
THE ORIGIN
OF THE *Z*ETAS
AND THEIR EXPANSION
IN NORTHERN
COAHUILA

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INTRODUCTION¹

Various academic papers and newspaper articles have focused on the recent violence in northern Coahuila.² El Colegio de México's Seminar on Violence and Peace has approached the analysis of this situation in two phases. The first studied two paradigmatic bouts of violence in northeastern Mexico, and took the form of a book: *State of Neglect: Los Zetas, the State, Society and the Victims of San Fernando, Tamaulipas (2010) and Allende, Coahuila (2011)*.³ In collaboration with the Inter-American Academy of Human Rights in Coahuila, the second phase explored the findings and reflections of the first part of the research in greater detail. This resulted in *The Zeta Yoke*, containing a detailed analysis of the internal dynamics of the Piedras Negras prison, and furthered research in northern Coahuila.⁴

This paper supplements *The Zeta Yoke*, with the objective of describing the expansion of criminal groups operating in the region. Divided into two parts, the first includes the history of the Zetas, from their origins and operations to their break from the Gulf Cartel, and what we know of their current situation; the second part examines northern Coahuila's strategic importance, the reasons behind the Zetas' arrival in the area, and some aspects of their operation in the region.

A BRIEF BACKGROUND OF THE ZETAS

Two organizations clearly define criminal activity in Coahuila: the Gulf Cartel, with its constant presence in the state, and the Zetas, who have recently managed to take over control. In the following overview of these organizations' general background, the close relationship between them is clearly evident.

Background: the Gulf Cartel

The Gulf Cartel began its life as a whiskey-smuggling organization in Matamoros, Tamaulipas. Led by Juan Nepomuceno Guerra, it took advantage of Prohibition in the United States, trafficking the product to Texas in the 1930s.⁵ By mid-1980s, Nepomuceno Guerra gradually started to hand over the reins of the organization to Juan García Ábrego, one of his nephews. The main change within the Gulf Cartel under García Ábrego's leadership was its transition towards the business of large-scale drug dealing, responding to the demand of the international drug market.⁶ The geographical location of Tamaulipas gave García Ábrego a particular advantage:

It must be the most coveted state for Mexican drug dealers (given their main role as drug carriers to the United States): it has a long border with the United States; it has a long coastline and, compared to other states with borders and coastlines, such as Baja California and Sonora, its border cities (Nuevo Laredo, Miguel Alemán, Reynosa, Río Bravo, and Matamoros) are the nearest destinations.⁷

The Gulf Cartel's growth was so spectacular in the early-1990s that many believed García Ábrego had struck a special deal with the Mexican authorities. "Curiously, his leadership lasted only slightly longer than Carlos Salinas de Gortari's six-year presidency: he was arrested only 13 months after Salinas left office, on January 14, 1996."⁸ The Mexican government then took advantage of García Ábrego's US nationality to order the drug lord's immediate extradition. This move prevented García Ábrego from using the corruption within the Mexican prison system to his advantage in order to continue ruling the Gulf Cartel from behind bars, the *modus operandi* of one of his successors some years later.

Juan García Ábrego's capture triggered an internal struggle for control over the Gulf Cartel, because there was no blood relative to take over. Juan's brother, Humberto García Ábrego, had been in prison since 1994.⁹ As a result, two factions fought over the control of the Gulf Cartel: Salvador Gómez Herrera, alias "Chava Gómez," and Osiel Cárdenas Guillén were pitted against Óscar Malherbe de León and Hugo Baldomero Medina Garza, alias "El Rey de los Tráileres" (the Trucking King).¹⁰

The leadership role initially fell to Malherbe because, as the main contact between the Cali and Gulf Cartels, he managed to maintain a continued flow of drug supplies after García Ábrego's extradition. However, he was only in control for a few months, due to his arrest in May 1997. The rival faction took advantage of this situation and seized control of the organization. Salvador Gómez Herrera orchestrated an attack against Baldomero Medina almost immediately, in May.¹¹ Medina saved his own life, but decided to retire temporarily from criminal activities.¹² The Gulf Cartel was left under the control of Salvador Gómez Herrera and Osiel Cárdenas Guillén.

According to Guillermo Valdés Castellanos, Gómez Herrera focused on eliminating rivals and spending time pursuing recreational activities,

delegating operational and commercial matters to Cárdenas Guillén. In this sense, Gómez Herrera appeared to consider Cárdenas Guillén more as a subordinate than a partner.¹³ This dual, albeit asymmetrical configuration would also prove short-lived. The internal power struggle following García Ábrego's arrest had already lasted more than two years, with two transitory leaderships and several attempts to resolve the succession issue.

Within a few months, Cárdenas Guillén delivered the final blow and eliminated Salvador Gómez in 1998. With the support of Arturo Guzmán Decena—his bodyguard, an elite ex-soldier whom he had met through Gilberto García Nena, at that time a regional boss (“jefe de plaza”) for the Gulf Cartel in Miguel Alemán, Tamaulipas—¹⁴ Osiel Cárdenas Guillén finally put an end to the succession conflict within the organization. This episode is so important it even had symbolic effects: on the one hand Osiel Cárdenas' nickname changed from “El Chaparrito” (Shorty) to “El Mata Amigos” (Friend-Killer),¹⁵ and on the other, it marked the arrival of the first Zeta onto the criminal scene.

Osiel Cárdenas Guillén and the formation of the Zetas

Varying accounts exist to explain how the Zeta organization was established. It is widely understood, however, that Cárdenas Guillén requested Guzmán Decena to hire the most highly-trained bodyguards. Guzmán Decena then set out to convince his former companions from elite Army units to work for the new leader of the Gulf Cartel. Guzmán Decena focused on persuading his former companions from the Airborne Special Forces (Grupo Aeromóvil de Fuerzas Especiales, GAFE) , an elite unit of the Mexican army, with very select members trained in counterinsurgency at the Escuela de las Américas, both in tactics and in the use of specialized weapons.¹⁶ That select group was

part of the government response to the emergence of the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional, EZLN) in 1994. GAFE members were trained as small, mobile, decentralized, quick-response units.¹⁷ After the Mexican state managed to rapidly control the Zapatista's guerrilla movement,¹⁸ the government took advantage of its specialized training for fighting against organized crime, thus moving them to Tamaulipas.

