

ONDERZOEKSSEMINAR III

# On the Instrumental Role of Excessive violence in los Zetas' Emergence as a Drug Cartel

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Bachelor Thesis

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# ON THE INSTRUMENTAL ROLE OF EXCESSIVE VIOLENCE IN LOS ZETAS' EMERGENCE AS A DRUG CARTEL

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The bodies of two murdered men, faces covered with duct tape, left at the side of the road in the city of Veracruz, December 2011. Veracruz lies in East-Mexico and is currently experiencing an increase in violence due to the los Zetas – Gulf Cartel conflict over the region (photograph by Felix Marquez).

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## INTRODUCTION

Felipe Calderón was elected president of Mexico on December 6 2006. He immediately declared a Mexican War on Drugs and on December 11 the first anti-drug operation was initiated. Now, six years later, Mexico has elected her next president. Since the War on Drugs that Calderón promoted and kept on supporting throughout his presidency, violence has skyrocketed (Human Rights Watch 2011:14). The exact number of drug-related deaths is unknown, but estimations vary from 50,000 to over 60,000, with the Mexican government presenting lower estimations than human rights organizations (Damien Cave 2012). One thing about these deaths is confirmed by all sources: their amount grows every year. The Mexican war on drugs seems to not have diminished Mexico's drug-related violence, or Mexico's drug trafficking for that matter.

Rather, more than ninety percent of illegal drugs entering the United States does so as part of the Mexican-American drug trade. The price of cocaine in the US has never been as low as it is today: 177,21 Dollar for one gram (Eduardo Porter 2012). However, this decline of 74 percent in thirty years had a price tag in Mexico: Security. Because, even before Calderón declared a North American war on drugs, security was decreasing. This started in the early nineties, the time that Mexican drug cartels took over the leading role in drug trafficking from the Colombian ones, and has started escalating rapidly since 2000, when a new sort of cartel started developing (Tomas Kellner & Francesco Pipitone 2010:31). Los Zetas were one of these new cartels.

Although cartel life and the illegal drug trade have always been violent, an increase in both violence and cruelty has taken place in the last ten years. The romantic image that movies such as *the Godfather* and books such as *Gomorra* present of mafia and cartels quickly disappears when realizing these cartels have their own vocabulary describing different torture techniques, most of them referring to so-called 'torture-killings' (145-146). A 2010 calculation also shows that eighteen percent of the people who died a drug-related death in Mexico were tortured before dying (Pamela Bunker, Lisa Campbell & Robert Bunker 2010:147). The leading group here is los Zetas (Lisa Campbell 2010:65).

Los Zetas hereby form a considerable threat to Mexico's security because of their extremely rapid economical and geographical expansion: In a few years, los Zetas managed to grow out to be the second most powerful Mexican drug cartel. They have shown great resistance to attacks from both other cartels and the state (Samuel Logan 2012). Although quite some academics have published articles and books about los Zetas and Mexico's drug-related problems the last few years, most literature only presents a contextual analysis. Very little is written about the 'why' of los Zetas' use of excessive violence. The aim of this thesis is to contribute to the academic debate about this. The main focus will be the instrumental role of this violence: There will be sought for an answer to the question why violence is used. The leading question will be: ***What are the functions and motives of the excessive violence used by Mexican drug cartel los Zetas, looking at the context in which the violence is committed, los Zetas' relationship with other actors, and the group dynamics of los Zetas?***

The conclusion of this thesis will not be a solid answer on the above stated question. Rather, the goal is to present a scale of possible explanations for the excessive violence that is used. These explanations will be sought on three levels: on a contextual, intergroup- and intragroup-level. However, in order to be able to understand excessive violence and the instrumental role it fulfils on these levels, it is necessary to understand in which culture and by whom it is committed.

Background information about los Zetas will therefore be provided in the first chapter. The first chapter will start contextually by presenting the history of los Zetas to enable a historiographic view during the rest of the thesis, which will be more explanatory.

The following three chapters will each focus on one of the three earlier mentioned levels. Chapter two will focus on the context and will discuss Mexico as a state. There will be sought for an explanation how los Zetas were able to grow and are able to use illegal, excessive violence. Because, as John Bailey and Roy Godson explain, the Mexican drug problem is not a modern problem that can be fixed or understood by only attacking the cartels: Deep-set institutional problems need to be addressed too (2000:4). The following chapter will look at the functions of violence for los Zetas as an organization and at the instrumental role of violence in the relationship between los Zetas and other actors on an intergroup-level. Central will be the *Weak State Insecurity Dilemma* framework formulated by Richard Jackson. The last chapter will focus on the role and function of excessive violence for an individual member of los Zetas (a Zeta). The group dynamics of los Zetas will be scrutinized in search for possible intragroup explanations for the use of excessive violence. Two aspects of los Zetas' social structure will be scrutinized. This will be based on respectively the implications of the Milgram obedience theory (1974) and the symbolism theory formulated by Bunker, Campbell and Bunker (2010). The leading question will then be answered in the conclusion, which will be followed by a discussion in which the choice and limits of subject and approach will be discussed.

For a good understanding of this thesis, two key terms need to be understood: 'cartel' and 'excessive violence'. The word 'cartel' is short for drug cartel, which means the same as DTO: Drug Trafficking Organization (Robert Bunker & John Sullivan 2010:30). A DTO, or drug cartel, is an illegal organization with the main purpose of organizing or controlling drug trafficking operations. Often, other illegal activities such as drug production and the trafficking of exotic animals, illegal organs, or weapons are conducted or organized by a DTO. The terms cartel, drug cartel and DTO thus are interchangeable, but only 'cartel' is used in this thesis to avoid confusion.

