

## REVIEW

## Los Zetas Inc: Criminal Corporations, Energy and Civil War in Mexico

By: Guadalupe Cabrera-Correa, University of Texas Press (2017), 379 pp. w/notes, bibliography and index (\$90.00), ISBN: 978-1-4773-1274-2

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This article reviews *Los Zetas Inc: Criminal Corporations, Energy and Civil War in Mexico* by Guadalupe Cabrera-Correa. Her book attempts to address some of the inaccuracies of journalistic descriptions of organized criminal activities. The review challenges some of the author's hypotheses, in particular the characterization of the current context of Mexico as one in the midst of a 'new' civil war.

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Los Zetas Inc, despite having a title that suggests a future movie or television miniseries like Netflix's *Narcos*, is a serious effort somewhere along the spectrum between a doctoral dissertation and an extensive piece of investigative journalism. After finishing this book, most readers will not likely remember the names of any of the kingpins nor their material excesses, but rather the complex dynamics revolving around the increasingly militarized war on drugs in Mexico. Guadalupe Cabrera-Correa, an associate professor at George Mason University and previously with the University of Texas-Rio Grande, provides a detailed and academically-grounded account of the evolution of the operations of the Mexican criminal organization known as the

Zetas. During the 1990s, the Zetas emerged as one of the most violent criminal groups in Mexico known for extreme forms of violence, including decapitating their victims and leaving them for the public to see. Following the weakening of the Medellin and Cali cartels in Colombia in the mid-1990s, significant portions of the global narcotics supply chain were transferred from Colombia to Mexico.

The Zetas were initially hired as the enforcers of the Gulf of Mexico Cartel, drawn in large part from ex-members of Mexico's and Guatemala's military special forces. They eventually made the decision to go out on their own, permanently changing Mexico's security landscape, as well as extending their reach to the area known as the Northern Triangle of Central America (El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras). The book documents how for the Zetas the use of extreme

violence was not a means to an end, but rather a permanent branding strategy to demonstrate market dominance whether required for immediate purposes or not. Due to the weakness of and corruption of police institutions at the federal, state and municipal levels, the Mexican army and navy were called into fill the gap demonstrating gains in some areas of operations and human rights concerns in others.<sup>1</sup>

Cabrera-Correa sets out to debunk some of the conventional wisdom and characterizations of the Zetas and other criminal organizations operating in Mexico. This experience is personal for her as some of her family members were forced to flee their homes in the State of Michoacán by this group. She employs a mixed methodology including critical secondary literature review, field interviews and social media monitoring. Her main points of argumentation are that a) the Zetas are no longer a drug trafficking organization and behave much more like a transnational corporation; b) there has been a gradual government-complicit process of para-militarization in affected parts of Mexico to respond to the threat of the Zetas and other similar groups; and c) Mexico finds itself in the middle of a new kind of civil war sometimes referred to as new wars or hybrid wars.

The author provides a range of evidence that demonstrates that illicit drug trafficking is only one of a number of illicit activities undertaken by the Zetas and is yielding an increasingly smaller portion of its profits as the group has moved into the sales of stolen and diverted hydrocarbons and minerals in the context of the Mexican government's process of privatizing components of the national oil company, Pemex. When Cabrera-Correa states that the Zetas act more like a transnational corporation, she is alluding to the way that the group has organized itself into a network of businesses without a large footprint of centralized control and how this protects the other business units when a single unit comes into conflict with the law or is attacked by a rival. While the author is clear that she is not claiming a causal relationship, she believes that there is a relationship between the privatization of Pemex, the growth of multinational

energy companies and private security contractors presence in zones of Mexico where the Zetas have traditionally exerted control.

Another section of Zetas Inc focuses on the emergence of paramilitary organizations and self-defense committees as a response by rural and agricultural interests to the extortion and violence practiced by the Zetas. In this section, Cabrera-Correa charts the growth and evolving alliances of these groups with security forces and local governments and uses a case study comparison method drawing on the evolution of the paramilitary phenomenon during the Colombian armed conflict. As in the case of Colombia, often these self-defense columns finance themselves through illicit activities and, in some cases, become more nefarious than the organizations they were set up to confront in the first place. Where the comparisons to Colombia have their limits, is in the lack of a left-wing insurgency to combat and the difficulty of fully determining state complicity in Mexico's highly decentralized form of government and security structures in contrast to the unitary government that exists in Colombia.

Perhaps the most controversial point that Cabrera-Correa tries to make in the book is that Mexico now finds itself in a new kind of civil war, including the cyber domain. In rhetorical terms, this makes sense. Parts of Mexico have experienced intense and gruesome levels of armed violence utilizing weapons of war between criminal organizations and the security forces as well as among themselves. Victims are often tracked down via social media. However, it is not clear that the situation in Mexico would meet the definition of war under international law as defined by the International Committee of the Red Cross in terms of the organization of the parties involved (vertical chain of command, recruitment capacity, military planning capability and territorial control) and the intensity of violence (seriousness and frequency of armed confrontations, troops and equipment, governmental measures, and humanitarian consequences).<sup>2</sup> To be clear, several of these factors are indeed present, but they do not likely cross the threshold

sufficiently to be categorized as a non-international armed conflict under international law.

The readers of this book can draw their own conclusions regarding these three points, in addition to others made within. While highly critical of the Mexican government's militarized approach to combating the Zetas, Cabrera-Correa does not put forth an alternative vision of policy for addressing violent actors operating within Mexico. Throughout much of the Western Hemisphere, heated debate is taking place as to the evolving role of the armed forces in national contexts where traditional law enforcement seems incapable of neutralizing existing threats. Should the police become militarized, should the armed forces be given greater policing powers, or is some intermediate-type force called for? That is a debate for another day, or perhaps another book.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Human Rights Watch, *World Report, 2017: Events of 2016*, New York, HRW, 425–432.
- <sup>2</sup> Sylvain Vité, 'Typology of conflicts in international humanitarian law: legal concepts and actual situations', *International Review of the Red Cross*, Vol. 91: 873, March 2009.

## Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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