According to a declassified document of the United States Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA),¹⁹ in the second half of 1998 Guzmán Decena held several meetings with GAFE members assigned to the 15th Infantry Battalion, assigned to Tancol, Tamaulipas. For instance, American authorities recorded meetings between Guzmán Decena and active soldiers in bars in Miguel Alemán, Tamaulipas, in December 1998. On the basis of this documentary evidence, we can date the Zetas' formation to December 1998.

After his arrest, Jesús Enrique Rejón Aguilar, alias "El Mamito" or Z-7, declared that there "were initially seven Zetas, and then seven more came along, adding up to fourteen, and we were the oldest."²⁰ It is very hard to determine the original number of deserters, but among them were Alejandro Lucio Morales Betancourt, Rogelio González Pizaña, Heriberto Lazcano Lazcano, Mateo Díaz López, Jesús Enrique Rejón Aguilar, Óscar Guerrero Silva, Omar Lorméndez Pitalúa, and Efraín Teodoro Torres.²¹ According to Logan,²² in the first few years Guzmán Decena convinced 31 elite soldiers to abandon the army.

The group did not receive a specific name, but in time they became known as the Zetas, as they identified themselves with successive codes starting with the letter Z, where Guzmán Decena was Z-1, Lucio Morales Z-2,²³ Heriberto Lazcano Z-3, and so on. It is most widely believed that they used their radio frequencies to identify each other. Initially, the Zetas were

only in charge of eliminating Cárdenas Guillén's competitors, according to Morales Betancourt's statement given to the Federal Attorney General's Office (Procuraduría General de la República, PGR) when he was a protected witness following his arrest.²⁴

There were two transcendental moments in the Zetas' early years. Firstly, when Guzmán Decena was shot dead by Mexican soldiers at a Matamoros restaurant on November 22, 2002. The successor was not Z-2,²⁵ but Heriberto Lazcano, alias Z-3 or "El Verdugo" (the Executioner). It remains unclear whether the succession was a decision of the group of hitmen or imposed by Cárdenas Guillén, but some common traits are notable: Z-1 and Z-3 were not born or raised in northeastern part of the country but instead in central Mexican states (Puebla and Hidalgo, respectively); both were highly-trained soldiers, capable of large-scale violence carried out with great precision.²⁶

The second moment relates to the leader of the Gulf Cartel and founder of the Zetas. The Army managed to capture Osiel Cárdenas Guillén in March 2003, in Matamoros, Tamaulipas. The National Defence Minister at the time, General Gerardo Clemente Ricardo Vega García, declared that Mexican soldiers managed to repel several attacks from Cárdenas Guillén's hitmen. He talked about three specific clashes during his capture and the rescue attempts by his subordinates.²⁷ As detailed below, this did not spell the end of Cárdenas Guillén's leadership of the Gulf Cartel, but it did loosen the chain of command and allowed the Zetas to expand.

The Zetas' growing independence from the Gulf Cartel

Cárdenas Guillén's arrest by the Mexican authorities called for the division of labor to be reorganized within the organization. Therefore, although even

from prison he remained in control,²⁸ traditional members—under the command of Osiel’s brother, Ezequiel Cárdenas, alias “Tony Tormenta” (Storm Tony) and Eduardo Costilla, alias “El Coss”— kept the drug-dealing business for themselves, particularly exploiting the border regions around Matamoros and Reynosa, and keeping contact with Colombian cartels, ensuring that the Zetas continued making money from mining their territories for resources through extortion, kidnapping and drug dealing.

Lazcano leveraged his organization’s capacities and the partial absence of Cárdenas Guillén to expand the Zetas’ territorial presence. Here we should note the Zetas’ large comparative advantages within the Mexican crime scene: they skillfully spread out geographically, organizing themselves in cells and seizing positions as elite military commands. This territorial strategy also represented another innovation in the world of Mexican organized crime.

We should first note the fact that the Zetas took violence within Mexican organized crime to a new level. Their firepower, level of training, tactical knowledge, and the sheer brutality of their methods gave the Gulf Cartel a strong advantage. This clearly forced rival organizations to adapt or be crushed, thus *professionalizing* extreme violence and ruthlessness.²⁹

Secondly, they developed a model of criminal franchises. A Zeta cell would set up in a specific locale, eliminate possible competitors, co-opt local police corporations and then recruit local representatives who would remain in charge of the area (“la plaza”) and hand over a percentage of their income to the Zeta leadership and the Gulf Cartel.

As a third factor, the Zetas did not limit their activities to controlling drug-dealing. They also became involved local crime, racketeering in other criminal activities such as kidnapping and extortion; additionally, they took control of businesses in the formal sector, from horse racing, shopping malls

and possibly even government tenders.³⁰ In short, they had their fingers in every pie to extract resources.³¹

The Zetas therefore concentrated on the organization's territorial expansion and opening up new business opportunities—such as extorting stores, kidnapping, selling drugs on the street, stealing fuel, operating illegal activities in nightclubs, piracy, and clandestine alcohol sales—while commanders of the Gulf Cartel concentrated on strengthening their main source of income: crossborder drug-trafficking, particularly from Matamoros to Brownsville, and from Reynosa to McAllen.

This limited the interaction between both structures, and increased the Zetas' independence and operational capacity; they received direct incomes that did not depend on the commanders of the Gulf Cartel. Over time, this triggered a series of frictions between the Zetas and other units within the cartel.

They expanded down Mexico's Gulf coast, reaching Central America, but also operating in Nuevo León, San Luis Potosí, Coahuila, Hidalgo, and Chiapas.³² The Zetas waged hard-fought battles against rival organizations in various territories, from Michoacán—for the control of Lázaro Cárdenas' port—to Guatemala, to access South American cocaine and migrant routes.³³ This process of expansion also involved the recruitment of new members, thus expanding the Zetas' main nucleus of operation.

