



# **Ground Zero**

## Zetas Leader Capture Makes Laredo Border Epicenter of Mexico Drug War

A Report by  
InSight Crime  
and  
The Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars

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## About the Project

### Abstract

After the capture of Miguel Angel Treviño, alias “Z40,” Nuevo Laredo is bracing itself for the worst. InSight Crime and the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars break down what makes the city such an important trafficking corridor and what it will take for the Zetas to maintain their bloody grip on power in the city.

See the full, interactive series at: <http://insightcrime.org/special-series/nuevo-laredo-mexico-zetas>

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See full series of papers at: <http://wilsoncenter.org/program/mexico-institute>

## **Zetas Leader's First Task: Hold Nuevo Laredo**

By Steven Dudley

Even before Zetas' leader Miguel "Z40" Treviño's surprising capture on July 16, Nuevo Laredo was slipping into a chaotic state of nearly constant dispute. Now Treviño's brother, "Omar," alias "Z42," will have the nearly impossible task of keeping it firmly under the group's wing if the Zetas are to survive as an organization.

The Zetas consider Nuevo Laredo their home, perhaps now more than ever. They may have spread throughout the country and into foreign nations, most notably Guatemala, but their base remains Nuevo Laredo. It is where their model -- control territory, extract rent, move drugs (in that order) -- has its clearest manifestation. It is also their most important moneymaker, especially since they lost their grip on Mexico's industrial hub, Monterrey, in recent months.

The city has historical significance as well. It is where Treviño and his successor Alejandro "Omar" Treviño, alias Z42, were raised and still have family and a presumed base of support. Turnover from one group to another can be bloody and costly for any Nuevo Laredo resident willingly or unwillingly participating in the Zetas' operations. It is where the Zetas passed their first stern military test by resisting an offensive by the Sinaloa Cartel in 2004 - 2006, and solidified their reputation.

Nuevo Laredo is also where they first took control of a police, a mayor's office, and a city. It is where they first shut down civil society and the local press, developing a means by which they could control the public message and perception in the areas under their control. And it appears to be where the last of the first generation of Zetas' leaders like Z42 may make their final stand or evolve into something resembling a more gentlemanly criminal group.

### **Internal and External Threats**

Z42 will face challenges from within. The Zetas split into various factions at least two years ago, the two most powerful of which came from the Nuevo Laredo underworld. In the early 2000s, the Treviños shared duties in the city with Ivan Velazquez Caballero, alias "El Taliban." It was a tense relationship, almost from the beginning, as each tried to secure international contacts to move illegal drugs. In the early 2000s, one Dallas-based drug dealer testified in court that he was kidnapped, in part because of this rivalry.

El Taliban, who was later sent to monitor points south such as the San Luis Potosi province, split from the Treviños in 2011, after the capture of Jesus Enrique Rejon Aguilar, alias "El Mamito." (Mamito was extradited to the United States and has since testified against the Treviños in a money laundering case tried in Austin, Texas.) Via so-called "narcobanners" and videos distributed on YouTube, El Taliban claimed Z40 had sold out pieces of the group to authorities, including Mamito.

After El Taliban's capture in September 2012, a faction calling themselves the "Legionarios" announced their intentions to overrun the Treviños. Later, a second faction calling itself "Sangre Z" vowed to continue El Taliban's fight.

This internal power struggle came to a head following the death of the group's top leader in October, Heriberto Lazcano, alias "Z3." Other groups, most notably the Gulf and Sinaloa Cartels, sought to take advantage of the rifts as well. El Taliban's group was rumored to have rejoined forces with the Gulf Cartel, the Zetas' former masters, from whom the Zetas had separated in 2010.

Nuevo Laredo was at the center of the fight. It spilled into public view in May 2012, with the appearance of 23 bodies, some hung from bridges, alongside threatening notes. By the end of 2012 and the beginning of 2013, the battles were a near daily experience, say numerous residents, officials and investigators in this city, and included a firefight with high powered rifles and grenades that occurred a block from the US Consulate.

The carnage was historic. In 2012, the city government recovered some 550 bodies, according to sources close to the government, giving it a homicide rate of 143 per 100,000. By comparison, Juarez, the country's most famous hotbed of criminal activity, registered a 56 per 100,000 murder rate.

