A Hidden War in Plain Sight: How the Mexican Cartels Have Brutalized the Western Hemisphere into Numbness

by

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Abstract

The Mexican Cartel War (2006-2016) is shifting (see appendices D-K for a visual representation of territory and country map for reference). Drastic tactical changes, escalating brutality, and aggression against American law enforcement at border locations indicate the cartel violence in Mexico will not stop anytime soon. Due to increased violence and depravity among members, improved interdiction, viable domestic competition, and hemorrhaging operational costs, the cartels and their leaders seem desperate for more money and territory (Appropriations Hearing, 2009; Call to Action, 2011; Carrillo, 2013; Line in the Sand, 2009). The cartels directly own almost the entire nation of Mexico. The war will either eventually fade as citizens fight back and the government applies their forces genuinely to eradicate the violent cartels, or the cartels will continue until their activities merge and they resemble the FARC in Colombia or the Taliban in Afghanistan (Farah, 2012).

Keywords: cartel, drug wars, Sinaloa, El Chapo, Félix Gallardo
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<tr>
<td>Ajuste de cuentas (m)</td>
<td>Settling a score. Getting even. Revenge. alt. ajusticimiento</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ATF</td>
<td>Agency of Department of Justice—the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beltrán Leyvas</td>
<td>Brothers and childhood friends of Joaquín Guzmán. Broke with him after the arrest of El Mochomo Beltrán Leyva and engaged in a bloody dispute for territory. Relocated to Nuevo Leon in the aftermath.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cartel</td>
<td>Eight organizations in Mexico are the Golfo, Sinaloa, Tijuana, Juarez, Beltrán-Leyva, Amezcua-Contreras, Los Zetas, Diaz-Parada, &amp; La Familia Michoacana. Cartels regularly split, shift ownership, and divide.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cartel del Poniente</td>
<td>A place of the Sinaloa cartel usually found in Durango and Gomez Palacios</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C.D.G.</td>
<td>Gulf Drug Cartel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CECJUDE</td>
<td>Centro de Ejecución de las Consecuencias Jurídicas del Delito.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapos or Chaparrines</td>
<td>The troops of Joaquín Guzmán Loera's Sinaloa Cartel. Derived from Guzmán's nickname of &quot;El Chapo.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charoliar</td>
<td>Pretending to belong to a cartel and having a lot of inside knowledge of cartel activities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CNDH</td>
<td>Comisión Nacional de los Derechos Humanos</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coddehum</td>
<td>La Comisión de Defensa de los Derechos Humanos (Chihuahua).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cortar cartuchos</td>
<td>Armatillar. Ready to fire. To cock a weapon.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cuerno de chivo</td>
<td>AK-47, the preferred weapon of drug cartels.</td>
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<tr>
<td>DTO</td>
<td>Drug trafficking organization.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>El Señor de los Cielos</td>
<td>Amado Carrillo Fuentes, the Lord of the Skies who helped consolidate the Juárez cartel. He died in 1997 undergoing plastic surgery in Mexico City (Polanco).</td>
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<td>Term</td>
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<tr>
<td>Encajuelados</td>
<td>Victims found in the trunks of cars.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Encintados</td>
<td>Victims found bound and blindfolded with tape.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Encobijado</td>
<td>A common way that sicarios dispose of bodies — wrapped in a blanket, rug, or tarpaulin and taped.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Familia (la)</td>
<td>'DeMichoacan.’ DTO that specializes in synthetic drugs (crystal) and with a religious code. Extremely violent and unpredictable.</td>
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<tr>
<td>FFL</td>
<td>US legal term for federal firearms licensees. Approximately 6700 operate in American Southwest.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Foco</td>
<td>Crystal meth.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fuero (el)</td>
<td>(jurisdicción) jurisdiction (privilegio, derecho) privilege</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gente nueva (la)</td>
<td>Chapo Guzmán sicarios (Chihuahua).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guachicol</td>
<td>Oil product stolen from PEMEX and then sold back to business under duress. A practice common in Tamaulipas.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Halcon (los)</td>
<td>There are two meanings here. In the border area, &quot;halcones&quot; are lookouts and street level informants (falcons) who warn the drug cartels about intrusions from other DTO's, police, or army manoeuvres. Halcones are also an elite squad of commandos that have a notorious reputation for violation of civil rights and abuse.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hormiga (el correo de.)</td>
<td>An ant run. The big result of lots of little additions and purchases.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ICESI</td>
<td>Instituto ciudadano de estudios sobre la inseguridad</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jefe de Jefes</td>
<td>Capo de Capos. The name applied to the most prominent drug chief in Mexico. Most frequently is associated with Miguel Ángel Félix Gallardo. Popular corrido of Los Tigres del Norte, although Miguel Félix Gallardo denies that the song is about him.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>La Última Letra</td>
<td>Los Zetas. The last letter, Z.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Levantón (m)</td>
<td>Abduction. A term used in northwest Mexico to describe forced seizure of a person. Most of the time, the &quot;levantado&quot; is never seen alive again. Secuestro is the term used more often to</td>
</tr>
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describe kidnapping. Los desaparacidos is another term to describe "the disappeared."

Linces (los) A unit of sicarios employed by "El Viceroy" Vicente Carrilo-Fuentes and the Juárez cartel. May have evolved from "La Linea." This group is apparently composed of military deserters (like the Zetas) who are well trained; use military ordnance, uniforms, and vehicles. The Mexican military argues that this group is responsible for most human right violations in Chihuahua.

linea (la) sicarios in the employ of Juarez DTO.

Matapolicia (f) Bullets of a heavy caliber that can penetrate vests. Police killers ordnance used when attacking police or members of the military.

Matazetas (los) A name used by a group that has executed members of Los Zetas. It is most likely that the matazetas are members of a rival cartel, but it is possible that they are actually an independent group.

Maña A local name for cartels in Tamaulipas most often used to refer to Los Zetas or other sicarios working for Gulf cartel.

Mota (f) Marijuana

Narco General term for drug trafficker

Narcocorrido A version of a corrido that deals with a drug theme. Some narcocorridos are commissioned by the drug dealers to "sing their praises," but others share much in common with morality plays because they sing about the negative consequences of drug dealing.