The response by the authorities and other criminal groups reduced the number of Zeta leaders, either because they were murdered, captured, or even because they abandoned the organization.³⁴ For instance, by 2005 the DEA calculated a reduction of between 30 and 40 out of the 83 members estimated to form the organization's nucleus. It is worth clarifying that the recruitment process continued after 1998; the Zetas gradually brought into their ranks soldiers with less training, former policemen, and even criminals, whom they sent to training camps run by the organization. They also started

to recruit Kaibiles—elite soldiers from the Guatemalan army, trained in counterinsurgency activity and responsible for several human rights violations—to replenish their numbers. It is certain that the downsizing of the Guatemalan army by more than 50%, under the rule of the former president, Óscar Berger Perdomo (2004-2008),³⁵ facilitated their recruitment.

The Treviño Morales brothers rose to prominence in this context, particularly Miguel Ángel, alias Z-40, who from 2009 started to make many of the operative decisions within the organization, even though this group was still under the leadership of Heriberto Lazcano.³⁶ The role of the Treviño Morales siblings was important for two main reasons: firstly, because they rose up within the Zeta ranks despite having a different profile to the organization's founders—who had been elite soldiers. This reveals that arrests and murders started to weaken the original founders' nucleus. Secondly, it represents the organization's multinational dynamics, as the Treviño Morales were criminals operating around the US-Mexico border region, with businesses on both sides of the Río Bravo, as became abundantly clear after the José Treviño Morales's arrest and trial in the United States in 2013.³⁷

The watershed in the Zetas' history happened when Osiel Cárdenas Guillén was extradited to the United States in early 2007, at the very start of President Felipe Calderón Hinojosa's "Guerra contra el narcotráfico" (War on Drugs). According to Corchado and Krause, when he arrived in the United States:

Cárdenas Guillén considered rejecting the US charges of drug-dealing and conspiracy, according to two of his former partners; but his lawyers reminded him that the last Mexican drug lord to do so, his predecessor Juan García Ábrego, had lost the trial and was sentenced to 11 consecutive life

sentences and forced to hand over millions of dollars of illicit income. They advised him that cooperation was the best strategy.³⁸

Osiel Cárdenas Guillén's extradition to the United States triggered two closely inter-related processes that, in the long-term, turned northeastern Mexico into a brutally violent region. Firstly, the extradition increased the Zetas' power and independence from their umbrella organization, the Gulf Cartel, which was no longer in the position to assign territories or missions. Instead, it now had to maintain a collaborative attitude towards its former subordinates, respecting their territories and being unable to prevent them from encroaching further into the lucrative drug-dealing business. The case of northern Coahuila is a case in point, and shall be discussed in more detail below. Secondly, Cárdenas Guillén's extradition to the United States implied the weakening of his organization, increasingly understood as an alliance between the old Gulf Cartel and the Zetas, no longer as a superior-subordinate relationship.

The effects of Osiel Cárdenas Guillén's extradition were gradual. Information gathered by Corchado and Krause showed how Cárdenas Guillén continued in control of the Gulf Cartel from 2007 to 2009, when he was already in the United States.³⁹ This was only made possible due to the collaboration of the US authorities. According to Corchado and Krause, the US government had turned one of Cárdenas Guillén's trusted henchmen into an informer back in 2001. Cárdenas Guillén managed to communicate with the leaders of the Gulf Cartel and the Zetas through Juan Jesús Guerrero Chapa, ensuring the organization remained stable and in control of northeastern Mexico. Considering there was no conflict between criminal organizations in the region, it therefore comes as no surprise that violence indicators in the region—particularly murder rates—did not increase

drastically at the end of the 2000s, especially when compared to other regions in the country and considering the “War on Drugs” had begun.⁴⁰

The uprising: war breaks out between the Gulf Cartel and the Zetas

The Zetas and the Gulf Cartel separated in early 2010, leading to an extremely violent and bloody confrontation in their overlapping territories, particularly Tamaulipas. There are three main causes for the uprising, or “El Alzamiento” as the outbreak of the war between the former allies is known.⁴¹ Far from contradicting themselves, they resemble pieces of a puzzle: the murder of “El Concord 3,” Cárdenas Guillén’s betrayal and, structurally, the Zetas’ expansion throughout the country.

Although he could operate in that city due to the inter-organizational alliance, Víctor Peña Mendoza, alias “El Concord 3,” represented the Zetas in Reynosa, Tamaulipas, a bastion of the Gulf Cartel. According to Mexico’s Federal Police officials, Peña Mendoza was inside Miguel Ángel Treviño’s circle of trust.⁴² Federal agents captured Peña Mendoza in March 2009, although he was inexplicably free at the end of that year.⁴³ Everything points to Eduardo Costilla Sánchez, alias “el Coss,” having ordered Samuel Flores Borrego, alias “Metro 3” and leader of the band “Los Metros,” to murder Peña Mendoza.

Zeta leaders did not declare war immediately. Lazcano and Treviño Morales asked Ezequiel Cárdenas Guillén and Costilla Sánchez to hand over the hitmen, or else they would start to attack members of the Gulf Cartel.⁴⁴ The Gulf Cartel leaders refused, creating a definitive break between the two organizations. The Zetas began the offensive in Tamaulipas at the end of January.⁴⁵

According to Corchado and Krause, the second reason for the break was that Osiel Cárdenas's betrayals were increasingly obvious, to the point that attempts to capture Heriberto Lazcano Lazcano intensified. Lazcano Lazcano noted he was being pursued in a different way, particularly after his survival skills barely enabled him to evade an arrest attempt from the authorities. He immediately began to investigate these incidents, which were unusual given his strong security measures.⁴⁶ One of his sources informed him that Osiel Cárdenas Guillén was plea-bargaining with American authorities, which had to mean he was supplying information about his subordinates, his operations, and his properties, to the US Department of Justice. In fact, the US Consulate in Monterrey itself has verified data provided by Corchado and Krause: "the information gathered by intelligence services reflects that this separation was the result of the extradition of [redacted] to the United States in 2007, and sentenced on February 25, 2010."⁴⁷

