known to be trafficking routes. Their enemy’s fate would come to a violent end by being savagely executed by the hand of their assassins, the Los Zetas (Parsons, 2010)⁶

Decena as the leader of the Zetas was identified by the organization as (Z1). He was assassinated by a rival (DTO) member back in November of 2002 in a restaurant while dining.

Roger Gonzales Pizana (Z-2), who was second in command, was captured and the leadership of the organization now fell on the shoulders of Heriberto Lazcano (Z-3).

Lazcano was born in Mexico in December of 1974. In 2007, the current leader of Los Zetas was characterized as one of the 50 most powerful men in the world. This distinction was shared with the likes of rap singer Eminem, Shiite leader Muktada al-Sadr, and golfer, Tiger Woods. Lazcano’s rise to power began in the Mexican military as a soldier with low ranking. He

⁵ Longmire, S. (2009). Los Lincos, Mexican Drug War Contemporaries of Los Zetas, p-1, Retrieved on February 26, 2011, p-1-2, <http://mexidata.info/id2361.html>

⁶ Parsons, D. (2010). Mexico’s Drug Wars Los Zetas and the Gun Laws that Help Them Thrive, p-1, Retrieved on, February 26, 2011, <http://www.thecuttingedgenews.com/index.php?article=12501&pageid=&pagename=>

later joined the Grupo Aeromovil de Fuerzas Especiales (GAFES) in the (1990's) (Cronin, 2009).⁷

Osiel Cardenas Guillen, the leader of the Gulf (DTO), was arrested in 2003. The Zetas and the Beltran-Leyva (DTOs) formed a cooperative effort and are presently considered allies (Mexican Drug Cartels, 2011).⁸

Lastly, the Los Zetas and the Beltran Leyva (DTOs) in February of 2010 found themselves in an oppositional territorial war against the Zetas' former boss of the Gulf (DTO) in border towns like Reynosa and Tamaulipas.

According to CNN World (2010):

The area, which borders Texas, has seen bloody fighting between the Zetas and Gulf cartels after a recent gangland slaying. Hour-long gun battles are common, and U.S. officials were recently forced to temporarily close the consulate in the city of Reynosa. The trouble started January 18 when a Gulf cartel member killed top Zeta lieutenant Victor Mendoza. The Zetas demanded that the Gulf cartel turn over the killer, but the narco group refused (p-1).⁹

- **La Familia Michoacana**

In 2000, "La Minsa" Rueda Medina became the number one assassin for La Empresa, a criminal organization which later evolved into the La Familia Michoacana-or La Familia back in 2006. This major player, Amoldo Rueda Medina, served at the pleasure of the late patriarch for La Familia, Nazario "El Mas Loco" "The Most Crazy" Moreno Gonzalez (aka) "El Chayo". Gonzalez was killed by Federal Police on Friday, December 10, 2010 in a shootout in Morelia, Mexico.

⁷ Cronin, M.(2009). Los Zetas, drug trade organization threat analysis, p-6

⁸ Mexican Drug Cartels. (4Jan2011).The Gulf Cartel: No Let up against the Zetas, p-1, Retrieved on, March 4, 2011, <http://www.mexico.vg/mexicos-drug-cartels/the-gulf-cartel-no-let-up-against-the-zetas/1779>

⁹ CNN World (19Mar2010). Gulf: Drug criminals block roads in Mexico, p-1, Retrieved on, March 5, 2011, http://articles.cnn.com/2010-03-19/world/mexico.violence_1_zetas-gulf-cartel-nuevo-leon?_s=PM:WORLD

La Minsa's responsibilities consisted of synthetic drug manufacturing, marijuana and cocaine smuggling into the United States, and designating the leadership for chiefs for their criminal enterprise effectuation in the following states: Michoacan, Colima, Guanajuato, Aguascalientes, San Luis Potosi, and Julisco. Medina and La Familia's former leader, Gonzalez, developed the organization's drug smuggling routes into the United States and through Tijuana, and Mexicali and other localities such as the border states of Sonora and Chihuahua (Mexico arrests important Familia Michoacana boss, 2010).¹⁰

La Familia erupted onto the scene back on September 6, 2006 in Sol y Sombra, a nightclub located in Uruapan, Michoacan. These La Familia gunmen fired gun shots into the ceiling and gave orders to the patrons of the nightclub to lie down on the floor. At this juncture, they threw five human heads wrapped in plastic onto the dance floor. These La Familia gunmen left the following note praising their deed:

"The Family doesn't kill for money; it doesn't kill women; it doesn't kill innocent people; only those who deserve to die. Everyone should know...this is divine justice" (Grayson, 2010).¹¹

These victims had been seized the day before the graphic display at Uruapan from a mechanics shop. The La Familia assassins decapitated them with a bowie knife as the victims withered in pain. "You don't do something like that unless you want to send a big message," said a U.S. law enforcement official, speaking on condition of anonymity about an act of human depravity that would "cast a pall over the darkest nooks of hell" (Grayson, 2010).¹²

Some analysts believe that La Familia emerged onto the scene in 1980 with their mission falling on them to protect the poor of Michoacana.