Narcofosa Narco cemetery; body disposal place, usually clandestine and used for a period. Have been found in at least eight Mexican states.

Narcomanta/narcomensaje(f) A banner or a poster placed in a prominent location with a message. Most frequently, the messages seem to originate with the drug organizations, but the message may also be aimed at the drug trafficking organizations.

Narco tienditas or picaderos Businesses where they traffic drugs.

Operation Coronado The code term for the DEA/FBI/ICE coordinated arrest of La Familia de Michoacana members on Oct. 24, 2009.
Pelones (los)  "The bald ones". Sicarios that were initially assembled by the Beltrán Leyva brothers for the Sinaloa Federation.

Perico (m) Cocaine. A parrot. Nickname based on the idea that it "goes up the nose."

Pez gordo (m.) Big fish, big boss.

PGR La Procuraduria General de la Republica. The institutional agency of the Mexican Attorney General.

Pista (f) The ‘game.’ Literally, 'the track' as in racing. Refers to the business at hand.

Plaza (f) Territory, turf. Can also refer to the product being moved or in dispute.

Polizetas Policemen at the service of the narco. It originated from Nuevo Leon, Tamaulipas region where the Zetas were deeply embedded with the police.

Pozolero A person within the cartel who has a knowledge of chemistry and disposes of bodies.

PROCAMPO A federal program to provide financial support for farmers and ejiditarios. Recent revelations indicate that it has been a source of income for agribusiness and PRI party members. Little of the original program (to provide irrigation etc.) has benefitted the poorest farmers.

Project Gunrunner US DOJ and ATF plan to disrupt illegal flow of guns from the US into Mexico.

Rematar Literally "to re-kill". Rematar is used when a means of execution is especially brutal, and also used to mean "slaughter," "finish off."

Sicario (m) The word used to describe an "assassin" or hitman for the cartels. The word has roots back to Roman times. Sicarios are sometimes young and "throw-away" bodies recruited by the cartels, but can also be well-trained military deserters or police (e.g. Los Zetas).

Sistema SNSP Sistema Nacional de Seguridad Pública.

SSP Secretaria de Seguridad Publica.
<table>
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<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Definition</th>
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<tr>
<td>Straw purchasers</td>
<td>Surrogate purchasers of guns—someone who is licensed to purchase a gun but does so on behalf of someone who is not. Cartel sicarios have a system of straw purchasers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tiendita</td>
<td>The exact location where drugs are sold. Literal translation: little store.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UIFIA</td>
<td>Unidad de Inspección Fiscal y Aduanera.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WATCHIVATO</td>
<td>Mexican artist famous for narco images—especially iconic images of Jesus Malverde. Artist on BBC site Narco Mexico.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zetas, (los)</td>
<td>Now la Compañía. Paramilitary force formed by Gulf Cartel and now independent. Deserters from Mexican army GAFE unit; highly trained anti-terrorist unit.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: The letters f or m after a word indicates the word is either feminine (f) or masculine (m) in the Spanish language.
Chapter 1: Introduction:

When the Mexican military joined the drug war in 2006, the game permanently changed for the worse. Mexico’s President Calderón’s intervention would have been welcome had his forces applied their eagerness to rid the nation of cartels evenly and justly. Unfortunately, friendly treatment of the Pacific based Sinaloa cartel gave the impression that the dominant western organization was connected to Mexico City (Martin, 2013). Three years later in December 2009 the Beltrán Leyva Organization, a heavyweight rival drug cartel, suffered a devastating blow when the head of their organization was assassinated by the Mexican military—at what was immediately deemed the request of a Sinaloa member. Almost immediately afterward Edgar Loera, the son of Joaquín Guzmán Loera, the head of the Sinaloa cartel, was assassinated by Beltrán Leyva hitmen. The shot marked the crescendo of a retaliatory narco-terrorist war that devastated Mexico. Despite the proximity to the battlefield, however, the totality of the bloodshed has escaped many American headlines, which resulted in a vacuous environment quite suitable for violence.

The progression of violence in Mexico has escalated to levels that seem to have numbed the native population; the violence has also, unfortunately, spilled over into the United States (Randol, 2010; Rush, 2012; Southern Border Violence, 2009). The delivery of product at a reasonable cost, which was once the goal, matured to a significantly deadlier and costlier endeavor for both the trafficking and intercepting parties (Southern Border Violence, 2009). Carrying methodologies have always been a fluid study in evasion, but the employment of assassins to ensure delivery marks a shift in the game, particularly for American law enforcement who encounter the mules: what was once a catch-me-if-you-can game morphed into a catch-me-and-I’ll-kill-you task (Call to Action, 2011). Throughout the cartel wars of the last
decade, routine murders of traitors, underachievers, snitches, and others produced a body count more than ten times the combined casualties in the Afghanistan and Iraq wars (icasualties.org, 2016; Rush, 2012; Sullivan & Beittel, 2013). In a frightening deviation, law enforcement officers, particularly in the Border States, are increasingly targeted instead of avoided (Call to Action, 2011; Line in the Sand, 2009).