This should not seem strange to anyone, because plea-bargaining in exchange for information is a systematic practice of the US Department of Justice, regardless of its potential consequences for the internal dynamics of organizations, countries, and lives of innocent people.⁴⁸ According to a Human Rights Watch report, the US Department of Justice uses its prosecutors to force detainees to cooperate by threatening them with the severest penalties possible, and offering lower sentences to those who plead guilty and collaborate with the DEA, informing on accomplices and rivals alike.⁴⁹

The system works the same way whether the person in question is a small-scale trafficker or the leader of an organization. This issue is particularly important to explain the situation in northeastern Mexico, as the approach is not limited to the deal struck with Osiel Cárdenas Guillén but also the plea-bargain arrangements with lower-level criminals, such as

Alfonso Cuéllar or Héctor Moreno, key figures in the kidnappings and assassinations in Allende, Piedras Negras, and the Cinco Manantiales region in Coahuila, widely known as ‘Allende’s Massacre’, and which we will call the Zeta Revenge.⁵⁰

These doubts were confirmed after Osiel Cárdenas Guillén’s sentence: for crimes including money laundering, assaulting and murdering federal agents, conspiring to distribute drugs in the United States, among others, he received only 25 years in prison. “This is unacceptable. Cárdenas deserves no such special treatment,” stated the editorial of the *Houston Chronicle* in the United States.⁵¹ According to the statement made by Jesús Enrique Rejón Aguilar, alias “El Mamito,” “the Zetas were loyal to Cárdenas Guillén until February 2010, when the deal struck for his sentencing became known.”⁵²

However, the main cause for the two organizations to split was structural. Simply put, the Zetas’ expansion and autonomy outstripped that of the Gulf Cartel, and the latter organization very soon became overshadowed by its former subordinate. In this sense, the strategy chosen by Ezequiel Cárdenas, alias “Tony Tormenta,” and Eduardo Costilla, alias “El Coss,” to maintain the regional status quo for drug-trafficking in the northeast, Matamoros, and Reynosa, proved counterproductive, for the Zeta’s expansion had not only enabled them to secure their control of the area from Nuevo Laredo to Laredo, but also opened the door to other territories, such as Piedras Negras to Eagle Pass, Texas. Furthermore, it gave them direct access to suppliers when they reached Central America, and the opportunity to extract resources by other means, as outlined above.⁵³

Stratfor—a company that refers to itself as a geopolitical intelligence platform—included all Mexican entities bordering the Gulf of Mexico, from Tamaulipas to Yucatán, and some nearby areas such as San Luis Potosí, Hidalgo, Puebla, Chiapas, or Campeche, in a list of territories within the alliance between the Zetas and the Gulf Cartel.⁵⁴ Alfonso Cuéllar presented

a similar list during José Treviño Morales's trial in 2013.⁵⁵ However, the split made it clear that the territories only belonged to the Zetas, because they were stronger in most states in their area, and had greater firepower. For instance, whereas the Gulf Cartel controlled Matamoros and Reynosa, the Zetas had a strong presence in the surroundings, both in Nuevo Laredo and in the region of San Fernando and Ciudad Victoria.

According to Osorno,⁵⁶ the Gulf Cartel's surprise attack on its former allies has several names, depending on the point of view of those involved: members of the Gulf Cartel called it "La Vuelta" (the Return) or "El Reto" (the Challenge); the Zetas spoke of "La Traición" (Betrayal); for everyone else it was simply 'El Alzamiento' (the Uprising). After the torture and murder of Víctor Peña Mendoza, alias "El Concord 3," the Zeta response was extremely violent. A couple of days before Osiel Cárdenas Guillén was sentenced on February 22, 2010, the Zetas launched a counterattack throughout the region known as La Frontera Chica in Tamaulipas. They literally laid siege to Ciudad Mier, Miguel Alemán, and Camargo.⁵⁷

The war had multiple effects. Firstly, violence in the region spiked to alarming levels, almost as high as those seen in notoriously dangerous states such as Sinaloa, Chihuahua, and Baja California. The murder and disappearance rates increased significantly at the start of this decade, with a lag of two or three years in relation to the national trend.⁵⁸

An analysis of the events that took place during the war between the Gulf Cartel and the Zetas would be extremely complicated. Suffice to say that the brutality of the confrontations was extreme. The well-known, paradigmatic cases speak for themselves; it is worth reading Osorno's work on the battle of Ciudad Mier,⁵⁹ the research on the migrant massacre in San Fernando,⁶⁰ and the appearance of torsos in Cadereyta,⁶¹ among others. Of course, many other cases of extreme violence received scant attention. For

instance, a diplomatic note from the United States signaled the presence of car bombs in the center of Ciudad Victoria, capital of Tamaulipas.⁶²

The pursuit of Zeta leaders and internal rifts

In the medium term, the struggle over the various territories stabilized and the Zetas came out on top; between 2011 and 2015, they became one of the country's two largest criminal organizations, along with the Sinaloa Cartel. However, disputes broke out within its ranks among those seeking control of the group, and an increasingly dogged pursuit by Mexican and American authorities.

The first division in the organization opened up in 2012, when a regional cell headed by Iván Velázquez Caballero, alias “El Talibán,” decided to become independent.⁶³ The Talibans, as they called themselves, operated in various municipalities of Zacatecas, San Luis Potosí, Coahuila, Aguascalientes, Guanajuato, and Nuevo León. They entered an alliance with the Gulf Cartel to take over some Zeta “plazas” in Zacatecas and San Luis Potosí, a struggle that continues, because the remaining Talibans now form part of the structure of the Gulf Cartel.

