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Federal Bureau of Investigation
Intelligence
ASSESSMENT

(U) Los Zetas: An Emerging Threat to the United States

July 15, 2005

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D. J. [unclear]

Prepared Jointly by
Criminal Investigative
Division & San Antonio

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(U) Los Zetas: An Emerging Threat to the United States

(U) Scope Note

(U) This Intelligence Assessment addresses standing FBI Drug Trafficking Organization (DTO) Requirements Set Part I.C1.D1-2; Part II.A.1.C.2; and Part III.B.4-5.

(U//FOUO) The purpose of this assessment is to provide an overview of the Los Zetas criminal organization, specifically to evaluate both what is known and unknown regarding the group. The assessment focuses on Los Zetas' operational capability, criminal involvement, organizational structure, and overall threat to the United States. Unless otherwise specified, information contained in this report is derived from FBI intelligence.

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(U) Key Judgments

- (U//FOUO) Los Zetas has developed into a sizeable organization threatening the security of cities in the Mexican state of Tamaulipas and menacing US citizens north of the border. Los Zetas controls the major drug trafficking corridors along the south Texas/Mexico border for the Gulf Cartel and is involved in or linked to numerous criminal activities including kidnapping, murder, and alien smuggling. The group is undermining Mexican law enforcement efforts in Nuevo Laredo, the primary location of recent drug-related violence. In June 2005, the Government of Mexico sent federal forces to Nuevo Laredo to restore order to the city. As Los Zetas has corrupted many Mexican public officials in the Nuevo Laredo area, the government will likely achieve limited success at controlling their activities.
- (U//FOUO) Los Zetas has positioned itself as the strongest force within the Gulf Cartel. The group possesses the training and firepower to eliminate challengers within the cartel and fend off external cartel foes.
- (U//FOUO) Since the late 2002 death of Zeta leader Arturo Guzman Decena (a.k.a. Zeta 1), the leadership structure of Los Zetas has become more fluid. Though several lieutenants have assumed some degree of control, no one has replaced him.
- (U//FOUO) FBI reporting suggests Los Zetas has some of the capabilities and resources to break away from the Gulf Cartel and form an autonomous organization. The group likely amasses sizeable earnings from independent transactions conducted in cartel drug trafficking corridors. These earnings compliment stipends received from the cartel. Likewise, as an organization adept at intelligence gathering, they can collect vast amounts of information on cartel activities and could potentially coordinate a strike with military precision against the Gulf Cartel. Los Zetas' lack of a strong leader probably impedes the immediate planning and execution of any such designs. Further, there is no information to suggest the group has a direct cocaine supplier from Colombia, a requirement to successfully sever ties with the cartel.
- (U//FOUO) The overall membership of Los Zetas is increasing despite having lost several core members. The group has supplemented its membership with new recruits. Similarly, Los Zetas has established alliances with prison and street gangs operating in the United States. These connections more solidly root the group on US soil and allow it to expand its influences throughout Texas.
- (U//FOUO) It is unlikely that Los Zetas will significantly widen its operations beyond the US/Mexico border. By limiting the scope of its activities, the group can continue to closely protect its interests. Although Los Zetas has made incursions into north Texas including, the FBI has not confirmed reports of Zeta activity in Arizona, Oklahoma, Arkansas, Tennessee, or Georgia.

(U) Introduction

(U//FOUO) The FBI attributes much of the current drug-related violence along the US/Mexico border between Del Rio and Brownsville, Texas, to Los Zetas. The leaders of Los Zetas, highly trained former Mexican military Special Forces, have applied their elite skills to the drug trade. While allied with the Gulf Cartel drug trafficking organization, Los Zetas members are likely engaged in semi-independent drug trafficking activity which involves drug transactions and related violence in Texas. Within the last year, Los Zetas has developed into a significant threat to the border region.

(U) Origins: Mexican Military Special Forces

(U//FOUO) In 2002, [REDACTED] the Gulf Cartel's leader, tightened his grasp over drug trafficking corridors in the Mexican state of Tamaulipas and hired a small group of Mexican military deserters as assassins and security specialists. Known as Los Zetas, they quickly developed into well-trained, brutal cartel enforcers. Since that time Los Zetas has grown into a sizeable, semi-independent organization.