¹⁰ Mexico arrests important familia Michoacana boss. (n.d.). Latin American Herald Tribune, Retrieved on October 26, 2010, p-1, <http://www.laht.com/article.asp?CategoryId=14091&ArticleId=339066>

¹¹ Grayson, G.W. (2010). Mexico: Narco-violence failed state, p-197, Transaction Publishers, New Jersey

¹² *ibid*, p-197

According to DiBacco (2009):

La Familia Michoacana's Mission is the following:

“Who are we? Common workers from the hot lands region in the state of Michoacan, organized by the need to end oppression, the humiliation to which we have constantly been subjected by people who always had power...Our sole motive is that we love our state and are no longer willing to see our people's dignity trampled on (P-6).”¹³

The state of Michoacan is situated in Southwestern Mexico which is only 126 miles or 204 kilometers from Mexico City, the capital. Ironically, President Felipe Calderon is a native son of Michoacan which is now the home turf of one of the most dangerous (DTOs) existing in Mexico today (DiBacco, 2009).¹⁴

The initialization of the formation of La Familia was inspired by becoming a powerful force to counter the infringement by their enemies who were kidnappers and drug dealers. La Familia's reputation grew by structuring their folklore through transcending their strengths into a criminal enterprise (Grayson, 2009).¹⁵

La Familia prides itself as a faith-based (DTO). The late leader, Moreno Gonzalez and the current leader, Mendez Vargaz, refer to the orders of beheading and executions of their enemies as “Divine Justice”. The New Jerusalem, which is a religious movement, is directly or indirectly tied to La Familia leadership. Nazario Moreno Gonzalez, (a.k.a.: El Mas Loco or the Craziest One) had his own Bible published with his personal sayings (Grayson, 2009).¹⁶

This doctrine that Moreno based his writings on is the Christian writer, Eldredge. His book, the Salvaje de Corazon (Wild at Heart) is a requisite for each La Familia member to read,

¹³ DiBacco, A (2009). Non-State violent actors, p-6

¹⁴ *ibid*, p-1

¹⁵ Grayson, G.W.(2009).). La Familia: Another Deadly Mexican Syndicate, p-1-2, Retrieved on, November 1, 2010, <http://www.zimbio.com/Norte+del+Valle+Cartel/articles/42/La+Familia+Another+Deadly+Mexican+Syndicate>

¹⁶ *ibid*, p-6

and has even paid National Development Education (CONAFE) and rural teachers to distribute this work throughout the countryside through the state of Michoacan (Eldredge, 2009).¹⁷

According to Eldredge (2009):

“Every man must have “a battle to fight, a beauty to rescue and an adventure to live” (p-5).¹⁸

The La Familia criminal organization emphasizes religion and family values during their recruitment process. They are known to stream narco-banners in town squares where they conduct operations spewing intolerance for drug abuse and abuse of women and children

According to Luna, Mexico’s Public Safety Secretary (2010):

“One of the gang's alleged recruiters, detained last spring, ran drug rehabilitation centers, helping addicts to recover and then forcing them to work for the drug gang or be killed” (p-3).¹⁹

La Familia partnered with the Gulf and Sinaloa (DTOs) and previously emerged as the Gulf’s paramilitary group that had trained with the Los Zetas in 2006. Later, La Familia broke off into an independent criminal enterprise. La Familia rivals remain today with the Beltran-Leyva and Los Zetas criminal organizations. La Familia became a major player in the drug trade and their strong ties were established with the Sinaloa (DTO) back in 2006.

Lastly, the La Familia savagery especially exists within its own membership. The gang’s hierarchy insists that methamphetamines are not sold to fellow Michoacanos. The penalties for gang members who partake in drug use are severely scrutinized. On the first violation, the member is tied-up for 15 days in dark isolation. The second infraction, they experience a severe

¹⁷Eldredge, J. (2009). From focus on the family to La Familia Michoacana, Retrieved on, March 6, 2011, <http://julydogs.wordpress.com/2009/06/02/from-focus-on-the-family-to-la-familia-michoacana/>

¹⁸Grayson, G.W. (2009). La Familia Michoacána: A Deadly Mexican Cartel Revisited, Foreign Policy Research Institute, p-5, Retrieved on, October 31, 2010, from <http://www.fpri.org/enotes/200908.grayson.lafamiliamichoacana.html>

¹⁹Spagat, E and Murphy, S. (2009). Arrest More Than 300 Across U.S., p-3, Retrieved on, March 5, 2011, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2009/10/22/la-familia-cartel-targete_n_330041.html

beating for a period of 12-days. The third and final noncompliance results in an immutable penalty, execution (Padgett, & Grillo, 2010).²⁰

This is the brutality of both criminal enterprises that we will explore.