The official murder tally in Nuevo Laredo, however, was 288. The Zetas prefer that murders be reported on their terms, often via YouTube or blogs, and certainly not in ways that make Nuevo Laredo appear like a place in dispute. The local newspaper, El Mañana, did not report either statistic; it has been silenced by the Zetas and announced last year that it was no longer in the business of covering organized crime.

Mexican and US government officials say that murder rate is considerably lower this year and attribute last year's spike to the latest attempt by the Zetas' rivals to overrun this important transit point for illegal drugs moving north and money, and weapons moving south.

However, many expect another surge now that Z40 is in jail. His brother, Z42, while formidable and ruthless, carries less gravitas than his older sibling and will be scrambling to keep himself out of prison. He is thought to be on the run, spending

most of his time in the neighboring states of Coahuila and Nuevo Leon. The city, it appears, is up for grabs again.

### **A City with Multiple Layers**

From afar, Z42 will have to maintain control the Zetas' various layers of operation in the city. At the top layer, the Zetas have a "plaza boss." He is in charge of a hundred square miles stretching along the border and reaching into the interior of Mexico. He has to keep the overall operations running in the city, which include the movement of the Zetas' prime moneymaker in this area, the movement of illegal drugs into the United States.

This drug trafficking activity is what distinguishes this plaza from many others the Zetas run in Mexico. In Nuevo Laredo, the group is focused less on the local criminal economy and more on the international one. Nuevo Laredo is the only major crossing point into the United States the organization controls in its entirety. But it is also one of the most important, if not the most important, in Mexico. Thirty-five percent of all truck traffic between the US – Mexico goes through this city. That translates into between 10,000 and 12,000 commercial trucks crossing the Rio Grande every day.

The corridor stretches to Houston and Dallas, two large drug markets that provided the core of the Zetas' revenue for years as they spread into nearly half the states in Mexico. Laredo connects to I-35, a highway that effectively splits the United States in two giving equal access to both coastal markets and everything in between. The line of trucks is endless and despite technological advances that include several million-dollar mobile X-ray machines to scan trucks, as well as numerous other sensors and gadgets, border officials admit that it's a difficult, if not impossible, battle.

The numbers tell part of the story. Seizures of marijuana, once in the hundreds of pounds in the early 1990s, now are regularly in the thousands, US border officials told InSight Crime. Cocaine seizures routinely top 100 kilograms in any given seizure. Methamphetamines are coming through in increasing amounts, border and drug agents say, packed in car batteries or in liquid form as windshield wiper fluid.

The X-ray trucks the US have help, to be sure. They can detect anomalies in everything from strawberry flats to furniture. But it's the dogs and, most often, the human scent, which lead to the seizures. They are, however, a small dent in the operations of these organizations. A recent money laundering case against Miguel and Omar Treviño's uncle netted over \$20 million in seizures. The organization, investigators say, continued without a blip.

The Nuevo Laredo plaza boss' job is to ensure there are no blips on the Mexican side of the border. He has four lieutenants who help him. They are divided geographically: the river; the highway or "kilometros"; the east side of the city; and the west side of the city. This geographical approach is consistent with the Zetas' military origins and their modus operandi. The original group's core was Mexican Special Forces recruited by then Gulf Cartel head Osiel Cardenas to act as his personal guards. They eventually became his most effective and important military wing.

True to their military origins, the group is concerned with controlling territory first, extracting rent from illegal activities second. This includes all the illegal activities going on in Nuevo Laredo, from prostitution to the movement of contraband cigarettes. Achieving this control takes a clear, hierarchical structure. Each lieutenant has several units or "estacas," which are broken down into groups of 5 or 6 soldiers that obeys, to a certain extent, the number of men they can fit in the large vehicles they use to mobilize their soldiers. These estacas have numerous jobs: regular patrols, protecting and moving commanders, protecting and moving drugs, enforcement, engaging and/or distracting security forces.

The Zetas ability to deal with the security forces has diminished over time, according to several law enforcement and military personnel consulted for this report. But it is still formidable and sufficient enough to repel the many frontal assaults the group faces these days. The group counts on a vast network of informants and collaborators around the city to keep their enemies at bay. These "halcones," or "hawks," as they are known are spread throughout the city and its surroundings. They number in the hundreds, according to one military source. Many work in jobs that require them to be mobile or give them access to information: they are taxi drivers or cellular phone retailers for example. They often have radios themselves, but more often they just ping their handlers to alert them.

