Zetas Transnational Criminal Organization: Past, Present, and Future threat to United States Security

Eric Galarza

Introduction

The United States is the land of democracy and opportunity, home of the brave and the land of the free. It is part of Western civilization that is home to apple pie, baseball, and Friday Night Lights that is threatened by the Zetas TCO. The Zetas TCO is a threat to United States security and interest because of several factors. In addition to the group’s historical involvement in money laundering, weapons trafficking, the smuggling of illicit bulk currency, the facilitation of narcotics, extortion, and human trafficking, they recently have become involved in pirated software and movies and petroleum and oil theft and illicit sales.

Some scholars, including me, believe the Zetas TCO has earned quite a bit of money from diesel and other petroleum products, that at some point, this may surpass the profits of illegal drug trades. The Zetas TCO is also tapping the market of pirated software and movies often earning huge profits that fund their cause because of the lax enforcement in Mexico. According to Booth (2011) the Mexican sale of bootleg copies of Toy Story 3 and Microsoft Windows XP is funding the powerful mafias whose relentless violence has left more than 35,000 Mexicans dead in the past four years.

The Zeta TCO also partakes in corruption which could lead to the assistance and facilitation of terrorist groups and terrorism, their practice of narco-terrorism, and the recruitment of current and former U.S. military service members. Another area of concern to U.S. security and interests is with the Zetas TCO presence in Guatemala because they use the country as a staging area for undocumented travelers destined for the United States.

In order for the United States to combat threats from the Zeta TCO there needs to be a continued collaboration and partnerships among all levels of law enforcement to include international partnerships. This report will explain the brief history and leadership of the Zeta TCO and how their threats are important for U.S. security and interest.

The threats posed by Los Zetas are among the most significant threats to United States security, vitality, and prosperity. Because the Zetas pose institutional problems in Mexico and other parts of the world, it is likely that they would encroach into our social, political, and economic systems as well.

Background
The Zeta TCO was once the enforcement arm of the Gulf Cartel. The Gulf Cartel is one of the most powerful TCOs in Mexico, whose base of operations is in Matamoros, Tamaulipas across the border from Brownsville, Texas. Osiel Cárdenas-Guillén took control of the Gulf Cartel after the 1996 capture and extradition of Juan García Ábrego to the United States. The Gulf Cartel under the control of Cárdenas-Guillén was in a violent turf war with rival TCOs for lucrative drug smuggling routes along the Northern Mexican border between Brownsville and Laredo and all roads in between to include the route beginning in Monterrey, Nuevo Leon.

Cárdenas-Guillén saw an opportunity to strengthen his presence amongst rival cartels, so he recruited former members of the Mexican Special Forces; his goal was protection from rival cartels and Mexican Military. Cárdenas-Guillén sought help from Ruben Salinas, alias el Chato, a retired Mexican Army Lieutenant who lured approximately 30 army deserters from the Mexican Army’s Special Forces, the elite Grupo Aeromóvil de Fuerzas Especiales (GAFE). The deserters became body guards, mercenaries, and hit men; they were chosen because of the training they received and were promised higher salaries by the cartel compared to what the Mexican Government would pay them. The GAFE members received training in urban warfare at the School of the Americas in Ft. Bragg, North Carolina from Israeli and U.S. Special Forces; training included rapid deployment, surveillance, counter-surveillance, ambushes, marksmanship, and intimidation (Grayson and Logan, 2012).

Organization

Why not other letters of the alphabet such as “A”, “B”, or “C”? The letter “Z” or “Zeta” in Spanish was the radio code given to members of the Federal Police in charge of a city (Los Zetas, n.d.) The Zetas TCO first commander, while under the Gulf Cartel, was Arturo Guzmán Decena, whose radio call sign was “Z1.” After Guzmán Decena (Z1) was killed in November of 2002 in Matamoros, Tamaulipas by members of the Mexican Military, Heriberto Lazcano (Z3) took over the paramilitary group; Lazcano remained in control of the group through its split from the Gulf Cartel in February 2010 and to become its own TCO until his death in October of 2012 (“El origen,” 2011). Next in line for control of the Zeta TCO was Miguel Angel Treviño Morales (Z40). Lazcano and Treviño Morales worked together; however, Treviño Morales used violent acts and tactics during his leadership.

