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# Los Zetas and Tactics of Fear

How one of Mexico's biggest drug cartels tries to gain control by using extreme violence



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## ***Introduction***

While Mexico's economy is growing and the country has the second largest economy in Latin America, Mexico battles with a difficult fight against criminal violence. Being a country next to the United States of America, Mexico is a transit of narcotics from South America to the United States. Several drug cartels fight each other for territory, with the goal of controlling as many trafficking corridors to the United States as possible. The drug war, not to be confused with the war on drugs in which governments try to stop the drug trafficking organizations, has been going on for many years. But since the drug cartel Los Zetas entered the stage in 2010 as an independent organization, the violence exploded.

Los Zetas introduced different tactics from those of the other drug cartels. The organization started as a group of dissidents from a Mexican army special force, after which the group was active as a protection and enforcement wing of an existing cartel. Since 2010 Los Zetas has been operating on its own and today (April 2013) they control over half of Mexico's territory. The cartel uses violence that can be considered as extreme to gain and remain control over certain areas of Mexico.

Opponents are not only killed, but often tortured and exposed to the public. Los Zetas sends out a message to potential competitors and opponents with every murder they commit. In this essay the use of violence and the extreme character of it will be discussed. I will argue that Los Zetas is not just a sadistic group of people, but that the extreme violence serves a strategic purpose.

To prove that point, several theories by scholars on symbolic violence and creating fear as a tactic to gain control of an area, are discussed. After that, several examples of specific violent actions committed by Los Zetas will be given. This is done to make clear what kind of violence is used, against whom and why. At the end of the chapter about violence, a short analysis will be given. The fourth chapter will shine a new light on Los Zetas, supported by the earlier discussed theories, after which the conclusion follows.

## ***Chapter 1: The Academic debate***

Symbolic violence can appear in many ways. It should be seen as violence that is not directly or only meant to take out a person (who can be a competitor, a foe or someone who stands for an opposite idea than the aggressor has). This chapter will discuss the several ways that symbolic violence can arise and is looked upon by scholars.

*Before reading this chapter, is it important to realize that the organization of discussion in this thesis, Los Zetas, does not have any political inspiration or ideals.*

### ***1.1 Terrorism***

A terrorist attack is not often committed to directly take out opponents. The victims of an attack can represent a larger group or institution. For example, Timothy McVeigh attacked a government building in Oklahoma City in 1995 because of his hate against the government.<sup>1</sup> His attack was not directly aimed at the people who worked there. After his arrest, McVeigh said he regretted parking the explosive-filled truck near the day care facility, because the death of 19 children overshadowed his anti-government message.<sup>2</sup> Martha Crenshaw puts it as following in her article 'The Causes of Terrorism: Terrorist violence communicates a political message; its ends go beyond damaging an enemy's material resources.' The victims or objects of terrorist attack have little intrinsic value to the terrorist group but represent a larger human audience whose reaction the terrorists seek."<sup>3</sup>

Apart from the statement of Crenshaw, Andrew H. Kydd and Barbara F. Walter claim in their article "The Strategies of Terrorism' that terrorists have five different strategic logics for committing an attack. Attrition, intimidation, provocation, spoiling, and outbidding.<sup>4</sup> For this thesis, the strategies intimidation and outbidding are the most interesting to take a further look upon.

The authors describe the intimidation tactic as a plan of action in which the population of a certain area is tried to get convinced by the idea that the terrorist are powerful and will punish disobedience, with the government being too weak to stop them. The goal of this tactic is to get the people behave as the

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<sup>1</sup> <http://law2.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/mcveigh/mcveighaccount.html>

<sup>2</sup> <http://edition.cnn.com/CNN/Programs/people/shows/mcveigh/profile.html>

<sup>3</sup> Crenshaw, Martha. "The causes of terrorism." *Comparative politics* 13.4 (1981): 379-399.

<sup>4</sup> Kydd, Andrew H., and Barbara F. Walter. "The strategies of terrorism." *International Security* 31.1 (2006): 49-80.

terrorists wish.<sup>5</sup> The intimidation can include massacres of civilians who have cooperated with rival groups. In the article, the authors argue that intimidation is likely to be used against civilians on the fault lines between rebel and government control, to prevent or stop them from supporting the government. To counter this tactic in a situation where the aggressive group is looking for social control, the authors advice to strengthen the law enforcement in the region.

The outbidding tactic is used to convince the public of the organization's the will to fight.<sup>6</sup> Kydd and Walter describe this plan of action as a way to get support for a particular terrorist group. This is done by being more violent, which gives a group the image of being a hard liner. The authors give three reasons for why more hard lined groups are likely to be rewarded for their stiff approach. Two of these reasons are focused on groups that are looking for political power and are therefore irrelevant for this thesis to elaborate on further. However, one given reason is that by forming a militant image, groups make clear they are not afraid to use violence to achieve their goal and negotiation is not part of their plans. In other words, they try to send out the message that they will fight till they get what they want. Kydd and Walter see the outbidding tactic as a way to get the support from the public. They describe the more violent group getting framed as the strong and resolute one, a defender of the cause. If people choose to support this side, they know that peace might be far away, but that the group will keep fighting for the cause. A less aggressive group might be able to create a more peaceful situation, but might need a compromise with the opposing group to arrange it. The authors give the example of the Palestinian group Hamas, that represents itself as a hard line group, instead of competitor Fatah, a group that is more willing to compromise. That is why Palestinians might prefer Hamas, the authors argue. Hamas is more likely to reject inferior deals with Israel than Fatah, as being a group that is notorious for their will to fight till they get what they want.<sup>7</sup>