This information is channeled through a central communications team. These are communications specialists -- "techies" as they were described to InSight Crime -- who knowhow to manage sophisticated radio repeaters and technology used to intercept security force communications. The system works. Local military admitted that the Zetas know where they are at all times.

If the Zetas have to engage, they can employ numerous countermeasures. They are known to call buses, trucks and passenger vehicles into the fray by instructing them to block the roads the military is using to send personnel or reinforcements. They can sprinkle the streets with what are known as "punchallantas" or "estrellas," highly resistant pieces of metal curved so that they can puncture the army trucks' tires. And they have weapons, a seemingly endless array of them, from 50-caliber rifles to grenade launchers, which they will employ in any circumstance without regard for civilian casualties.

As it is in the rest of the country, the quality of the Zeta soldier is not what it was, but there is an abundance of potential recruits. The organization is recruiting from pools of teens and young adults who find themselves in a city that has been largely abandoned by its wealthiest citizens and many of its businesses, and ignored by its federal government. The previous president, Felipe Calderon, came as a candidate and promised to "rescue the city from the mafia." However, he did not visit the city during his six years in office and certainly did not rescue much of anything in the northeast of this country.

There are also potential recruits amongst the thousands of illegal migrants who still come to the border each year seeking passage to the United States. The influx of migrants into the ranks is evident when speaking to the locals who tend to blame the degradation of the situation on "outsiders," willfully ignoring the origins of Treviño family's continued residence in neighboring Laredo.

### **Time for a New Boss?**

It is this degradation, which is a direct result of how the Zetas operate, that plagues the city the most and may represent an equally formidable challenge to Z42's hold on Nuevo Laredo. The criminal organization's lowest layer has a lot of autonomy to delve into side businesses. The targets of these criminal activities are most often local businesses and citizens who get extorted regularly by those who work, or claim to work, with the Zetas. The nearly constant turnover of mid and low-level members -- who are either killed, are arrested or leave -- creates even more uncertainty and unpredictability.

That unpredictability has led many businesses and businessmen to flee Nuevo Laredo into neighboring Laredo. Customs brokers, restaurant owners, and media moguls have all left. Those who stayed often did so because they cannot afford to move and prefer to spend their money to send their kids to the universities on the US side. The Customs Brokers Association (Asociacion de Agentes Aduanales – AAA) estimates that more than half have left the city and those who are left are desperate, asking whether they can develop their own "self-defense" groups in the Colombian style.

InSight Crime visited one large US company that remains in operation in Laredo. The company asked we not publish its name, as did its managers. Those managers said it has not been the subject of extortion and that only one company employee had been killed. However, they added that the army was a poor substitute for the police in matters of security and that common crime was on the rise.

"They don't know the streets, the neighborhoods," a top-level manager of operations said.



For him, it was clear who ran the streets. Although the army patrolled, the Zetas had lookouts on every corner and stopped whomever they needed to inspect. In the previous six months, he had been stopped three times during his commute. He said the Zetas probably know who he is but have decided to leave him alone for now.

Added to this chaos is the local and state government's near complete abdication of power. The police have not operated in Nuevo Laredo for close to three years since the state government declared that it would run the municipal officers through a series of "confidence" and drug tests. So far it has reportedly tested five officers, only one of which has passed. The rest of the police remain on the payroll while the state figures out whether to dismiss them outright, which may require a new labor law, or run the rest through the tests.

Many local civil society groups and authorities alike said the dismissal of the police was for the best. The police had become an important operational arm of the Zetas. Few who accepted survived. Since 2005, four police chiefs have been killed or gone missing, the latest last year. Fernando Rios, who later became the head of the Municipal Committee for Citizen Participation, was one of the last to hold the job and live to tell about it.

"You have to know your limits," he told InSight Crime, when asked what his secret was.

With regards to security, the municipal government has failed. For people here, it has been paralyzed at best and an appendage of the Zetas at worst. The lack of police punctuates this, but it is only one manifestation of the government's feeble attempts to slow the spread of the Zetas.

A federal court in Texas, for instance, has accused former Tamaulipas Governor Tomas Yarrington (1999 – 2004), who also ran for president in 2006, of accepting bribes in the millions from the Gulf Cartel and then laundering the million in proceeds in Texas properties, among other places. The case against Yarrington has moved slowly. An international arrest warrant was issued for Yarrington only in December 2012, although news reports suggest that he might have gone into witness protection in the US prior to that announcement. Meanwhile, from his Facebook page, the former governor continues a defiant stance.