Heriberto Lazcano was killed on October 9, 2012 in a firefight with Mexican Marines prompting Miguel Angel Treviño Morales to take control of the Zeta TCO. Miguel Angel Treviño Morales was captured on July 14, 2013 along with two bodyguards on a dirt road in the Mexican northern states of Nuevo Leon. No shots were fired in the conflict. Before any extradition to the United States to face multiple charges of drug trafficking, murder, extortion, and kidnapping could take place, Treviño Morales must stand trial in Mexico for similar crimes. With the capture of his brother, the less qualified Omar Treviño Morales (Z42) assumed control of the Zeta TCO.

Leadership
Under the leadership of Lazcano the Zetas had the respect for their leader. As control in the TCO seemed to weaken and falter from the immense pressure of rival cartels and the Mexican Government, Lazcano still had the respect of his men under the organization. According to Logan (2012) there was respect for Lazcano as commander because he ensured cohesion among the group. Because of the leadership by Lazcano, his military style, structure, and respect of the group's members, the Zetas cared for each other's families, recovered bodies of fallen comrades, dogged pursuit of arrested plaza bosses by their rank and file structure, and initiated prison breaks. According to Logan (2012) the Zeta TCO exemplified an esprit de corps more recognizable in a military unit than in a criminal organization. The respect for Lazcano of his men carried all the way until his death as his body was stolen from a funeral home and taken to an undisclosed location, a ranch of some type, for his final resting place.

The Zeta TCO under the leadership of Miguel Angel Treviño was an organization without a true leader. Unlike Lazcano who kept a low profile, Miguel Angel Treviño was under intense pressure and was the focal point of an international manhunt because of his violent tendencies and nature. Miguel Angel Treviño Morales favored a technique known as a “guso” or stew in which enemies, victims, or anyone in his way was laced into a 55 gallon drum and burned alive (“Leader of Mexico’s,” 2013).

The leadership of the Zeta TCO under Omar Treviño Morales has been relatively quiet. It is unknown if the organization is keeping a low-profile in order to not attract attention from law enforcement authorities. In speaking with law enforcement and intelligence officials, who wish to remain anonymous, they advised the Zetas are fighting the Gulf Cartel in Northern Tamaulipas region of Mexico. Law enforcement authorities believe the fighting in Northern Tamaulipas is taking place between the Zeta TCO and Gulf Cartel’s new enforcement arm, members of the Grupo de Armas y Tácticas Especiales (GATE). Elements of GATE are special weapons and tactics group (Bunker & Kuhn, 2012). Members of the GATE’s once assisted Federal Police in capturing members of the Zetas throughout Mexico’s Northern cities of Piedras Negaras, Nuevo Laredo, Reynosa, and Matamoros; however, because corruption is ever rampant, GATE are recruited by the Gulf Cartel to take out the Zetas.

Structure

The Zetas TCO while under the Gulf Cartel and in the early years of being its own organization had a structured command with a rank and file similar to the paramilitary structure. The organization, as a true TCO under its first leadership of Lazcano, was held together as a cohesive unit. The Zeta TCO under the leadership of Miguel Angel Treviño Morales did not have the same rank and file structure as it did when lead by Lazcano. Miguel Angel Treviño had no experience in the military or the respect of the organization. According to Logan (2012) the death of Lazcano signified the “cascading moment when the paramilitary group devolved from a cohesive unit into a decentralized, leaderless collective that is harder to define, detect, and dismantle” (para. 1).
Logan (2012) states Treviño’s focus was on drug trafficking, and he retained control over that aspect of the organization until his capture. Unlike Lazcano, Miguel Angel Treviño was not a military man; he was not part of the core group that founded the Zetas as they were a part of the Gulf cartel. Treviño did not receive the same level respect from Zeta members as did Lazcano. He did not have the “rank-and-file” respect that Lazcano had from his men. (Logan, par. 10, 2012)

**Operations**

The Zeta TCO is the largest drug cartel in terms of geographical presences with their area of operations in northern Mexico consisting of the states of Tamaulipas, Nuevo Leon, Coahuila, and Chihuahua, the coastal states of Veracruz, Campeche, and Yucatan, and other Mexican states of Tabasco, Quintana Roo, San Luis Potosí, Oaxaca to name a few. They are also present in Mexico’s southern border within the State of Chiapas. The Zeta TCO also has operations within the United States and countries far away in Europe, more specifically, Italy and in Central America, especially Guatemala.