The outbidding tactic can also be seen in a wider context, in which the support of a population is not needed. It can be used as a way to mobilize new recruits and instead of achieving support from the public, the ultimate goal is for the public to submit to the group. In some cases, outbidding an opponent can be used as a way of creating fear, which can help in silencing a population or make it more easy to make them act as the group wants them to act. This is similar to the earlier discussed intimidation tactic, but not completely. Instead of just intimidating a crowd by violence, outbidding a competing group by

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<sup>5</sup> Kydd, Andrew H., and Barbara F. Walter. "The strategies of terrorism." *International Security* 31.1 (2006): p51

<sup>6</sup> Kydd, Andrew H., and Barbara F. Walter. "The strategies of terrorism." *International Security* 31.1 (2006): p51

<sup>7</sup> Kydd, Andrew H., and Barbara F. Walter. "The strategies of terrorism." *International Security* 31.1 (2006): p77

using extreme violence, will give the more aggressive and violent organization the image of being the group that will do anything to achieve their goals. It has two advantages. First, the advantages of the intimidation tactic apply also on outbidding. Extreme violence creates an atmosphere in which less people will stand up against the group. Secondly, it represents the group as the one that will always go further to become the biggest, most powerful organization. This gives an advantage over competing organizations. In other words, the outbidding tactic does not have to be used as a way to get the support of a population, but can also be a specific tactic to create an unscrupulous image.

### ***1.2 Tactics by fear***

Another part of the academic debate on symbolic violence focuses on atrocities on civilians in civil war. What motivates a group to kill civilians or other people that are not fighting you with the same weaponry? Kasper Thams Olsen researched the atrocities committed by the Lord's Resistance Army in Uganda. In his introduction he argues that there are a number of reasons for, in this case the LRA, to attack the civilian population.<sup>8</sup> Olsen argues that it in academic circles it is popular to say that violence in a civil war is caused by the financial aspiration of militias, as scholar David Keen stated in his work.<sup>9</sup> Militias would be driven to violate the population to enrich themselves with controlling farming, trading and also looting, but Olsen does not think that motive tells the whole story, nor does the by the media represented motive of pure sadism and killing rage.<sup>10</sup> He argues that the violence is also a force multiplier, a way to make the group seem bigger and more powerful than their actual numbers would suggest. Olsen performed interviews with several members of the LRA and concluded after the conversations that the fear the LRA spreads with using violence against civilians, gives them more power over them. The created fear gives The LRA a better opportunity to control the population and lets them communicate their will.<sup>11</sup> Olsen also emphasizes that apart from stopping people who work against the LRA, the violence also sends out a clear message to people who are planning to do so, or can be used as a collective punishment for those who did not obey their orders. Another aspect of the violence used by the LRA is the symbolic character. Olsen describes the use of extremely brutal violence, which has a

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<sup>8</sup> Olsen, Kasper Thams. Violence against Civilians in Civil War. Understanding Atrocities by the Lord's Resistance Army in Northern Uganda. working paper, Conflict Research Group, 2007, [http://www.psw.ugent.be/crg/publications/working%20paper/workingpaper\\_LRA.pdf](http://www.psw.ugent.be/crg/publications/working%20paper/workingpaper_LRA.pdf) (accessed June 14, 2010), 2007.

<sup>9</sup> Keen, David. "Adelphi Paper 320: The Economic Functions of Violence in Civil Wars." (1998).

<sup>10</sup> Olsen, Kasper Thams. Violence against Civilians in Civil War. Understanding Atrocities by the Lord's Resistance Army in Northern Uganda. working paper, Conflict Research Group, 2007, p3

<sup>11</sup> Olsen, Kasper Thams. Violence against Civilians in Civil War. Understanding Atrocities by the Lord's Resistance Army in Northern Uganda. working paper, Conflict Research Group, 2007, p6

symbolic message. Cooking people and let relatives eat them, pounding children with mortars and mutilation are ways of killing or limbering the victims to send out the message, which can be spread by the surviving witnesses, that the LRA is not afraid to use this kind of violence to get the desired control.<sup>12</sup>

Olsen concludes that the violence is driven by economic, strategic and psychological reasons. Scholar Anthony Vinci confirms this claim, in his article 'The Strategic Use of Fear by the Lord's Resistance Army'.<sup>13</sup> According to Vinci, the LRA is using the creation of fear as a force multiplier. The group maximizes its threat by creating an insecure atmosphere. Vinci claims that the LRA might be barbaric in the extreme, but that the group is acting rationally and the extreme tactics serve a purpose. "Together the sense of insecurity and anxiety weaken the population's sense of control over their environment and makes them easier to manipulate", Vinci argues.<sup>14</sup> The creation of fear makes people think that the LRA is both fearless and omnipotent.<sup>15</sup> For example, the LRA does not want open communication between populated areas. Since the size of their forces is not big enough to set up check points, they choose to attack bicyclists. By visibly mutilating them, the LRA sets an example for everybody who thinks about traveling between the areas. By creating fear due extreme violence, communications are limited between the populated areas, even without having enormous forces.<sup>16</sup>

The tactics of fear can also be applied on a non civil war or even military situation. Criminal syndicates can use the advantages of creating fear too, as will be illustrated in the next chapters. Deliberately creating fear amongst a population, gives an opportunity of power. Like Vinci described, fear and insecurity weak the population's sense of control. The group that creates fear does know what their targets are and jumps in the created window of opportunity.