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(U//FOUO) Los Zetas emerged from the Grupo Aeromovil de Fuerzas Especiales (GAFE), a Mexican army unit created in the mid 1990s to combat drug trafficking organizations along the US/Mexico border. The GAFE received special training in tactics and weapons. The US military provided some of this instruction at Fort Benning, Georgia. These elite counter-drug troops learned to use sophisticated intelligence-gathering equipment, advanced weaponry, and specialized tactics to combat drug traffickers. They fought to limit the escalating warfare among traffickers in Tamaulipas after the 1996 arrest of Juan Garcia Abrego, the Gulf Cartel's leader at the time.

(U//FOUO) An unknown number of GAFE soldiers under the command of Arturo Guzman Decena deserted and joined the Gulf Cartel in early 2002.¹ Reports differ on exact figures but range from 31 to 67 deserters. They dubbed themselves Los Zetas after Decena's GAFE radio call signal, "Zeta 1." Subsequently in a March 2002 shootout, group members helped a [REDACTED] elude capture by Mexican authorities. In May 2002, Los Zetas delivered control of Nuevo Laredo, Mexico to [REDACTED] by murdering his primary rivals Dionicio Roman Garcia Sanchez and Juvenal Torres Sanchez.

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(U) Relationship with Gulf Cartel

(U//FOUO) According to FBI information, Los Zetas members have served as Gulf Cartel henchmen, effectively executing the orders of cartel leadership. However, developments within the Gulf Cartel's leadership structure and the Zeta hierarchy have complicated dealings between the groups. As a result, Los Zetas may be moving away from its role as "hired guns" for the cartel and beginning to exercise more autonomy.

¹ The first official FBI description of Los Zetas as an organized group of Gulf Cartel enforcers occurs in FBI San Antonio electronic communication, "Organized Crime & Drug Program Crime Survey," 30 August 2002.

(U//FOUO) Two critical leadership shifts have muddied the relationship between the Gulf Cartel and Los Zetas. First, the Mexican military killed Guzman Decena in a November 2002 shootout. No one has successfully filled the void left by Guzman Decena; however, Heriberto Lazcano Lazcano (a.k.a. Lazca) has assumed a degree of overall control and several Zetas have become regional commanders. Second, Mexican military apprehended and jailed [REDACTED] in 2003. Before this, Los Zetas likely worked under his immediate direction. [REDACTED] still runs the Cartel from prison, but lieutenants have assumed the responsibilities for day-to-day operations.

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- (U//FOUO) According to FBI intelligence, shortly after [REDACTED] capture in 2003, Los Zetas leaders discussed killing key cartel lieutenants to assume control of the organization's operations. They balked at this option for unknown reasons and still take orders from the cartel. Nonetheless, this suggests a sense of Zeta independence and may help explain some of the group's bolder actions in the last two years.

(U//FOUO) FBI intelligence reporting suggests that Los Zetas does not plan to completely break from the Gulf Cartel in the near future. However, Los Zetas is growing in number, spreading geographically, and possibly biding time until the appropriate moment to assert itself against the Gulf Cartel.

(U) Membership

(U//FOUO) It is difficult to determine the parameters of Los Zetas membership and organizational structure. According to Intelligence Community reporting, few clear lines distinguishing between full-fledged members, associates, and imitators exist. A core group of original Zetas, those who deserted with Guzman Decena, remain. According to FBI intelligence, approximately 20 still work for the cartel. However, they continue to recruit and train new members from the Mexican military and law enforcement. FBI sources estimate Los Zetas membership between 300 and 350, including original and new members.

(U//FOUO) New recruits, referenced in FBI reporting as Zetitas, have bolstered Los Zetas ranks within the last 18 months. They consist of young Gulf Cartel operatives and Zeta family members. They are allegedly more violent than their leaders and may be behind much of the drug-related turmoil occurring along the border. Zetitas appear to serve as foot soldiers for the core Zetas who act as officers. Unless otherwise specified, FBI use of the term "Los Zetas" refers to the group's core members and associates--Zetas and Zetitas.²

(U//FOUO) FBI reporting also references Zeta "wannabes." This designation distinguishes between Zetas and unrelated individuals using similar modi operandi. The extent of the wannabe phenomenon is unknown, but it is unlikely that criminal groups are

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operating in Los Zetas territory without the group's authorization. FBI San Antonio notes that [REDACTED]

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(U) Leadership Structure

(U//FOUO) Lazca emerged as the leader of Los Zetas after Guzman Decena's death in 2002, but has not consolidated control over the organization. Rather, Los Zetas has likely developed a more fluid structure with commanders roving the South Texas border. Several Zeta lieutenants can work in an area, readily moving between plazas.³ These commanders lead varying numbers of Zetas within their territories.