In the end, the city's chaos is as big a challenge to Z42's reign as his rivals. Few criminal organizations can operate without the blessing of the local business and political elites. The fear that Z40 generated may have kept these two in line for a time, but his absence may give them the space to seek other, underworld arrangements. If a rival can bring relative order and even commercial and tourist activity to Nuevo Laredo, the Zetas days will be numbered in the city.

## 2 Reasons Why Laredo Has Less Homicides than Nuevo Laredo

By Steven Dudley

Laredo and Nuevo Laredo, sister cities along the US-Mexico border, are almost the same size. They have very similar economic motors, cultural heritage, populations and socio-economic indicators. Yet, in 2012, Nuevo Laredo had at least 36 times the number of murders. Why?

It is a question that is pondered up and down this 1,951-mile border, especially after the explosions of violence in Tijuana and Juarez during the last decade, places that sit across from San Diego and El Paso respectively, two of the safest cities in the United States.

Like those cities, murder rates have traditionally been higher in Nuevo Laredo by a factor of three to five. And few places offer such similarities in what is essentially an isolated geographic space.

### Nuevo Laredo – Laredo: By the Numbers

	Nuevo Laredo	Laredo
Population	384,000	236,000
% “single-mother homes”	24	21
% finish high school	36	55
% speak Spanish at home	Not Given	91
Persons per household	3.8	3.7
Homicides (2012)	288	8

Sources: INEGI, Secretario Ejecutivo del Sistema Nacional de Seguridad Publica, US Census Bureau

Last year was the worst on record in Nuevo Laredo with 288 homicides. Unofficially, it was much worse, with a reported 550 bodies recovered by authorities. Grenades exploded. Bodies were hung from bridges. The city was on a virtual lockdown at night as battles raged through the early part of this year.

It is expected to pick up again after the dramatic July 16 capture of the Zetas' top commander, Miguel Angel Treviño, alias "Z40." Treviño's brother, "Omar," alias "Z42," is the presumed leader but does not have his brother's charisma and will have a hard time holding Nuevo Laredo.

Meanwhile, Laredo had eight murders last year, only one of which authorities said was organized crime-related.

The question in Laredo - Nuevo Laredo becomes even more relevant given the presence of the Zetas, Mexico's most volatile and unpredictable criminal organization and also the group most frequently cited as inciting "spillover violence" in the US.

### **Reason Number 1: The Zetas**

Homicide rates for both cities increased when the Zetas arrived. In part, this is because the Zetas are not like other criminal organizations. Their core was former military personnel who broke many of the traditional rules of the Mexican underworld. Their focus is on finding and controlling territory, so they can extract "rent" or what is known as "piso," from the other underworld actors. In Nuevo Laredo, this financial portfolio included a vital extra: they themselves got into drug trafficking.

The Zetas arrived around the year 2000, and Nuevo Laredo's homicide rate has been consistently higher ever since. The group, then the armed wing of the Gulf Cartel, was sent to help secure passage through this, the most important commercial crossing point on the border. They did this by recruiting knowledgeable locals such as Miguel Treviño.

Treviño had started as a gopher for the Nuevo Laredo traffickers (he is often referred to by his rivals as "lavacarros" or "car washer") but had since graduated to management. He quickly defected to the Zetas who would later rely on his knowledge to rid them of the local power brokers.

At the time, the most prominent group in Nuevo Laredo was Jose Dionisio Garcia, alias "El Chacho," and his organization, aptly named "Los Chachos." Like any other outsider organization, the Gulf Cartel paid "piso," or a "toll," to Chacho to use the area as a corridor.

There are many stories regarding what happened next. According to one report that cited a Gulf Cartel informant, Chacho double-crossed the Gulf Cartel and, with the help of the local authorities, tried to steal a drug shipment. Anabel Hernandez, in her book "Los Señores del Narco," says the Gulf simply decided to take it. In either case, the Zetas, who were recruited from Mexico's Special Forces, kidnapped and killed Garcia.

The Zetas spent the next four years securing the Nuevo Laredo "plaza," Mexican parlance for illicit corridor. It was not easy. They faced a cadre of local traffickers, many of who were loyal to Chacho or at least not loyal to them. And when the Gulf Cartel boss, Osiel Cardenas, was arrested in 2003 (he would later be extradited to the US), some of these local traffickers staged a revolt, refusing to pay their new overlords the "piso."