The term 'excessive violence' is more difficult to explain. As the term suggests, is excessive violence more extreme than 'normal' violence: It is unreasonably extreme. The line between excessive and 'normal' violence is difficult to draw because violence always is, to some level, extreme and unnecessary, which makes it difficult to say what qualifies as excessive violence and exceeds 'normal' brutal violence. To decide what is 'more than is necessary, normal, or desirable' (Catherine Soanes & Sarah Hawkes 2006), it is needed to measure it to what is seen as normal or regular. When looking at violence committed by drug cartels, it can be said that the kind of violence used has been constant for a few decades before escalating around 2000. Since the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century violence however escalated to a new level of brutality. Acts of violence that have become more common over the last twelve years will therefore be seen as 'excessive'. An example of 'normal' violence is murder, and an example of excessive violence is murder by life beheading.

## CHAPTER ONE: LOS ZETAS AND THEIR USE OF VIOLENCE

In the introduction, it was stated that los Zetas are a fast-growing and powerful drug cartel. In order to understand the functions of the violence used by its members, a better understanding of those members and of the by them committed violence is needed. This chapter will present a closer look at los Zetas: Who are they, what is their history? A history of their development will be given in the first part of this chapter. After that, a linkage between excessive violence and drug cartel los Zetas will be made. The central question in this chapter will be: **Who are los Zetas and what forms of violence do they use?**

In the late 1990's Mexico's biggest drug cartel was the Gulf Cartel, which was active in east-Mexico. The paranoid Osiel Cárdenas Guillén became its leader in 1999. Constantly afraid of his friends and enemies alike, he felt he needed the best security possible. He found this security in a group of 31 highly trained members of the Mexico Army's Grupo Aeromovil de Fuerzas Especiales (GAFE) who were specialized in fighting drug cartels but discovered more money could be made fighting with them than against them (Campbell 2010:56). They were quickly called los Zetas, named after the codenames each member got and which existed out of the Z (pronounced as 'Zeta' in Spanish) and a number (Logan 2012). Over the next four years, the group grew rapidly. The 300 new members that were assembled in that period not only came from the GAFE, but also from the Guatemalan Special Force and were all assigned as bodyguards of Gulf Cartel leaders (George Grayson & Samuel Logan 2012:7).

Over the next years, the precision and mercilessness in which los Zetas operated brought them both the rivalry of other groups of bodyguards who felt overshadowed and a broader spectrum of assignments as rescuing prison inmates, collecting debts and keeping Osiel's subordinates in line (2012:8-10). The group was content with this for a while, but started organizing themselves more and more from 2004 on (Logan 2012). Around 2008, the group decided to accept job offers with big rewards that leaders of other cartels offered them. They started to accept jobs from the highest bidders from that year on. A small academic debate exists about when exactly los Zetas started splitting off the Gulf Cartel, with academics stating this process started as early as in 2004 (Logan 2012) and other stating los Zetas were still a part of the Gulf Cartel until 2010, when they quickly split off (June Beittel 2012:68). Relative consensus exists about the time they truly stopped working for cartels for doing the dirty work and formed an independent cartel and is estimated to be either in 2009 or 2010 (Grayson & Logan 2012:19, Beittel 2012:69). The most logical breaking point seems to be in early 2010, when a Gulf Cartel leader ordered the assassination of a los Zetas operator (Logan 2012).

Heriberto Lazcano Lazcano, who had been a member of los Zetas since the desertion of the 31 GAFE-militaries in 1999, became the leader of los Zetas 2003 and stayed in that position until his death in the summer of 2012 (Sara Llana 2012). The cartel los Zetas had great knowledge about all aspects of drug trafficking, which was a result of their background as both highly trained militaries and high-placed employees in a powerful drug cartel. The result was a big and fast expansion of los Zetas' wealth and territory. The cartel operated among Mexico's east-coast and quickly won ground over the Gulf Cartel, who formerly was the most powerful east-Mexican cartel. Thus, the former allies became each' others biggest enemies. Fights over cities and ground between the two however were generally won by los Zetas and by 2012 practically the whole east coast was in hands of the latter. As of today, los Zetas are considered the most notorious and

the second most moneyed drug cartel in the whole of north and central America. Their territory spreads across the entire east coast, while 2010 estimations about the number of Zetas suggest there are no more than three hundred of them (George Grayson 2010:190).

To keep a hold of all the criminal activities and regions, an effective organization is needed. Here, the military training that los 'original' Zetas were subjected to shows off. The organization shows a great amount of professionalism, while the hierarchical structure of the cartel is both characteristic for the military and cartels. This structure is kept muddled in order to confuse enemies, but a general hierarchy and division of different groups with specific tasks has been made by several academics (Grayson 2010, Campbell 2010, Grayson & Logan 2012). The top Zetas are called los *Zetas Viejos*, which literally means the old Zetas, a logical name since the group exists out of ex-GAFES. They move around the east-coast of Mexico and have a group of bodyguards for their protection. The next ones in command are the *Zetas Nuevos*, who are newer to the cartel. Many of them are regional and plaza bosses, which means they are the boss of a certain region and under direct command of los *Zetas Viejos* or are the boss of a city or small region and under command of a region commander (Campbell 2010:59). Under them, many groups are placed: *La Dirección*, which is a group of communication experts, *los Matamilitares* who are specialised in executions and *Cobras Nuevos*, who act as bodyguards are among the well-respected ranks. Lower ranks include groups of teenagers who act as lookouts (*los Halcones*) or eavesdroppers (*las Ventanas*). Poor civilians sometimes are bribed into or paid for taking part in anti-police demonstrations or spreading slogans. This group can be placed at the very bottom and is called *los Tapados* (Grayson 2010:188-189).

