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**Building the ideal sicario: how Los Zetas and the Cartel Jalisco Nueva Generation train
their soldiers**

Bachelor Thesis – Political Science: International Relations and Organisations (BSc), Leiden
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Introduction and structure:

The War on drugs in Mexico is a much debated topic since its official start during “Operation Michoacan” on the 11th of December 2006, sanctioned by the then President Felipe Calderon (F. N. Acuna, 2006). The convoluted nature of this conflict has seen the rise and fall of several actors on both sides such as the Secretary of the Navy (SEMAR), the Secretariat of National Defense (SEDENA) and many infamous cartels such as Joaquín "El Chapo" Guzmán’s Sinaloa Cartel. The majority of the existing literature has focused on how external forces are influencing the conflict, such as the United States establishing the Merida Initiative to help the Mexican government combat the cartels (Seelke & Finklea, 2017). Furthermore, the causes of the war have been thoroughly examined where the academic community is divided on who is to blame. A popular opinion is that the Mexican government is at fault due to its rapid militarisation that led to the cartels to escalate their attacks in response to acts such as the previously mentioned “Operation Michoacan” (Shirk & Ferreira, 2013). This violent response to cartel violence in 2006 is argued to have stimulated the cartels to respond with even more numerous acts of violence. By contrast, the other half of the community blames not the suppliers, but the American demand for drugs (Castañeda, 2010). Drug abuse has been a significant issue in the United States with an increasing number of American adults consuming drugs every year (Bustamante, 2023). Furthermore, when it comes to illegal drugs, the United States has had an increase of cocaine-related death overdoses leading up to the year of publication of this study (2023). In addition, the vast majority of cocaine produced in Colombia, ends up passing through Mexico and trafficked into the United States, making them the biggest market for cocaine consumers in the world (2023).

Nevertheless, there is a gap in academic literature regarding how cartels have had to adapt to face the military from 2006 until now. When compared to historic cartels such as the Cartel de Guadalajara, newer cartels such as the Cartel Jalisco Nueva Generación (CJNG) and

Familia Michoacana have increased their violent tendencies towards the Mexican Armed forces causing serious casualties on both sides. This modern War on drugs has forced cartels to adapt their recruitment practices and provide military training to their forces. Unlike the Mexican Armed Forces, the cartels do not offer streamlined training to their recruits, their methods and successes differ from one another. As a result, this thesis aims to find out if there is a correlation between the military training within the cartels and their survivability. The research question is the following: ‘how does the degree of military training of cartel recruits affect the longevity of Mexican drug cartels?’. To answer this question, the research will focus on two rival cartels: Los Zetas and the CJNG headed by Nemesio Ruben Oseguera Cervantes, also known as “El Mencho” and how they handle their recruits.

The first section will focus on giving a brief overview of the existing relevant literature for the study in order to bring clarity and define the variables in the research question. The subsequent theoretical section will provide the existing theories used to conduct this research and how they will be used further on in the analysis. Once the necessary concepts along with the variables are defined, the research design along with the sampling methods will be explained. Following this, a brief background to the events surrounding the rivalry between Los Zetas and the CJNG will be provided. After this, the empirical results will be then examined along with some limitations and outlying cases to the study. With these cases considered, the data from the analysis will be interpreted to see if the hypothesis is disproved or not. Finally, a brief conclusion will be laid out recounting all the relevant events of the study along with suggestions for further research on the topic.

Literature background for cartel recruitment and training:

As mentioned above, there is a gap in the literature surrounding the scope of the research question, however there are relevant studies that will be used to produce a relevant analysis.

The relevant literature for this study focuses on three separate areas of the research question: the longevity aspect, recruitment by cartels and lastly military training by cartels.

A good tool to understand how a drug cartel can survive for long is to compare it to a terrorist organisation. Terrorist groups such as al-Qaeda and the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) are known to be notoriously hard to dismantle even despite massive economic and military efforts. As a result, Brian J. Phillips (2014) proceeds to explain that one of the key factors that allow these organisations to survive for a long time is the sheer number of alliances it has with other groups. By having a high number of allies providing resources and information, counterterrorism operations are not as efficient (p. 345). This theory perfectly aligns with the fact that the CJGN arose as a direct consequence of Los Zetas' brutal actions against other cartels, and quickly allied itself with other cartels such as the Sinaloa cartel and the Knights Templars (Stratfor, 2012). It is not unreasonable to assume that having several allies against Los Zetas allowed the CJNG to survive its first steps during the war.