The difference between the tactics of intimidation and outbidding and Olsen's and Vinci's tactics by fear, is that the use of tactics by fear is going a few steps further in the brutality of the acts. Besides intimidation, which is used to show the power of the aggressive organization, the constant creation of

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<sup>12</sup> Olsen, Kasper Thams. Violence against Civilians in Civil War. Understanding Atrocities by the Lord's Resistance Army in Northern Uganda. working paper, Conflict Research Group, 2007, p8

<sup>13</sup> Vinci, Anthony. "The strategic use of fear by the Lord's Resistance Army." Small Wars & Insurgencies 16.3 (2005): 360-381.

<sup>14</sup> Vinci, Anthony. "The strategic use of fear by the Lord's Resistance Army." Small Wars & Insurgencies 16.3 (2005) p376

<sup>15</sup> Vinci, Anthony. "The strategic use of fear by the Lord's Resistance Army." Small Wars & Insurgencies 16.3 (2005) p374

<sup>16</sup> Vinci, Anthony. "The strategic use of fear by the Lord's Resistance Army." Small Wars & Insurgencies 16.3 (2005) p370

fear in a population is needed as well. Not just to keep control, but also to gain control over an uncertain population. Secondly, the use of these tactics gives the aggressor the earlier described force multiplier.

### **1.3 Recruitment and 'copy cat' behavior**

Another theory that is an interesting academic approach, which is not directly related to symbolic violence, but does apply to the case in this thesis, comes from political scientist Max Abrahms. In his article 'What Terrorists Really Want', he argues that the social aspect of joining a terrorist group is not something to be underestimated.<sup>17</sup> "Many joined these armed struggles not because of their personal attachment to their political or ideological agendas, but to maintain or develop social relations with other terrorist members", writes Abrahms. He comes to this conclusion after several interviews with members of terrorist organizations, who besides this motivation also claim that having several friends or family members in an organization was part of the choice they made.<sup>18</sup> This mechanism can also play a role in the active recruitment of a terrorist or criminal organization - for example in the organization that is discussed in this thesis, Los Zetas. With their money making business, the wealth of the cartel members looks appealing to young people, who are, in most cases, poor. In addition to Abrahms statement of joining a organization to develop social relations, wealth and a higher standard of life can also play a role. The cartel members are not only rich, they also have power. Young people, like for example Rosalio Reta, want powerful friends and roll into the drug trafficking and murdering business.<sup>19</sup> In an interrogation with the police, Reta describes how he started as a hit man for Los Zetas, being just thirteen years old. He tells the police how he felt like Superman while killing and how he enjoyed the high standard of living.

Another way of interoperating Abrahms theory is the copying of extreme violence. The internet is flooded with videos of extremely cruel executions, performed by recognizable young people, who might not even have reached the age of eighteen years old. They keep telling the viewers who they represent and try to make the execution as painful as possible. By this behavior they show that they have to prove themselves, making sure the executives of the organization notice their dedication. Climbing the ladder gives them several advantages. Not just more money, but more social contacts as well.

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<sup>17</sup> Abrahms, Max. "What terrorists really want: Terrorist motives and counterterrorism strategy." *International Security* 32.4 (2008): 78-105.

<sup>18</sup> Abrahms, Max. "What terrorists really want: Terrorist motives and counterterrorism strategy." *International Security* 32.4 (2008): 97.

<sup>19</sup> <http://edition.cnn.com/2009/CRIME/03/12/cartel.teens/> (15-3-2013)



## Chapter 2: A brief historic review on Los Zetas

*"The Zetas have obviously assumed the role of being the No. 1 organization responsible for the majority of the homicides, the narcotic-related homicides, the beheadings, the kidnappings, the extortions that take place in Mexico." A quote from, Ralph Reyes, the U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency's chief for Mexico and Central America.<sup>20</sup>*

### 2.1 Background

Los Zetas was founded in the late 1990's, when a group of the Mexican special operations force deserted and started on their own. The group took over their army's call sign, the letter 'Z'. The 'Zetas' established themselves as an enforcement and protection arm of the Gulf Cartel, a drug trafficking organization. Originally there were 31 members who had been military trained. Arturo Guzman Decenas is known as Z-1, the founder of Los Zetas. He was the one who convinced the 31 men to leave military service and join him in a group that had the mission to protect the head of the Gulf Cartel. Some of the 31 dissidents had been serving in a Mexican Special Forces unit known as the Grupos Aeromoviles de Fuerzas Especiales (GAFE). The men had been trained as elites, but turned against their former employer, who had been training them.<sup>21</sup> They named themselves Los Zetas and had two objectives: protect the Gulf Cartel and its leaders, and hunt the enemies of the organization. Los Zetas completed several secret missions into cities to kill rivals, to ensure that the Gulf Cartel became the most powerful drug trafficking organization in the region.<sup>22</sup> That number grew in the following years, but more importantly Los Zetas brought military tactics into the criminal world of Mexico. According to John P. Sullivan, senior researcher at the Center for the Advanced Studies of Terrorism and Samuel Logan, Latin American analyst for iJET Intelligent Risk Systems, the core specialties of Los Zetas (intelligence capabilities, exploiting grassroots networks, precision small-unit attacks, ambushes and raids, and symbolic violence and brutality) were introduced.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> [http://edition.cnn.com/2009/WORLD/americas/08/06/mexico.drug.cartels/index.html?\\_s=PM:WORLD](http://edition.cnn.com/2009/WORLD/americas/08/06/mexico.drug.cartels/index.html?_s=PM:WORLD) (15-3-2013)

<sup>21</sup> <http://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/a-profile-of-los-zetas-mexicos-second-most-powerful-drug-cartel> (15-3-2013)

<sup>22</sup> Sullivan, John P., and Samuel Logan. "Los Zetas: Massacres, Assassinations and Infantry Tactics." Security Solutions International (2010).