In the first decade of the twenty-first century, the authorities focused on the organization's lieutenants, such as Jesús Enrique Rejón Aguilar, alias “El Mamito”, and Jaime González Durán, alias “El Hummer.” However, the wave of brutality and, above all, the high-profile episodes of the war between the Gulf Cartel and the Zetas caused the Mexican authorities to target the leaders: Heriberto Lazcano, alias Z-3, was shot dead by the Mexican Marines in Progreso, Coahuila, on October 7, 2012.⁶⁴ His successor, Miguel Ángel Treviño Morales, alias Z-40, led the organization very briefly, although some reports state he had ousted Lazcano even before the latter's death. Marines

arrested Miguel Ángel Treviño Morales on July 15, 2013, in Anáhuac, Nuevo León, close to the border with Tamaulipas. A few months earlier, the US Department of Justice had sentenced his older brother, José Treviño Morales, for money laundering through pure-blood horse breeding and racing, in an episode directly related to disappearances and assassinations in the northern region of Coahuila.⁶⁵

Omar Treviño Morales, the youngest brother known as Z-42, retained the Treviño's control over the Zetas, but from an increasingly weak position. According to Monte Alejandro Rubido, then National Security Commissioner, "his extremely violent personality did not earn him the respect his brother had enjoyed within the organization, which forced him to face the opposition of some local operators who sought their independence, a situation that derived in further confrontations within the criminal group."⁶⁶

The arrest of Omar Treviño Z-42 triggered an internal dispute within the organization, which was impossible to resolve in the short term. This led to the split of the Zetas into two independent groups, which still exist today. The first organization, known as "Los Zetas Vieja Escuela" (Old-School Zetas), and was controlled by Ricardo Carreón Olvera, killed in September 2017.⁶⁷ This organization still has an alliance with the Gulf Cartel.⁶⁸ Its operations are centered on Tamaulipas and northern Veracruz.

The other group, the "Cartel del Noreste," is the larger of the two organizations, and could be considered as the true heir of the Zetas, regardless of the name of its rival organization. It is headed by Z-40 and Z-42's nephew, Juan Gerardo Treviño Sánchez, who seems that he kept the lion's share of the Zetas' structure, and keeps its presence in significant areas of the territories where the original Zetas operated. Therefore, it is possible that the old Zetas still operate in northern Coahuila, although perhaps with less intensity than before and under a different name. This can be confirmed with a single fact: after his arrest in Ciudad Cardel, Veracruz, Rogelio López

Alemán, alias “El Kelo,” declared that he was the Cartel del Noreste’s “jefe de plaza” in Coahuila. Subsequently, he was arraigned by a judge (Juez Primero de Primera Instancia del Distrito Judicial), based in Sabinas, Coahuila.⁶⁹

THE ZETAS IN NORTHERN COAHUILA

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

The region's importance

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

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

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

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

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

The Zetas' arrival in northern Coahuila

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

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

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

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

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

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

In parallel, they worked to gain the local people’s support. For instance, after a tornado in 2004 the Gulf Cartel—the Zetas’ parent organization at the time—offered assistance to residents of the Villa Fuente neighborhood in Piedras Negras.⁷⁶ Various newspapers also reported how toys were distributed under the name of Osiel Cárdenas Guillén at a Zetas’ Children’s Day party in Acuña on April 30, 2005.⁷⁷

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

Occupation of the region

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

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

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

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

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

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

Notes

¹ The authors wish to thank Gerardo Arroyo Beristain for his collaboration in writing this working paper.

² A characteristic feature of studies on violence in northern Coahuila—and, in general, of papers focused in the Zetas—is their binational aspect, reflected in the investigative journalism or academic research both from Mexico and the United States. The following is a list of the most relevant works:

- a) Outstanding Mexican investigative journalism includes the work of Juan Alberto Cedillo “El apocalipsis en Coahuila,” *Proceso*, December 24, 2012, available at: <http://www.proceso.com.mx/328697/el-apocalipsis-en-coahuila-2>, accessed on February 1, 2018; “Historia de una matanza delirante,” *Proceso*, April 26, 2014, available at: <http://www.proceso.com.mx/370694/historia-de-una-matanza-delirante>, accessed on February 1, 2018, and “Los Zetas, Reyes de Coahuila,” *Proceso*, July 23, 2016, available at: <http://www.proceso.com.mx/448388/los-zetas-reyes-coahuila>, accessed on December 18, 2017. Sanjuana Martínez’s work is also notable, “El alcalde que entregó al pueblo tiene completa a su familia, nosotros no,” *La Jornada*, July 24, 2016, available at: <http://www.jornada.unam.mx/2016/07/24/politica/007n1pol>, accessed on February 1, 2018, and Diego Enrique Osorno’s “El manantial masacrado,” *Vice*, February 2014, available at: http://www.vice.com/es_mx/read/el-manantial-masacrado, accessed on February 1, 2018.
- b) Outstanding US investigative journalism includes the work of Ginger Thompson, winner of the Pulitzer Prize, with her texts “Anatomy of a Massacre,” *ProPublica* and *National Geographic*, June 12, 2017, available at: <https://www.propublica.org/article/allende-zetas-cartel-massacre-and-the-us-dea>, accessed on December 18, 2017, and “How the US Triggered a Massacre in Mexico,” *National Geographic*, June 2017, available at: <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/magazine/2017/07/making-of-a-massacre-mexico/>, accessed on November 2, 2017. For their part, journalists of the *San Antonio Express News* have made a very important contribution to disentangling violence in the region, mainly through their follow-up of trials of leading Zeta members in the United States; see Janson Buch, “Zetas Brutality Bred Informants,” *San Antonio Express News*, April 27, 2013, available at: http://www.mysanantonio.com/news/local_news/article/Zetas-brutality-bred-informants-4469695.php, accessed on September 30, 2016; Janson Buch and Guillermo Contreras, “A Trial Offered Inside Look at a Violent, Bloody Cartel,” *San Antonio Express News*, July 23, 2016, available at: <http://www.expressnews.com/news/local/article/Trial-offered-inside-look->

[at-a-violent-bloody-8405250.php?t=c0b75ea9cd6a5efc77&cmpid=twitter-premium](https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/18/us/politics/at-a-violent-bloody-8405250.php?t=c0b75ea9cd6a5efc77&cmpid=twitter-premium), accessed on December 18, 2017.