The map (see Figure 1) shows the separation and location of drug cartels in the US and Mexico and shows the areas in Northern Mexico that the Zeta TCO continue to fight the Gulf Cartel for lucrative drug and human trafficking routes in the Northern Mexican states from the Ciudad Acuña, Coahuila to Matamoros, Tamaulipas. Since June of 2014 the Zeta TCO has been relatively; however, they are battling their former employers, the Gulf Cartel,
in the Northern Mexican area across from the Rio Grande Valley, Texas from Miguel Aleman, Tamaulipas to Matamoros.

The tactics used by the Zeta TCO whether they were part of the Gulf Cartel or their own organization were unheard of prior to the late 1990s and early 2000's. In the 1980s Mexican news media, more specifically the newspapers, would publish images of bullet ridden bodies. Fast forward twenty plus years, and newspapers now publish pictures of beheaded bodies, dismembered corpses, bodies hanging from highway overpasses, and heads on iron spikes. YouTube videos of rival cartels and snitches being tortured and beheaded are created by the Zeta TCOs to instill fear to rivals, innocent people, and law enforcement. The drug violence is not new; however, the Zeta TCOs used the media as a psychological factor to intimidate law enforcement and instill fear in the innocent. These types of scare tactics were not practiced by other TCOs. Prior to the arrival of the Zeta TCOs known cartel and rivals often held negotiations and bribery was a common theme; the Zeta TCOs prefer brutality over bribery.

As a member of the Gulf Cartel and a TCO in its own, the Zetas are a very dangerous group. They are the most powerful and violent criminal syndicate in Mexico and are considered by the U.S. Government to be the most technologically advanced, sophisticated, and dangerous drug organization to operate in Mexico (Ware, 2009). TCO and drug cartel activity in the 1980s, the business was in the drug trade. Rivals killed rivals, business was business, and innocent people to include women and children were left alone. The dangerous TCO group that is the Zetas have been linked to violent attacks, murders, and kidnapping. The 2008 Morelia grenade attack in which 8 people were killed and over 100 injured. The two massacres in San Fernando, Tamaulipas that occurred within a year of each other with the first occurring in 2010 where 72 migrants, mostly Central Americans, were killed and in 2011 where 193 people were killed and the other massacre that happened in 2011 in which 27 farmers were killed. The Zetas TCO was also responsible for the 2011 Monterrey Casino attack, the 2010 Puebla oil pipeline explosion, and the 2011 Massacre in Allende, Coahuila, located approximately 240 miles southeast of Eagle Pass, Texas to which 300 to 500 civilians were killed and houses burned to the ground.

The Zeta TCO was also suspected of the September 30th, 2012 killing of David Hartley on Falcon Lake and the killing of U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) Agent Jaime Zapata in February of 2011. In October of 2009 José Eduardo Humberto Moreira, the son of the former Governor to the State of Coahuila, Mexico, Humberto Moreira, was gunned down in Ciudad Acuña, Coahuila, Mexico across the border from Del Rio, Texas (“MexicoPerspective,” 2012). Media reported the reason was because of police having killed a nephew of Zetas leader Miguel Angel Treviño Morales.

Several prison escapes are also attributed to the Zeta TCOs. In January and February of 2012 there were two separate incidents to which 31 and 44 Gulf Cartel members were killed by Zeta TCOs. In September 2012 the Zetas were responsible for a prison break at the Centro de Readaptación Social (CERESO), Mexican correction facility, in Piedras Negras, Coahuila, Mexico across the Rio Grande River from Eagle Pass, Texas. The Eagle Pass Port of Entry manned by U.S. Customs and Border Protection’s (CBP) Office of
Field Operations (OFO) was placed on high alert and an emergency bi-national meeting was held between U.S. and Mexican law enforcement. “We were placed on high-alert at the port of entry. Our Tactical Enforcement Officers (TEOs) were activated as a reactive approach because of the prison break” (P. Macias, personal communication, July 6, 2014).