II. Leadership

- **Los Zetas**

The leader of the Gulf (DTO), Cardenas Guillen, chose his top recruit, Lieutenant Arturo Guzman Decena. In 1997, Decena defected from the (GAFE Unit) (Cronin, 2009).²¹

Decena brought with him thirty deserters from the (GAFE Unit) who had been lured there by salaries that were significantly higher than the Mexican government's salaries. This group of future assassins became the Los Zetas. Decena, as the leader of the Zetas, was identified by the organization as (Z1). Decena's federal police radio code was given by him to identify high ranking officers (Cronin, 2009).²²

In conclusion, He had been assassinated by a rival (DTO) member back in November of 2002 in a restaurant while dining out. Roger Gonzales Pizana, a.k.a. (El Kelin, Z-2), who was second in command, had been captured in October of 2004. The leadership of the paramilitaries now fell onto the shoulders of Heriberto Lazcano (Z-3), (Cronin, 2009).²³

According to the Journalist Sam Logan (2009):

"Most of the original Zetas are gone, but the legacy of the Zetas still lives on," The original 31 Zetas are either in custody or dead (p-2-3).²⁴

²⁰ Padgett, T, and Grillo (28 Jun 2010). Time Magazine, Mexico's Meth Warriors, p-4, Retrieved, October 26, 2010, <http://www.time.com/time/printout/0,8816,1997449,00.html>

²¹ Cronin, M.(2009). Los Zetas, drug trade organization threat analysis, p-5

²² ibid, p-5

²³ Cronin, M.(2009). Los Zetas, drug trade organization threat analysis, p-5-6

²⁴ Logan, S. (2009). Los Zetas: Evolution of a Criminal Organization, p-2-3, Retrieved October 31, 2010, <http://mexidata.info/id2194.html>

- **La Familia Michoacana**

Another key leader in this (DTO) is Servando Gomez Martinez a.k.a (“La Tuta”). “La Tuta’s” responsibilities are drug trafficking and gun smuggling for his organization. His main mission is to assure that their criminal activities are not hindered by law enforcement. It has also been reported that “La Tuta” on July 11 through July 14, 2009, was the alleged planner of horrific atrocities committed against the Mexican federal police (DiBacco, 2009).²⁵

The U.S. Department of Justice, U.S. Attorney’s Office on October 22, 2009 handed down an indictment on Servando Gomez-Martinez for scheming to import and to distribute cocaine and methamphetamines into the United States from Mexico. Presently, the Mexican authorities are conducting a manhunt for “La Tuta” (DiBacco, 2009)!²⁶

Dionisio Loya Plancarte (“El Tio”) is another senior leader who has moved up in the organization since the arrest of La Minsa. He now holds the leadership position of 2nd in command. He is the propaganda communications voice of La Familia, and is also believed to have once belonged to the Los Zetas criminal organization (DiBacco, 2009).²⁷

Before Medina’s arrest in 2009, he and the late leader of La Familia, (The Most Crazy) Moreno Gonzalez, developed the organization’s drug smuggling routes into the United States and through Tijuana, Mexicali and other localities like Border States, Sonora and Chihuahua (“Mexico arrests important Familia Michoacana boss”, 2010).²⁸

Finally, Grayson, a college professor from William and Mary College in Virginia is an authority on Mexico. He has listed other major players such as “El Nica” Barrera Medrano, who was involved with the Uruapan discotheque plaza murders in 2006, as well as “El Inge” Mendez,

²⁵ DiBacco, A (2009).Non-State violent actors, p-12

²⁶ ibid, p-13

²⁷ ibid, p-14

²⁸ Mexico arrests important Familia Michoacana boss, Latin American Herald Tribune, Retrieved October 26, 2010, p-1, <http://www.laht.com/article.asp?CategoryId=14091&ArticleId=339066>

who heads up La Familia's operation in Turicato Michoacan, Mexico. In addition, he refers to "El Tio" Loya Plancarte, who, besides being a public relations liaison for the organization, his other main duty is to act as a recruiter for La Familia (Grayson, 2009).²⁹

III Structure

- **Los Zetas**

The Zetas consists of a small command structure. The operation level is handed down by the senior hierarchy which supports its associations with small cell networking. The horizontal structure is opted versus the slower vertical hierarchical chain of command. There exists a second, third, and level tier. The second level leadership exists in a layer or circle. Those bosses manage by overseeing the areas of intelligence, operational planning, financial support, and recruitment. This is all under the tutelage of the top echelon. Another functionality of these managers is to geographically distribute special project teams (Manwaring, 2009).³⁰

The third level is the lower-level cell members who may be involved in national or subnational activities that may as well be on the international level.

The fourth and final level (circle) is groups that embody a chain of (clickas).