Unfortunately, the violence will continue unchecked without a wholesale purge of local law enforcement, federales, and the Mexican army. Municipal and correctional officers, who make minuscule salaries, depend on bribes to supplement their incomes. The federales and the Army have disproportionately performed their duties and terrorized victims, a sign of their involvement in the cartels. In the past, mayors ran drug municipalities, to coin a term. Governors replaced mayors and entire states now belong to one cartel or another as opposed to the modest county controls of the past. Unlike the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarios de Colombia, or FARC, the cartels do not wish to take over the government; until recently, they enjoyed a cozy symbiotic relationship with Mexico City (Farah, 2012; Gibbler 2011; Grillo 2011; Martin, 2013). It is even rumored former presidents favored one group or another while in office, which is unsurprising given the level of documented cartel influence (Keefe, 2012; Martin, 2013). Thus, the agencies that should control the cartels are themselves in the cartels’ thrall and unable to fulfill their most basic law enforcement oversight (Dudley, 2011). The pseudo-immune cartels in turn have outgrown their territory and have resorted to cannibalizing former allies and diversifying their operations until they can truly expand beyond the Mexican borders. For now, the violent drug organizations, their friends, foes, and allies are trapped – along with the innocent and ignorant – in their own barbarous nightmare. The Backstory
The Mexican drug cartels as we know them now have only been in existence for a few decades. Unlike the mafia, which is a source of regular comparison, modern drug cartels originated in the late 20th century with one particularly influential, capable, ambitious, and tenacious individual: Miguel *El Padrino* (literally translated to the Godfather) Ángel Félix Gallardo. His entrepreneurship, combined with a ring of loyal associates and convenient access helped him foster a narcotics objective that initially paled in comparison to the shiploads of drugs arriving daily from South America (Longmire, 2011). At the time, Colombia was the cocaine capital of the globe (Kenney, 2007; Longmire, 2011). Thanks in part to the severe damage inflicted upon the Colombian cartels and Gallardo’s work ethic; however, his exploits ensnared high-market clients all over the United States, thereby effectively giving Colombia a run for its money (Kenney, 2007). Good business practices paid off, and Gallardo patiently engineered an empire that exploded in fortune. He carefully mapped out where the cartels were to operate; however, the mighty conquests Gallardo managed and the delicate Federation that resulted fractured after his arrest (Grillo, 2011). After his arrest in 1989, Gallardo handed the baton to Joaquín Guzmán Loera, aka, El Chapo. Guzmán supervised the federation with a keen eye to business practices; however, the bonds forged under the common goal of wealth suffered from the increasing weight of greed. The Federation crumbled entirely in December 2009 when Guzmán informed the Mexican Marines and Navy where to find Arturo Beltrán Leyva. Leyva’s murder prompted immediate retribution by his surviving brothers against Guzman’s son.

**A Declaration of War: Leyva’s Death**

Trust is understandably difficult to establish in an institution that routinely executes its own members. Thus, when Arturo Beltrán Leyva died, already festering tensions shattered tenuous relationships. Battlefield enemies and allies splintered into small but immensely
powerful groups run by men who found themselves either freed of a master or unimpeded by a competitor. In preparation for battle, the cartels set to rallying enforcements wherever it was possible. In Mexico, the numbers of low-paid police officers and officials moonlighting as subcontracted traffickers climbed (Grillo, 2011; Helman, 2013).

A power vacuum emerged after Gallardo's removal from an activity. Government officials in Mexico, particularly those in civic and law enforcement careers, began to side with one group or another. A chosen few cartels grew even fatter with the sustenance of Mexico City behind them (Call to Action, 2011; Langton 2011; Longmire, 2011). Incarceration was a complete farce (as demonstrated by El Chapo’s multiple escapes). The drug empires owned entire police departments. Other police stations emptied forever. Mayors bowed down to the drug bosses in their territory (Beith, 2010). The drug trade directly funded municipalities and in many cases, the citizens were quietly grateful for it (Gibler, 2011). By 2006, the favored drug trafficking organization was the vast and extraordinarily violent Sinaloa Cartel (Keefe, 2012; Longmire, 2011).

The Sinaloa organization vied savagely for territory and choice trafficking routes with cartels based along prime corridors. The infamous Zetas annexed their slaughterous talents to the Sinaloa’s chief adversary, the Gulf Cartel (CDG) (Farah, 2012). The Juarez Cartel (CDJ), armed with the gangs La Linea and Las Aztecas and the Beltrán Leyva Organization (BLO), or South Pacific Cartel, rounded out the original contenders. Among all the other armed groups, the Zetas embodied the fiercest and most tactically advanced enemies to the Sinaloa Cartel. Rogue special-forces soldiers who defected from the Mexican Army, the Zetas were not the crack-shot farmers who guarded their puny stands with pistols (Weak Bilateral Law Enforcement, 2006). The Zetas expertly tracked, enforced, and delivered brutal punishments that quickly elevated the
violence amongst the already murderous narco-traffickers (Grillo, 2011). The prevailing bravado of the drug bosses acknowledged the thrown gauntlet and answered the call with historically brutal levels of bloodshed.

In relatively short order and after the arrest or death of several reigning cartel bosses, the infamous head of the Sinaloa Cartel, Joaquín Guzmán Loera, also known as El Chapo, took the crown of reigning kingpin. After El Padrino’s arrest, his understudy, Guzmán, stood well placed to inherit his territory. Guzmán launched strategic battles for highly prized narco-routes; even after two arrests and one escape from a maximum-security prison, (escape and arrests noted are from the Cartel War era).

**Territory**

Mexico has struggled for years with its reputation. Rampant corruption and extreme disparity between classes paved the way for many from poor families to make ends meet through the billion-dollar drug trade that flourished, sometimes entirely unchecked, throughout the whole country (Molloy, 2011; Schwan, 2013). Loyalty has historically been more of an issue of survival than fraternity, although the Mexican citizens often wrote ballads or celebrated a favored trafficker for his panache, generosity to the people, or unbridled gutsiness (Grillo, 2011). It is similar to American pop culture’s romanticization of figures like Al Capone and Scarface.

Before the cartels splintered there were fewer factions, but disputed territories were larger. The incorporation of the Zetas, further internal restructuring, and successful interdiction efforts against high-ranking members yielded a greater crop of power-hungry capos eager for their slice of the multi-billion-dollar pie ( Appropriations Hearing, 2009). The Federation of Cartels, which involved several gangs, broke up for all intents and purposes with Sinaloa claiming almost all of the territory formerly allied through fragile treaties.
One cartel or another now owns almost all of Mexico (see appendices for maps of cartel influence). Recent estimates calculate one organization or another control close to 90 percent of the country (Beittel, 2011). Over a thousand American cities and over a hundred nations identified cartel elements within their borders (Beittel, 2011; United States House Committee on Homeland Security, 2012). Their involvement in Central America is particularly troubling: Guatemalans are surging into Mexico similar to the way Mexicans have flooded American borders for years, and in both cases, they bring their criminal intentions with them (Grillo, 2011). Ambitious endeavors to recruit the Guatemalan Special Forces for drug carrying continue, much the way Gulf Cartel selected the Mexican Army Special Forces as their war-machine (Farah, 2012; Grillo, 2011; Weak Bilateral Law Enforcement, 2006). Allegedly, disgruntled Mexican Special Forces became the modern day Zetas; their Guatemalan equivalent, the Kaibiles, enact similar barbarity in Central America (Beittel, 2013; Borderlandbeat.com, 2012; Grillo, 2011).