(U//FOUO) According to FBI sources, Los Zetas members typically receive orders directly from regional Gulf Cartel lieutenants. FBI intelligence indicates that several key Los Zetas operatives are working various plazas along the border. These plazas are identified below.

- (U//FOUO) *Piedras Negras, Coahuila, Mexico:* [REDACTED]
[REDACTED] Los Zetas in the city of Piedras Negras.

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- (U//FOUO) According to the [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

- (U//FOUO) *Nuevo Laredo, Tamaulipas, Mexico:* [REDACTED]
[REDACTED] Los Zetas operations in Nuevo Laredo.

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- (U//FOUO) Several Zetas [REDACTED] are resident aliens of Laredo, Texas.

- (U//FOUO) Hector Saucedo Gamboa (a.k.a. El Karis) [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

- (U//FOUO) *Ciudad Miguel Aleman and Ciudad Camargo, Mexico:* [REDACTED]
[REDACTED] Zeta activity in the vicinity of these Mexican towns.

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- (U//FOUO) *Reynosa, Tamaulipas, Mexico:* [REDACTED]
[REDACTED] is primarily based in Reynosa.

³ "Plaza" refers to an area controlled by a drug-trafficking organization. This control involves of corruption of public officials and the protection of trafficking corridors from other criminals.

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- o (U//FOUO) Gulf Cartel [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED] of Hector Saucedo Gamboa.

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- (U//FOUO) *Matamoras, Tamaulipas, Mexico*: Heriberto Lazcano Lazcano (a.k.a. Lazca) represents Los Zetas in this Gulf Cartel stronghold.

- o (U//FOUO) [REDACTED] runs cartel operations in the region.
- o (U//FOUO) Of particular note is that Lazca, the reputed head of Los Zetas, and El Coss, the individual likely in charge of day-to-day Gulf Cartel operations, work in the same city.

(U) Capabilities and Operations

(U//FOUO) Los Zetas is a versatile criminal organization tied to numerous illicit activities including public corruption, alien smuggling, kidnapping, assault, murder, extortion, and money laundering. The majority of these crimes facilitate their drug trafficking activities.

(U//FOUO) Like other sophisticated drug trafficking groups, Los Zetas uses assault rifles, grenades, armored vehicles, and advanced communications equipment. Unlike other traffickers, the elite military background of its leaders enables Los Zetas to mount complicated, precise operations.

- (U//FOUO) In January 2004, disguised as Mexican soldiers and federal agents in military vehicles, approximately 40 armed Zetas broke into the Apatzingan prison in Michoacan, Mexico. They freed approximately 25 prisoners, including several Zetas. One police officer died during the incident. [REDACTED] possibly ordered this mission, in part, to evaluate the likelihood of his own escape from La Palma Maximum Security Prison. Open source reporting indicates Los Zetas trained in Michoacan, Mexico, for this purpose.

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(U//FOUO) According to source reporting, [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

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(U//FOUO) Because of their military skills, Los Zetas members are capable of other, less tactical operations as well. While still part of the Mexican military, the original Zetas completed specialized training in intelligence collection, surveillance techniques, and operational planning. They likely pass this knowledge on to new recruits.

- (U//FOUO) FBI reporting indicates Los Zetas employs "lookouts" or "halcones" to surveil Nuevo Laredo. These individuals search the city for members of the

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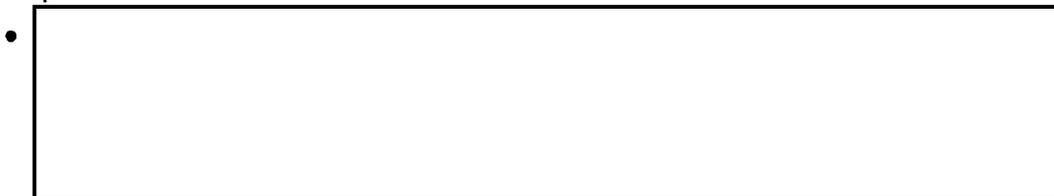
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rival Chapo Guzman Mexican drug trafficking organization. The lookouts monitor city streets, government buildings, tourist venues, highways, ports of entry, and hotels.