According to OFO Acting Port Director for Tactical Operations at the Eagle Pass Port of Entry, Robert Cagle (personal communication, August 13, 2014), the Zeta TCOs are recruiting gang such as the Mexican Mafia to support their operations in the United States. They expanded their operations from Mexico into the United States. The cartel recruitment has not only been highly trained, specialized military groups; the Zetas are seeking recruitment of prisons and street gangs. According to Seper (2013), “the Zetas are recruiting U.S. prison and street gangs, and non-Mexicans, for its drug trafficking and support operations in Mexico and the U.S.” (para. 1). Seper further states Zetas used Texas Mexican Mafia prison gang members to collect debts, traffic drugs, and carry out hits in Laredo, Texas. Zetas even contacted Houston Tango Blast gang members to purchase AK-47 assault rifles and recruiting Los Plojos, a McAllen, Texas based gang, to purchase vehicles through car jackings and auto auctions. Cagle (personal interview) also stated the Zetas process of smuggling narcotics proceeds back into Mexico under the radar of law enforcement was conducted with the legitimate purchase of vehicles. Vehicles would be purchased not for concealing narcotics, but were purchased with narcotics proceeds and then sold in Mexico to receive a profit. The profit was then turned over to the Zetas, and this process was a legitimate way of doing business.

Several enhanced outbound operations conducted at the Eagle Pass, Texas Port of Entry by OFO, the Office of Border Patrol (OBP), and ICE along with State and Local Law Enforcement (STL) such as Texas Department of Public Safety (TXDPS), Eagle Pass Police Department (EGPPD) and Maverick County Sheriff’s Office (MCSO) resulted in the recovery of stolen vehicles that were destined for Zeta TCO operating in Piedras Negras, Coahuila, Mexico. The vehicles were driven by Mexican Mafia gang members out of San Antonio, Texas.

OFO and OBP also conduct daily operations at the port of entries in search of illicit bulk currency and weapons being smuggled through the port of entry from the United States to Mexico. In their daily operations OFO and OBP encounter suspected Texas gang members who are associated with the Zeta TCO.

**The Case of Yasiel Puig and Leonys Martin**

The Zeta TCO was also responsible for the captivity and human smuggling of baseball stars Yasiel Puig and Leonys Martin. They do not discriminate between statuses as money is involved. Both baseball stars were smuggled into the Mexico from Cuba with passage into the United States. Each star was held for ransom until it was either paid or they escaped their captors. Other stories are similar as the organization may be a catalyst for other Cuban baseball players needing to escape Cuba (“Yasiel Puig,” 2014). The experience by Puig and Martin were two incidents that brought about awareness of the smuggling of Cuban baseball players to the United States. José Dariel Abreu, another
baseball player, was believed to have disappeared from Cuba; however, there was no official word on his whereabouts during the time he was gone. Abreu, like Martin and Puig, refused to discuss about their incidents.

**Unreleased Movies and Cheap Software**

The movie *The Expendables 3* debuted in theaters on August 15, 2014, and it is not expected to be released on DVD or Blue Ray until sometime in January of 2015. A bootleg or pirated copy of the recently released movie can probably be found in a market or shop in Mexico. The price for the pirated copy will sell for approximately 80 to 90 percent off of the original price. Booth (2011) states, “the bootleg units sell for about $1, versus the $12 charged for legal disks” (para. 6).

How are pirated or counterfeit DVDs created? According to White (2011) it is a multi-step process that involves illicit recordings collected from multiple countries with audio and video pieced together to produce DVDs in various languages. White further indicates that piracy rings typically either steal a digital copy of a film or secretly bring a camcorder into a theater in a country with lax enforcement. According to Booth (2011) pre-dawn raids in April of 2011 in the Mexico City warehouse district netted “12 tons of movie disks and more than 1,000 DVD burners, enough machinery to produce a staggering 500,000 counterfeit copies of ‘Kung Fu Panda 2’ a day, if the factories were running at capacity” (para. 1).

The Zeta TCOs are not only known for their drug trafficking business; they are in the business of pirated software and movies as well. According to White (2011) Ayala Romero, known as Don Gabi, was running the Zeta TCOs DVD and piracy business from his prison cell up until his murder in prison. Don Gabi’s role earned him the nickname, the Czar of Piracy. The Zeta TCO operations in the pirated film business generated “$1.8 million a month, according to the Motion Picture Association of America” (White, 2011, para. 1).

Government agencies in the United States such as CBP’s OFO and Department of Homeland Security’s ICE are tasked with ensuring pirated movies and software never make entry into the country from Mexico. OFO examines all cargo and merchandise entering a port of entry and they maintain a database of registered trademarks. OFO and ICE’s punishment for piracy can be anywhere from a fine to imprisonment for a violation of intellectual property rights.