Another comparison that is often brought up is between the older Colombian super-cartels and their Mexican newer counterparts. Pablo Escobar's Medellin cartel and his rivals in the Cali cartel are well known to have produced and distributed immense amounts of illegal narcotics, all the while reaping massive economic profits. The characteristic that contributed to their success is how stable their whole operations were, this is not the case with Mexico (Longmire, 2011). Even though while the majority of Mexican cartels are smaller and not as rich as the previous Colombian ones, their erratic and unpredictable nature has helped them survive (2011). This however does not mean that Mexican cartels are not growing rich. To fully understand how Los Zetas and the CJNG survived for years despite the thousands of casualties they suffered, they must be also thought of as economic businesses (Wainwright, 2016).

The next aspect relevant to the study involves how the CJNG and Los Zetas recruited members. It is important to note that both of these cartels have recruited not just from the civilian population, but also from Mexican Armed Forces. There are four main factors that influence military personnel to join cartel forces: corruption, financial incentives, intimidation and ideologies (Bunker, 2011). Corruption and financial factors are tied intrinsically, as usually one leads to the other. Low salaries and few benefits are a very common problem for military and law enforcement, often times cartels offer better pay and unfortunately, many accept these pay-outs (2011). If for some reason, these incentives do not work, the CJNG and Los Zetas are known to use intimidation tactics to coerce government forces to work for them. These acts of intimidation vary and can be directed at the individual that is to be recruited, or to his or her family (2011). Finally, the most controversial factor revolves around shared ideologies such as an anti-government or sense of abandonment between armed forces, such was the case with some former Grupo Aeromóvil de Fuerzas Especiales (GAFE) personnel that then formed Los Zetas (Grayson, 2014).

Los Zetas perfectly exemplify the recruitment of Mexican Armed Forces personnel because of their prior background as GAFE members (2014). Often, a cartel member with a military background is able to use the military network and their personal connections to locate potential recruits (Felbab-Brown & Silva Ávalos, 2009). These scouting techniques employed by Los Zetas and the CJNG permit them to analyse individual's not just economic conditions, but their social status (Grayson & Logan, 2010). Similar to the previously mentioned ideological factors, joining drug cartels is shown to be a valid alternative to the limited job careers available for Armed Forces personnel once they retire (2010). It is also important to discern between voluntary and involuntary recruitment. While Mexican military personnel has voluntarily joined cartels, such as in Los Zetas, there are instances where individuals have been tricked (Jones, 2018). An example would be when the CJNG used Facebook to trick

people into applying for what seemed legal security jobs, only to then force them to attend CJNG training camps (p. 26, 2018).

Finally, the third aspect revolves around the military training supplied by the two cartels to its recruits. As stated above, the original members of Los Zetas were Mexican Special Forces Corps members, thus already having significant military training (Grayson, 2014). However, their forces were additionally trained by the Guatemalan special operation forces known as Kaibiles (Grayson, p. 19, 2014). This two-month additional training of the original Zetas demonstrates just how different they were compared to the typical cartel gunman (p. 17). By contrast, CJNG recruits do not typically possess this kind of military pedigree but have to go through extensive three-month long training camps (*Sobrevivi a Una Escuela De Sicarios Del Cártel Jalisco Nueva Generación*, 2019). Per survivor recounts, these camps not only aim to teach recruits how to handle weapons, but also build a soldier's mentality and ability to resist pain through near torture methods (2019). However, the brutality of the CJNG's training methods seems to pay off as El Mencho's influence has expanded significantly. The extensive training CJNG recruits receive have allowed them to handle significant types of weaponry such as grenades, high calibre sniper rifles, heavy machine guns, grenade launchers and armoured vehicles as shown with the so called 'Grupo Elite' (Staff, 2020). Furthermore, CJNG members have revolutionised military tactics by being the first cartel to use drones as weapons, showing their acquired military training (Shuldiner, 2023).

A common point between the two cartels training methods is also the use of foreign military personnel as advisors. As explained before, Los Zetas had good connections with the Guatemalan Kaibiles, so much so that aside from training the original members of Los Zetas, they also helped train later recruits including children (Grayson, 2014, p. 51). Similarly, the CJNG have had American Delta Force and Navy personnel help train their recruits in their camps (Meza, 2019). The involvement of American forces with the CJNG has also expanded

with United States Marines members not only acting as advisors, but also traffic narcotics themselves (Martin, 2022).