For now, the most relevant organizations include the convalescing Beltrán Leyva Organization (also known as the South Pacific Cartel), the Zetas, who broke apart from their benefactors, the Gulf Cartel, and of course, the Sinaloa Cartel (Sullivan and Beittel, 2013) (see Appendix A for synopses). The Sinaloa Cartel beat the smaller organizations that formerly claimed rights to El Paso/Ciudad Juarez and San Diego/Tijuana the two most critical routes to the United States (Beittel, 2013; Bowden and Cardona, 2011; Farah, 2012). Sinaloa currently holds sway over almost the entire Mexican border from the Pacific coast to the Chihuahua/Coahuila state line, located across the Rio Grande from Big Bend National Park in Texas. Sinaloa’s monopoly on the U.S. border grants them rights to San Diego/Tijuana, Mexicali, Nogales, Douglas, Arizona/Agua Preta, and El Paso/Ciudad Juarez. Major points of entry for the Zetas and their former business partners, the Gulf Cartel, included two major ports
into Texas: Nuevo Laredo/Laredo, Reynosa/McAllen. Nuevo Laredo makes regular headlines for its scenes of murder near the border crossing. Corpses have dangled from the bridge many times to display the might and audacity of the overtly governing cartel in that region.

Although Sinaloa is the most powerful narcotics operation in the hemisphere, the Zetas’ geographical territory is similar in size to its chief rival’s (Beittel, 2011; Beittel 2013; Dudley, 2011; Martin, 2013). While the two are spreading prolifically, Zetas are diversifying their operations in the face of major financial and leadership setbacks to include a myriad of related business ventures: extortion, kidnapping, and human trafficking (Beittel 2013; Cawley, 2011; Langton, 2011; Martin, 2013; Sullivan and Beittel, 2013). However, contrary to the Zetas and like the old GMC slogan, the Sinaloans elect to do one thing and to do it well. Reports indicate that the incarcerated Guzmán and his successors prefer to micromanage trafficking operations and refrain from engaging in the low-level distribution to disconnect the association between the consumers and themselves, a technique that has successfully shrouded them from intermediaries, assassins, and customers (Sullivan and Beittel, 2013). Arranging the Sinaloan cartel members laterally instead of vertically allows for an easier and faster disconnect between ranking members of the organization, a technique that also worked well for Al Qaida. Additionally, surrogate street gangs distribute the product for their sponsoring cartels in other parts of the Mexico and the United States as independent contractors (Beittel, 2011). Intermediaries carry out much of the street level violence between rival cartels, allowing the DTOs to wage proxy-war (Beittel, 2011).

Zetas number their members according to rank, a sensible, albeit risky and audacious notion, for an organization spawned directly from a branch of the military. However, it is challenging to wrangle quantitative data on membership due to hemorrhaging numbers in spite
of the Zetas’ more simplistic categorization technique. Additionally, the Zetas have also enjoyed a bit of the celebrity treatment in Mexico where their notoriety has polarized many who despise the corrupt federal government, the police, and rival drug cartels against those who detest all of the violence and take up arms a-la vigilantism, even penning the name Mata-Zetas, or kill the Zetas. Unfortunately, it is unlikely the Mata-Zetas will retain any righteousness in their struggle: there have already been reports from multiple narco-blogging sites in Mexico that drug trafficking has seeped into the anti-drug assassin organization. For their targets, the adage "there's no such thing as bad publicity" is very applicable to the Zetas, who seem to relish any attention they gather.

The Beltrán Leyva Organization (BLO), a heavyweight in the cartel world before arrest and murder dismantled its leadership, maintained a smaller but still decent foothold in Western. The removal of half of its governing body left the BLO severely crippled and impotent against the Sinaloan cartel, the federal government’s favored organization (Poppa, 2010). It is widely accepted that the Sinaloa cartel assassinated Héctor Beltrán Leyva for conquest purposes and his death marked the beginning of the Mexican Drug War. The Arrellano-Félix organization, also known as the Tijuana Cartel, similarly fell to Sinaloa. The Juarez Cartel employed many local and state police to combat El Chapo’s Sinaloan forces, but it too could not endure the monumental losses inflicted by the larger and better-funded organization (Bowden, 2011; Martin, 2013). After the Juarez Cartel had succumbed, the Gulf and Sinaloa cartels fought viciously for the territory (BBC News - Mexico drug war). The battle for Juarez was particularly grueling; perhaps the low point in the war up to that date. Sinaloa eventually triumphed, but it too suffered heavy losses. The end of the 2000s brought about a devastating loss of life among not only the cartel members but also their collateral casualties as well.
The sole viable contender in the drug war by 2009 was the Gulf Cartel, partnered with the renegade commandos, the Zetas. Soon after, however, the Zetas walked away from their accord and began running their operations which quickly threatened the enterprise of their former allies. And although the Gulf Cartel still retains a formidable hold on much of the South Texas area, the Zetas have multiplied their holdings and taken control of much of the formerly disputed territory, particularly westward across the Texas frontier and south toward Guatemala and Belize (Call to Action, 2011). Decapitation and mutilation are the hallmarks of violence in recently disputed and conquered territories, a practice likely borrowed from contemporaries in broadcasted barbarity, Iraqi insurgents, who posted their atrocities on the web for universal viewing (Southern Border Violence, 2009). During the crescendo of violence after the Zetas divorced themselves from the Gulf Cartel, Zetas began beheading as a means of demonstrating their superiority and inventing themselves as the fiercest of all the capos. In a technique borrowed from the Iraq war, the Zetas consistently aired their atrocities on YouTube, which originally dumbstruck viewers but eventually left citizens numb to the highly produced violence (Borderlandbeat.com, 2013, June 4; Fugate, 2012). Decapitations begat total dismemberment begat sexual humiliation and so on as cartel members sought to maintain the terror they inspired at the outset of the war. Oddly enough, however, the cartels have teeter-tottered back and forth between claiming and denying responsibility for their actions, almost as if a lower echelon of cartel members decided such methods were a good idea, but their superiors thought otherwise. With all the smaller cartels dismantled or preoccupied, the fight to claim supremacy in Mexico resembled the lead up to a sports championship: teams combined and the victors advanced to the next level. In the case of Mexico, however, losers are murdered or repatriated among their new leadership. Unlike athletic events, the winners amassed new strength with each win: new
territory, more trade routes, more employees, and more money. Thus, as the quarter and semifinals concluded, the competing organizations not only grew more powerful, but more intense in their violence. Perhaps it was only natural for government officials to take sides as if betting in the final rounds of play.