In the fourteen years that have passed during los Zetas' development from a group of deserters to a highly notorious drug cartel, they became known because of their two trademarks: their diversification in other criminal activities and their use of extreme violence (Beittel 2012:67). The latter might not come as a surprise, since the evolution of los Zetas was brutally violent from the start. Beheadings, killings and torture were used as weapons within the drug world for decades, but los Zetas went further. Their military training raised the bar of not only professionalism, but also of violence for all drug cartels, a characteristic of their violence that will be reflected on more in chapter three (Logan 2012). A last aspect that distinguishes los Zetas is that they break the formerly unwritten but well-known rules about whom to engage: They do not only target enemies or treats, but also their families or friends.

In the introduction, it was stated that eighteen percent of the about 20,000 people who were killed in the War on Drugs was tortured too (Bunker, Campbell & Bunker 2010:147). This was an increase compared to previous years and Bunker et al. estimate that this percentage or at least number will keep rising. Of those who die a so-called torture-death, many die by beheading. In another article, Campbell states that this is one of the techniques that are mostly used by los Zetas (2010:67). Other techniques include putting a person in an acid bath (*Pozoleado*) and chopping off limbs, mostly genitals, tongues or eyes (Bunker, Campbell & Bunker 2010: 46, Grayson & Logan:94). These actions are not only considered gruesome by most people, but also have a symbolic function: mutilation and death are used as ways to send a message. Extreme violence is thus used for intimidation.



The leading question of this chapter was: **Who are los Zetas and what forms of violence do they use?** The answer has been given in the above pages and can be summarized as following. Nowadays, Los Zetas are an extremely powerful Mexican drug cartel. They find their roots in a group of deserting militaries, which is reflected in its effectiveness, professionalism and extreme brutality. Los Zetas' use of violence was previously unknown even in the drug world. The techniques used to present this violence by choosing their victims, torture methods, and by controlling and using modern media, los Zetas have created a trademark that proved very effective: In the three years since they started as a cartel, they have grown to control almost all of Mexico's east coast.

## CHAPTER TWO: THE FRAGILITY OF THE MEXICAN STATE

Members of Mexican drug cartels take part in many illegal activities, of which drug use, trafficking and production, and the torture and murder of fellow human beings are examples. The Mexican state however appears to be unable to prevent the cartel members from committing these crimes. In this chapter the ways in which the development of drug cartels was and is enabled will be scrutinized. This will be done by looking at some of the structural problems within the Mexican state. This chapter will thus follow the footsteps of many authors before who have blamed 'deficiencies in democracy ... for much of Mexico's past and persisting problems' (Daniel Levy & Kathleen Bruhn 2006:1). The starting point will be the question: **What Mexican national political conditions have enabled and are enabling los Zetas' use of excessive violence?**

To answer this question, there will firstly be given an introduction into the theoretical concept of the 'Failed State' according to C.S. Sekhar (2010) and Richard Jackson (2006). After that, the implications of this concept will be linked to an overview of the biggest flaws within the Mexican state that have enabled the cartels to grow. The manifestations of these flaws will be illustrated by both an overview of the current functioning of state officials and a short history of the developments of the Mexican state since its civil war and revolution that took place a hundred years ago. The chapter will end with a comprehensive answer on the above stated question.

The concept of 'Weak States' is used by many scholars. According to Sekhar (2010:263), a weak or failed state '...is unable to perform its core functions and displays vulnerability in the social, political, and economic domains.' The weak state thus is a theoretical concept that can be measured by certain characteristics. In this chapter, it will be stated that Mexico indeed is a weak state. The implications of that statement will be explained on the basis of the Fragile State theory that Sekhar presented in 2010 and on the 2006 writing of Jackson. Both authors talk about the factors that result in a failed, weak or well-functioning state. Jackson states that weak states lack three attributes: effective state institutions, consensus on the idea of the state and a monopoly on the instruments of violence (2006:149).

The authors both present the Weberian idea of the state as an entity that holds the monopoly on power by having both the means and the authority to impose it (2010:265, 2006:150). The most important aspect of this monopoly, is the monopoly on violence (2006:150). The latter is the factor that will be focused upon. For, as has been said in the introduction of this chapter, the Mexican state is unable to control violence used by other parties. This means it does not have the monopoly on violence.

Mexico experienced a ten-year long revolution and accompanying civil war from 1910 till 1920. The revolution started with an uprising as result of the big economic disparities between the rich and the poor and was, as Anita Brenner stated: 'a struggle for liberty and equality' (1987:205). The revolution brought an end to the repressive regime of Porfirio Díaz, who had reigned over Mexico for 35 years before his central government was overthrown in 1911. The revolution also led to the 1917 constitution in which principles about the sovereignty of the nation, the separation of powers and a new, representative democracy were laid out. Although the revolution resulted into the end of Díaz' dictatorship and Mexico taking the first step towards becoming a democracy by creating a political, central system where leaders are elected

six-year terms, the fighting also left Mexico broke and in shambles while a bureaucratic system was established (Peter Watt & Roberto Zepeda 2012:23). This in combination with three preceding centuries of political exploitation and dictatorship created the perfect breeding ground for corruption to grow.