According to Manwaring (2009):

These groups may be constituted by aspirants (that is, new recruits trying to prove themselves) and or by specialists. The specific subgroups include the following: (1) Los Halcones (The Hawks), who keep watch over distribution zones; (2) Loss Ventanas (The Windows), who whistle or signal to warn of unexpected dangers in an operational area; 3) Los Manosos (The cunning ones), who acquire arms, ammunition, communications, and other military equipment; (4) Las Leopardas (The Leopards) who are prostitutes, attached to the intelligence section of the functional organization and are trained to extract information from their clients; (5) Direccion (communications experts), who intercept phone calls, and follow and identify

²⁹ Grayson, G.W.(2009). La Familia Michoacána: A deadly Mexican Cartel Revisited, E Notes:Foreign Policy Institute Research Institute, p-4, Retrieved on, October 31, 2010, <http://www.fpri.org/enotes/200908.grayson.lafamiliamihoacana.html>

³⁰ Manwaring, M. (2009). A "New" Dynamic in the Western Hemisphere Security Environment: The Mexican Zetas and Other Private Armies, Strategic Studies Institute, p-20, Retrieved on, October 30, 2010, <http://www.strategicstudiesinstitute.army.mil/pubs/display.cfm?PubID=940>

suspicious automobiles And persons, and have been known to engage in kidnapping and executions (p-20-21).³¹

- **La Familia Michoacana**

Ravelo, an investigative journalist and an authority on organized crime stated the following (2009):

“The cartel is distinctly entrepreneurial. La Familia was the first to use a horizontal business structure, with different offices spread all over the country. “It’s a cartel, but it has a social component, as if to say: We’re not that bad. “We also worry about the people” (p-3).³²

According to the chief of anti-drug operations, at Public Security Ministry, Rafael Pequeno Garcia (2009):

La Familia filled a vacuum in social services and community development. “When you need help, you didn’t go to the government. You went to the narcos” he said. They are a parallel structure, and they have a way of satisfying the needs of the people. In this way, they maintain social control (p-3).³³

IV Force Structure

- **Los Zetas**

As most reports indicate, they reflect that the Zetas have anywhere from 30 to 200 members.

In September of 2005 in a testimony to the Mexican Congress by former Defense Secretary Clemente Vega, Vega enumerated that the Los Zetas brought into their ranks thirty former Kaibiles recruits from Guatemala (Cook, 2007).³⁴

The Kaibiles are a special operations force for the Guatemalan Military who specialize in jungle warfare tactical operations coupled with counter-insurgency operations. The mission of the Kaibiles Center is to train the most elite commando forces. They have an infamous training reputation of forcing recruits to bite off heads of live chickens and make recruits drink river

³¹ Manwaring, M. (2009). A “New” Dynamic in the Western Hemisphere Security Environment: The Mexican Zetas and Other Private Armies, Strategic Studies Institute, p-20-21, Retrieved on, October 30, 2010, <http://www.strategicstudiesinstitute.army.mil/pubs/display.cfm?PubID=940>

³² Fainaru S & Booth, W. (13, June 2009). A Mexican Cartel’s Swift and Grisly Climb, Washington Post, p-3, Retrieved on, October 31, 2010, <http://www.banderasnews.com/0906/edat-cartelsswiftclimb.htm>

³³ ibid, p-3

³⁴ Cook, C. (2007). CRS report for Congress: Mexico’s drug Cartels, Analyst In Latin American Affairs , Foreign Affairs, p-7, Retrieved on March 5, 2011, <http://ftp.fas.org/spp/crs/row/RL34215.pdf>

water out of a fired artillery shell with the remains of the burnt residue still inside. These commandos are very tough and, when wounded, they take out their knives and cut an X into the wound then extract the bullet (“Kaibiles, n.d.”).³⁵

- **La Familia Michoacana**

Richard Ravelo, a journalist from Proceso magazine also reported that there are at least 4,000 La Familia members who were born and raised in Michoacan. These members are paid a salary from \$1500.00 to \$2,000.00 monthly (Grayson, 2010).³⁶

Reports surface like the one from the Washington Post confirming just how powerful La Familia’s force structure is being well noted to be over 4,000 members:

Fainaru and Booth from the Washington Post reported in (2009):

In April, 400 government agents backed by two Black Hawk helicopters arrested another La Familia leader, Rafael Cedeño Hernández, while he attended a party celebrating a baptism. According to federal police, Cedeño boasted that he had recruited and trained 9,000 new members in 2008 instilling "religious, ethical and moral lessons" while forbidding the excessive use of alcohol and drugs (p-3).³⁷

V. Objectives

The first objective of these powerful (DTOs), Los Zetas and La Familia Michoacana, is to first establish themselves through intimidation of business men in targeted communities. They specialize in the corruption of law-enforcement and political officials with the expansion of their criminal activities so that they can operate their criminal enterprise smoothly and reap large profits.

³⁵ Kaibiles, (n.d.) In Wikipedia, Retrieved on March 12, 2011, p-3 and 6, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kaibiles>

³⁶ Grayson, G.W. (2010). Mexico: Narco-violence failed state, p-206, Transaction Publishers, New Jersey

³⁷ Fainaru S & Booth, W.(13June2009).A Mexican Cartel’s Swift and Grisly Climb, Washington Post, p-3, Retrieved on, October 31, 2010, <http://www.banderasnews.com/0906/edat-cartelsswiftclimb.htm>

- **Los Zetas**

According to Manwaring (2009):