The murder statistics in Mexico defy belief. Casualty numbers soared beyond anything else Mexico experienced in recorded history. Many organized crime syndicates around the globe operate with certain guidelines, whether or not they conform to societal norms, but not so the cartels. The greed for the most valuable assets in Mexico and the need to deflate competitors supersede any inclination to conduct business in a professional manner: everything is personal for them. Much of the violence continues without repercussions while significant numbers of law enforcement officers in Mexico moonlight on one cartel’s payroll or another. Kidnappings happen so frequently they are no longer tabulated. Murder rates in Ciudad Juarez alone trumped correlating statistics for entire nations. When capos are not pulling triggers or sawing off limbs, the cops are. All out gun battles empty entire towns that survive off the “good will” of their plazas’ proprietors. Police name victims of the violence as cartel members, whether or not they are, to placate their masters or silence their mourning survivors (Bowden, 2011). Large groups of murdered citizens turn up often in the media as cartels continue to manipulate the population through fear.

**Violence**

Throughout the jigsaw history of Mexican drug-trafficers and their territories, unconvincing handshakes sealed many agreements. A litany of partnerships and about-faces occurred over time to incite further violence and distrust amongst the drug dealers. That which began as an old-fashioned campaign of retaliation in Mexico very rapidly spiraled into what is
now almost an entirely chaotic bloodletting. At any given time the casualties include the renegades of the renegades (the Zetas), the narcotics kingpins (who are routinely assassinated or captured), local level cops in Mexico, federales, and American agents and law enforcement officers near the border (Call to Action, 2011). Mexican police corruption is a long acknowledged axiom of border culture, but the stakes dramatically increased under President Calderón’s presidency (Beittel 2013; Beittel 2011; Rush, 2012). Allegedly, Calderón pardoned Sinaloans and ignored their activities in hopes of exterminating rival cartels (Beittel, 2011). In addition to the regular hum-drum drug trafficking life, pressure to compete with the increasing supply of American narcotics, outwit advancing interception capabilities, and the siren call of fame and fortune all contributed to the dramatic upswing of violence that seemingly numbed the average Mexican citizen to the atrocities being committed on their own front steps.

**Media and publicity**

Although it seems counterintuitive for criminal organizations to want or need publicity, cartels require the hand of the media to peacock their achievements. One must also keep in mind narcos have a longstanding presence in everyday Mexican life; therefore conspicuous declaration of gang affiliation is not met with the same disdain as in the United States (Borderlandbeat.com, 2013). The drug trade kept many towns and families afloat for generations with the tacit (or overt) complicity of the government (Borderlandbeat.com, 2013; Martin, 2013). Furthermore, in a scene of unfathomable gore, the media is necessary to officially tally the body count for the public. In a sense, the media is the scoreboard in Mexico. Enter the journalists. Rival organizations blended in with ordinary criminals when their methods were simpler. Death by gunshot was not very extraordinary. Nobody remembered stabbings, even in public venues. However, hanging bodies off freeway bridges and airing their atrocities online separate the
amateurs from the criminal deities. Since they act with impunity, copyrighting a particular style of violence also insures the public is aware of the responsible party, thus informing them of who is in charge. Similar to the Japanese Yakuza and their practice of finger cutting, yubitsume, the cartels need a hallmark move. Early in the drug war, beheadings became the standard punishment. Severed heads were rolled onto dance floors, buried separately, and mutilated a variety of ways as the war descended in its barbarism. Five minutes spent on the Borderlandbeat.com, La Nota Roja, or El Blog del Narco (all underground sites operating anonymously with the sole purpose of accurately reporting cartel violence) document the atrocities.

**Barbarism**

The gratuitous use of homicide as retribution became banal. Murder once reserved to deliver a particular message is now committed to reminding Mexico who is in charge. There are now ordinary executions (those done simply with a bullet), statement killings (bodies dumped with messages left behind written in the victims’ blood/entrails), and dramatized murder (mass killings video-recorded for the internet) (Bowden, 2011). Any variety of cartel related executions in Mexico is intended to attract attention; however, journalists are at a very high risk of becoming victims themselves should they report disparaging information about those involved or those conducting the investigations (Bowden 2011; Gibler, 2011). Some reporters print accounts of homicide without explicitly naming a responsible party; others journal anonymously with pointed remarks directed at the perpetrators and the flaccid Mexican government. Blog del Narco, a site run anonymously in Mexico, is particularly stinging toward the cartels and the Mexican officials. Newspapers have also asked the cartels directly in their periodicals about what is permissible to print to avoid provoking retribution (Longmire, 2011).
The sheer volume of murder in Mexico has had the dual effect of inspiring fear and antipathy among the citizenry. Since originality seems to be the objective for sicarios, dismemberment alone is not as noteworthy as it was a few years ago. Stewing victims alive in acid or burning them to death has replaced the merciful gunshot. The constant one-upping pace of the war necessitates that assassins must continue their efforts to stack up bodies (or body parts), but they must do it with the greatest imaginable level of torture and depravity. Claiming their victims are retaliatory trophies has become a transparent ruse to the public—the purpose behind all the gore is the crux of classical terrorism: to terrify. The cartels understand that in Mexico, murder holds no shock value in print if it is photographically unaccompanied or conventional. Therefore, by working hand in hand with the serf media, the Gulf, Zetas, and Sinaloa organizations ensure the populace and their enemies drown in reports of the groups' prowess. So far the narcissistic methods have proven more efficient than not: only recently, almost a decade into the war, are there substantial reports of vigilantism.