**Theft of Oil and Petroleum**

The theft of oil is a threat to the economy of Mexico and the United States, and it is an attractive business because the theft is low risk due Mexico’s lack of resources to secure the thousands of miles of oil pipeline. The Zeta TCO is one of two TCOs while the other is the Sinaloa Cartel that are actively involved with the theft of oil from Mexico’s oil company Pemex. The large bureaucracy in Pemex also generates a large number of targets for corruption, an action the Zeta TCO thrives on.
Oil theft robberies according to Corcoran (2012) during the Calderon administration changed from small scale to a wide scale with the involvement of the Zeta TCO. Pemex discovered 5,000 illegal siphons in 2006 with an estimate of roughly $475 million in losses to the company. Pemex stated the majority of oil thefts occurred in the three Mexican states of Veracruz, Nuevo Leon, and Tamaulipas. According to Corcoran (2012) the Zetas occupied states have seen a spike in stolen hydrocarbons. The Zeta TCOs would sell the stolen oil to refineries within the United States.

The recent oil and gas boom in South Texas known as the Eagle Ford Shale has also allowed for TCOs such as the Zetas not only to use the legitimate oil and gas business to facilitate and smuggle narcotics and human trafficking but to use the stolen trucks to legally import oil into the United States. Alexander (2014) stated the rapid development of the Eagle Ford shale formation in South Texas is leading not just to a huge oil boom, but also to a boost for drug gangs in the area. The profit from illegally obtained oil is used to purchase weapons and ammunition destined back to Mexico.

**Corruption of Public Officials**

The ease of corruption by any TCO, including the Zeta TCO, is a threat to U.S. security and interest. In order for any TCO to operate freely in a country such as Mexico public officials to include law enforcers and lawmakers need to be paid off. According to Godson, Olson, and Shelly (as cited in Liddick, 2004), political-criminal nexus is the fusion of political and criminal power. Organized crime groups have a purpose for their actions (as cited by Liddick, 2004), organized groups and relationships with political officials. For example, organized criminals that move throughout Mexico need to bribe public officials in order to keep their business running. The Zeta TCO was no different as they moved around the country of Mexico as they were untouchable.

Corruption kept cartel operations low key in the 1980s. Because of the 71 year rule of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) minimal drug violence was seen. The Mexican Government had a few arrests to exemplify, they were attempting to curtail the drug problem while at the same time allowing drug cartel operations to continue. The Mexican Government would look the other way in exchange for bribes while drug traffickers went about their business. Agreements were made between the government and cartels. In 2000 the PRI lost power to the National Action Party (PAN) and all agreements between cartels and the previous government, PRI, were off. The PRI had been protecting the Gulf Cartel and Zetas TCO for years.

Tamaulipas was the home state of the Gulf Cartel and one of the main states for the Zeta TCO and was at the forefront of corruption and influence by the PRI. Three former governors of the state were charged with having ties to the Gulf Cartel and Zeta TCO. According to Moreno (2011) Governors Manuel Cavazos Lerma, Tomás Yarrington, and Eugenio Hernández Flores were ordered to remain in the country while they and their families were investigated by the Attorney General of Mexico for their involvement with the cartels. The Zetas TCO, although relatively quiet in 2014, have the means and finances in order to corrupt government and public officials.
U.S. Security Threats

Exploitation of Military Personnel

A concern for U.S. security and interest is the recruitment of current and former U.S. Military servicemen by the Zeta TCO to serve as hit men. Military members receive the most sophisticated training in the world, and they are enticed by the Zetas, just as the original Zetas were once enticed by the Gulf Cartel. Although not the Zeta TCO, members of the Juarez Cartel recruited 22 year old PFC Michael Apodca from Ft. Bliss in El Paso to do a contract killing of a snitch for ICE who lived a few houses from the house of the El Paso Police Chief (Hastings, 2013). Two other military members stationed in Ft. Carson, Colorado were recruited by undercover federal agents posing as members of the Zeta TCO to conduct a contract killing on a rival gang member, who was also an undercover agent. Some of the military members stated they would steal weapons from Ft. Carson for the hit while another stated he wanted to get paid $50,000 and five kilograms of cocaine (Hastings, 2013).

Terrorism-Narcotics-DTO Nexus

Another reason the Zetas TCO is a threat to U.S. security and interests is the threat of terrorism. As mentioned previously in this research with corruption, terrorism is a factor that is of grave concern for the United States since the attacks of 9/11. Al-Qaeda and the Taliban are two common terrorist groups that are on the radar of U.S. security and intelligence groups; they both are in the drug trafficking business as drug trafficking is the primary source of finances for their terrorist activities. Both groups and their link to TCO are a threat to the United States. For example, TCOs can facilitate terrorist groups into a country to carry out a terrorist act. They provide needed resources such as forged documents, weapons, or clandestine travel assistance where terrorist cannot procure the resources on their own (Rollins and Wyler, 2010). These two organizations, Al-Qaeda and the Taliban, would enjoy nothing more than to wreak havoc on the United States.