(U) Drug Trafficking

(U//FOUO) Los Zetas handles a majority of the Gulf Cartel's drug operations. Part of this responsibility includes the protection of cartel-controlled plazas, a job which has earned Los Zetas a reputation for ruthlessness. In particular, Los Zetas has battled the expansion of Chapo Guzman's drug trafficking organization into Tamaulipas. The resulting bloody conflict has destabilized Mexican border towns in the state.

- (U//FOUO) In the first half of 2005, several Mexican police officers were murdered in and around Nuevo Laredo. These killings resulted from the drug-related turf war between the Gulf Cartel and Chapo Guzman.



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- (U//FOUO) While protecting Gulf Cartel turf and collecting taxes on illicit activities in Gulf Cartel plazas, Los Zetas may also be simultaneously engaging in semi-independent drug trafficking. However, the FBI has no reporting indicating Los Zetas has developed direct connections with Colombian cocaine suppliers. Rather, they likely acquire their cocaine from the cartel. Because of Los Zetas' continued cooperation with the Gulf Cartel, it is difficult to distinguish between cartel-directed operations and independent Zeta ventures. Regardless, Los Zetas is responsible for most of the Gulf Cartel-controlled drugs transiting corridors in Tamaulipas.

(U) Recent Developments in Nuevo Laredo

(U//FOUO) Los Zetas has established control over Nuevo Laredo, Mexico. Much of the recent drug-related border violence has transpired in or around the city which is located directly across the border from Laredo, Texas. Until June 2005, Los Zetas effectively controlled the city's police force.

- (U//FOUO) The FBI reported the abduction of 35 US citizens along the border between Texas and Mexico from May 2004 to May 2005. Twenty-eight of these abductions transpired in Nuevo Laredo and law enforcement suspects Zeta involvement in at least 24 of these instances.
- (U//FOUO) On 7 June 2005, assailants murdered Nuevo Laredo police chief Alejandro Dominguez Coello only hours after his swearing in.

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[REDACTED]

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[REDACTED]

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[REDACTED]

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(U) Drug-Related Kidnappings Involving US Citizens

(U//FOUO) As mentioned above, Los Zetas members have kidnapped approximately 35 US citizens. Most of these abductions occurred in Mexico. Los Zetas kidnap individuals for various reasons, including extortion, association with unsuccessful drug transactions, defiance of the Gulf Cartel, and cooperation with rival drug trafficking organizations.

- (U//FOUO) According to FBI sources, in

[REDACTED]

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(U//FOUO) Law enforcement has connected Los Zetas to at least 28 (80 percent) of the 35 reported abductions of US citizens occurring along the South Texas border between May 2004 and May 2005. However, the numbers are significantly higher when considering unreported abductions.

(U) US Activity

(U//FOUO) Los Zetas oversees Gulf Cartel drug shipments at south Texas border crossings. These activities have involved incursions and operations in the United States. Recent developments highlight Zeta activity in Texas. It is unclear if Zeta inroads into the United States reflect attempts to establish permanent US bases of operation. Likewise, whether Los Zetas plans to expand its US efforts beyond Texas remains unconfirmed.

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- (U//FOUO) In early June 2005, assailants gunned down Cesario Carrera, (a.k.a. Cuate) in Laredo. Prior to his death, the FBI and Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) were investigating Cuate, reportedly the Zeta in charge of operations in Laredo. The FBI and DEA suspected his involvement in a May 2004 kidnapping and three Laredo murders. Cuate coordinated drug shipments through Laredo to Dallas and Houston, Texas, and allegedly transported two to three 2,000 pound shipments of marijuana and 20 to 25 kilograms of cocaine each month. Cuate worked with Gulf Cartel lieutenant Hector Saucedo Gamboa.
- (U//FOUO) In June 2004, DEA agents arrested [REDACTED]
[REDACTED] Intelligence indicates that [REDACTED].
- (U//FOUO) In May 2005, the FBI and Laredo Police Department suspected Zeta involvement in a double homicide. Responding officers discovered 3,000 pounds of marijuana, likely a stolen Gulf Cartel load, at the home of the deceased.
- (U//FOUO) Claims of Los Zetas activity in Atlanta, Georgia; Arizona; eastern Oklahoma; Tennessee; and Arkansas have surfaced. However, the FBI has not substantiated these claims.

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(U//FOUO) Los Zetas has forged connections with both prison and street gangs in Texas. The group uses these alliances to strengthen its operational capabilities.