The primary objective of the political insurgents, drug cartels and private armies such as the Zetas is to attain the level of freedom of movement and action that allows the achievement of the desired enrichment. After reviewing the brutal methods the Zetas use to insinuate their power over people, one can see that these seemingly random and senseless criminal acts have specific political-psychological objectives. After getting even closer to the situation, one can see that these objectives are not being lost on the intended audience (p-25 and 32).³⁸

- **La Familia Michoacana**

The objectives for La Familia initiated back in the year of 2006 began as a small group of men who were armed so they were able to protect the children in Michoacan, Mexico from methamphetamines. Presently, they are now considered to be one of the top tier echelons of Drug Trafficking Organizations (DTOs) in Mexico (Grayson, 2009).³⁹

Shortly after the Uruapan Discotheque debauchery, La Familia purchased a half-page advertisement in newspapers professing that they consider themselves to be crime fighters. Two of the following periodicals: El Sol of Morelia and La Voz de Michoacan published their manifesto. In Tepalcatepec Michoacan, Mexico, La Familia's self proclamation of civic duty was short lived after the resident newspapers reported that 18-32 police officers had resigned after they received death threats from La Familia (Grayson, 2009).⁴⁰

³⁸ Manwaring, M. (2009). A "New" Dynamic in the Western Hemisphere Security Environment: The Mexican Zetas and Other Private Armies, Strategic Studies Institute, p-25 and 32, Retrieved on, October 30, 2010, <http://www.strategicstudiesinstitute.army.mil/pubs/display.cfm?PubID=940>

³⁹ Grayson, G.W.(2009). La Familia: Another Deadly Mexican Syndicate, p-3, Retrieved on, November 1, 2010, <http://www.zimbio.com/Norte+del+Valle+Cartel/articles/42/La+Familia+Another+Deadly+Mexican+Syndicate>

⁴⁰ Grayson, G.W.(2009). La Familia: Another Deadly Mexican Syndicate, p-3, Retrieved on, November 1, 2010, <http://www.zimbio.com/Norte+del+Valle+Cartel/articles/42/La+Familia+Another+Deadly+Mexican+Syndicate>

La Familia advertises news-worthy events by streaming narco-banners in communities emphasizing their civil accomplishments. They are also known to nationally publish videos on the internet as well (Grayson, 2009).⁴¹

VI Scope of Activities

A. Origins of Groups

- **Los Zetas**

The Los Zetas have become the most dangerous DTOs in cities of Matamoros, Reynosa, and Nuevo Laredo located in Tamaulipas. The visibility of Los Zetas are showing throughout the Gulf Coast region, and showing up in the southern locality of states like Tabasco, Yucatan, and Quintana Roo. They also are showing up in cities of Chiapas, Guerrero, Oaxaca, and Michoacan Pacific Coastal states, as well as Mexico City. They have been very active in Texas and perhaps in other United States cities (Grayson, 2008).⁴²

- **La Familia Michoacana**

La Familia territory locations dominate 77 of the 113 municipalities in their home state of Michoacan. Their strongest presence is located in Apatzingan, Lazaro Cardenas, Patzcuaro, Uruapan, Zinapécuaro, Tiquicheo, Tanhuato, Ocampo, Jacona, San Juan Nuevo, Tancitaro, and Morelia Mexico (Grayson, 2010)⁴³

⁴¹ Grayson, G.W.(2009). La Familia: Another Deadly Mexican Syndicate, p-3, Retrieved on, November 1, 2010, <http://www.zimbio.com/Norte+del+Valle+Cartel/articles/42/La+Familia+Another+Deadly+Mexican+Syndicate>

⁴² Grayson, G.W. (2008, May). Los Zetas: The ruthless army spawned by a Mexican drug Cartel, E Notes: Foreign Policy Research Institute, p-2-3, Retrieved on May 23, 2010, <http://www.fpri.org/enotes/200805.grayson.loszetas.html>

⁴³ Grayson, G.W. (2010). Mexico: Narco-violence failed state, p-201, Transaction Publishers, New Jersey

B. Strength of the Organization

• Los Zetas

The main strength of this criminal organization is their expertise in tactical warfare. These ex-military elitists were trained and are prepared for battle. They wear body armor, and some Zetas wear Kevlar ballistic helmets. Their arsenal consists of the most advanced weaponry such as the following:

- AR-15
- AK-47 rifles
- MP-5 submachine guns
- .50 caliber machine guns
- Grenade launchers
- Surface to-air missiles
- Dynamite and,
- Helicopters

The superb military training they received as a special group for the Mexican Army Special Forces was selected from the Grupo Aeromovil de Fuerzas Especiales (GAFES) soldiers (Grayson, 2010).⁴⁴

The Zetas are highly trained in the most sophisticated wire tapping equipment. Their tactical training specialty is disguising themselves as uniformed Mexican Federal Police where they drive identical looking police vehicles. Their strength is their criminal activities in intimidation with kidnapping journalists and their murdering of competitive drug (DTO) members along with their family members. It has been reported that the Los Zetas has collaborated with gangs like MS-13 and the Texas Syndicate to contract their services to carry out killings (Los Zetas Cartel, n.d.).⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Grayson, G.W. (2010). Mexico: Narco-violence failed state, p-184-185, Transaction Publishers, New Jersey