According to Ulstein (2010) drug trafficking and international terrorism has five features in common. They both need a wide geographic area where products such people, goods and money are shipped through a network that facilitates command, control and communications. The second commonality between drug traffickers and international terrorists is that both need to handle large amounts of money by money laundering and transferring across countries and continents. A third common feature is their brutality. In Mexico’s cartel war, it is common to find beheaded victims; Al-Qaeda style (Ulstein, 2010). This brutality is exemplified within the Zeta TCO as shown in the picture (Figure 2). The image is of a group of young adults brutally executed by the Zeta TCO.
Fourth, the drug trafficking groups and international terrorist groups, both thrive in lawless areas. The last commonality is that both groups tend to establish private armies with a need for training, camps and military hardware.

Drug trafficking organizations work closely with international terrorist groups. According to Ulstein (2010) as stated by Michael Braun a retired assistant administrator and chief of operations at the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) Hezbollah works together with Mexican drug cartels as they both rely on "the same criminal weapons smugglers, document traffickers and transportation experts as the drug cartels" in Mexico and South-America (para. 22, 2010).

In addition to the threat of assisting terrorist groups, the Zeta TCO utilizes narco-terrorism. Narco-terrorism is defined as terrorism defined by profits from illegal drug trafficking. The Zeta TCO has been known to cross international boundaries to conduct their illicit operations. There have also been reports of armed incursions on Texas ranches along the Rio Grande River, which many believe to be members of the Zeta TCO. Narco-terrorism is real and combating that threat is a high priority for Federal Agencies such as OBP and OFO that secure the border of the United States with Mexico.

**Funding**

The corruption and influence of the Zetas TCO of government officials is of great concern to the U.S. Security and interests. Although the country of Mexico is a southern ally to the United States, the United States priority is the safety of its people. Money buys protection for the cartels. The Zeta TCO uses its finances towards corruption to protect its interests. Intelligence experts state the Zeta TCO has been quiet because of the leadership of Omar Treviño Morales. Did the organization run out of finances? If the Zeta TCO is running out of finances, a wealthy terrorist group could pay the group to enter into the United States or have weapons of mass effect (WME) smuggled into the United States. The Zeta TCO now has funding for their own operations at the expense of the United States security interest, uses their funding from the terrorist group to pay off government officials.
to look the other way, as they sneak the terrorist group and/or WMEs into the United States to create an event or disaster greater than the 9/11. The idea sounds farfetched; however, that is what security and intelligence experts said about using commercial airliners as weapons.

The Zeta TCO is a greater threat to the U.S. security and interests because of their violent tactics, ability to influence public officials through corruption which could lead to terrorism the threat of terrorism, narco-terrorism, and the recruitment of current and former members of the U.S. Military Service. How does the United States combat such a threat? They do so by continued collaboration and partnerships as they are currently doing with the Merida Initiative.

**Guatemala**

![Drug cartels in Mexico](https://oneway2day.wordpress.com/tag/narco-terrorism/)

*Figure 3. Drug Cartels in Mexico. From "NeoConservative Christian Right," (n.d.).* https://oneway2day.wordpress.com/tag/narco-terrorism/

Figure 3, illustrates the Zeta TCO's area of operations in Mexico with their proximity at or near the Guatemalan border. An area of concern for U.S. law enforcement and intelligence agencies is their proximity to the Central American country of Guatemala. According Casey (2011) the Zeta TCO has made their presence known in Guatemala. Narco-mantas or drug banners were hung in the town of Poptún indicating anyone, including law enforcement, which opposed them would be killed. The banners Poptún were similar to those hung in public squares in Mexico to claim territory and threaten rivals.