In regular bids to raise the bar of monstrosity, gangs regularly target women. Females are especially susceptible to the wrath of the cartels’ low ranking members who seem to vie for promotion through mass murder. High body counts unconnected to actual gang members were particularly prevalent among the Zetas, whose call signs correlate directly to their rank. Young females, as young as teenagers, are raped, tortured, photographed, or videoed in sexually humiliating postures, before being beheaded or dismembered, for nothing more than their attire although they may have been heavily involved in the drug trade for years. Like many women with poor prospects, young girls also latch onto the narcos to escape the merciless life of poverty in a culture that tends to value men more than women (Longmire, 2011). Albeit the savagery
directed toward women is not prototypal, the increase of femicide in Mexico parallels the heightened barbarism; it indicates cartels are still searching for shock value.

**Targeting Texans**

The old rule of thumb for mules encouraged dumping of contraband in the face of interdiction. Minimally paid carriers would throw their loads into the water, abandon vehicles, flee, and otherwise nonviolently desert their paychecks. Upper level capos occasionally murdered carriers for dereliction of duty, but often they received more drugs to smuggle (Longmire, 2011). That changed a few years ago when armed drug-traffickers escorted drug loads bound for the United States.

In the summer of 2012 at 5:30 p.m. in the briefing room of a busy South Texas police department, a patrol lieutenant advised his officers to avoid any vehicles with a "Z" decal, often located inside the image of La Virgin Guadalupe, Santa Muerte, or another Mexican culture icon. If one was identified, he said, call the gang unit, and absolutely wait for backup. Those vehicles carried assassins, he stressed. Officers who listened intently to their lieutenant regarding the Zetas and their dedication to delivery had been working during a recent shootout between cartel-linked mules and Border Patrol Agents north of their location. Information trickled down that at least one of the runners survived, identified the border patrol agents, and escaped the scene.

Regardless of department, police all over South Texas received formal notice from the Zetas of their intent to retaliate against all officers. Police treated the threat as credible. The shift supervisor further reported from an internal memo that filtered down the law enforcement pipeline about new techniques employed by the cartels to ensure delivery. Everyone in the room had seen the grainy dash-cam videos of illegal immigrants running from uniformed police officers. Police caught many of the illegal aliens and seized their contraband. Those seizures
paid for more training, guns, equipment, and more American police officers. The memo indicated that cartels were sending large payloads with armed escorts with the objective of trapping law enforcement officers and executing them before any interception could begin. Heavily tinted SUV’s would travel behind semi-trucks and should an officer stop the truck, the SUV’s would surround the patrol unit and execute the cop, allowing the load to get away. The barricade methods, well practiced in Mexico, marked a significant change from the dump-it-and-run methodology used for years.

Drug interdiction in Texas is a big deal: both federal and state grants fund operations year round for road officers. The border between Texas and Mexico is 1,241 miles, approximately double the length of the combined borders between Mexico and New Mexico, Arizona, and California (Beaver, 2006). Most of Texas border, marked by the Rio Grande, so named for its size, is desolate and inhospitable. Desert spans much of the countryside along the western edges of Texas, and the whole frontier is deadly hot from March to October. Cougars, wild boars, coyotes, a variety of poisonous snakes and spiders, and a cornucopia of prickly flora dominate the region. Very few people live there: ranches, such as the famous King Ranch, hamlets, and corridor cities comprise the geography. Excluding border towns, any city of notable size in Texas is over a hundred miles away from the Rio Grande. Most of the border towns range between villages of a handful of citizens to towns of a few thousand, all well-spaced apart. The barrenness, minimally staffed Border Patrol, and vastness of rural Texas create incredible odds for non-detection. In the past, when capos engaged border patrol officers encounters typically involved chases more often than gun battles. The drugs that did not make it over the border represented such a minute fraction of its owners’ product that the loss was minimal; it better to
have a good mule return to work. After the Zetas had broken off from the Gulf Cartel, the rules changed significantly.

**Fame and Fortune**

People love the idea of bad boys. Notoriety is still fame, after all, and fame attracts both those with the inclinations toward megalomania and their groupies. Robin Hood, Al Capone, and James Dean all offer a variety of flavors of badness, and they adorn many a bedroom poster. When El Chapo, the reigning kingpin, landed on Forbes’ billionaire list, he reached the pinnacle of societal royalty as an undisputed member of the bad boy club. Chicago added to his resume when they listed him, a non-U.S. citizen, as Public Enemy #1. In doing so, the Windy City blessed him as the coolest bad person since Capone, the first and last person to be bestowed that particular title. Pegging him as both a wealthy and powerful person by a highly regarded American publication (Forbes) as well as the most wanted narcotics kingpin in the world (Chicago) made him Hollywood material (Borderlandbeat.com, 2013; Esteves, 2013; O’Conner, 2011). While those two distinctions have little in common on the surface, they certainly added to El Chapo’s ego as demonstrated by his lifestyle during his long tenure as a fugitive.

**Working Harder for the Same Results**

In this new age of drug trafficking, the plaza dynamics have shifted: governors represent upper management instead of mayors (Fugate, 2012). Smaller municipalities fall under an umbrella of greater protection through state level sponsors that belong to one cartel or another in many cases. For instance, the Sinaloa/Zeta border across from Texas runs contemporaneously to the Chihuahua/Coahuila state borders.

During the pioneering days of plazas, much of rural Mexico was dependent upon and victimized by the same narcotics industry (Longmire, 2011). During battles for control of one
area or another, average citizens had to juggle allegiance to whoever was either less likely to kill them or more liable to protect them (Longmire, 2011). Furthermore, any industry not directly affiliated with drug trafficking faced persistent coercion from entrepreneurial cartel members who sought to expand their territory. Coercion degenerated to less friendly tactics when the Federation splintered.