One of these local traffickers was Edgar Valdez Villareal, alias "La Barbie." Like many of the soldiers in this battle, Barbie grew up in Laredo and had fled to Mexico when his drug trafficking crew was busted by US law enforcement. According to Rolling Stone, when Cardenas was arrested, Barbie went to Monterrey and convinced the Beltran Leyva Organization and the Sinaloa Cartel to team with him and retake Nuevo Laredo.

Barbie would become legendary for a ferocity matched only by his chief rival, Miguel Treviño. The spat was personal. The Zetas killed one of Barbie's associates. Barbie later killed Treviño's brother. Treviño found and killed another Barbie associate and raped his granddaughter, Rolling Stone says. Barbie's brother was also assassinated.

The fight also spilled into Laredo, which is the only time Laredo's murder rate actually approached that of its sister city. The assassinations paralleled the type of hits occurring in Nuevo Laredo: in parking lots, outside of houses, at stoplights. This was, and remains, one of the few real cases of spillover violence from Mexico.

Many say that the splurge of violence in the area is anomaly that can be blamed on the Zetas. To be sure, the Zetas are the some of the most vicious and predatory of organized criminal groups. A study by Harvard University revealed that between 1999 and 2010, the group had moved into more municipalities than any of its rivals.

The Zetas were an anomaly in many respects, but so are some their rivals. Barbie's evildoings, for instance, at least matched the Zetas' barbarities. Indeed, the Zetas battle with Barbie heralded a significant change in the underworld in which there families were targets and media would be used as a tool to fight the wars. For some analysts, this was more Barbie's doing than the Zetas.

## **Reason Number 2: Rule of Law**

There was a major difference in how the authorities on both sides of the border reacted to the Zetas, which seems to be at the heart of why violence does not proliferate on the US side of the border.

The Mexican forces completely capitulated. By 2011, Tamaulipas state authorities had disbanded the police. It has not been reconstituted. Instead, the army is responsible for security, which has resulted in a de facto abdication of the streets.

And while at first, the US security forces were startled, they quickly regrouped, and using interagency cooperation, they zeroed in on the hitmen who were crossing into Laredo to target suspected "Chapos," the allies of the Sinaloa and the Beltran Leyvas.

The head of those hitmen was Gabriel Cardona, alias "Pelon." Cardona was born in San Antonio and moved to Laredo when he was four, according to an account of the time period in *Esquire* magazine in which the reporter interviewed Cardona. He first shot a man outside a bar in Nuevo Laredo when he was just 14, *Esquire* says. He did not get caught and the message was clear: there are no consequences for murder in the sister city.

The Zetas tried to set up similar operations in Laredo, intimidate law enforcement as they had in Nuevo Laredo, and murder suspected witnesses and weak links in the group. But the US law enforcement quickly got ahead of them.

By 2004, the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) had already flipped a key member of the organization named Rocky Juarez. Juarez testified in court that he moved to Nuevo Laredo around the year 2000 to start working with the Zetas. His job was to pay off police officers and keep them on the "payroll," as he called it.

By then, the Zetas controlled the Nuevo Laredo police, which gave them the upper hand in their fight against Barbie. Another witness in the case against Cardona's cell, Mario Jesus Alvarado, testified about how different Nuevo Laredo was when he traveled there to do drug deals with the Zetas in the early 2000s.

"I started seeing a little difference as far as carrying guns, driving, and stuff like that," he told the court. "Getting pulled over and the cops not messing with you. They pulled us over, and the cops let us go and stuff like that for speeding or whatever."

When the Zetas became more "aggressive, more violent," Juarez returned to the US and signed a deal with the DEA. Shortly thereafter, Juarez rented a safe house where the DEA installed cameras to watch the Zetas cell in real time. By then, the authorities were also tapping their phones and could listen as they prepared an attempted hit in 2006, just outside a Laredo nightclub. To thwart the hit, the police pulled the driver over and pretended to arrest and impound his car. The driver was lucky: he was the wrong target.

Juarez also was an errand boy for hitmen sent from Mexico. They were typical of the Zetas' recruits. Like Cardona, they were young, brash and unprofessional. At one

point, they sent Juarez to buy condoms and bring them cocaine in their hotel. They did little to conceal their identities with outsiders, and bragged to Juarez they were going to "kill...at least 50 persons (sic)" at a nightclub where one target had been identified by one of the Zetas' many female lookouts.