Drug banners were also hung in El Petén, Guatemala during a massacre at a ranch known as Los Cocos ranch. Guatemalan soldiers entered a cattle ranch and found twenty-seven bodies throughout the property with heads thrown over the fence. The drug banner was found a wall with a message written in blood and signed "Z200," a moniker authorities
say belongs to a local wing of Mexico’s Los Zetas (Casey, 2011). The incident at the cattle ranch was a result of a kidnapping and its failed payment of a ransom demand. The Zetas kidnapped three family members of the ranch’s owner Otto Salguero and demanded a ransom of about $50,000 from Mr. Salguero. Salguero fled without paying and caused the Zetas to kill relatives and employees of Mr. Salguero. Guatemalan soldiers stated the assailants must have headed for the Mexican border. Nearby security forces found what was believed to be a Zetas encampment with a cache of AK-47 assault rifles and police uniforms, which were possibly used as disguises (Casey, 2011). Figure 4, illustrates one of the bodies found decapitated on a northern Guatemalan farm.


The presence of the Zeta TCO in Guatemala is also concern of U.S. law enforcement and intelligence resources due to the recent flow of Other than Mexicans (OTMs) from Central American countries such as Honduras and El Salvador into the United States. The Zeta TCO facilitates the travel of OTMs from Central America through Guatemala because of the vast lawless area. According to Casey (2011) the area of El Petén, an area about the size of Maryland that covers a third of Guatemala, is an ideal place for illicit work and is referred to as the "Wild West".

The Rio Grande Valley area of Texas has experienced an increase in OTM apprehensions that drained the resources of OBP and OFO that President Barack Obama has called for a state of emergency and has requested the assistance of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). FEMA and U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS) are coordinating a government-wide response to address the needs of an influx of unaccompanied children crossing into the United States creating a humanitarian situation along the southwest U.S. border. FEMA is identified as the lead coordinating agency and is leveraging the capabilities of the federal government to support CBP, ICE and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) as they have lead roles in addressing the immediate needs of unaccompanied children (“Homeland Security,” n.d.).

Sources of information (SOI) have reported to law enforcement and intelligence agencies that Zeta TCOs facilitated crossings of OTMs through Guatemala for destinations to Tamaulipas or Coahuila for entry into the United States either at or between the ports of
entries. According Cagle (personal communication, August 13, 2014), Honduran OTMs are smuggled into Coahuila by the Zeta TCOS while El Salvadoran OTMs are smuggled into Tamaulipas for entry into the United States near the Rio Grande Valley. The Zeta TCOS facilitate the travel of OTMs and coach them to state they are in fear of returning to their home country because of the violence that exists whether or not there is violence present. The OTMs arrive and turn themselves in to immigration authorities.

Recommendations for Controlling the DTO Incursion and Operations

Continued collaboration and partnerships to combat TCOS such as the Zetas are needed between all levels of law enforcement to include the level of STL. STL would become a force multiplier with its Federal partners in combating any threat from a TCOS such as the Zetas. Securing our borders is part of a big picture, part of a strategic plan identified by DHS. Goal 2.3 of the 2012-2016 DHS Strategic Plan is to, “Disrupt and dismantle transnational organizations that engage in smuggling and trafficking across the U.S border.”

DHS supplements STL by funding their operations through grants as part of the Homeland Security Grant Program (HSGP). Grants such as Operation Stone Garden (OPSG) provide funds for resources such as equipment and manpower in order to secure the border with Mexico. Allocations of funds, received from the Homeland Security Appropriations Act, 2010 (Public Law 110-83), are based on a risk-based prioritization by CBP’s sector-specific border risk methodology, which include "threat, vulnerability, miles of border and other border-specific law enforcement intelligence" (“FY 2013 Homeland Security Grant Program,” 2013).

Conclusion

In addition to money laundering, the acquisition, of weapons, facilitation and smuggling of narcotics, human trafficking, kidnapping, extortion, and bulk cash smuggling, the Zeta TCO also partake in the theft of oil and petroleum products and profit in pirated movies and software. The Zetas TCO is a dangerous group whose violent tactics since its creation are a threat to the U.S. security and interest. Factors such as the corruption of public officials through bribery could assistance terrorist groups and/or facilitate acts of terrorism are also a threat to U.S. security and interests. The Zeta TCO also practices narco-terrorism and recruit of current and former U.S. military service members which are also a threat to the security and interest of the U.S. The southern neighboring country of Guatemala is also an area of concern for the U.S. security and interests because the Zeta TCO uses the country as a staging area for the influx of undocumented Central Americans and because of its vast remote areas with little or no government presence. Continued collaboration and partnerships among all levels of law enforcement are needed to combat the threats from the Zeta TCO. This report exemplified the brief history and leadership of the Zeta TCO among the threats to U.S. security and interest.