As evidenced by the number of fatalities, the spread of gang territory in Mexico and the struggle between cartels does not seem to be waning. Business is business, and even as the drug empires expand, so do the expenses of claiming new lands and conquering challenged ones. Thousands upon thousands of cartel members died in less than a decade of struggle (Beittel, 2011). Police, journalists, and families require funding for silence, thus the cartel corpses contribute to the cost of the cartel war. Not to be misunderstood, meddlers from any demographic face lethal consequences for speaking out; however, pressure has been mounting internationally for the victims’ investigations. Bullets may be cheap, but the bribes are not. Upper level administrators and government officials have proven to be particularly greedy in the past, and although it is unlikely any authority would turn on a member of his sponsored cartel, the accepted business practice mandates payment.

While the drug world continues to adapt and create elaborate schemes to deliver their product, they face interdiction efforts by law enforcement officers with superior technology. Lower level mules especially face a difficult task in combatting well-funded American agents and police with significant interdiction training, equipment, and staffing. The effort to interrupt drug delivery is not specific to the border, either. Operation Border Star, for example, is a grant funded interdiction effort supported by federal, state, and local agencies, as well as private industry and volunteers according to Texas Department of Public Safety. In a post 9-11 world, it
is exemplary of multi-level law enforcement cooperation. The grant spreads from the border to pivotal locations along the northern-bound drug routes. All the inbound Mexican narcotics traveling by ground pass through areas patrolled by the Customs and Border Patrol and by police officers familiar with the culture and methods of mules. There is also mentionable crossover from local officers and federal agents in the area: federal agents who wish to remain in one location sometimes become local officers and police officers looking for different opportunities shift into the federal sector. The result is a unique appreciation among agencies. Aptitude and diligence are two other key factors among officers working Operation Border Star: as a grant, it requires results for retention. From the personnel perspective, the program provides officers a chance to do something different. Border Star workers are eager, which leads to competition, almost locker room environment. Cops working Border Star want the big busts, the trophies, the recognition, and the rush of a massive capture.

The burgeoning economy in Texas is attracting more cops every day and all of them train to identify drugs, enforce the laws, and attempt to eradicate the problem. Unlike the cartels, they are not dying by the tens of thousands a year in their efforts. They are aggressively spending more money on training, equipment, staffing, and instruction. Therefore, while the Zetas, Sinaloans, and Golfos lick their wounds from the continued struggle, Texas (along with its federal and state allies along the border) continually increase efforts to keep the violence and drugs out of their own neighborhoods (see appendices B and C for Texas population and gang activity maps for comparison).

For many cops, the struggle is personal: they come from Mexico. They have family in Mexico. They have friends, schools, and memories in Mexico. Even if they are impotent to change the landscape of events there, most police officers cite wanting to make a difference as a
reason for signing on for the badge. The bright-eyed optimism may fade over the years, but as
the author’s own experience reinforced, it is unheard of to encounter law enforcement personnel
who willingly surrender the safety of their own families and neighborhoods and fighting the
cartels as credible officers is a direct method of insulating those assets against the narco-
terrorists. Thus, all along the Rio Grande, Latinos in uniform are taking a conspicuous stance
against the activities occurring in their homeland. In addition, while they may not have the same
financial backing the governor as a Mexican state, they do have the resources to interrupt billions
of dollars’ worth of deliveries.

It is arguable that law enforcement interdiction makes but a small dent in the narcotics
industry, but it is far from being the sole challenge distributor’s face: people are also buying
American. Domestically created and grown drugs are gaining momentum, particularly as
legalized marijuana spreads across the nation. Prescription drug abuse and narcotics engineered
from everyday supplies are also infesting the streets. No longer are organics the most reliable
source of a high: a semi-determined kitchen chemist can Google any number of methods to
manufacture a buzz out of materials he already has on hand or can get at the grocery store while
he picks up his accompanying snacks.

Bribery is a line item on every kingpin’s expense account. Everyone in a position of
authority in Mexico requires payment for operations to run smoothly. Even visiting Americans
understand the role of bribery in Mexico for years. As the cartels have expanded operations,
territory, and ventured into new industries, greasy-palmed officials kept pace in their numbers.
Pressure to incarcerate drug lords and corrupt officials has necessitated a ready hand in the jail,
court, and law enforcement systems. Staged prison breakouts, puppet courts, and police
departments require funding. For example, El Chapo’s “escapes” from a high security prison cost him a millions dollars according to varying accounts.
Chapter 2: Background & Project Description

This project was born from personal experiences as a patrol officer in Corpus Christi, a sizeable city directly in the heart of the Eastern-bound drug route. The gang influence in Corpus Christi is undeniable, but the news of cartel violence barely trickled in. Before becoming a police officer, the author was an active duty Spanish cryptologic linguist in the Marine Corps assigned to a counter-narcotics and counter-terrorism mission sponsored by NSA and the Department of the Navy (there is no classified or sensitive information contained herein). Those experiences provided her a view of the gap between what federal level intelligence agencies accomplish versus what the everyday beat cop encounters. She saw an interesting paradox: at the federal intelligence level, agencies made enormous captures but had limited exposure to the brutality of the cartels. As a patrol officer, the author encountered dozens of documented cartel members but never participated in a seizure that would warrant national attention. This paper attempts to bring attention to a feud that has left tens of thousands dead at our doorstep and to address the threat the cartels bring to our borders as they seek to break new ground in the face of an evolving American drug market.
Chapter 3: Where Do We Go From Here

2001-2010 was a formative decade in the United States about narcotics usage. War-wounded vets returned by the thousands with many of them addicted to opiates handed out by military doctors and medics to get troops through the myriad of injuries sustained in deployment during the Iraqi and Afghanistan Wars (Lawrence, 2014). Simultaneously, cheap, entirely inorganic narcotics mixed in bathtubs and kitchen sinks surfaced everywhere and in every demographic. Drug stores began checking and logging the identification of individuals purchasing over the counter allergy medication. Certain chemical agents disappeared behind steel cages in discount shopping stores, similar to the way spray paint became an 18 years or older product in the 1990’s. Proponents of narcotic legalization emerged as reputable and formidable, unlike the hippie niche of decades prior. Marijuana is legal either medically or recreationally in almost every state in the Union.