"We need to kill a lot of people, so we can make our point here," Juarez told the courts the two assassins told him. "So they can know who the Zetas are."

But the two assassins never reached their target at the bar. Nor did they kill "50 persons." In other words, what passed for professional and feared on one side of the border, was amateur on the US side. And while their impact was real during those first years, US law enforcement reaction limited the damage and sent a message to the Zetas that operating in the US would be, in a word, different.

On the Nuevo Laredo side, the Zetas prevailed, in part by filming their own gruesome torture sessions of their rivals and intimidating anyone who stood in their way. (Four police chiefs have gone missing or been killed since 2005 in the city.) The video sessions would become part of these organizations' tactics as the fight in Mexico became considerably less gentlemanly.

The murder rate in Nuevo Laredo would drop after the Zetas consolidated their hold on the city only to go up again in the last three years after the organization broke from its progenitor, the Gulf Cartel, and splintered.

However, on the US side, the Zetas' cell was decimated. Twelve members, including at least four who pulled the trigger on murders in Laredo, were jailed and prosecuted. Most of them, including Cardona, remain in prison.

## **How Mexico's PRI Can Make Nuevo Laredo into Juarez**

By Christopher Wilson

Mexico's Ciudad Juarez, once the country's most violent city, has seen violence drop dramatically in the last three years. The Woodrow Wilson Center's Christopher Wilson explores whether the current government can do the same with Nuevo Laredo, the current epicenter of violence along the border.

In early 2010, as violence in Ciudad Juarez skyrocketed, former Mexican president Felipe Calderon declared that the 15 young people who had been gunned down at a celebration following a youth league baseball game were themselves criminals, that in a certain sense they had it coming. He was wrong, and the parents of the victims made sure he would not forget it.

Their children were innocent victims of Juarez's gang war, a case of mistaken identity, and though President Calderon may have initially visited Juarez in an effort to atone for the gaffe, in the end he created a major federal program, "Todos Somos Juarez" (We Are All Juarez), that brought together the business community, civil society and the various levels of government to take on the challenge of organized crime. In part as a result of the investments and efforts of all of these groups, by the beginning of 2013 the murder rate in Ciudad Juarez had fallen 90 percent from its high point at the end of 2010.

Yet even as crime has subsided on the western stretch of the border, the US State Department reports murders in Nuevo Laredo, Tamaulipas are up 92.5 percent from their 2012 level and that the state's kidnapping rate is the highest in the nation. The police was disbanded in 2011, and thousands have fled into the United States, including large numbers of community and business leaders. At the heart of this violence are the Zetas, the local criminal powerbrokers of the region. And following the capture of the group's leader, Miguel Angel Treviño Morales, alias "Z40," on July 16, the situation may get worse as rivals seek to fill the power vacuum.

Still, Nuevo Laredo has hope. With a new president in Los Pinos, Zetas leader Treviño behind bars, and the election of a new party to the mayor's office for the first time in 38 years, it might be possible for federal, state and local actors to design and implement an effort to reduce violence and restore the rule of law in the city. This article seeks not to design such a plan but to suggest that despite the challenges, if the right group of actors is brought together and sufficient resources are dedicated, Nuevo Laredo can become a key success in the new Mexican administration's security policy.



## The Geography of Violence

Geography is both a blessing and a curse for Nuevo Laredo. It is the crossing point for forty-five percent of all US-Mexico trade, more than \$200 billion a year, and the city's businesses are able to benefit from all of that traffic by helping businesses fill out their customs declarations and trucking their goods to and from warehouses on each side of the border.

But the same geography that makes Nuevo Laredo the crossing point for so much legal trade also makes it appealing for illicit commerce. The approximately ten thousand trucks carrying everything from auto parts to frozen strawberries across the border both ways each day offer an endless array of options for traffickers looking to plant their drugs. The long tradition of drug trafficking that is the result of this unique geography has left the city and state with a robust criminal infrastructure but conversely weak civil society and government institutions.

For all the benefits it brings to Nuevo Laredo, the nature of legitimate commerce presents its own challenge in terms of the structural incentives it creates, or fails to create, for civil society to demand effective government responses to the situation of organized crime and violence. A full 35 percent of all the trucks crossing the southern border into the United States pass through Nuevo Laredo, causing the city to rely less on the functioning of its own local economy than to serve as a logistics hub for binational trade beginning and ending far in the interiors of the United States and Mexico.