<sup>23</sup> Sullivan, John P., and Samuel Logan. "Los Zetas: Massacres, Assassinations and Infantry Tactics." Security Solutions International (2010).

In 2010 Los Zetas separated from the Gulf Cartel. The exact reason for the split up remains unknown, but one of the main motivators for Los Zetas was that they were big enough to start their own business.<sup>24</sup> The separation resulted in Los Zetas starting a war against all cartels, but also against state related organizations, as the police, the military and the juridical system.<sup>25</sup> With the use of extreme violence, Los Zetas expanded their power. According to Sullivan and Logan, Los Zetas grew to a 'sizable private army and criminal enterprise'.<sup>26</sup> The government of the United States labels Los Zetas as "the most technologically advanced, sophisticated and dangerous cartel operating in Mexico".<sup>27</sup>

## **2.2 The power and reach of Los Zetas**

The organization is using violence to send a message out to everybody who does not cooperate. Global intelligence organization STRATFOR reports that since the year 2010, the year Los Zetas became independent, over 20.000 people were killed every year.<sup>28</sup> The years before that, the number of victims was around 16.000. Not every victim is a person assaulted by Los Zetas, but their break away intensified the fighting and the killing.

Drug trafficking and distribution is the main business of Los Zetas, but also other violent crimes are part of their revenue making. Los Zetas is active in human trafficking, product piracy, kidnapping, and petroleum theft to enrich themselves.<sup>29</sup> This makes them an unique organization, organized as a military group and active as a criminal organization, which is hard to fight for the government. The brutal character of the violence is a result of their military heritage. According to STRATFOR, Los Zetas has a far less subtle way of working than the other cartels. Also, their military structure makes members tend to move up in the group's hierarchy through merit, instead of familiar connections, which is the case with most other cartels.<sup>30</sup> The brutality of the organization can be seen in their symbolic violence, which is used to scare opponents. People who work against the cartel are not just killed, but Los Zetas tries to make an example out of them. Sometimes this is done with severe violence, like mutilations, beheadings

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<sup>24</sup> Stewart, Scott. "Mexico: The Struggle for Balance." Global Security and Intelligence Report (2010).

<sup>25</sup> Sullivan, John P., and Samuel Logan. "Los Zetas: Massacres, Assassinations and Infantry Tactics." Security Solutions International (2010).

<sup>26</sup> Sullivan, John P., and Samuel Logan. "Los Zetas: Massacres, Assassinations and Infantry Tactics." Security Solutions International (2010).

<sup>27</sup> [http://edition.cnn.com/2009/WORLD/americas/08/06/mexico.drug.cartels/index.html?\\_s=PM:WORLD](http://edition.cnn.com/2009/WORLD/americas/08/06/mexico.drug.cartels/index.html?_s=PM:WORLD)

<sup>28</sup> <http://www.stratfor.com/analysis/spring-break-mexico-2013-security-risks-and-travel-tips> (15-3-2013)

<sup>29</sup> Sullivan, John P., and Samuel Logan. "Los Zetas: Massacres, Assassinations and Infantry Tactics." Security Solutions International (2010).

<sup>30</sup> <http://www.stratfor.com/sample/analysis/polarization-and-sustained-violence-mexicos-cartel-war> (15-3-2013)

or torture. In other occasions, a clear message is sent out by a written statement. Written on a paper , it is attached to the victim, who is then shown to the public hanging from a bridge or other main building in a city. In chapter 3 the specific violence is further discussed.

Looking at the territory, Los Zetas is the most powerful cartel in Mexico since 2011.<sup>31</sup> The cartel is present in 17 out of the 31 Mexican states (over half of Mexico's territory) and is, according to the Assistant Attorney General's Office for Special Investigations on Organized Crime of Mexico, responsible for most of the criminal activity in the country.<sup>32</sup>

Los Zetas is a growing organization, which benefits from its notorious imago. The number of victims of the drug war has grown since Los Zetas became a separate organization in 2010 and their extreme tactics proved to be fruitful.

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<sup>31</sup> <http://www.stratfor.com/sample/analysis/polarization-and-sustained-violence-mexicos-cartel-war> (15-3-2013)

<sup>32</sup> <http://www.jornada.unam.mx/2011/11/09/politica/005n1pol>

### **Chapter 3: The violence**

As described in the historic review, Los Zetas is using extreme violence to get what they want. Part of the reason why they are more brutal than other cartels can be found in their military background, but also the symbolic message and the outbidding tactics are important. This chapter will analyze three different types of victims that have been targeted by the cartel, illustrated by an example. For every group Los Zetas has a different reason to attack them.