While the American drug culture shifted to cheap, manufactured, accessible drugs, Mexican drug lords steadily kidnapped, ransomed, tortured, mutilated, and murdered citizens by the thousands. Many Americans living far from the Mexican border believed the brutality occurring south was exclusively due to America’s marijuana habit. With minds pointed toward singularly to recreational cannabis, calls to end the War on Drugs sounded, completely disregarding the rampant usage of new party favorites: crystal meth, cocaine, crack, ecstasy, heroin, and a number of new and exotic varieties.

As the first decade of the second millennia wound down, the second brought an even greater demand for recreational drugs and an increase in prescription drug misuse (Volkow, 2014). The cartels ran parallel with the drug demands but they also diversified their criminal portfolio as American consumption shifted (Martin, 2013). Cartels smuggle anything valuable,
including guns, oil, and humans (Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2013). Human smuggling then evolved into human trafficking as the cartels planted roots in American soil (Brice, 2010; Davila, 2015). Back home in Mexico, cartels own gas stations and extort families and businesses in their respective jurisdictions under the guise of protection from rival gangs. Kidnapping for ransom is a daily occurrence.

As American drug usage escalates, becomes legal in expanding circumstances, and border patrol becomes a higher priority, recreational marijuana usage is less taboo: almost half of Americans experiment with the drug before graduating high school (Motel, 2015). Many addicts claim a need for a more intense narcotic experience drives them to riskier behavior and more lethal substances.

Vigilante groups in Mexico attempt to solve the cartel problem that cripples their government but grassroots counter-cartel efforts will never keep pace with the armies raised by the DTOs. The United States' war on drugs arguably left little impact on the cartels' existence and influence in Mexico. It is unwise to lend resources and funds to Mexican leadership while cartel influence remains at multiple governmental, judicial, and political levels.
Chapter 4: Conclusion

The cartels in Mexico will not unify again as in the old Federation days, nor will they disappear. It is more likely that they will continue to diversify their operations and link arms with insurgent groups from afar, unless our Southern border hardens against their infiltration. America’s tacit acceptance of drug use and the subsequent domestic narcotic manufacturers cut the cartels, but the extent of that damage is incalculable. Improved interdiction by American law enforcement eager to protect their homes is helpful against the flow of violence into the United States, but the U.S. government lacks the resources and public approval to properly staff the barrier. Mexico’s attempt to purge certain DTOs from their borders did more damage than good: the remaining organizations fed upon the corpses and grew fatter from the carrion. Disgruntled Mexicans have the option to organize grassroots eradication efforts, pay their tariff unhappily, or end up in a mass grave with tens of thousands of their countrymen.
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Appendices

Appendix A:

The most influential cartels of 2016 and their origins.

By the infamous Joaquín Guzmán Loera, *El Chapo*, led the Sinaloa cartel to its height and remains a popular figure in narcocultura. Ismael El Mayo Zambada García presently manages operations. *El Nacho* Villareal, the third in succession was killed by the Mexican military. Sinaloa’s namesake state is on the Pacific coast of Mexico. Their activities spread from there; they have more global consumers than the other cartels. García led the Sinaloa cartel during El Chapo’s other imprisonments and is the presumed head of the organization to date.

The Gulf cartel is based in Matamoros in Tamaulipas, an Eastern State in Mexico. Osiel Cardenas Guillen ran the organization until his sentencing in 2010 in the United States. He was arrested in 2003 and still managed operations from inside prison until 2007 when ambitious members began fighting for the leadership role. In November of 2010, Osiel's brother was killed in their home city by Mexican Marines. He was the de facto leader after Osiel. Eduardo Costilla "El Coss" was the last head of the Gulf Cartel before his arrest in Tampico. Sinaloans, Golfos, and Zetas fight brutally for the hotly contested Gulf territory.

Zetas were led by Heriberto Lazcano Lazcano until Mexican Marines killed him. Allocated aliases that correlate to their rank, the organization is led by Z40, Miguel Ángel Trevino Morales, although he does not command universal loyalty among the most violent of the cartels. Zetas are actively recruiting Guatemalan Special Forces known as Kaibiles to duplicate their model in the tiny Central American country. Ultimately, Zetas aspire to conquer the cocaine trade between Guatemala and Mexico.
The four Beltrán-Leyva brothers ran their namesake organization, the BLO until 2009. Arturo was assassinated in 2009 and Carlos was arrested in 2010. The group fractured afterward, and remnants of the group divided their allegiance between Edgar Valdez Villareal, "La Barbie" (born in Texas and nicknamed for his Ken doll-like features) and Héctor Beltrán Leyva. The former retained the BLO title while Héctor’s group became the South Pacific Cartel.

La Familia Michoacana/The Knights Templar originated as a singular vigilante group that sought to eradicate drugs in the Michoacán region. The spiritual head of La Familia Michoacana, Nazario Moreno Gonzalez “El Mas Loco” was killed in 2011 and the leader, José de Jesús Méndez Vargas was arrested. Former lieutenant Servando Gomez "La Tuta" led the Templar tributary. Their relevance is not entirely restricted to the Michoacan region, but that is where there influence is most dominant. Like the Matazetas, (kill the zetas), this vigilante group fell to the same corruption that rules all the cartels.
Appendix B:

Map of Gang Activity in Texas

Source: http://www.insightcrime.org/news-analysis/texas-security-reports-point-to-cross-border-gang-alliances
Appendix C:

Population Density Map of Texas

Appendix D:

2007 Map of Cartel Influence

Appendix E:

2009 Map of Cartel Influence

Appendix F:

2010 Map of Cartel Influence

Appendix G:

Cartel Influence 2011

Appendix H:

2012 Map of Cartel Influence

Appendix I:

2013 Map of Cartel Influence

Source: https://www.stratfor.com/image/areas-cartel-influence-mexico-2013
Appendix J:

2014 Map of Cartel Influence

Appendix K

Map of Mexico

Mexico with Individual Administrative Districts and Names

Source: http://www.freeusandworldmaps.com/html/Countries/NAmericanCountries.html