Concepts and theoretical framework:

The following section will elaborate on the necessary concepts used in the analysis, starting by identifying the two variables. In the research question, the independent variable corresponds to ‘the degree of military training of cartel recruits’. This concept should be defined by two aspects: whether the recruits have military training prior to joining the cartels and how much additional training do they receive once they join.

The first aspect of the variable has very opposite answers when comparing the origins of the two rival cartels. It is well documented that Los Zetas have originated as an armed wing of the Gulf Cartel in an attempt to fight off the Sinaloa Cartel’s incursions in Matamoros, Tamaulipas (Grayson, 2014). The founder Osiel Cárdenas Guillén was a member of the Gulf Cartel as well and succeeded in recruiting 30 Mexican Special Forces troops as an armed wing (2014). Later on, as time passed during the war on drugs, the Mexican government began to crack down on Los Zetas and succeeded to eventually capture or kill all of the original members. This course of action forced the newer Los Zetas leaders to start recruiting from other types of recruits with no prior military experience, including children and women (2014, p. 58).

On the other hand, El Mencho’s CJNG has had an almost exactly opposite development. Originally, the CJNG was made up of former Milenio Cartel and Sinaloa Cartel operators from Jalisco with the sole task of taking out Los Zetas, calling themselves ‘Mata Zetas’ (Jones, 2018, p. 21). In a way, they mirrored the function of Los Zetas acting as an armed wing of the Gulf Cartel but for their opponents in Sinaloa. The key difference was the level of military training. As already established, Los Zetas were an elite combat unit, while the

CJNG were local gunmen. As a result, when focusing on the first component of the independent variable, degree of military training prior to joining the Cartel, in the initial phases of the CJNG's existence, recruits did not have much if any military training. However, later developments in the conflict and victories against rival factions allowed the CJNG to recruit professional soldiers to their side (Martin, 2022).

The second component of the independent variable is focused on the additional military training of the recruits. For Los Zetas in the early stages of their existence, additional training was a requirement as shown by the collaborations with the Guatemalan special forces (Grayson, p. 19, 2014). This pattern of intensive training of new recruits seemed to hold strong for the initial phases of the war, with additional training taking place not only in Mexico but also in El Salvador (p, 21, 2014). As mentioned previously, the course of the war forced Los Zetas to begin recruiting women and children out of desperation, which in turn lead to a decrease in quality of military training (p.36-37, 2014).

When it comes to the CJNG, the same cannot be said. While not being as militarily apt as the original GAFE members of Los Zetas, the CJNG always prioritised the training of their gunmen. This concept of training from the ground up their soldiers rapidly gave CJNG members the knowledge to build, and use improvised explosive devices (IEDs) (Jones, p. 25-26, 2018). Furthermore, latest developments have established an increase in the quality of these training camps thanks to better equipment available and eternal military advisors (Meza, 2019). Unlike the Los Zetas child soldiers, the CJNG is now able to recruit and train elite soldiers that act as their heavily armed shock troops in their battle against rival cartels and Mexican Armed Forces (Staff, 2020).

With a clear knowledge of the structure of the independent variable, the dependent one is simpler: the longevity of the Mexican cartels. This aspect can be interpreted as to how long in

a measurement of years the cartel in question operates. To do this there has to be a clear moment in time when the cartel is formed and a clear moment when it stops existing. The first part is not the issue as both the CJNG and Los Zetas have a point in time where they arose. For Los Zetas it would be when Osiel Cárdenas Guillén recruited the original GAFE members (Grayson, 2014). For the CJNG it would be their emergence as the 'Mata Zetas' in Jalisco (Jones, 2018, p. 21). However, the problem with this concept of longevity rises because while the CJNG is still very active today, Los Zetas has been crippled by the Mexican government and fragmented into many different factions (Grayson, 2014). As a result, conducting an analysis on Los Zetas' longevity by looking for a specific moment in time where they ceased to exist would be incorrect. Therefore, this study will define the dependent variable as the ability of cartel members to survive their clashes with Mexican Armed Forces and each other.