Another result of the revolution was the establishment of the Partido Nacional Revolucionario (PNR) in 1929, which became the leading political party. It immediately provided immunity for criminals in exchange for money, which they used to stimulate the economy (and their own bank account) (Bailey & Godson 2000:33). The PNR, which later changed its name to Partido Nacional Institucional (PNI), stayed Mexico's political leading party until 2000. Its method of governance was as following:

[It] developed and solidified a centralized structure with an ineffective federal system, an authoritarian political scheme with a strong president and weak and subservient legislative and judicial branches. Such an arrangement allowed the government to cultivate a blueprint of corruption and a lack of accountability by asserting widespread client list controls over the Mexican people. (Luz Nagle 2010:96)

By being tied to both investors and criminal organizations, the PNI maintained a relative stability and enabled economic growth for several decades. The illegal Mexican – North American drug trade contributed to the latter since the 1930's, when many drugs became illegal in the United States (Grayson 2010:27). This changed in the 1980's, when stronger drug control laws were enforced, leading to even more secret drug routes. Meanwhile, Mexico's central government landed in a recession while the Mexican president, Durazo, got arrested for ties with the criminal underworld (Nagle 2010:99).

This continuous drug trade was part of another way in which modern Mexican politics stimulated economic growth. In the first decades after the revolution, politicians on all levels protected or helped drug production and trafficking in exchange for money. Especially on a local level, this system not only provided political authorities with money, but with more power too (Paul Kenny & Mónica Serrano 2012:30-31). The new political system, which was centralized and then divided in regions, left many (rural) areas of Mexico under meagre jurisdiction and in that way made corruption extremely easy.

The two biggest flaws within the Mexican state that enable excessive violence to be used by cartel members are corruption and economic shortage. Both of these problems have afflicted Mexico since the start of the modern state a century ago and have grown hand in hand with Mexican democracy, which is said to only really have been established in the 1990's (Levy & Bruhn 2006:3). The two are strongly connected: Mexico's poor economic situation led to poor salaries for most officials. From the 1930's on, bribes were taken because the financial benefits it brought were seen as more important than legal boundaries. In more recent decades, cartels offer police officers and other officials more than their salary. Therefore, it is the combination of the tradition of corruption and the Mexican state economy that has been stagnating for years that has led to a system where officials can be bribed with money and threatened with violence.

Luz Nagle (2010:96) described corruption as the 'abuse of the public trust to gain a private benefit'. Corruption within the police corps is thus high that a 2007 survey showed that about 80 percent of Mexican civilians thinks the police is too corrupted to trust (Diego Cervillos 2007),

which is about the same percentage of Mexicans who think their politicians are corrupted (Stephen Morris & Joseph Klesner 2010:1267). Ten years ago, corruption within the juridical system was estimated to be between 50 and 70 percent, according to a United Nations report (2002:18). State officials are highly untrustworthy, which leads to an inefficient execution and enforcement of the law. Nagle (2010:108) states that this lawlessness is not as much a problem of the Mexican law itself, but purely a result of corruption in both law enforcement and judiciary. One of the reasons for state officials taking bribes is that the state cannot offer them enough money.

The state also is not able to keep criminals from threatening its officials. This is another type of power the Mexican government lacks: the monopoly on violence. A result of this is that the state itself started trespassing laws as well in an attempt to (re)gain control. In the period from 2007 till 2010, which covers the first years of the War on Drugs, human rights violated by state officials multiplied seven times compared to the four previous years (Human Rights Watch 2011:7). 2010 Estimations suggest that ten percent of drug-related casualties were being incurred by police and military personnel (Graham Turbiville 2010:124). When looking at the weak state criteria as stated by Sekhar (2010) and Jackson (2006), and the development and current state of the Mexican state, it can thus be seen that it does not meet the most important state criterion: It does not have the monopoly on power. This weakness of the state allowed some Mexican municipalities to become under dual sovereignty. These are regions where cartels have established a parallel government (Grayson & Logan 2012:247). In those municipalities, the cartels have taken over many functions of the state, from leading the town to raising taxes, and also have complete control over elements set up by the state, as prison, judiciary, or politics (69-70).

All this leads to the possibility of answering the leading question stated in this chapter: **What Mexican national political conditions have enabled and are enabling los Zetas' use of excessive violence?** According to the weak state theories of Sekhar (2010) and Jackson (2006), the Mexican state is a weak state, with corruption as one of the biggest causes and effects. Corruption has taken place in Mexico since before the revolution a hundred years ago, and the introduction of bureaucracy a hundred years ago offered this corruption the opportunity to become systematic. A Mexican saying sums this tradition up: 'Corruption is not a characteristic of the system in Mexico, it is the system' (Anthony DePalma 1996). Another reason is the stagnating Mexican economy which leaves many people underpaid, unemployed or living on minimum wages. This makes accepting bribes or desertion more tempting. This has also led to a vicious circle, since the large-scale corruption has negative consequences for the economy. The criminal organizations also provide a humungous challenge for the state, because they are numerous and wealthy. The fact that the state does not have complete public support is probably another factor (James Cockcroft 2010:38, Randal Archibold & Damien Cave 2012). The implication that the state does not have the monopoly on power and thus is a weak state will be addressed further in the following chapter.

