

Los Zetas: Organizational structure, tactics, and the innovation of a modern cartel

Los Zetas: Organizational Structure, Tactics, and the Innovation of a Modern Cartel  
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## **Introduction**

In this review I am comparing and contrasting the different interpretations of one of the most powerful Mexican drug cartels, the Zeta's, in terms of their organizational structure in comparison with the Mexican government's, how they have innovated a new type of modern cartel, and what tactics they have been using to forward their mission. The Zetas are a recently formed cartel and paramilitary group that split off from the Gulf Cartel in 2007 and have shocked the world with their new styles of operations. They are known for their extreme brutality and uses of social media to grow and gain power. Most of the research is slightly vague, because of the inability to interview active cartel members without seriously endangering their status and safety, and it would be practically impossible to get completely accurate inside information without being killed and the Zetas immediately changing their organizational structure. The research into this cartel generally agrees and only adds onto itself in slightly varying perspectives.

## **Methodology**

To gather research I first went through academic search engines related to my discourse community of political science such as "JSTOR", "Sage Pub", and the "Foreign Policy Research Institute" with search terms about Zetas and cartel activity in Mexico. From there I found many different academic articles about the broader topics of cartel tactics and histories of these cartels. To narrow it down from there I went to two different books, the only two that I found that explicitly mentioned the Zetas that I checked out of the Boston Public Library. "El Narco: Inside Mexico's Criminal Insurgency" by Ion Grillo is a broader cartel overview and "The Executioner's Men" by George Grayson and Samuel Logan was exclusively about the Zetas and

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every facet of their organization. From there I realized that most of the literature I found through academic searches on this topic was either written by either one of those three writers, or used them as a sources for their own research. This is important because it shows how the current research is limited and that there are not many experts on this specific topic. A publication called “Small Wars and Insurgencies” had multiple different peer-reviewed articles on the Zetas, including Samuel Logan and he seemed to be very involved with the publication. From there I exclusively focused on sources that directly addressed the organizational tactics and the type of logistic and social –media innovation particular to the Zetas. I attempted to get a large variety of sources that were not entirely based off of and did not exclusively cite Logan and Grayson as their primary sources.

## **Body**

### **Zeta’s Recruitment Tactics in Comparison with the Mexican Government**

There is not much disagreement among researchers in the idea that the Zetas have employed some of the same recruitment tactics and structure as the Mexican government, especially considering their history of recruiting army defectors, however there is some different interpretation as to how their structure differs from source to source. Some sources agree more with the idea that they function much like the Mexican government does in different areas while others interpret the Zetas actions more as an independent actor who uses mainly violent and criminal tactics to further their mission. The Zetas were originally trained to be a paramilitary group for the Mexican government, the Mexican version of the U.S. Rangers of the French Green Barrets. George Grayson and Samuel Logan in their book say that the Zetas like to work as a sort of “shadow regime” to the government where they can control many different illegal activities and count on the Mexican government’s impunity and possible open cooperation

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(Grayson and Logan, 2012, p. 69). Grayson and Logan take the stance that the Zetas can work almost hand in hand with the state and that is how they achieve many of their goals. Diane Davis agrees with Grayson and Logan. Davis (2010) thinks that this cartel acts like a state power by relying on the loyalties in both the communities and global arenas that the Zetas operate in (p. 401). She says that the Zetas help community solidarity by offering services such as employment, supporting and building parks and playgrounds, and answering the city's needs at a local level which the community responds positively towards (Davis, 2010, p. 401). Davis (2010) thinks that these types of services helped the Zetas wage "a battle for the hearts and minds of citizens" (p. 401), which was expedited by the community's mistrust of the Mexican police and military. She argues they have achieved the community's support by using the same tactics used by the Mexican state such as paying voters and protesters, which when the State did these things destroyed the trust between themselves and their citizens (Davis, 2010, p. 401). Both Graham Turbiville and Robert Bunker have similar approaches to understanding the Zetas' relationship with the Mexican government. They both approach this relationship from the angle that the Zetas' organization and aims diverge much farther than merely a counter-form to the Mexican government. Bunker (2011) thinks that the Mexican Federal Government has not meaningfully participated in any "ongoing cartel and vigilante information offensives and counter-offensives" (p.3) and Turbiville (2010) thinks that the relationship between the Mexican government and the Zetas points to a how the security forces and paramilitaries have caused an equilibrium shift in the these relationships and may cause wider reaching crossover violence (p.125). The two main schools of thinking in this subject are of the Zetas acting as a consciously competing form of governance and of the Zetas working exclusively for their own benefit and only employing the government when completely necessary to forward their own missions.

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The exact organizational structure of the Zetas is not well known by any researchers because the Zetas reconfigure every time that they think someone has figured out their operations or structure. The Zetas pride themselves on being many steps in front of the government. The ways of how the Zetas' thinking is interpreted however, does vary from source to source. This section delves into the different opinions of the scholars in this discourse community. Logan and Grayson (2012) in particular focus their research on the esprit de corps of the Zetas, how they apply techniques of team building, leadership, and loyalty in similar ways to the military to retain and recruit more members such as going to great lengths to promote group solidarity and protect their members (p. 78). Another researcher, Ioan Grillo, has a different way of interpreting the main styles of thinking among the Zetas. He explains that the Zetas function similarly to the franchise model, meaning that even if the leaders are killed, the different organizational factions can continue without much disruption. Grillo (2011) believes that the Zetas think like a paramilitary group aiming to control and gain territory and not like gangsters, and that this approach to fighting has extended into the larger Mexican Drug War (p. 106).