#### **3.1 Violence against civilians**

Not only people who are fighting Los Zetas from different points of interest are in danger, civilians who do not want to be involved in the violent conflict can get hurt as well. As mentioned before, kidnapping makes part of the criminal acts of Los Zetas. The cartel tries to get a ransom from the family of the kidnapped person.<sup>33</sup> But also owners of businesses who are forced to pay a part of their income to the cartel are targeted, in case they refuse to pay their protection money. In such an attack many civilians can be involved, as was the case with the attack by Los Zetas on a casino in the city Monterrey. In an attempt to scare the owner who was refusing to pay, 52 people were killed. Security cameras recorded members of Los Zetas filling up jerry cans with gasoline, which was later spilled and ignited at the entrance of the casino. In the panic and disorientation of the fast spreading fire, 52 of the visitors of the casino were trapped and died.<sup>34</sup> Another example of an attack on people who were not involved in the drug war itself, is the execution of 72 migrants, who tried to get to the United States of America. While crossing Los Zetas territory in San Fernando, a town in the state of Tamaulipas about 100 miles from the USA border, they were forced by members of the cartel to hand over all of their belongings. The migrants refused to do so and were shot. One migrant escaped and went to a military checkpoint to get help. After the authorities arrived, they found 72 dead bodies piled up.<sup>35</sup>

Civilians can also get mixed up in the clash between different cartels. The music band Kombo Kolombia was reportedly performing in bars that paid protection money to Los Zetas. The band performed their act in territory that is partly controlled by Los Zetas. But in that particular area, the Mexican state Nuevo León, the Gulf Cartel is also active. Kombo Kolombia reportedly performed a gig in an Gulf Cartel area,

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<sup>33</sup> <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/06/17/magazine/how-a-mexican-drug-cartel-makes-its-billions.html?pagewanted=all> (15-3-2013)

<sup>34</sup> <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-latin-america-16449962> (15-3-2013)

<sup>35</sup> <http://www.foxnews.com/world/2010/08/25/mexican-government-migrants-dead-ranch-killed-zetas-drug-gang/> (15-3-2013)

which resulted in a kidnapping of twenty band members on the 25<sup>th</sup> of January 2013.<sup>36</sup> Kombo Kolombia was not associated with the music style 'narcocorridos', which can best be described as a drug trafficking romanticizing and glorifying style. Some drug cartels pay singers to perform positive song about them, which can awake the anger of a competing drug cartel. More than often a band or artist performing a narcocorridos act goes missing or gets killed.<sup>37</sup> But Kombo Kolombia was specialized in Colombian popular music, which is not normally linked to the drug cartel violence.<sup>38</sup> Los Zetas sent out a message to other bands who play in bars at their territory, to not play at venues that are organized in competing cartel controlled areas. Nineteen of the twenty band members were found in a well, killed , with signs of torture on their body.<sup>39</sup>

### ***3.2 Violence against media representatives and authorities***

Los Zetas does not like to get negative attention. The cartel tries to control the media with a probably not surprising method: violence. Journalists are not welcome and according to Knight Centre of Journalism in the Americas, an organization of the University of Texas in Austin which advices and trains journalists active in the Americas, Mexico is the most dangerous country for press associates to work.<sup>40</sup> According to the centre, eighty journalists have been killed in Mexico since the year 2000 and seventeen have gone missing. The tactic seems to work, while the violence neutered news coverage by newspapers. This argument is confirmed by Dutch Latin America reporter Marjon van Royen, who worked for the Dutch national broadcaster NOS and still works for many other high rated media. She witnessed a change in Mexico in the last years. "I have visited the Mexican City Ciudad de Juarez many times", she said. "In the beginning of the last decennium there were many great newspapers who covered the violence. I recently talked with the chief editor of one of those papers and he told me that he would never think of doing the same nowadays. That is a harsh conclusion, given the fact that they were so socially engaged just a few years back. There are no regional newspapers in Mexico left that report on the violence. Only a few mainstream national papers are willing to do so." Van Royen reported from Monterrey in the summer of 2012. She accompanied a heavily armed police patrol. "I would go

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<sup>36</sup> <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-latin-america-21216933> (17-3-2013)

<sup>37</sup> [http://www.hum.uu.nl/medewerkers/k.s.wellinga/de\\_verseeping\\_van\\_mexico\\_ii.htm](http://www.hum.uu.nl/medewerkers/k.s.wellinga/de_verseeping_van_mexico_ii.htm) (17-3-2013)

<sup>38</sup> <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-latin-america-21238763> (17-3-2013)

<sup>39</sup> <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-latin-america-21286652> (17-3-2013)

<sup>40</sup> [http://abcnews.go.com/Blotter/us-journalist-disappears-mexico-drug-cartel-stronghold/story?id=16645695#.UMZaAKy\\_CVo](http://abcnews.go.com/Blotter/us-journalist-disappears-mexico-drug-cartel-stronghold/story?id=16645695#.UMZaAKy_CVo) (5-4-2013)

there again tomorrow if I was asked, but I did feel threatened as a journalist. My advantage as a foreign reporter is that I go in and out, but I felt the fear of my colleagues that work in the region every day. One of the most striking things that I heard in Mexico is that journalists are also killed for unknown reasons. They might have said something wrong or made a comment by accident that was interpreted in the wrong way by Los Zetas. They get killed and the chief editor does not even know why one of his employees got murdered.”