⁴⁵ Los Zetas Cartel. (n.d.). In Wikipedia, Retrieved on, March 12, 2011, p-6,
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Los_Zetas_Cartel#cite_note-24

- **La Familia Michoacana**

The strength of La Familia is the intimidation factor that they set after the Uruapan, Mexico discotheque incident when erupting onto the scene. When La Familia's gunmen threw those five human heads onto the dance floor, their reign of terror began. They left the following note praising their deed:

“The Family doesn't kill for money; it doesn't kill women; it doesn't kill innocent people; only those who deserve to die. Everyone should know...this is divine justice”

These victims had been seized the day before the graphic display at Uruapan from a mechanics shop. The La Familia assassins decapitated them with a bowie knife as the victims withered in pain (Grayson, 2010).⁴⁶

At this juncture, all other (DTOs), law enforcement and the Mexican Military took notice of this new breed of (DTOs).

La Familia's strength also comes through as a faith-based (DTO), as stated earlier in the paper. This veil of religious fanaticism is a tactic to control and intimidate La Familia's membership, and thereby is very effective.

La Familia has established its authority by the murdering of public officers in Michoacan. The murder of dozens of mayors and city hall officials establishes their power. In 2009, ten mayors and 20 other public officials were arrested and detained in a drug investigation. This investigation has exposed this element as being deeply entrenched in city halls across the state (Wilkinson, 2009).⁴⁷

⁴⁶ Grayson, G.W. (2010). Mexico: Narco-violence failed state, p-197, Transaction Publishers, New Jersey

⁴⁷ Wilkinson, T. (2009). Mexico Under Siege Mexico Drug Traffickers Corrupt Politics, Los Angeles Times/World, p-2, Retrieved on, March 6, 2011, <http://www.latimes.com/news/nationworld/world/la-fg-michoacan-drugs31-2009may31.0.1691370.story>

VII. Weakness of the Organization

- Los Zetas

This author believes that the weakness for the Zetas' organization is their recent escalation with violence and intimidation towards civilians, law enforcement and the Mexican federal police. This has contributed to a splintering affect with other (DTOs) such as their former Gulf partner and their engagement in a turf war because of the Zetas' latest climb to the top to control all of the drug routes.

The Mexican Marines killed the drug pin, Ezequiel "Tony Tormenta" Cardenas, the leader of the Gulf (DTO). The Mexican people feel as if they are living in a war zone between two of the largest (DTOs). Los Zetas, for example, is attempting to grab the turf of Gulf's murdered kingpin. These armed encounters between both groups have escalated in Matamoros, nearby Reynosa, and Mexico's richest city, Monterey (Emmott, 2010).⁴⁸

Heriberto, "The Executioner" Lazcano, arranged the split of the Zetas from the Gulf's criminal organization. Lazcano had been fingered for the massacre for 72 immigrants back in August of 2010. By these contributing actions, the most wanted Sinaola (DTO) leader, Joaquin "Shorty" Guzman is wading in to also fight the Zetas for these profitable smuggling routes (Emmott, 2010).⁴⁹

In this writer's opinion, these mass evacuations of entire towns will continue to weaken the Los Zetas by turning all of the populous against the Zetas, and will empower the military to position themselves to defeat and neutralize this (DTO).

⁴⁸ Emmott, R. (9, November 2010). Mexicans fear turf war after drug kingpin's death,p-1, Retrieved on, November 21, 2010, <http://www.reuters.com/article/idUSTRE6A85J020101110>

⁴⁹ ibid, p-1

La Familia Michoacana

On Friday, December 10, 2010, a vital blow to the leadership of La Familia was handed down in a shootout in Morelia, Mexico between La Familia (DTO) and the Federal police. In this shootout, beginning on Wednesday, December 8, 2010, there were at least eight individuals killed, as well as an 8-month old baby. In this gun battle, Alejandro Poiré - Government Spokesman - stated that the patriarch and leader of La Familia, Nazario Moreno Gonzalez – nicknamed “The Craziest One” was killed in this melee of gunfire” (Crimesider staff, 2010).⁵⁰

The loss of La Familia’s, “The Craziest One’s” leadership sends waves of instability throughout the organization. This power struggle and turmoil will further weaken the organization.

Another weakness looms ahead for this organization. The United States’ Department of Justice (DOJ) is targeting La Familia (DTO) with a successful program called Project Coronado. Law enforcement, on the federal, state, and local levels targeted La Familia’s drug distribution network across the United States. On November 6, 2009, *Drug Week* reported that more than 3,000 agents over a two day takedown were responsible for arresting over 300 individuals over a span of 19-states. During this two-day tactical operation, the following contraband was netted: \$3.4 million in U.S. currency, 729 pounds of methamphetamines, 62-kilograms of cocaine, 967-pounds of marijuana, and 144 weapons. There were also 109 vehicles confiscated by law enforcement (“U.S. Department of Justice”, 2009).⁵¹

These efforts by the United States through project Coronado had significantly dealt a severe blow to La Familia’s supply chain of their production and distribution of illegal drugs,