- (U//FOUO) According to FBI sources, Los Zetas has developed ties with a faction of Hermanos Pisoleros Latinos (HPL), a prison gang based in Laredo. HPL is the largest criminal organization operating in the city and has splintered into competitive groups. Another faction of the HPL operating in the Laredo area transports large shipments of cocaine from Chapo Guzman's organization.
- (U//FOUO) FBI information indicates that Los Zetas employs both Texas Syndicate and Mexican Mafia members as contract killers.
- (U//FOUO) According to FBI information, Los Zetas allowed Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13), a violent Latino gang, to transport marijuana shipments through Los Zetas territory without paying tax. Los Zetas permitted MS-13 to conduct this activity only if the group also smuggled Los Zetas-controlled drugs. The relationship soured when Los Zetas began taxing MS-13 activities. The gang subsequently aligned with Chapo Guzman.

(U//FOUO) No clear motive exists for Los Zetas presence in the United States. The extent of the group's activity in Texas and beyond remains unclear as well. Several scenarios potentially account for this trend:

- (U//FOUO) [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

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[REDACTED]

- (U//FOUO) [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

- (U//FOUO) [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

(U) Targeting of US Law Enforcement

(U//FOUO) Intelligence reporting suggests that Los Zetas may have intimidated and/or threatened US law enforcement on several recent occasions.

- [REDACTED]

- (U//FOUO) In June 2005, a Laredo Police officer noticed unknown subjects following him while on duty. The officer was able to maneuver his patrol car behind the pursuing vehicle. The ensuing chase concluded along a dirt road running parallel to the Rio Grande. As the officer called for backup, dust clouds kicked up by the pursuit obscured his vision, but he heard several gunshots fired in his direction. When the dust cleared, the officer spotted the other vehicle; however, the subjects had fled across the river into Mexico. Responding police witnessed what appeared to be a Mexican military unit directly across the river

from their position. [REDACTED]

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(U//FOUO) The specific motives behind these incidents remain unknown and intelligence reporting regarding Los Zetas efforts to target US law enforcement is contradictory. An FBI source with undetermined reliability recently relayed information [REDACTED]

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According to another FBI source [REDACTED]

- (U//FOUO) In May 2005, an FBI source reported [REDACTED]

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(U//FOUO) While Los Zetas may not be directly targeting US law enforcement, the group is well-armed, highly-trained, and accustomed to violent altercations with Mexican law enforcement authorities. Thus, Los Zetas members potentially pose a serious danger if confronted by US officials.

(U) Public Image

(U//FOUO) Consciously or not, Los Zetas has developed a rogue public image that has attracted significant media attention. The group's paramilitary training, all-black SWAT-like uniforms, black SUVs, and brazen cross-border criminal activity have spawned a frightening vision that has emerged in both the US and Mexican media.

- (U//FOUO) In 2004, a popular song celebrating Zeta lawlessness aired on Mexican radio before Mexican officials removed it from play lists. Lyrics described Zetas feeding kidnapping victims to lions. As outlandish as this may seem, multiple independent FBI sources with accurate reporting histories also discussed caged lions owned by Los Zetas.
- (U) In April 2005, Time Magazine described Los Zetas as a "new and ruthless drug gang" whose leaders have "perpetrated crimes that range from the brutal to the bizarre."⁴
- (U) On 28 June 2005, news sources as divergent as Fox News Network and National Public Radio ran stories about Los Zetas activity in Nuevo Laredo.
- (U//FOUO) In late June 2005, a group of 10-15 well-armed assailants dressed in black, military-style uniforms fired upon two US Border Patrol agents near