Furthermore, the prior comparison between Mexican drug cartels and terrorist organisations such as al-Qaeda bring in an additional layer to the definition of cartel longevity in this study. In this case, the terrorist networks, the CJNG, and Los Zetas are at a numerical and military disadvantage when compared to their opposing forces. However, studies have explained that the number of connections that al-Qaeda possessed allowed it to survive numerous fatalities (Phillips, 2014). The concept of having a greater number of allies over the quality of said allied forces is factored into the analysis of this study. In particular, the study would like to compare the longevity of the two cartels by considering their past and present alliances. The comparison would be on one side how the CJNG had initial alliances with the Sinaloa Cartel and later with the Tijuana New Generation Cartel for example (Alonso, 2017). On the other, how Los Zetas ended up alienating most other forces and therefore, unlike al-Qaeda, had a very limited number of connections (Phillips, 2014).

An additional theory for this study is the Social Learning Theory developed by Albert Bandura (1971). This theory aims to explain individuals can change their behaviour by observing others. New skills and behaviours can be taught by directly instructing individuals, as happens in a lecture hall where a professor explains to a room of students paying attention. The Social Learning Theory however explains that sets of knowledge and instructions can be acquired just by observing somebody do their tasks (1971). When it comes to cartels training their recruits, they often put them through extreme physical and psychological hardships, which often culminates in forcing the recruits to do something against their morality, such as committing murder (*Sobreviví a Una Escuela De Sicarios Del Cártel Jalisco Nueva Generación*, 2019). To the reader it might seem unfathomable how somebody could go against their own ideals and commit acts of brutality typical of the cartels like the Veracruz massacres (CNN, 2011). The Social Learning Theory would explain how by observing the cruel behaviour of their cartel trainers, the new recruits would mould their behaviour to better fit the cartel's brutal nature (Bandura, 1971). As a result, this theory explains how rapidly previously innocent civilians change their behaviour after training camps and become effective sicarios.

The next existing theory used by this study is the Differential Association Theory designed by Edwin Sutherland (1942). Similarly to Albert Bandura (1971), Sutherland believes that criminal behaviour can be observed and learned by individuals. This theory establishes that social interactions with criminal elements, shape an individual's perception of them (1942). While Sutherland at the time applied his theory to a broader criminal audience, it is still valid when applied to the current cartel recruitment practices in Mexico. Individuals that have had contact with either the CJNG or Los Zetas can view them in a positive light and their interactions with their members will shape their perception of the cartels. As a result, the observed behaviour of cartel forces can shape a civilian's mind to not see them as criminals,

but a necessary evil. This would explain the rise of the CJNG as the ‘Mata Zetas’ because of the negative association that the citizens of Jalisco had regarding Los Zetas (Jones, 2018, p. 21). This theory is useful to analyse the voluntary recruitment of locals into the CJNG or Los Zetas.

Finally, the Social Disorganization Theory is considered for the analysis. This theory developed by the Chicago School of sociology and criminology explains how certain communities are more prone to breed criminal elements due to their surrounding social environment. Children and teenagers are more easily swayed to commit crimes and therefore, in neighbourhoods where they are not supervised by adults, they can be targeted by criminal organisations (Sampson & Groves, 1989). The main characteristics of these types of neighbourhoods would include: low adult supervision, absence of social institutions, lack of cohesion between community members and most importantly, economic disparity (1989). Areas where poverty, unemployment and lack of education are abundant are the hunting ground for cartel recruiters that offer to young recruits a sense of belonging or monetary compensation.

Now that all the parts of the research question have been explained, this study draws the following hypothesis: ‘the higher the degree of military training made available to recruits, the higher the longevity of the cartel’. The goal of this hypothesis is to prove that when cartels provide extensive military training to their new members, the likelihood of the criminal organisation to survive engagements with Mexican Armed Forces and other rival groups increases. To clarify, by saying higher degree of military training, this study does not mean just basic handling of weapons like local gunmen (Grayson, 2014). In order to not just survive but also win engagements, cartels must instruct their recruits with highly specialised and modern military tactics, such as advanced use of drones and explosives (Shuldiner, 2023).

Research design:

In order to provide an answer to the previously stated research question, this thesis will employ quantitative methods of analysis. In particular, the research design that will be used in the following analysis section will be an intra-national comparative design. This research design allows for a better understanding of the context surrounding this conflict due to the inclusion of theories that encompass the economic and social relationships that the cartels have with their potential recruits. The comparison between the CJNG and Los Zetas samples reflect the efficiency of their recruitment methods through the Social Disorganization Theory that explains the social reasons for recruits to join (Sampson & Groves, 1989).