### **Zetas' Tactical and Organizational Interpretations**

Within the greater umbrella of the Zetas' organizational structure there is some debate about what types of tactics and what the main focus of these tactics is. Some believe that their tactics are mainly violence and fear based, while others believe that it is more important to focus on the bigger, overall structure. Samuel Logan, both in his individual paper and his joint research with John Sullivan focuses on how the Zetas use violence as their main tactic and that they are focused primarily on territorial control. Logan and Sullivan (2011) focus on how violence can bring the Zetas closer to the state by engaging in raids and ambushes and employing

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“small unit infantry tactics supported by intelligence operations” to force the state and security forces into close quarters battle (Conclusion, para.1). Logan and Sullivan (2011) approach the Zetas as a cohesive, military-like network, which uses exceptional brutality as a type of tactical step to larger engagement (Origins, para.2). Turbiville (2010) gives them less credit in terms of military style and thinks that their tactical underpinnings are firefights, raids, and assassinations (p. 125). Yet another way of viewing the Zetas’ organizational structure is through the eyes of Diane Davis, who sees the conflict from a broader perspective. The Zetas’ tactics remind her of older interpretations of land division and control styles and says that the Zetas work as “territorially circumscribed power brokers” who use this power over their subjects, markets, and territories (p. 402).

Another approach to understanding the tactical objectives of the Zetas is to understand them through a lens of them being information brokers who wield great power over the Internet. Bunker (2011) talks about how the cartels use their immense power over journalists and reports to influence and/or suppress the information distributed about them (p. 2). Another opinion and comparison to other structures says that the Zetas’ tactics emulate those of terrorists or insurgents even though these motives are based on profit instead of a political mission (Shirk, 2011, p.3). This perspective takes a step that the others did not by comparing the Zetas to a terrorist organization, which brings up the highly disputed topic of whether leveling them as a terrorist organization is helpful and if it would simply imply that everyone who uses cartel-supplied drugs is a terrorist financier. All of these different lenses of understanding the Zetas’ tactical style do not necessarily conflict with each other as much as help foster a more profound understanding of the topic.

### **Innovation in Cartel Style**

This section compares and contrasts the different opinions of how the Zetas have used innovative styles of structure and tactics to forward their mission territorial expansion and control. Most of my research does not disagree but chooses to build on different ideas of how the Zetas are a very forward thinking cartel. One of the first ideas for how the Zetas have changed the normal cartel structure is that they have changed the image of the gentleman drug lord that was popular for many years through their use of extreme brutality and scare tactics (Logan, 2011, p.720). In this way of thinking they are painted as a group that is more separate from the community and cares much less about appeasing Mexican citizens than former cartels had. This theme, explored by Sullivan and Logan (2011), focuses on the employment of military-like structure and tactics such as ambushes, defensive positions, and small-war tactics (Origins, para. 2). Their argument is that they use the military style unlike other cartels have in the past, specifically “hell-honed intelligence capabilities, exploiting grassroots networks, precision small-unit attacks, ambushes and raids, and symbolic violence and brutality” (Sullivan and Logan, 2011). Another opinion of how the Zetas are innovative in their cartel style is that they have brought back the use of extreme violence, such as decapitation, which was almost unheard of in modern times until the Zetas came into power (Grillo, 2011, p.106). This opinion is echoed to different degrees throughout my research with descriptions of the Zetas’ use of violence tactics and their reputation for being a particularly horrible cartel.

Another prevalent idea of how the Zetas are innovative has to do with their use of social media to recruit and connect with each other in ways that have not yet been seen before this type of conflict. Their use of social media is believed to accelerate the velocity of violence (Logan, 2011, p.718). This focus of Zeta innovation is expanded on by Robert Bunker, who focuses in

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his own research on Mexican cartels' use of cyberspace. He says that the existence of social media has completely synthesized the old method of cartel brutalization, torturing/killing victims and leaving them in public surrounded by graffiti, and has combined it with a dual-dimensional initiative to utilize new forms of media and bring these tortures/killings to the social-media world. Youtube and other social media platforms were therefore utilized heavily from about 2005-2006 as the conduit for this graphic violence (Bunker, 2011, p. 2). This focus on the Zetas' use of social media sees their expanded recruitment and communications abilities all through a lens of modern technology. Another innovative communication style, which different researchers have decided to concentrate on more than social media, is that of the narcomensajes and narcomantas, messages left by cartels on large sheets. This focus says that these messages are some of the main methods of recruitment and scare-tactics (Eiss, 2014, p. 79).

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

Most of the literature I researched on the topics of the organizational structure's relationship to the Mexican government's, the focus and tactics of the Zetas, and how they are seen as an innovative and new style of cartel are in agreement. These themes are purely approached from different backgrounds and understandings, such as seeing them as a terrorist organization, a simple business, or a structure that competes with that of the Mexican government. The main point of contention between sources is which of these lenses gives the broadest understanding and what the most important tactics used are. There is not nearly enough research done on this topic, understandably so because of the extremely dangerous task of attempting to trick a cartel which would most likely end in death. One recommendation for further research would be to explore more into the actual goals of the Zetas along with how they

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could be structured as a type of 'shadow state'. This could come from interviews with Zeta members currently in jail (though this could gravely endanger this informant since the Zetas have large sway in local prisons and jails). The research needs to agree on whether the Zetas are attempting to form a parallel government or if they are just focused on forwarding their own business and any perceived empathy is purely for citizen persuasion. This is important to understand because it could help in an accurate framing of their intentions. To be able to understand this topic in a comprehensive manner and properly compare these ideas, we need to wait a few years and see how this cartel develops and hopefully have more reliable sources to base information off of instead of the existing, part-speculative style of analysis and investigation that are being used currently.

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