The international nature of this business makes it harder to get these business leaders to buy into the need for more security at home. Customs and logistics, the industries that service the massive flow of bilateral trade through Nuevo Laredo, are the heart of the local economy, employing nineteen percent of the local workforce. As a result, the "agentes aduanales," or customs brokers, are natural leaders in the community. Nonetheless, since Nuevo Laredo sits on the main thoroughfare connecting Mexico City, Monterrey, Dallas, and the Midwest and Eastern United States, their business is only marginally affected by the destructive influence of organized crime on the local community. What's more, many of them have left Nuevo Laredo to reside in the safety of Laredo, Texas.

There are other challenges as well. The Maquila industry, so prevalent in Juarez, is less influential in Nuevo Laredo. Supported by foreign investors constantly scouring the globe for the best location for their factories, the managers of local Maquiladora assembly plants have more to win or lose based on the reality and the perception of violence and corruption. Still, many higher-level managers live in the safety of the other side of the border, and the Maquiladora industry represents a smaller share of the economy in Nuevo Laredo than it does in many other Mexican border cities.



From a civil society and business perspective, this leaves much of the struggle to the mom and popshops of downtown Nuevo Laredo. With much of the population minimizing trips out of their homes for fear of being caught in a shootout, kidnapping or robbery, local retailers and restaurateurs have a tough time keeping their doors open. A brave few have banded together to do more than that, to work with the military police to find safe ways to report crimes and suspicious activities. This is a courageous and important act in the context of Zeta control, but in the absence of an alliance with a broader group of community leaders, the impact is insufficient.

### **A Challenge to the Federal Government—A Need for Greater Support**

The examples of Tijuana and especially Ciudad Juarez, other border towns that have experienced major spikes and then declines of violence, have made the need for strong federal support quite clear. However, so far local actors, even with the support of the Mexican military, have been unable to overcome the challenges of geography and the Zetas' business model of brutality and territorial control. The need is doubly important in a state like Tamaulipas, where municipalities like Nuevo Laredo (population 384,000) are smaller and have fewer resources at their disposal than the larger border cities to the west.

The severity of the crisis of governance and public security should be enough, but there are additional compelling reasons why the federal government may want to pay special attention to the case of Tamaulipas and Nuevo Laredo. Like the current federal government, Tamaulipas is governed by the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI). It has been ruled by the PRI for as long as the party has existed, and the democratic transition that has transformed Mexico over the past decades has yet to fully reach the state. The dominance of the PRI in Tamaulipas makes the state a test of the new government's security policy, and it also makes Tamaulipas a potential liability. Insofar as corruption, as suggested by the allegations against three former governors, and extreme violence, like the 72 migrants found in a mass grave in San Fernando, continue to be issues, they will likely form part of a counternarrative to the story of the emergence of a new, modern and democratic PRI.

Recently, cracks have appeared in the PRI armor in the state, with the National Action Party (PAN) candidate taking more votes than President Peña Nieto while also winning six out of eight federal congressional districts in the 2012 elections. The PRI came back to win the majority in the state congress and most of the mayoral elections contested in 2013, but, Carlos Cantu Rosas of the PAN became the first non-PRI mayor of Nuevo Laredo since his father held the post 38 years ago.

Following the capture of Z40, a spike in violence in the region is likely, even if in the long term his arrest strengthens the rule of law by limiting impunity, taking one of the most violent criminal actors off the streets and virtually completing the destruction of the Zetas' top leadership. In this context, Nuevo Laredo and indeed the entire state of Tamaulipas could become the "Ciudad Juarez" of the Peña Nieto administration, meaning it could become a defining challenge for the security strategy being designed and implemented by the new government.

The federal government has made coordination among the various security agencies and the federal, state and local levels of government a centerpiece of its anti-crime strategy, and the alignment of PRI leadership between the federal and state governments creates an opportunity to improve coordination. To be sure, within a few months of Enrique Peña taking over the presidency, the current mayor reported that regular meetings were taking place between those responsible for public security in Nuevo Laredo from the three levels of government, a promising development. The recent election of a PAN mayor could complicate this somewhat, but it also offers an opportunity to re-launch local anti-crime efforts and certainly does not change the serious need for greater coordination and greater support from the federal government.