This design will allow the collection of data regarding military engagements on both the CJNG and Los Zetas. As explained above, the dependent variable will focus on the fatalities suffered by the cartels in the engagements between one another and against government forces. Furthermore, to determine the effectiveness of the military units of said cartels, also the fatalities suffered by the Mexican Armed Forces will be collected. It is important to mention that civilian casualties along with non-fatal injuries will not be taken into account. Civilian casualties are an unfortunate aspect of the War on drugs, but they are not relevant to the goal of this thesis. As for the wounded in action, collecting information on the health of cartel members after a firefight is impossible because unlike their Mexican Armed Forces counterparts they do not publish updates on the status of their members.

The data necessary for this study has been gathered from several different points. The use of online news articles reporting on firefights is the main source of data for engagements between criminals and government forces. It is worth noting that data has been drawn from Mexican and foreign news agencies, therefore bringing the necessity to translate some sources from Spanish to English. Furthermore, the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (2022) has

provided a data set with casualties sustained by the CJNG and Los Zetas when in conflict with each other. The data provided from this data set does not distinguish which side has suffered more losses, they however give a best estimate of the total amounts of victims where it defines it as the most reliable number of victims during this conflict by year (2022). After the necessary collection of data on fatalities, this comparative design will aim to find a relationship on how successful the cartels are during the early and latest stages of their existence. For Los Zetas it is until they are dismantled, for the CJNG it will be until the date of the publication of this thesis as they are still active.

As just explained, since the CJNG was formed as a form of opposition to Los Zetas (Jones, 2018). Due to this, the collection of data for the CJNG begins later in time and ends in the current year of publication for this thesis (Shuldiner, 2023). This could prove interesting for further data collection as there might be further events taking place in the future that should be added to this research.

Historical context of Los Zetas and CJNG:

The following section aims to provide some historical context to the data that has been used to avoid any confusion. As it has been stated before, the modern War on drugs conducted in Mexico today, started in 2006 with the deployment of Mexican Armed Forces on the region of Michoacan, also known as “Operation Michoacan” (F. N. Acuna, 2006). This deployment of troops to provide safety to the region and limit the influence of the current cartels traces its roots to the late 20th century with the downfall of the first ever modern Mexican drug cartel, the Cartel of Guadalajara. This organisation was headed by Miguel Ángel Félix Gallardo, also known as “El Padrino” due to his tendency to have control over every small aspect of the business. After his capture and subsequent fracture of the Guadalajara Cartel, rival groups such as the cartels of Tijuana, Sinaloa and the Gulf tried to rapidly fill in the position of most

powerful organisation that Félix Gallardo previously occupied (Kellner & Pipitone, 2010). As a result, violence between criminal organisations escalated significantly, leaving thousands of civilian victims, and forcing President Felipe Calderon to send the Army to Michoacan (F. N. Acuna, 2006).

This escalation in terms of violence presented several opportunities for cartels to expand their influence, as exemplified by El Chapo targeting the Gulf Cartel while trying to gain a foothold on the Eastern Mexican coast and its smuggling routes. The threat posed by the Sinaloa Cartel forced the Gulf Cartel's leadership to establish their own armed wing to hold off the attackers, Los Zetas. Hailing from the special forces, this group of former GAFE soldiers would turn the tide against Sinaloa thanks to their expertise (Grayson, 2014). The most crucial moment of this conflict between cartels happened in 2003, when Sinaloa forces attempted to seize the town of Nuevo Laredo but were fought off by Los Zetas and the Gulf Cartel, inflicting heavy casualties (González, 2003). This victory for Los Zetas served as a catalyst that began a series of disagreements between the Gulf Cartel and their own armed wing, which eventually broke off and formed their separate cartel (CNN México, 2011).