### CHAPTER THREE: LOS ZETAS AND THEIR INSTRUMENTS OF INTIMIDATION

Drug violence is shown to increase rapidly in Mexico since 1995. Kellner and Pipitone (2010:31) state that the emergence of new drug cartels la Familia Michoacana and los Zetas, who used violence 'previously unimaginable' was the cause. Turbiville (2010:133) signals another change in drug violence in 2003. He states that this year can be seen as the turning point for drug violence to become more open and brutal and signals a change in organization and professionalism. Again, los Zetas are the pioneers. On the following pages, the reasons why los Zetas introduced and held on to this excessive violence will be scrutinized by an examination of the violent relationship los Zetas have with other actors. Those other actors will be divided in three groups: other cartels, the state, and civilians. The leading question that will be answered in this chapter is: **To what extent is violence used as an instrument in the relationship los Zetas hold with other national actors?**

Los Zetas can be seen as the pioneers of a new sort cartel violence: Brutal violence with a strong symbolic message (Logan 2012). This excessive violence quickly became los Zetas' trademark. This might not be surprising, since it was their brutality that got them into the world of drug trafficking in the first place. The sorts of violence that are most common for los Zetas have been discussed in chapter one. Cases are known of mutilated bodies or body parts (usually heads) left at specific places. Often, the bodies or body parts are left in public places, sometimes accompanied by letters to make the message clearer. Examples of those texts are 'One by one you go falling' and 'one more message, dirtbags, so that you learn to respect'. The letter 'Z' also is sometimes left, carved into the body or written on a note (Bunker, Campbell & Bunker 2010:151). The same message, which is one of intimidation, is also spread by the open display of violence in the form of shootouts in broad daylight (Campbell 2010: 65).

The three groups of other actors can be divided in two, based on the sort of relationship they hold with los Zetas. Other cartels are competition for los Zetas because they have the same goals: They trade in the same products. Because they trade in illegal products, they also use the same methods and routes. This competitive relationship is different from the one between los Zetas and the state or civilians. The latter two are no competition for the cartel, because they have different goals. Rather, they are obstacles instead of competition for los Zetas. The function of excessive violence los Zetas use against these parties also differs. In this chapter, the competitive relationship between los Zetas and other cartels will be scrutinized using Jackson's *Weak State Insecurity Dilemma* theory (2006). From there, the relationship between these parties and the role of violence in this will be explained. After that, the role of excessive violence used against the state and civilians will be scrutinized. The scrutiny of excessive violence as intimidation will be based on the idea that this intimidation has two functions.

In the last chapter, it has been concluded that the Mexican state is a weak state, based on the notion that it does not hold a monopoly on power. Jackson argues that the weakness of a state makes it more vulnerable to state challenges. Those can come from external threats, as intervention or penetration, and internal threats as political, religious, or criminal groups (149). He formulates this as following:

The inability of the state to provide peace and order creates a contentious environment where each component of society – including the ruling elite or regime - competes to preserve and protect its own well-being. This creates a domestic situation seminal to the

neo-realist conception of structural anarchy where groups create insecurity in the rest of the system when they try to improve their own security (152).

A weak state finds itself in a dilemma. It will most likely react on the loss of the monopoly on violence by trying to increase or retrieve security, which will lead to resistance from the other parties that have now grabbed power. This attempt also often undermines the foundations of the state, and can lead to the state becoming a threat for its own security, according to Jackson. He concludes by saying that, for many weak states, there is no way out of the dilemma because they have to choose between trying to ensure short-term security or keeping to the long-term goal of state-making (155).

Because the state does not have the monopoly on violence, drug cartels can use it in their competition over power and ground. The cartels react on each other by constantly raising the bar a bit more to ensure their own safety. This creates a violent spiral of each cartel going a little further in order to try to protect or expand its own territory. The result is a constantly decreasing national security: Each party increased its own security by using more violence. Los Zetas ensured their own security by raising the bar of violence quite a bit. They did so by introducing torture methods that were not used before, but also by raising the level of professionalism and boldness. The latter means the nonchalance with which bodies are left in public places and fire fights take place in broad day light. These techniques reflect a new sort of violence which seems to be based on a tactic of intimidation that los Zetas introduced: Psychological warfare (Grayson & Logan 2012:90, 94).

This can be seen in the examples of (mutilated) bodies placed at strategic, public places. Sometimes victims are specifically chosen. However, often, the victims have become so by accident (Daniel Hernandez 2012): The death of these individuals is not the goal. Rather, the fear of everyone who sees it is. This psychological warfare also takes place via media. Some newspapers are known to be under control of los Zetas, and journalists are collectively intimidated and threatened to publish only what los Zetas want them to (Grayson & Logan 2012:67). In Veracruz, a region under los Zetas' control located in South-Eastern Mexico, alone, seven journalists were killed in the period from January 2011 till March 2012 (José de Córdoba 2012). The internet is used too: several videos of torture have been released on YouTube and the burying site of eighteen corpses was revealed via the internet (Nacha Cattan 2010).

This intimidation seems to work, because the Gulf Cartel, Sinaloa Cartel and la Familia Michoacana have been seen to work together in an attempt to reduce los Zetas' power and retrieve their territory (Beittel 2011:68). More problematic is the bar of brutality and professionalism in torture and murder which los Zetas raised for its rivals: Other cartels are seen to start using more brutal violence too. Grayson and Logan (2012) state that los Zetas pioneered excessive violence, but that its 'kind of butchery associated with the paramilitaries' (117) is no longer monopolized by the cartel. Los Zetas introduced excessive violence in order to safeguard their own safety, but because there is no monopoly on violence, other cartels raised their bar too. So far, however, los Zetas have managed to keep ahead. Logan (2012) suggests that los Zetas' paramilitary training is the reason for this.