The gap that the newspaper leaves is where independent internet bloggers take over. But bloggers who report about the situation are in danger as well. In 2011, a blogger known under his nick name ‘Rascatripas’ was found beheaded in the city Nuevo Laredo. On his body a message was found, in which the following was stated: “This happened to me for not understanding that I shouldn't report on the social networks.”<sup>41</sup> Los Zetas decided to make a bigger statement by hanging two dismembered bodies on a bridge in Nuevo Laredo, near the border with the United States. The two victims denounced Los Zetas activities on social media and were murdered. Together with their bodies a banner was shown, with the following statement: “You better fucking pay attention. I'm about to get you.”<sup>42</sup> Los Zetas is a modern organization, according to Van Royen. “They know who is writing about them online and besides that, they use the internet themselves to get their message out. They want to make sure that everybody knows what will happen to them when they get in the way of the cartel’s interest. By cutting off the media they are in control of the reports coming out.”

One of the most important blogs, Blog del Narco, is still active at the time of writing.<sup>43</sup> The blog reports on atrocities and picks up the content that is not published by many mainstream media in Mexico, that feel threatened by the cartels. But that responsibility does have its price. In an interview with the British newspaper The Guardian, the author of the blog, who uses the pseudonym Lucy, tells how the threats affected her life and how co-workers of the blog have ended up being murdered. She lives in hiding and moves around a lot.<sup>44</sup>

Authorities who try to fight the violence of the drug cartels are not safe either. For example, the mayor of Hidalgo, in violent border state of Tamaulipas, was killed. Marco Antonio Leal Garcia refused to be

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<sup>41</sup> <http://www.chron.com/news/houston-texas/article/Blogger-murdered-and-beheaded-in-Nuevo-Laredo-2260814.php> (5-4-2013)

<sup>42</sup> <http://edition.cnn.com/2011/WORLD/americas/09/14/mexico.violence/index.html> (5-4-2013)

<sup>43</sup> <http://www.blogdelnarco.com/> (6-4-2013)

<sup>44</sup> <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2013/apr/03/mexico-blog-del-narco-drug-wars> (6-4-2013)

cooperate with Los Zetas and was killed in August 2010. He was shot to death, while his daughter was wounded in the assault. In the same month another mayor of a town in Nuevo León was killed. Edelmiro Cavazos was kidnapped and three days later his body was found. He reportedly tried to stop the corruption in the police department in his town Edelmiro Cavazos, while several members of the law enforcement were also working for Los Zetas. This action was not tolerated by the drug cartel, which resulted in his death.<sup>45</sup> Police officers who are not related to Los Zetas and try to fight them, are in danger as well. An incident in Veracruz in 2009, not long from Los Zetas' breakaway from the Gulf Cartel, showed how uncooperative police officers are dealt with. In the middle of the night two cars pulled up in front of the police chief's house. Almost ten heavily armed gunmen got out and forced their way into the house. In less than five minutes they executed police officer Jesus Antonio Romero, his wife, who also worked for the police, and their son. After the execution the house was set on fire, in which the three remaining children were killed too.<sup>46</sup>

### ***3.3 Violence against competing drug cartels***

Before going into detail about the use of violence from Los Zetas against competing drug cartels, it is important to emphasize that all the active drug cartels in Mexico are violent organizations and are using extreme violence. However, Los Zetas is the most skilled and proficient in the propaganda of its violent acts. Some of the executions of competing drug cartel members are posted on the internet. The execution videos are notorious for their extremely violent and graphic character. For instance a video shows what happened to three members of a group that works for the Gulf Cartel, who were unlucky enough to fall into the hands of Los Zetas. The three are interrogated by a Los Zetas member who is not in front of the camera. After they have given their names and admitted that they have been working for the Gulf Cartel, the interrogator gives a warning by saying that this is what is going to happen to anybody who works for the competing cartels. An indescribable torture starts, in which the men have their fingers cut off, before they are decapitated with a knife. All is captured on camera.<sup>47</sup> The video is later uploaded by Los Zetas on the internet. Several 18+ websites do publish this graphic material.

This is just one of the hundreds of videos published by Los Zetas on the internet. The violence shown in the videos is extreme to say the least and is getting worse. A simple shot in the head or a decapitation

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<sup>45</sup> <http://articles.latimes.com/2010/aug/30/world/la-fg-mexico-mayor-20100831> (6-4-2013)

<sup>46</sup> [http://edition.cnn.com/2009/WORLD/americas/08/06/mexico.drug.cartels/index.html?\\_s=PM:WORLD](http://edition.cnn.com/2009/WORLD/americas/08/06/mexico.drug.cartels/index.html?_s=PM:WORLD) (5-4-2013)

<sup>47</sup> <http://www.borderlandbeat.com/2013/02/cdg-execution-video.html>

doesn't seem to be enough for Los Zetas. To get their message of terror across, they use a superlative form of violence. Beating a victim to death, mutilation by a chain saw, skinning, mutilation of genitals and other body parts while the victim is still conscious and other atrocities, are practiced and broadcast to make sure that everyone is aware of the power of the cartel. To emphasize the message in areas where Los Zetas is fighting for control, dismembered bodies are spread over an area where it can be seen or exposed to the public. For example, in May 2012 police found 18 mutilated, headless bodies near a lake in the vicinity of Guadalajara, a popular tourist area. The victims were people from a drug cartel that was fighting Los Zetas in that particular area.<sup>48</sup> Another notorious way of getting rid of competitors, is the so called 'guiso', which can be translated as stew. Victims are put in a 55-gallon oil drums. Gasoline is added and the victim is burned alive.<sup>49</sup>

Los Zetas already has a large share of the Mexican territory, but is fighting for more, while competing cartels are trying to get some of the land back. The psychological warfare of killing your opponent in the most brutal way you can think of, is as important, or perhaps more than showing power in direct fighting and shout out, which occurs in some cities. Young Mexicans who are interested in the money that comes with the business in narcotics, are intimidated by Los Zetas to not work for any other organization than theirs.