Despite being outnumbered, Los Zetas succeeded in establishing themselves as a dangerous opponent mainly through the use of terror tactics as shown during the Guadalajara massacres (CNN México, 2011). Similarly, as the Gulf Cartel had raised an armed wing to combat the Sinaloa threat, the Sinaloa Cartel established a group dedicated to hunt down Los Zetas in Jalisco, they called themselves 'Mata Zetas' (Jones, 2018, p. 21). These Zeta-killers rapidly matched Los Zetas in terms of gruesome violence and inflicted very heavy casualties to them, especially in a series of killing in Veracruz where 35 alleged Zetas members were killed (CNN, 2011). The rapid success of the 'Mata Zetas' gave their leader Nemesio Ruben Oseguera Cervantes the possibility to enter a partnership with Los Cuinis, financial operators that invested in the formation of the CJNG (Jones, 2018). In a similar fashion to what

happened to Los Zetas, the CJNG broke off from their Sinaloa allies and formed their own cartel. The geographic location of the CJNG permitted it to steal the supply routes that El Chapo was previously using in the state of Jalisco (Boyd et al., 2020). The geographic advantage that Jalisco provides is that it is in the perfect position to receive cocaine shipments from Colombia and at the same time form new shipping routes to the United States. The favourable position that the CJNG soon controlled allowed it to effectively finance their breaking away from the Sinaloa Cartel (2020). It is also worth noting that the vast array of shipping routes available to the CJNG allow them to diversify their business, such as the distribution of not only cocaine, but methamphetamines, marijuana, heroin and recently fentanyl (2020).

Eventually, pressure from the Mexican Armed Forces took out several of leaders of the original Zetas, notably the killing of Heriberto Lazcano by the Mexican Army, (De Córdoba & Casey, 2012). The combined power of the Mexican government and the CJNG proved too much for Los Zetas which caused them to be defeated. By contrast, El Mencho's CJNG has rapidly become one of the biggest cartel in the world, on par with El Mayo's Sinaloa Cartel (Winslow, 2016).

Results and analysis:

As explained from the research design section, this intra-national comparative design will focus on how Los Zetas and the CJNG fared against Mexican Armed Forces and against each other. As a result, the findings will be shown and interpreted separately. These findings are drawn by comparing the number of fatalities suffered by each side in a number of military engagements, as explained previously. The samples used for this analysis were obtained through open-source intelligence (OSINT) gathering processes where its limitations will be explained at the end of the section.

The first set of data obtained focuses on the fighting between Los Zetas and Mexico's Armed Forces. The first known sample dates back to 2007 where Los Zetas gunmen disguised themselves with fake military uniforms and murdered 5 police officers from the municipality of Acapulco (Grayson, 2008). The following samples used in the study include four separate moments of violence in 2011 that left 48 dead Zetas members with only one dead SEDENA soldier (Expansión, 2011). The next sets of data obtained take place in 2012, where 15 Zetas fatalities were documented to no official government casualties. Furthermore, data obtained from 2012 show that one of the dead Zetas was their leader at the time: Heriberto Lazcano (De Córdoba & Casey, 2012). The last piece of data obtained through the research design shows one loss for both sides happening in 2020, where one of the last Los Zetas leaders was killed (Rodriguez, 2020). Overall, the results indicate that while the Mexican government's forces sustained 7 losses, Los Zetas suffered 91 total confirmed casualties against them. It is also important to understand that some of these deaths are high-ranking individuals of the cartel.

The following set of data obtained through the analysis examines the relationship between the Mexican Armed Forces and their battles with the Cartel Jalisco Nueva Generación. The first batches of data take place in 2015, which coincides with a heightened wave of violence taking place in the state of Jalisco. Data from 2015 takes place with only 3 months of distance between one another. The first set shows the CJNG sustaining 3 dead while local police authorities had 5 fatalities (Rio Doce, 2008). The month of May in particular produces substantial casualties between the two sides, with data indicating that the death toll for the Mexican government forces amassing to thirteen and the CJNG suffering a further 51. The relationship between the two conflicting parties then stabilises itself as the data provided after 2015 mainly consists of a handful of casualties on each side per year. It is also important to

notice that the last available sample is taken from April of 2023, where one CJNG sicario perished along with two Mexican Army soldiers (Contreras, 2023).

Furthermore, the analysis examines the relationship between the CJNG and Los Zetas from 2011 up to 2021 through the use of the UCDP data program (2022). Data obtained from this aspect outline how there have been over 5000 deaths between the two factions. However, the data shows no discerning between who suffered more casualties.

Outlier and limitations:

Overall, the samples used fit the research design and the necessary criteria to conduct this analysis. However, it is important to identify the limitations in the sampling methods, the analysis and which samples influence the outcomes more than others.