When looking at the relationship between los Zetas and the civilians, excessive violence can again be seen to have an intimidating role. The relationship between los Zetas and civilians

seems to be two-sided: It seems to be a variation of 'plata o plomo'. When civilians do what los Zetas want them to do, they are rewarded with money or gifts. However, when los Zetas are disobeyed or opposed, punishment takes place. Those punishments are displayed in public places, and seem to be intended as warnings. In Nuevo Laredo, for example, Zetas have repeatedly hung the dead bodies of civilians from bridges (Elisabeth Flock 2011, Mica Rosenberg 2012).

The messages left with these bodies differ, and are sometimes directed at civilians, but sometimes are directed at other cartels or the state too. An example of the latter is given by Rosenberg, who states that in early 2012, los Zetas left a car with twelve dead bodies near the town hall. Los Zetas thus does not only use excessive violence on civilians to send them a message, but also uses civilians to intimidate other, more threatening parties. The state is intimidated in the same way as civilians are: Officials who take bribes are rewarded, but judges sending a Zeta to jail, police men who uncover a drug operation or paramilitaries who raid the hiding places of cartel members are punished. The goal for los zetas seems to be complete freedom to do what they want, without the interference of other parties.

The question stated at the beginning of this chapter was: **To what extent is violence used as an instrument in the relationship los Zetas hold with other national actors?** Assuming the other actors can be divided in three groups, other cartels, the state, and civilians, it can be seen that los Zetas has a hostile relationship with all three parties. The relationship with other cartels is highly competitive, and the use of excessive violence can be explained by applying Jackson's *Insecurity Dilemma*-framework (2006). It can be seen as an instrument of intimidation in the constant struggle in which each cartel fights for its own safety and so reduces national safety. Excessive violence thus serves as intimidation towards other groups who can threaten los Zetas' monopoly on power in certain Mexican regions. This also explains why other cartels are seen to become more violent as well. Violence against the state and civilians is also used as an instrument of intimidation. With a combination of brutality and public presentation of violence, los Zetas show that they fear no one, and that they eliminate everyone who is in their way. This means intimidation has a preventive function: By showing what happens when los Zetas are not obeyed, it is hoped that the others stay in line. There is a difference between the intimidating role of excessive violence directed at other cartels on one hand, and the state and civilians on the other hand: The first one is meant to defeat competition while the latter is meant to make the other parties leave los Zetas be (Logan 2012). On an intergroup level, excessive violence can thus be seen as an instrument of intimidation directed at other actors who either form a threat or obstacle for them. The combination of excessive violence and the framing and presentation of this is probably the leading characteristic of 21<sup>st</sup> century Mexican drug cartels, with los Zetas in the lead.

## CHAPTER FOUR: THE ZETA GROUP IDENTITY

Los Zetas are not merely a group of people working together. They are a group of people who share the characteristics of having endured an elite training and not being afraid to use violence. Grayson and Logan state that members feel a spirit of belonging: They are proud to be a part of a professional, lethal organization (2012:83). This makes los Zetas a group in which unity and fellowship are very important. Excessive violence is one of the key stones of los Zetas and part of their organization. In this social construction, being able to commit violence is the standard. In this last chapter, there will be contributed to an answer about the use of excessive violence on an intragroup level: Why is excessive violence used by individual Zetas, looking at the group dynamics within the cartel? The leading question hereby will be: **What is the group identity of los Zetas, and in how far is excessive violence a factor in this?**

An answer to this question will be sought in two aspects of los Zetas' social structure. The first one is the hierarchy los Zetas have created. This aspect will be approached using the concept of group identification that Donald Horowitz presents in *The Deadly Ethnic Riot* (2001) and the obedience theory of Stanley Milgram (1974). The other aspect is the role of religion within the cartel. The emerging *narcoculto* which worships *Santa Muerte* within the framework of religious symbolism that Bunker, Campbell and Bunker (2010) present. Firstly, however, the group structure of los Zetas will be scrutinized further.

Most Zetas are deserters from the military or police force. In Mexico, corruption and underpay lead to little public approval for these professions. Los Zetas-members are not in high esteem of the public either, but get paid at least three times as much as the armed forces do (Grayson & Logan 2012:83). Within the ranks of los Zetas, pride is taken in their function and cartel. There is a great sense of comradeship and loyalty between Zetas, which is reflected in the effort they put in breaking out cartel-members who were imprisoned and retrieving the bodies of fallen comrades (Campbell 2010:73). This 'esprit de corps' is encouraged by a yearly festival for all Zetas organized by *Zetas Viejos* (Grayson & Logan 2012:91). *Narcocorridos*, ballads that glorify cartel life, also help this feeling of pride and fellowship. Los Zetas have their own *corrido*, which functions as a sort of anthem and includes the line 'United as Family' (2012:76).