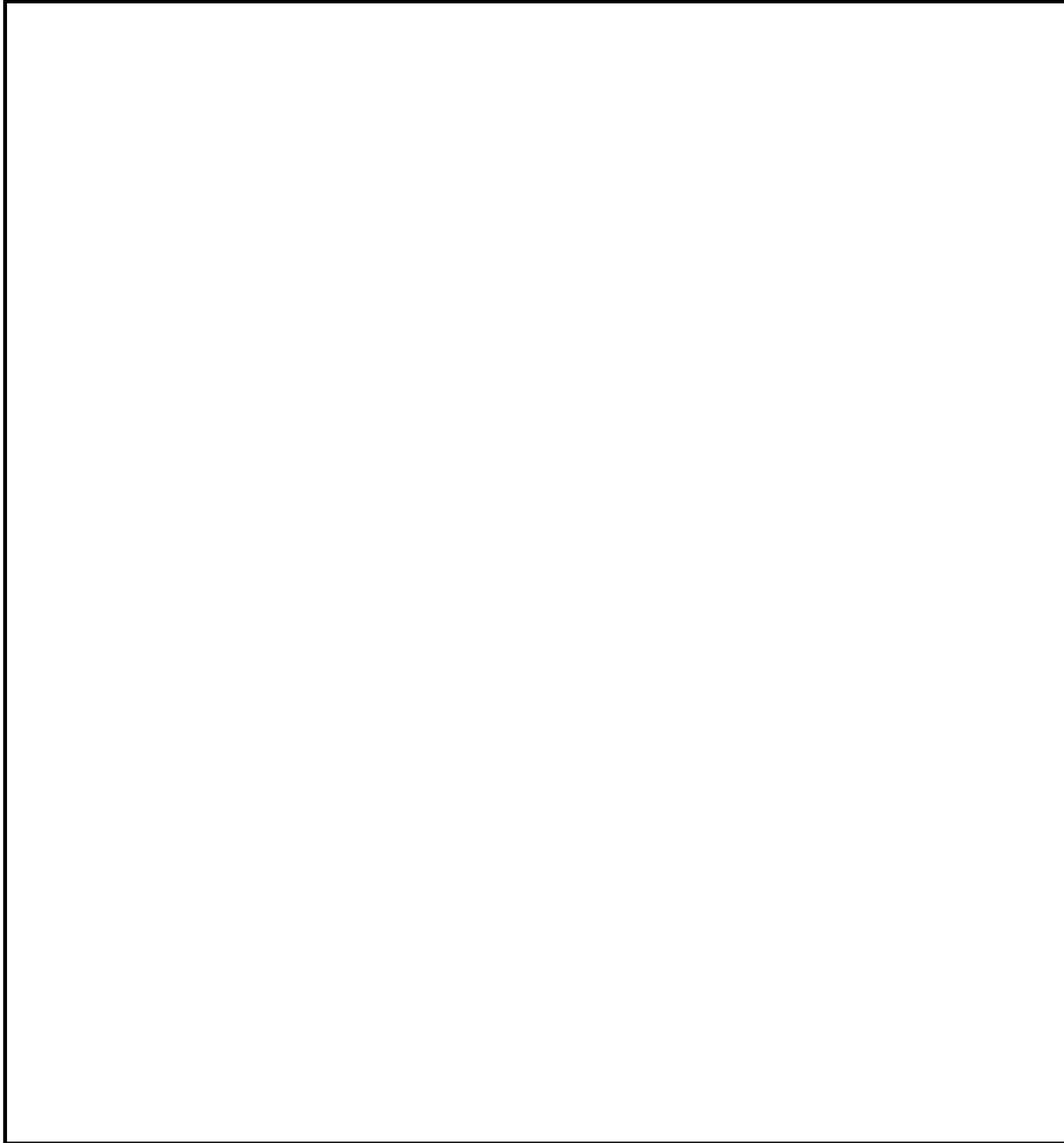
⁴ Padgett, Tim, "The Killers Next Door." *Time*, (18 April 2005): 140.

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Nogales, Arizona. Both agents sustained non-fatal gunshot wounds. A Tucson, Arizona, television news program subsequently discussed the possibility that Los Zetas was involved. The FBI has no information linking Los Zetas to the incident and this area is far removed from Gulf Cartel territory. Regardless, this indicates the significant degree of media attention raised by Los Zeta activities along the US/Mexico border.

(U) Intelligence Gaps



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(U) This intelligence assessment was prepared by the Criminal Investigative Division in conjunction with the San Antonio [redacted] Comments and queries may be addressed to National Gang Intelligence Unit Chief [redacted] or San Antonio [redacted] analyst [redacted]
[redacted]

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- 2 Disagree
- 3 Neither Agree or Disagree
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1	2	3	4	5	NA	This product was delivered within established deadlines.
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1	2	3	4	5		The product is reliable i.e., sources well documented and reputable.

Value

1	2	3	4	5	NA	The product contributed to satisfying intelligence gaps or predicated cases or intelligence operations, especially in previously unknown areas.
1	2	3	4	5	NA	The product resulted in change in investigative or intelligence priorities and/or a shift from unaddressed to addressed work, or vice versa.
1	2	3	4	5	NA	The product resulted in more informed decisions concerning investigative or intelligence initiatives and/or resource allocation.
1	2	3	4	5	NA	The product identified new information associated with pending matters or offered insights into information that could change the working premise in a program or initiative.

Comments

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