- c) Academic research in the United States is mainly carried out in the Human Rights Clinic at The University of Texas School of Law, coordinated by Ariel Dulitzky, and its recent report, “Control... sobre todo el estado de Coahuila,” November 2017, available at: <https://law.utexas.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/11/2017/11/2017-HRC-coahuilareport-ES.pdf>, accessed on December 18, 2017. See also the following work by Guadalupe Correa-Cabrera, *Los Zetas Inc*, Texas, University of Texas Press, 2017, which studies the Zetas from an innovative perspective.
- d) Mexican academic research is spearheaded by El Colegio de México’s Seminar on Violence and Peace, coordinated by Sergio Aguayo, with two publications directly related to violence in the northern region of Coahuila: Sergio Aguayo (coord.), *State of Neglect: Los Zetas, the State, Society and the Victims of San Fernando, Tamaulipas (2010) and Allende, Coahuila (2011)*, Mexico, El Colegio de México, 2017. See particularly “Capítulo 5. La tragedia en la región fronteriza de Coahuila: Allende, los Cinco Manantiales y Piedras Negras” by Manuel Pérez Aguirre and Anuar Ortega Galindo; “Capítulo 6. Desarrollo del expediente de la Procuraduría General de Justicia del estado de Coahuila sobre el caso Allende” by Anuar Ortega Galindo; “La desaparición de personas en Allende, Coahuila, a partir de marzo de 2011. El Estado mexicano” by Delia Sánchez del Ángel, and “La masacre de San Fernando, Tamaulipas, y la desaparición forzada de personas en Allende, Coahuila: un análisis desde el derecho penal internacional” by Delia Sánchez del Ángel. Also, by Sergio Aguayo and Jacobo Dayán, *El Yugo Zeta*, working paper from El Colegio de México’s Seminar on Violence and Peace, El Colegio de México, Mexico, 2017, which is entirely focused on violence in northern Coahuila.
- e) Finally, a hard-to-classify but essential text is Jan Martínez Ahrens’s “Silencio, aquí se mata,” *El País*, July 5, 2014, available at: http://internacional.elpais.com/internacional/2014/07/05/actualidad/1404594_964_269006.html, accessed on February 1, 2018.

³ Sergio Aguayo (coord.), *State of Neglect: Los Zetas, the State, Society and the Victims of San Fernando, Tamaulipas (2010) and Allende, Coahuila (2011)*, Mexico, El Colegio de México, 2017.

⁴ Sergio Aguayo and Jacobo Dayán, *El Yugo Zeta*, working paper of El Colegio de México’s Seminar on Violence and Peace, Mexico, El Colegio de México, 2017.

⁵ Guillermo Valdés Castellanos, *Historia del narcotráfico en México, Apuntes para entender al crimen organizado y la violencia*, Mexico, Aguilar, 2014.

⁶ Luis Astorga and David A. Shirk, *Drug Trafficking Organizations and Counter-Drug Strategies in the US-Mexican Context*, free-access working paper, San Diego, Center for

US-Mexican Studies of University of California, 2010, available at: <http://escholarship.org/uc/item/8j647429#page-1>, accessed on December 16, 2017.

⁷ Eduardo Guerrero, “La guerra por Tamaulipas,” *Nexos*, August 1, 2010, available at: <http://www.nexos.com.mx/?p=13889>, accessed on October 2, 2016.

⁸ Guillermo Valdés Castellanos, “El nacimiento de un ejército criminal,” *Nexos*, September 1, 2013, available at: <http://www.nexos.com.mx/?p=15460>, accessed on September 30, 2016. See David Carrizales, “La captura. García Abrego 20 años después,” *El Universal*, January 14, 2016, available at: <http://www.eluniversal.com.mx/articulo/estados/2016/01/14/la-captura-garcia-abrego-20-anos-despues>, accessed on November 2, 2017.

⁹ Valdés Castellanos, “El nacimiento de un ejército criminal.”

¹⁰ Héctor Aguilar Carmín, “La captura criminal del Estado,” *Nexos*, January 1, 2015, available at: <https://www.nexos.com.mx/?p=23798>, accessed on November 2, 2017.

¹¹ *Idem*.

¹² Valdés Castellanos, *Historia del narcotráfico en México*, p. 250.

¹³ Valdés Castellanos, *Historia del narcotráfico en México*, p. 251.

¹⁴ Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), “Los Zetas Threat Assessment/Operation Noble Hero,” declassified document from the DEA to the Research Registers Unit, September 21, 2005.

¹⁵ See Manuel Pérez Aguirre, “Panorama de la violencia en el Noreste mexicano” in Aguayo (coord.), *State of Neglect*, pp. 82-135.

¹⁶ Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), “Los Zetas; ITAR-Violent Gangs,” internal declassified document, April 22, 2005.

¹⁷ Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), “Los Zetas Threat Assessment/Operation Noble Hero.”

¹⁸ Guillermo Pereyra, “México: violencia criminal y ‘guerra contra el narcotráfico,’” *Revista Mexicana de Sociología*, vol. 3, n. 74, 2012, pp. 429-460.

¹⁹ Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), “Los Zetas Threat Assessment/Operation Noble Hero.”

²⁰ Declaration by Jesus Enrique Rejón Aguilar before the Procuraduría General de la República (PGR) [Attorney General of the Republic], after his arrest. See the PGR interview with “El Mamito” during his presentation. “Entrevista a ‘El Mamito’, presunto fundador de los Zetas,” available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HacDTEn2TDs>, accessed on September 29, 2016.

²¹ Editorial, “Del primer Zeta a ‘El Z-42,’” *Milenio*, March 4, 2015, available at: http://www.milenio.com/policia/cartel_de_los_zetas-Omar_Trevino_Morales-brazo_armado_los_zetas-historia_Los_Zetas_0_475152821.html, accessed on November 2, 2017.

²² Samuel Logan, “A Profile of Los Zetas: Mexico’s Second Most Powerful Drug Cartel,” *CTC Sentinel*, vol. 5, n. 2, 2012, pp. 5-7.