### **3.4 Use of violence**

Apart from these extreme examples in which Los Zetas uses violence on civilians, many other cases of people being attacked, despite not being involved in the drug war, can be found. The violence that is used is not symbolic and can be seen as pragmatic. The cartel uses violence or threatens to do so to get people to give them what they require, which, in most cases, is money.

The use of violence against civilians is an example of the earlier described tactic of intimidation. Los Zetas wants premise owners to pay protection money. If they don't, they will get punished. If refugees do not pay up, they will get killed and if music bands play in bars that are controlled by other cartels, they end up being tortured before they get killed and thrown in a well. The intimidation will secure the influence of Los Zetas in the targeted area. By making examples out of people who act against the will of

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<sup>48</sup> <http://abcnews.go.com/Blotter/18-headless-bodies-mexico-tourist-area/story?id=16320937#.UWLDjDePXKc> (5-4-2013)

<sup>49</sup> <http://abcnews.go.com/Blotter/ruthless-drug-lord-takes-control-deadly-cartel/story?id=17455674#.UWLJ1DePXKc>



the cartel, Los Zetas scares the civilian population into cooperation, or a similar treatment might await them. The same intimidation tactic applies to the violence used against media representatives. Reporting on the atrocities is something that is not appreciated by Los Zetas. By killing journalists and bloggers and exposing their bodies, the potential reporters get scared and stop their activities in some cases. The same goes for authorities who try to fight the cartel in a legal way.

The use of extreme violence, seen in the subchapter about the bloodshed against competing cartels, is not only an intimidation tactic, but also part of the outbidding tactic. With not only killing, but torturing and exposing the bodies, Los Zetas is making a point that is hard to misunderstand. The organization makes clear that it will do everything to control an area and its population and that it will go further than any other drug cartel. This tactic of wanting to be the most brutal and gruesome organization, is also seen with the American gang 'The Aryan Brotherhood'. The gang started as a prison gang in the northern part of Texas in the 1980s, but now has over 2,000 members, both in and out of jail.<sup>50</sup> They made brutal violence their trade mark. While the name suggests an ethnic purity driven organization, the core business of The Aryan Brotherhood is financial profit, like every other criminal organization. A similarity with Los Zetas, is the use of the outbidding tactic. The strategy of The Aryan Brotherhood is to be more violent than others. According to Michael Thompson, a former leader of the gang who is now cooperating with authorities, there is quite a simple reason for it. "Inmates will always fear me more than they will fear the staff", he said in an interview for a documentary. "They fear me more because they believe that I will kill them if they do not do what I want them to do. That is the essence of power. Nothing is more brutal than killing. Killing is a reality of this environment."<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2013/apr/02/aryan-brotherhood-texas-prison-gang> (6-4-2013)

<sup>51</sup> Aryan Brotherhood (Documentary): [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fh8mhmf-l\\_E](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fh8mhmf-l_E) (6-4-2013)

#### **Chapter 4: Los Zetas in a new perspective**

With several scholars giving their opinion and findings on the use of symbolic violence and tactics of fear and the background of Los Zetas and its atrocities, the criminal organization can be put in a new light. While mainstream media often represent the horrors in Mexico as brutal sadism, there is a plan behind the extreme violence.

The academic debates gives us several theories on symbolic violence and fear as a primary tactic. While those theories are written with examples of terrorist and militant organizations, they do apply to Los Zetas as well. While Los Zetas is a criminal organization, it distinguishes itself from the groups named by the scholars. Yet they do use the intimidation tactic of Kydd and Walter, while a broader interpretation of the outbidding tactic does apply to the criminal syndicate as well. Los Zetas combines these tactics to gain control of the desired Mexican areas and the population. In the first place, they use intimidation. Anybody who is considered to be a person who works against the interest of the cartel is dealt with. This can be civilians who do not want to cooperate, for example by refusing to pay protection money, government officials who try to convict the members or try to stop the violence, media representatives who report about the violence and of course the competing cartel members. In the second place, Los Zetas outbids their competitors, showing everybody who is in charge. Their trademark is extreme violence and by presenting their atrocities in a symbolic way (tape a computer keyboard in the hands of a killed blogger, a cell phone in the hand of a reported snitch) they make sure that their message gets the maximum attention. By filming and putting their most violent executions online, Los Zetas creates an atmosphere of fear in which they make sure that they are known as the most violent cartel of all. Other cartels do try to keep up with the atrocities and are filming the executions of Los Zetas members on video as well. This has started a battle, in which the cartels compete over who can kill the other in the most gruesome way. But while the other cartels are reacting to Los Zetas' violence, the Zetas themselves set the standard over and over again.