The first issue with the samples, are outlying cases that do not follow the regular path of the research. As previously stated, some of the losses that Los Zetas suffered include high ranking members held critical roles in the organisation (De Córdoba & Casey, 2012). Even though the data would list Lazcano's death as only one more casualty among Los Zetas, his death would influence Los Zetas behaviour in more drastic ways compared to the death of a low-ranking recruit. This same issue is reflected in the death of Hugo Alejandro Salcido Cisneros, also known as "El Porras", where his death effectively disbanded the remaining Zetas forces in 2020 (Rodriguez, 2020).

Jalisco's Cartel also has outlying cases such as their ambush on Federal Police forces in April of 2015 where they suffered no casualties but inflicted 15 fatalities on Jalisco's Police force (Tuckman, 2015). In a similar turn of events, a month later CJNG forces downed a Mexican Air Force Cougar EC725 helicopter with an RPG (Redacción, 2015). This episode of violence saw the deaths of 9 Mexican Armed Forces members, with no casualties for the ambushing CJNG soldiers (2015). These two cases should be deemed as outliers because they

demonstrate that despite not having the initial military training that their Zetas counterparts possessed, CJNG forces were able to rapidly adapt to the situation and inflict heavy losses to the Mexican government. While these cases show different results, they are still very relevant to the study and are very influential for both cartels. Therefore, the following interpretation of the data will proceed to take into consideration these outliers to draw its conclusions.

With the outliers explained, the study faced several limitations. The first one is an issue of time. In order to conduct an in-depth analysis this complex topic, more time should be needed specifically for the data collection. The gap in literature regarding the research question does not facilitate the process of gathering sufficient data to conduct an empirical analysis to examine the longevity of the two cartels. This limitation ties in directly with the fact that it is difficult to be certain of the number of fatalities sustained by the criminal organisations.

While the loss of Mexican Armed Forces are well documented through the Secretariat of National Defense and the Secretary of the Navy, cartels do not keep track of their membership. This makes it difficult to determine if a casualty is a member of a particular cartel, a civilian or just a common criminal with no affiliation to organised crime. As a result, even if it would be possible to be on the location of all military engagements happening between the conflicting parties, it would still be difficult to determine the allegiance of the non-governmental forces.

Furthermore, gathering data from a distance through OSINT methods gives limited options. Verifying the validity of reports and other data found through the internet is time consuming, and sometimes required a level of clearance that a Bachelor student is not able to provide. In addition to this, a great limitation of this study, is the seizing of sources by governmental institutions. Unfortunately, a significant portion of data used for this study was made unavailable because as mentioned above, some domains were seized, rendering a portion of the findings unavailable.

Interpretation of the data:

By comparing the casualties sustained by the two cartels when fighting each other and the Mexican government, two observations can be deducted. The first one focuses on Los Zetas. The analysis conducted shows that in the first years of their conflict, Los Zetas suffered less fatalities while inflicting heavy losses on the Mexican Armed Forces. In the later years, events such as the killing of their leader Heriberto Lazcano, paved the way for a greater number of losses for the cartel (De Córdoba & Casey, 2012). The data drawn from this comparative design demonstrates that in the later years of the conflict, the efficiency of Los Zetas began to fall, while the Mexican Armed Forces adapted faster to their confrontations and suffered less casualties. Further losses such as death of Hugo Alejandro Salcido Cisneros, also known as “El Porras”, only serve to pinpoint the last casualty for Los Zetas before their demise (Rodriguez, 2020).

When taking into consideration the research question: “how does the degree of military training of cartel recruits affect the longevity of Mexican drug cartels?”, the data surrounding Los Zetas would indicate that their failure to supply adequate military training to their recruits lead to their end. This is indeed the case because while Los Zetas were indeed an elite military unit at their formation, the loss of all of the original members forced the newer leadership to recruit less than ideal individuals such as children (Grayson, 2014, p. 58).