²³ There is some confusion regarding the person corresponding to Z-2. On the one hand, this alias is assigned to Lucio Morales Betancourt, protected witness of Mexican authorities since his arrest in 2001; however, in the Mexican press the alias was recently assigned to Rogelio González Pizaña, in prison since 2004. See Editorial, “Desde las entrañas del Ejército,” *Proceso*, May 16, 2010, available at: <http://www.proceso.com.mx/81516/desde-las-entranas-del-ejercito>, accessed on December 17, 2017, and Editorial, “El Z-2, heredero natural del poder dentro de Los Zetas,” *Excélsior*, March 5, 2015, available at: <http://www.excelsior.com.mx/nacional/2015/03/05/1011741>, accessed on December 17, 2017.

²⁴ Redacción, “Desde las entrañas del Ejército,” *Proceso*, May 16, 2010, available at <http://www.proceso.com.mx/81516/desde-las-entranas-del-ejercito>, accessed on December 17, 2017.

²⁵ As we have shown, there is confusion regarding who bears the alias Z-2. Lucio Morales Betancourt could not have inherited the leadership of the Zetas—as he had been in prison since 2001—while Rogelio González Pizaña, alias “Kelín,” was free when Guzmán Decena was defeated, and was only arrested in 2004. However, unlike Guzmán Decena, Morales Betancourt, Lazcano, or Rejón Aguilar, he did not come from the GAFE, a situation that could have played against him in that period of the organization. This leads us to consider that that code probably belonged to Lucio Morales Betancourt.

²⁶ See Editorial, “Desde las entrañas del Ejército,” *Proceso*, May 16, 2010, available at: <http://www.proceso.com.mx/81516/desde-las-entranas-del-ejercito>, accessed on December 17, 2017, and Omar Granados, “Los últimos minutos de ‘El Lazca,’” *Animal Político*, October 11, 2012, available at: <http://www.animalpolitico.com/2012/10/los-ultimos-minutos-de-el-lazca/>, accessed on December 17, 2017.

²⁷ Gustavo Castillo García, Armando Torres Barbosa and Martín Sánchez Treviño, “Un comando militar condujo al jefe del Cártel del Golfo al DF tras los tiroteos,” *La Jornada*, March 15, 2003, available at: <http://www.jornada.unam.mx/2003/03/15/048n1con.php?printver=0>, accessed on September 30, 2016.

²⁸ Alfredo Corchado and Kevin Krause, “Mexico’s Drug Violence: Deadly Deal,” *The Dallas Morning News*, April 14, 2016, available at: <http://interactives.dallasnews.com/2016/cartels/>, accessed on February 13, 2018.

²⁹ Steven Dudley, “Los Zetas in Guatemala,” special report by *InSight Crime*, 2011.

³⁰ Human Rights Clinic at The University of Texas School of Law, “Control... sobre todo el estado de Coahuila,” executive report of the Human Rights Clinic at The University of Texas School of Law, November 2017, available at: <https://law.utexas.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/11/2017/11/2017-HRC-coahuilareport-ES.pdf>, accessed on December 18, 2017. See also Janson Buch and Guillermo Contreras, “A Trial Offered

Inside Look at a Violent, Bloody Cartel,” *San Antonio Express News*, July 23, 2016, available at: <http://www.expressnews.com/news/local/article/Trial-offered-inside-look-at-a-violent-bloody-8405250.php?t=c0b75ea9cd6a5efc77&cmpid=twitter-premium>, accessed on December 18, 2017.

³¹ Valdés Castellanos, *Historia del narcotráfico en México*, p. 250.

³² Gustavo Castillo, “Desde 2009, la guerra interna de Los Zetas intensificó la violencia,” *La Jornada*, August 29, 2012, available at: <http://www.jornada.unam.mx/2012/08/29/politica/005n1pol>, accessed on November 2, 2017.

³³ Dudley, “Los Zetas in Guatemala.”

³⁴ Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), “Los Zetas Threat Assessment/Operation Noble Hero.”

³⁵ Ana Lilia Pérez, “Kaibiles, negocio desde el infierno,” *Revista Contralínea*, January 23, 2007, available at: http://www.contralinea.com.mx/archivo/2007/enero2/htm/kaibiles_negocio_infierno.htm, accessed on January 10, 2018.

³⁶ Valdés Castellanos, “El nacimiento de un ejército criminal.”

³⁷ Buch and Contreras, “A Trial Offered Inside Look at a Violent, Bloody Cartel.”

³⁸ Corchado and Krause, “Mexico’s Drug Violence: Deadly Deal.”

³⁹ *Idem*.

⁴⁰ See Víctor Sánchez Valdés and Manuel Pérez Aguirre, “La evolución de la violencia en el norte de Coahuila,” working paper for El Colegio de México’s Seminar on Violence and Peace, Mexico, 2018.

⁴¹ Diego Enrique Osorno, *La Guerra de los Zetas: viaje por la frontera de la necropolítica*, Mexico, Grijalbo, 2013, p 155.

⁴² Editorial, “Zetas contra ‘golfos’: tres años de hostilidades,” *Proceso*, February 20, 2013, available at: <http://www.proceso.com.mx/334135/zetas-contra-golfos-tres-anos-de-hostilidades>, accessed on November 2, 2017.

⁴³ Editorial, “Cae operador de Los Zetas en Tamaulipas,” *El Universal*, March 14, 2009, available at: <http://archivo.eluniversal.com.mx/notas/583711.html>, accessed on September 30, 2016.

⁴⁴ George W. Grayson and Samuel Logan, “The Executioner’s Men. Los Zetas, Rogue Soldiers, Criminal Entrepreneurs, and the Shadow State They Created,” New Jersey, Transaction Publishers, 2012, p. 198.

⁴⁵ Osorno, *La Guerra de los Zetas: viaje por la frontera de la necropolítica*.

⁴⁶ Corchado and Krause, “Mexico’s Drug Violence: Deadly Deal.”

⁴⁷ United States Consulate in Monterrey, untitled diplomatic note for the Mexican Embassy analysing the conflict between the Zetas and CDG, September 3, 2010.