⁵⁰ Crimesider Staff. (2010).Cops: Chief of La Familia Cartel Nazario Moreno, Believed Dead After Mexican Shootout, p-2-3, Retrieved on, March 6, 2011, http://www.cbsnews.com/8301-504083_162-20025353-504083.html

⁵¹ U.S. Department of Justice: More than 300 Alleged La Familia Cartel, Members, and Associates Arrested in Two-Day Nationwide Takedown (2009).*Drug Week*, p-1, Retrieved, November 23, 2010, from Academic Lexus database

weapons, and their supply of cash flowing across the Mexican and United States borders. In Dallas, a criminal complaint had been filed, and in this indictment, Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosive Agents (ATF) charged that La Familia shipped hundreds of firearms through U.S. and Mexico borders over a period of 12-months. Also indicted were individuals with an assortment of crimes such-as: conspiracy to distribute methamphetamine, cocaine, and marijuana. These violations of federal law were conspiracy to import narcotics into the U.S. along with money laundering, and numerous defendants who were charged with forfeitures allegations (“U.S. Department of Justice”, 2009).⁵²

According to DEA’s acting Administrator Michele M. Leonhart (2009):

This organization, the newest of Mexican cartels, is directly responsible for a vast majority of the methamphetamine pouring into our country across our Southwest Border, and has had a hand in fueling the cycle of violence that is wracking Mexico today. DEA, along with our U.S. and Mexican partners, are committed to strategically attacking the international and domestic drug trade with every tool at our disposal, and defeating those that thrive on the suffering of others (p-2).⁵³

This operation was geared at dismantling La Familia’s criminal organization in the U.S. This concerted effort of a culminated 44-month investigation resulted in a two-day sweep. Project Coronado with the partnering of federal, state and local law enforcement agencies was an important operation and a blueprint of defeating La Familia or any other (DTO) for that matter.

VIII Overall Assessment

The overall assessment of the Zetas and La Familia is that they will resort to any sort of violence to achieve their goals. Their main objective is war with their federal government and to launch brazen attacks on the federal police and military without hesitation.

⁵² U .S. Department of Justice: More than 300 Alleged La Familia Cartel, Members, and Associates Arrested in Two-Day Nationwide Takedown (2009).*Drug Week*, p-1, Retrieved, November 23, 2010, from Academic Lexus database

⁵³ *ibid*, p-2

The Zetas, for example, are so bold that in May of 2009 they assaulted Zacatecas Cieneguillas Penitentiary to free their imprisoned comrades. One year earlier they entered the Dupont-Ostion Penal Compound in Coatzacoalcos dressed as fifty AFI police and then, once inside, they overpowered the officers and freed five of their members (Grayson, 2010).⁵⁴

IX Targets

Los Zetas

There have been reports of the Zetas blatantly targeting and engaging the Mexican Military in firefights (Beittel, 2009).⁵⁵

The Zetas' known objective is to target police and military forces. Their extensive planning and pinpoint accuracy of the execution of their attacks are bold, to say the least. In December of 2008 they captured and executed eight Mexican Army officers in Guerrero, Mexico. There was another execution of Brigadier General Mauro Enrique Tello Quinones in February, 2009 shortly after he had been hired to promote a counter-drug force for Cancun, Mexico (Sullivan, 2009).⁵⁶

Zetas are quick to take retribution against copycats. In 2008, for example, in Monterey a 35-year old man was found to be savagely abused before being found with an ice pick shoved into his thorax accompanied by a note that dangled from his hand that stated: "This is one of those who carried out extortion by telephone trying to pass for "Z" (Grayson, 2010).⁵⁷

La Familia Michoacana

Since La Familia trained with Los Zetas back in 2006, they have splintered off as an independent (DTO), and their targets are the Beltran-Leyva Brothers (DTO) and the Los Zetas.

⁵⁴ Grayson, G.W. (2010). Mexico: Narco-violence failed state, p-190, Transaction Publishers, New Jersey

⁵⁵ Beittel, J.S. (2009). Mexico's Drug Related Violence, Congressional Research Service, p-5, Retrieved on, November 2, 2010, <http://www.policyarchive.org/handle/10207/bitstreams/19832.pdf>

⁵⁶ Sullivan, J.P. (2009). Police-Military Interaction in Mexico's Drug War, p-4, Retrieved on, November 1, 2010, <http://www.airpower.au.af.mil/apjinternational/apj-s/2009/3tri09/sullivaneng.htm>

⁵⁷ Grayson, G.W. (2010). Mexico: Narco-violence failed state, p-190, Transaction Publishers, New Jersey

After the events of the capture of Arnaldo “La Minsa” Rueda Medina, known as the coordinator for La Familia, La Minsa’s comrades mounted a concerted attack. The following incidents reflect the targeting of federal police and military agents of the federal government which surfaced to the forefront of this group inflicting their “Divine Justice” (Grayson, 2009).⁵⁸ According to Grayson (2009):

On July 11 La Familia ambushed units of armed forces and federal police in eight cities, beginning with Michoacan’s colonial capital, Morelia. On July 13 the (DTO) captured, stripped, bound, and executed a dozen federal police, leaving their corpses in a heap alongside the Morelia-: Lazaro Cardenas highway with a message reading: “Come for another [of our leaders], we are waiting for you” (“*Vengan por otro, los estamos esperando*”)(p-2).⁵⁹

On July 14th, La Familia ambushed thirty federal police on a tourist bus on the highway near La Huacana. The federal police headquarters later that day was set ablaze (Grayson, 2009).⁶⁰

X Linkages and Relationships

Los Zetas

The Zetas have been linked to Kaibiles (who are enforcers from Guatemala). The Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13) is a transnational gang which is also connected with the Zetas.