During the intensive training in one of los Zetas' training camps in either Mexico, the United States or Guatemala, the new recruits that show the most promise in executing excessive violence are selected (2010:68). After finishing their training, new members generally get a tattoo which shows they are a Zeta. Those tattoos are encouraged to be in places that can be covered up, but still mark people as Zetas (69). Zetas are also given nicknames, which generally are nouns. Examples of nicknames are 'el Gato' (the cat), 'El Olivo' (the olive), 'el Pitufo' (the smurf) and 'la Ardilla' (the squirrel) (Grayson & Logan 2012:231-246). Members thus get introduced to a new culture: they get new habits and names, learn new skills and their bodies get branded. It can be said that Zetas are given a new identity that estranges them from civilian life.

In 1961 Yale University professor Milgram started an experiment on the willingness of human beings to obey to authority, even when they are asked to do something that goes against a person's sense of morality. Central in the experiment was a principle that Milgram saw as a universally accepted one: one should not inflict suffering on another creature (Milgram 1973:13). In the procedure he set up, a subject was deceived into thinking he was part of an



educational experiment: He had to ask questions to another 'subject' (who actually was aware of the real purpose of the experiment) and had to give the other an increasing amount of electric shocks when wrong answers were given. An aspect of the basic procedure was changed in each of the fifteen variations that were conducted. In the experiment, the three actors have a hierarchical relationship: The experimenter is the highest authority, the subject feels the need to obey him. The subject however also stands above the victim, being the victim's teacher.

Milgram published a book that included the outcomes of all fifteen variations of the experiments in 1973. In most variations, many subjects kept obeying the experimenter until the test was over. Looking at the results, it however can be seen that factors as proximity of the victim and authority of the experimenter influence the results greatly. Obedience rates were seen to drop when the victim is nearby (36). Obedience rates also dropped when the experimenter did not wear a lab coat or when the experiment took place in an old building (1973: table three and four). What can be deduced from these results is that the subject needed a clear authority and fair distance from the victim in order to take the orders to 'hurt' the victim.

There is a clear hierarchy in the case of los Zetas. The orders to kill or mutilate victims are given by people higher in rank than the people who actually do the work. This creates a certain obligation, since not taking orders has negative consequences (Grayson & Logan 2012:83). The fact that the orders are given by someone higher in rank however also creates the possibility to diffuse the responsibility. Because, although a Zeta commits the excessive violence, he only does so because someone higher in rank told him to. This feeling of hierarchy los Zetas have, concerns others too. As said before, Zetas take great pride in their membership. They see themselves as part of an elite, which stand above everyone who is no part of this. This hierarchical segregation makes differentiation from other actors easier. As can be seen from the results from the Milgram experiment, differentiation makes it easier to hurt others.

The second factor that is central within los Zetas and is a possible contribution to the explanation for the individual use of excessive violence is religion. In Mexico, 88 percent of the population is Roman Catholic (Bejucal de Ocampo 2012). Since the introduction of Catholicism in Mexico, it has greatly intermingled with local beliefs. This has resulted in hundreds of saints to whom one can pray in specific situations (Bunker et al. 2010:161). Cults, or *cultos*, have formed around some of these saints. Grayson and Logan (2012:90) state that most cartel members are not only highly religious, but also superstitious and Bunker et al. signal that some cults have become closely associated with drug cartels from the 1980's on (160). *Santa Muerte* is one these saints. Kevin Freese states that 'Saint Death' is a saint to which '...a set of ritual practices [are] offered on behalf of a supernatural personification of death' (2005). Her cult has grown expansively over the last two decades, and although many poor people and small-time criminals are known to worship her, she has been most closely linked to drug cartels.

Bunker et al. signal the forming of a Zeta *narcoculto* around the saint. They describe a *narcoculto* as '...a number of cult-like belief systems [that] have become closely associated with specific Mexican drug cartels and ... with their criminal activities' (160). Freese (2005) suggests that *Santa Muerte* has become very popular for cartel members because she does not distinguish between good and evil practitioners. She does however demand that her practitioners follow detailed rituals (Bunker et al. 2010:166). The saint is thought to be very jealous, and there is a range of rituals the saint would demand in all kinds of occasions. Extra offerings are thought to

always be appreciated by her. Within los Zetas, *Santa Muerte* is getting increasingly more popular. This has led to an increasing amount of incidents involving torture and beheading that can be linked to *Santa Muerte* (Bunker et al. 2010:166).

Bunker et al. state that these incidents are very worrisome because they are getting more frequent. They continue to state that cartel violence normally functions as a terrorist act, but that some of the violence is conducted as an offering for a deity or saint (161). It however be argued that acts of excessive violence committed in the name of a saint have exactly the same function as secular violence. The *narcocultos* have started growing rapidly over the last decade. *Santa Muerte*, who Bunker et al. link to the cartel (161), could offer justification for excessive violence. Here, the theory of diffusing responsibility can again be applied: By adapting the belief that a saint wants you to bring her a head, you lay the responsibility of the beheading not with yourself, but with the saint.

The leading question in this chapter was: **What is the group identity of los Zetas, and in how far is excessive violence a factor in this?** Los Zetas are a unified cartel. Grayson and Logan say that the efforts they take to ensure the safety of its members is not seen in any other drug cartel (2012:83). Intensive training, good salaries but illegal activities, and nicknames create a new group identity for Zetas. This new identity and the feeling of belonging to an elite organization make it possible for members to displace the responsibility of acts of committed violence: The first because it creates the possibility to hold authorities responsible, the latter because it makes differentiation of the victim possible. The worship of a narco-saint also presents a justification because acts of excessive violence can be interpreted as needed sacrifices by the subject. Thus, excessive violence is no big factor in these aspects of the Zeta culture. Rather, these aspects offer a possible justification for committing violence.