Nonetheless, the lack of capacity of the rule of law institutions at the state and local levels put severe limitations on the ability of such cooperation to bear fruit. In part, these weak local institutions are the legacy of the old system of single-party, top-down federal control that has since given way to democracy and decentralization, in many parts of Mexico without the requisite capacity-building or the creation of transparency and accountability mechanisms to facilitate better subnational governance. To the extent that federal support can be extended to institution building, the federal government will find it has more partners in the state with which it can successfully coordinate public security efforts.

An obvious starting point would be addressing the current lack of police presence. As noted earlier, the municipal police was disbanded, as it was completely infiltrated by the Zetas. The state police, which includes approximately two thousand members of the new Mando Unico as well as deputized members of the military police, is quite simply not large enough to replace the several municipal police forces that have been disbanded throughout the state, including in Nuevo Laredo. Thousands of soldiers are currently helping to fill this void, but both the military and government admit this is not a long-term solution.

According to the Sistema Nacional de Seguridad Publica, with 184 police per 100,000 residents in 2011, Tamaulipas was the Mexican state with the second lowest number of police per capita. The absence of police not only opens up spaces for organized crime to continue its operations and inter-group battles, it also opens the door for small time crooks to take advantage of the near total impunity to begin

their own robbery, extortion and kidnapping rackets, whether under the auspices of a larger criminal group or independent from them.

The state is working to grow its police force, but federal support is needed to ensure it is created efficiently and with proper standards and training. Should the Mexican federal government decide to request it, the United States may be able to support efforts to create national policing standards and to assist states like Tamaulipas set up training and professional development programs to help their police forces meet federal standards as part of the next round of Merida Initiative projects, as it has already in states like Chihuahua, where Juarez lies.

The municipal government in Nuevo Laredo may also need support in order to officially disband its police force, which is still receiving pay from the city despite the fact that its members have not been patrolling the streets for approximately three years. Whatever the specific solution, something must be done to free up this critical portion of an already strained municipal budget.

In addition to supporting efforts to build capacity and create trustworthy partners in the state's rule of law institutions—police, judiciary, prosecutors, prisons—the president and his team also have an opportunity to use their leadership role within the PRI to make sure that Tamaulipas has strong, qualified and trustworthy candidates for key municipal and state posts. Those leaders will be their partners as they jointly work to address impunity and degrade the strength of organized crime throughout the current presidential term.

### **Support Must Extend Beyond Government Actors**

Given the extremely difficult climate in which civil society organizations and community leaders are acting in Nuevo Laredo, it is important that they are supported and protected by governmental and non-governmental groups.

With some effort, it may be possible to turn the disadvantage of the middle and upper classes that have fled the violence in their native Nuevo Laredo into something of an advantage. From their safer position in Laredo, Texas, members of the community may feel more comfortable organizing and supporting civil society efforts to combat violence, tend to the victims of violence, and promote educational and economic development opportunities in their hometown. This may be a particular opportunity for the United States government and philanthropic organizations, since the activities to support anti-crime efforts would take place on US soil and under the US legal framework.

Mexico City-based organizations have used similar tactics in support of civil society in other parts of Tamaulipas, inviting local leaders to workshops in Monterrey,

where they tend to feel more free to express their challenges and search for solutions. There may be opportunities to expand these activities to Nuevo Laredo, especially if they are supported by the Mexican government, US government, or large philanthropic organizations.

Particular emphasis might also be put on supporting the local businesses that are firmly rooted in Nuevo Laredo. They are already designing and implementing innovative solutions to complex problems in an extraordinarily difficult context. For example, members of a local chamber of commerce are working directly with a leader of the local military police to report crimes. While this may seem simple, the method provides security forces with much needed intelligence while rebuilding citizen confidence in the government. It is also helping to overcome the high rate of false emergency calls inundating the '911' service. These efforts, and other social programs, need to be nurtured. Without support, the climate of fear and impunity has overwhelmed and stymied the vast majority of social anti-crime initiatives, but with backing and protection, they may begin to take root, grow, and encourage others with new ideas to begin their own efforts.

Getting the city from a collective sense of "duck and cover" to "We Are All Nuevo Laredo" will be a difficult task. It will require significant outside support and also courageous and dedicated local leaders. But it is possible. If Juarez shows us anything, it's that the darkest days may also provide the push that is needed to reach the light.