According to journalist Sam Logan, “the Zetas possess links with local and state politicians and transnational gangs like MS-13, El Paso’s Barrio Azteca and the Texas Syndicate”(Sullivan, 2009).⁶¹

⁵⁸ Grayson, G.W.(2009).La Familia Michoacana: A Deadly Mexican Cartel Revisited, p-2, E Notes: Foreign Policy Research Institute, Retrieved on, October 31, 2010, <http://www.fpri.org/enotes/200908.grayson.lafamiliamihoacana.html>

⁵⁹ ibid, p-2

⁶⁰ Grayson, G.W.(2009). La Familia Michoacana: A Deadly Mexican Cartel Revisited, E Notes: Foreign Policy Research Institute, p-2, Retrieved on, October 31, 2010, <http://www.fpri.org/enotes/200908.grayson.lafamiliamihoacana.html>

⁶¹ Sullivan, J.P.(2009). Police-Military Interaction in Mexico’s Drug War, p-4, Retrieved on, November 1, 2010, <http://www.airpower.au.af.mil/apjinternational/apj-s/2009/3tri09/sullivaneng.htm>

La Familia Michoacana

The links to La Familia are the Sinaloa and Gulf Cartels.

La Familia is known for buying politicians and local police chiefs. It was reported that those who reject La Familia's open arms are shown no mercy, such as the case of some twenty murdered politicians in Michoacan (Morelia, 2009).⁶²

There were seven mayors criminally charged with criminal ties to La Familia. Even the state Governor's half-brother, who was elected to congress, has fled due to pending charges of graft (Morelia, 2009).⁶³

XI Conclusion

These two drug trafficking organizations, Los Zetas and La Familia Michoacana, have been exposed by this paper to be two of the most dangerous and powerful drug trafficking organizations which exist in Mexico today. Their tentacles of violence and criminal activity of major proportion has reached through drug trafficking routes into the United States. We have learned of the Zetas being hired by the Gulf (DTO) as hired assassins to kill off the Gulf's drug competitors. This alliance has rapidly gone south as these two former partners have become bitter rivals in competing for a broader drug territory. Loyalty for these individuals is only galvanized by their greed and self interests. The Zetas are killers who will resort to the most horrific crimes, such as the recent murder of 72 immigrants.

On the other hand, La Familia Michoacana is driven by a leadership of religious fanatics. The former patriarch of La Familia, Moreno Gonzalez, (a.k.a.: El Mas Loco or the Craziest One) had his own Bible published with his personal sayings. The doctrine that Moreno bases his writings on is the Christian writer, Eldredge. His book, the Salvaje de Corazon (Wild at Heart) is

⁶² Morelia, (2009). Taking on the unholy family; Mexico's drug gangs, The Economist, p-2, Retrieved on, November 1, 2010, http://www.economist.com/node/14091538?story_id=14091538

⁶³ ibid, p-2

the pulse of this (DTO). This bible is a requisite for each La Familia member to read. These leaders instill fear through the enforcement of strict religious principles. The New Jerusalem, which is a religious movement, can, at times, be directly or indirectly tied to La Familia leadership. The murdering method of beheading their enemies is termed by La Familia, as “Divine Justice.”

This (DTO) will not permit anyone to sell methamphetamines to their citizens of Michoacan. As ethical as that may seem, they will turn around and execute anyone who does. In contrast, La Familia was one of the largest distributors of “Meth” to the United States until a concerted law enforcement partnership, “Project Coronado”. This consisted of a combined effort by law enforcement agencies. It proved that this criminal organization could not run an unfettered criminal operation in the U.S. without a major consequence of major proportion which was dealt to La Familia.

Finally, it is this author’s opinion that law enforcement in the United States and Mexican law enforcement and the Mexican Military must continue to hound these criminal organizations on both sides of the border. The recent capturing or killing of their top leadership does hamper their hierarchy. It divides and separates them from within the (DTO). The lower ranks strive to fill that position by any violent means available to them. You can conquer them by splintering their organization by this tactic. As Project Coronado proved in their two-day sweep back in 2009, this kind of operation significantly breaks the back of any (DTO) like La Familia by indicting their members and confiscating large quantities of U.S. currency, product and other resources such as the impounding of their vehicles. This is a tactic that needs to be continued for law enforcement to defeat this dangerous new breed of criminals.

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