## CONCLUSION

This thesis has investigated the functions and motives of the excessive violence used by los Zetas. The aim of this thesis was to contribute to a comprehensive answer on the question why excessive violence is used by the drug cartel. It was designed to scrutinize the role of this violence on three levels: By looking into the Mexican national context, by examining the use of violence in los Zetas' relationships with other parties on an intergroup-level and by looking at aspects of the cartel's social structure on an intragroup-level. This was done in order to answer the leading question: ***What are the functions and motives of the excessive violence used by Mexican drug cartel los Zetas, looking at the context in which the violence is committed, los Zetas' relationship with other actors, and the group dynamics of los Zetas?***

Los Zetas commit excessive violence in the national context of a weak state. Corruption has led to untrustworthy police officers, a dysfunctional juridical system, a high percentage of deserting paramilitaries, and biased politicians. Los Zetas use this state weakness and combine high rewards for the corrupted with extremely violent penalties for the ones who do not accept bribes. This state weakness has led to the creation of an insecurity dilemma: Powerful cartels fight over the monopoly on violence that the Mexican state has lost. In this fight, each cartel increases its own security by using more violence towards others. The committed violence thus constantly worsens, which decreases the national security. In this power play, los Zetas have introduced a combination of excessive violence and public display to intimidate others: Bodies are mutilated and left in public places or displayed on the internet or in the newspaper.

The notion that those atrocities are meant as symbolic intimidation can be supported by the fact that sometimes, victims seem to be chosen randomly. Logan (2012) describes this technique as: '...if you frighten your enemy enough, you may defeat him without having to fight'. This calculated approach also influences the relationship los Zetas have with the other two parties that were distinguished in this thesis, the state and civilians. Because, although these are no direct enemies of los Zetas, their relationship with the cartel is hostile. Los Zetas decrease their safety, and the state and civilians can slow down los Zetas' expansion. However, by using intimidating excessive violence, los Zetas make these parties less of an obstacle.

Two aspects of the Zeta group culture were scrutinized: Its structural hierarchy and its growing *narcoculto* that worships *Santa Muerte*. By applying the outcomes of the Milgram Experiment on the Zeta hierarchy, it could be seen that both the order given by a clearly higher authority and the 'lower' position of the victim lead to the possibility of displacement of the responsibility. This displacement of responsibility then can be seen as a justification for committing excessive violence. This concept can also be applied on the existence of los Zetas' *narcoculto*. In recent years, an increasing amount of (human) offerings has been made to Saint Death on behalf of los Zetas. The theory of diffusing responsibility can explain this phenomenon: By adapting the belief that excessive violence is committed to please a saint, no personal guilt is necessary.

A comprehensive answer on the main question is: Excessive violence is used as an instrument to gain power. It is used against enemy cartels because they prey on the same things. Against the state and civilians, the violence is used as part of a stick-and-carrot approach in which acts that in some way cross the cartel's operations are severely punished and behaviour in favour of los Zetas is rewarded. On an intragroup-level, justification methods for committing excessive violence can be found. The strict hierarchy and worship of *Santa Muerte* offer a justification

method in which displacement of responsibility for excessive violent acts can take place. Thus, violence has no function in these aspects of Zeta cartel life. Rather, it seems that these aspects of the Zeta culture can have an instrumental role in committing excessive violence by offering a justification.

## DISCUSSION

The reason for the choice of subject of this thesis is that, as can be read in the above pages, los Zetas are a significant threat for the safety of many Mexican civilians. Research has been done, but while reading the available books and articles I noticed most of them only focussed on the contextual side. Very little I read focused on the question why los Zetas operate as they do. The stick-and-carrot- approach they use, in which 'bad' behaviour is punished, 'good' behaviour is rewarded, but most of all, warnings are given so that 'punishment' does not have to take place, is largely ignored.

This while there is a War on Drugs going on, and the current 'kingpin' strategy (which means that militaries focus on taking out leading persons within the cartels) that is used in this war is shown to have no influence on the committed violence (Beittel 2012:69). More research about the cartels is needed in order to understand them better and so formulate a better working counter-cartel strategy. With this thesis, I aim to show one of the hiatuses in academic knowledge about los Zetas by offering an examination of what I think to be their biggest trademark: Their use of excessive violence. My scrutiny however is limited, and one of my goals was to convince others that more research is needed rather than to offer a complete explanation to why los Zetas operate the way they do.

The limitations I was bound to, led me to decide to address los Zetas' use of excessive violence on the three levels in which the chapters of this thesis are classified. The levels of 'concept', 'inter-group' and 'intra-group' were, to me, a logical and clear division that would give me the opportunity to show the different aspects of los Zetas that together could help form a comprehensive answer to the question as to why excessive violence was introduced and is now used by los Zetas. Another limitation I set for myself was a geographical one. I have only discussed actors and acts within Mexico's borders. In reality, the drug war has gotten a lot of attention from the United States. More interestingly, Los Zetas are seen to spread out to Central America, and connections have even been seen between los Zetas and criminal organizations in Africa, Asia, and Europe (Campbell 2010:57). Therefore, further research might investigate los Zetas' international situation and the role of excessive violence here.

For an organization that uses intimidation as weapon, the media are a very powerful instrument. Los Zetas are known to control several newspapers, and journalists are often threatened. The manipulation of the media is a modern but very influential technique (Grayson & Logan 2012:133). Therefore, further study could also access the power of social media in los Zetas' terrorist-like strategy.

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