Some aspects of Los Zetas can be seen by other organizations as well, for example the LRA. The Mexican and the Ugandan groups both use deliberate violence as a tactic. Vinci describes in his article how the LRA has turned fear into a central strategy in their road to victory. The same can be said about Los Zetas, who are more than happy to be known as the most cruel and violent drug cartel in Mexico and probably in the whole world. Olsen's article underlines the advantage of this. "Battlefield strategies have been replaced by a strategy of atrocities intended to control the population and prevent them from working

against the rebels.” Apart from this, Los Zetas uses the tactics of fear to multiply their forces. Being physically outnumbered by the government troops, Los Zetas still has a lot of power. The members of the cartel do not often end up in a direct fight with the army and are planning their attacks more strategically. Los Zetas fights with the use of propaganda and sending terror to the public, making their direct power bigger than their numbers would suggest.

The Aryan Brotherhood also tries to become a notorious group by using more violence than other gangs. However, the combination of terrorist and militant tactics as a criminal organization is new. The terror of Los Zetas suggests a fight for political power, but that is not the case. Los Zetas does not want any political power, nor does it want any competitors. The only ambition is maximum profit. A lawless environment without competitors will give the organization the best chance to achieve that.

## Conclusion

Los Zetas is more than just a criminal organization. While the direct goal is to get control over the Mexican territory in order to create revenue, the tactics that are used are more extreme and have several similarities with terrorist organizations. The violent tactics, described in the previous chapters, are connecting to the theories of scholars who have been studying terrorism or militant groups. However, Los Zetas does not fit in those groups. It is a criminal organization, with terrorist or militant characteristics. This makes the group hard to fight. The thesis has shown that Los Zetas uses several tactics to maximize their forces, influence and power over Mexico and its inhabitants. The intimidation and outbidding tactic is one of the most important means, but in a slightly different way than Kydd and Walter described it in their article. Los Zetas is not looking for support by outbidding their competitors with a hard line policy, but wants to show that they are not tolerating resistance. This also is part of the intimidation tactic, however, showing your power by outbidding the competitor in the extremism of the used violence, combines the two tactics. The public is first intimidated by the killing of people who go against the cartel's interest and secondly, the extreme cruel character of the violence shows the public, competitors and the authorities that the organization will not be stopped by anything and will do everything in its power to become and remain the most powerful drug cartel in Mexico. Another way to become more powerful is the tactic by fear, described by Kasper Thams Olsen and Anthony Vinci. This tactic is used to create fear under civilians, but not in a terrorist perspective, as the intimidation tactic of Kydd and Walter, but in a situation of civil war. Olsen and Vince see the tactic by fear as a force multiplier, in which a smaller group is fighting a larger and more powerful group. By creating fear amongst the public, the virtual power increases.

It is not possible to name one theory of the earlier discussed academic debate that applies to Los Zetas the most. The unique situation of the cartel is the use of these symbolic tactics, but in a different way. Intimidation, outbidding and tactics of fear all are used, but cannot be compared directly with other cases. What can be concluded is that Los Zetas is not scared to use extreme violence to get more powerful. The cartel originated out of a military group, who became enforcers, which explains the well trained character. But it does not tell the whole story. Los Zetas found out that these extreme violent tactics worked. No cartel grew that much in such a short amount of time. As stated before, the United States government sees Los Zetas as the most technologically advanced, sophisticated and dangerous cartel. The territory gained in the last year also proves that their violent way of working is actually

successful. These tactics are not only terrible for the victims, but also give the other cartels the idea that they have no choice but to accept the violent challenge and fight back. While some non armed groups as the media often choose the option of submission to Los Zetas, competing cartels choose to fight back. That results in an extreme battle in which it sometimes looks like a competition, in which the one who kills the competitor in the most brutal way wins. The spiral of violence in Mexico is fed every day with new atrocities.

Recruitment is also part of the ongoing violence, as it is meeting the needs of often poor young men, who look up to the wealth and social status of the cartel members. The theory of Max Abrahms does apply to Los Zetas, but again not completely. While Abrahms argues that social connections are one of the main reasons for people joining a terrorist organization, instead of fighting and risking their lives for the cause, Los Zetas recruits young people who do want to join for social reasons, but climbing the social ladder through their newly gained wealth and powerful friends, is a more important factor. Young people, including children, fighting for a drug cartel is not just something that can be seen as morally wrong. The outbidding tactic applies to this situation as well. By seeing the violent tactics the other cartel members use, the young recruits copy this behavior. They kill with extreme violence, to gain the respect of the older members. In some cases of extremely violent videos, it is hard to verify if the young executioners are even part of Los Zetas, or if they commit this crime to get the opportunity to join the group.

This thesis is just a start of investigating Los Zetas with an angle used by scholars to explain the deeds of terrorist and militant organizations. A terrorist act or a war crime is more often than not difficult to understand, simply because the atrocities are too cruel to be able to understand. The extreme violence in Mexico is even more difficult to understand, because it is a new situation. Terrorist attacks have been analyzed many times, but the violence in Mexico is too complicated to explain to the public in a short news message. More research would benefit the case, because it can provide new insights in the way the cartels operate. The violence in Mexico is spinning out of control and while the economy of the country is doing well, the authorities lose grip on keeping the cruelties in line. Los Zetas uses extreme violence to gain and keep control of large parts of Mexico and their power is growing. A way to limit the atrocities has not yet been found. The number of homicides in the last years is growing since Los Zetas entered the stage and as this thesis shows, the cartel will not stop committing the crimes, as it benefits the organization itself.

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