⁴⁸ See Human Rights Watch, *An Offer You Can't Refuse: How US Federal Prosecutors Force Drug Defendants to Plead Guilty*, December 5, 2013, available at: <https://www.hrw.org/report/2013/12/05/offer-you-cant-refuse/how-us-federal-prosecutors-force-drug-defendants-plead>, accessed on December 11, 2017. From our perspective, this usual practice of the American authorities is irresponsible, focused on dividing the organizations and seizing their economic resources, without thinking further ahead. It is hard to disassociate the situation in northeastern Mexico in the early 2000s from the US Department of Justice's agreements with Cárdenas Guillén. Violence in the north of Coahuila—primarily in Allende, Piedras Negras and the Cinco Manantiales—cannot be explained either without the infiltration of the cell of Alfonso Cuéllar and José Vázquez. See Ginger Thompson, “How the US Triggered a Massacre in Mexico,” *National Geographic*, June 2017, available at: <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/magazine/2017/07/making-of-a-massacre-mexico/>, accessed on November 2, 2017.

⁴⁹ Human Rights Watch, *An Offer You Can't Refuse: How US Federal Prosecutors Force Drug Defendants to Plead Guilty*.

⁵⁰ See Aguayo (coord.), *State of Neglect*.

⁵¹ Editorial, “Justice Hidden: Drug Kingpin Cardenas' Sentencing Hearing Was Wrongly Kept from Public View,” *The Houston Chronicle*, February 26, 2010, available at: <http://www.chron.com/opinion/editorials/article/Justice-hidden-Drug-kingpin-Cardenas-1709179.php>, accessed on September 30, 2016.

⁵² Statement by Jesús Enrique Rejón Aguilar before the Attorney General's Office (PGR) after his arrest. See the PGR interview “El Mamito” during his presentation. “Entrevista a ‘El Mamito’, presunto fundador de los Zetas,” available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HacDTEn2TDs>, accessed on September 29, 2016.

⁵³ Dudley, “Loz Zetas in Guatemala.”

⁵⁴ Stratfor, *Mexico and the War Against the Drug Cartels in 2008*, December 9, 2018, available at: <https://worldview.stratfor.com/article/mexico-and-war-against-drug-cartels-2008>, accessed on February 12, 2018.

⁵⁵ Human Rights Clinic at The University of Texas School of Law, “Control... sobre todo el estado de Coahuila.”

⁵⁶ Osorno, *La guerra de los Zetas: viaje por la frontera de la necropolítica*.

⁵⁷ Eduardo Guerrero, “El dominio del miedo,” *Nexos*, July 1, 2014, available at: <http://www.nexos.com.mx/?p=21671>, accessed on September 30, 2016.

⁵⁸ Sánchez Valdés and Pérez Aguirre, “La evolución de la violencia en el norte de Coahuila.”

⁵⁹ Osorno, *La guerra de los Zetas: viaje por la frontera de la necropolítica*.

⁶⁰ See Aguayo (coord.), *State of Neglect*, particularly “Capítulo 3. La Masacre de 72 migrantes en San Fernando, Tamaulipas” and “Capítulo 4. San Fernando. El Estado mexicano”; Gary Moore, “Lost Piece of the Massacre Puzzle,” available at:

<https://garymoore22.wordpress.com/2011/09/12/lost-piece-of-the-massacre-puzzle/>, accessed on December 18, 2017; Marcela Turati, “La matanza de San Fernando: inconsistencias y falsedades,” *Proceso*, May 23, 2015, available at: <http://www.proceso.com.mx/405140/405140-la-matanza-de-san-fernando-inconsistencias-y-falsedades>, accessed on December 19, 2017. The organization Periodistas a Pie (Journalists on Foot) created the website: +de 72, available at: <http://www.masde72.periodistasdeapie.org.mx/>, accessed on December 19, 2017.

⁶¹ See Fundación para la Justicia y el Estado Democrático de Derecho, “El caso de 49 torsos encontrados en la carretera de Cadereyta, Nuevo León,” available at: <http://fundacionjusticia.org/el-caso-de-49-torsos-encontrados-en-la-carretera-de-cadereyta-nuevo-leon/>, accessed on December 19, 2017.

⁶² United States Consulate in Monterrey, “Timeline of Violent Events Occurring in Matamoros Consular District August 22-27, 2010,” diplomatic note for the State Department, August 27, 2010.

⁶³ Jesús Aranda, “Antes de ser capturado, El Talibán declare la Guerra a los máximos líderes de Los Zetas,” *La Jornada*, September 28, 2012, available at: <http://www.jornada.unam.mx/2012/09/28/politica/013n1pol>, accessed on November 2, 2017.

⁶⁴ Granados, “Los últimos minutos de ‘El Lazca’.”

⁶⁵ See Human Rights Clinic at The University of Texas School of Law, “Control... sobre todo el estado de Coahuila”; Buch and Contreras, “A Trial Offered Inside Look at a Violent, Bloody Cartel.”

⁶⁶ Juan Carlos Pérez Salazar, “México: cómo fue la captura de Omar Treviño, el brutal líder de los Zetas,” *BBC*, March 5, 2015, available at: http://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias/2015/03/150305_mexico_omar_trevino_z42_vida_caida_jcps, accessed on February 17, 2018.

⁶⁷ “Abaten a ‘El Calo’ presunto líder Zeta en Tamaulipas y sucesor de ‘Pancho’ Carreón,” *Proceso*, September 13, 2017, available at: <http://www.proceso.com.mx/502976/abaten-a-calo-presunto-lider-zeta-en-tamaulipas-sucesor-pancho-carreon-video>, accessed on December 22, 2017.

⁶⁸ Ignacio Alzaga, “Cártel del Noreste, clave en aumento de violencia en Tamaulipas,” *Milenio*, April 25, 2017, available at: http://www.milenio.com/policia/cartel-del-noreste-clave-aumento-violencia-tamaulipas-los-zetas-golfo-milenio_0_944905513.html, accessed on November 2, 2017.

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As one of its objectives, the Seminar on Violence and Peace (SVyP) seeks to understand the logic of criminal groups. Three years ago we began our research into events in the state of Coahuila during its most violent period; as a result, we now have a parallel study of the Zetas' origins, and the methods they employed to take control over the northern part of the state. Confronting violence requires an understanding of it.

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EL COLEGIO
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