On the other hand, data surrounding the CJNG shows mostly opposite results. The exceptions to this rule are the previously mentioned outliers such as the downing of the Mexican Air Force helicopter and murder of its personnel (Redacción, 2015). The rest of the data from the analysis demonstrates that in its earlier stages, the Mexican Armed Forces were able to inflict heavier casualties on CJNG gunmen, such the fighting in Tanhuato in early 2015, that left forty-three dead CJNG members and only three local police casualties (El Sol de Nayarit,

2015). Later on however, data from the case study demonstrates how the CJNG would rarely lose any soldiers, while Mexican Armed Forces suffered significantly more such as in 2019 where well trained CJNG forces ambushed and killed fourteen state policemen (BBC News, 2019). Furthermore, samples from 2022 show how five SEDENA soldiers were killed by order of El Mencho (Ortega, 2022). This last example, and 3 further samples dating to 2023 demonstrate how the CJNG's efficiency has not diminished. This shows that they are successfully providing military training to their recruits.

Overall, if we look at the variables of the equation, it will seem that the hypothesis: 'the higher the degree of military training made available to recruits, the higher the longevity of the cartel' is indeed validated. Los Zetas originated as an elite unit of former GAFE soldiers that succeeded in pushing back the Sinaloa Cartel in their early stages (González, 2003). Furthermore, the original members had additional training with foreign special forces such as the Kaibiles (Grayson, 2014). While this intense formation as an armed wing for the Gulf Cartel helped them achieve their early successes against the Mexican Armed Forces and their rivals from Sinaloa, the same cannot be said for the later stages of the conflict. With the death and capture of the original members, the training standards that were established with the Guatemalan special forces decreased. This is possibly because of a shift in priorities as the newer Los Zetas leaders would prioritise the quantity of recruits, rather than the quality.

The CJNG however, invested significant resources into their military training methods. The use of training camps, while barbaric and brutal, proves to be an effective method of training new sicarios (*Sobreviví a Una Escuela De Sicarios Del Cártel Jalisco Nueva Generación*, 2019). The hiring of United States Marines and Delta Force personnel as military advisors has allowed the CJNG recruits to receive more specialised training (Meza, 2019). By having dedicated training facilities and training staff, the CJNG has been able to replicate what Los Zetas could not, forming their own special forces division: the feared 'Grupo Elite' (Staff,

2020). The willingness that El Mencho has shown to provide adequate military training to his recruits, has been allowing the CJNG to replace their losses, whereas Los Zetas never really recovered.

Therefore, the aforementioned hypothesis holds true. Los Zetas provided a lower degree of military training to the recruits aside from the original ex-GAFE members, and therefore negatively impacted the longevity of their organisation. By contrast, the CJNG provided increasingly higher quality military training to its recruits, which positively affected their longevity. As a result, the data used in the analysis finds that the success of the CJNG and the failure of Los Zetas, perfectly reinforces the hypothesis.

Conclusions and final remarks:

Overall, the goal of this thesis was to evaluate how important the degree of military training that cartels provide for their recruits is for the cartel's own survival. While the majority of the literature has focused on the reasons for the War on drugs in Mexico or on how drug cartels operate, there is no literature that studies the different training methods between cartels.

Mexican drug cartels are very influential in world politics and have many separate aspects that distinguish them, such as the economic models they follow (Wainwright, 2016).

However, it is the way their ability to train new recruits that allows them to replenish their ranks and keep fighting. The purpose of the research question: "how does the degree of military training of cartel recruits affect the longevity of Mexican drug cartels?" is to determine the most efficient way to conduct this business.

By conducting a comparative analysis of how Los Zetas and the CJNG trained their recruits, this research came to two conclusions. The first is that if a cartel has members with prior military experience such as the case of Los Zetas, they are more likely to find success in the initial stages of a conflict with rivals or the state (Grayson, 2014). However, the second finding is that if these initial members are taken out, the new recruits that are called to fill in

the gaps should receive adequate military training. To be successful and contribute to the longevity of a cartel, recruits must have appropriate knowledge of how to fight in a military fashion, like the CJNG Grupo Elite does (Staff, 2020). With these results in mind, the hypothesis is verified and the question answered.

Furthermore, these findings can be used by the appropriate governmental authorities to neutralise these criminal organisations. By understanding at what stage of military training cartel gunmen are, the Mexican Armed Forces can efficiently deploy more qualified personnel to fight them. Being able to distinguish untrained sicarios from professionally trained elite forces can allow organisms such as the SEDENA to avoid needless losses. This would have been very helpful for the Jalisco state police that was ambushed by highly skilled CJNG forces in 2015 (Tuckman, 2015). Better understanding of the CJNG's capabilities would not have made the Mexican government underestimate them and so they could have deployed better trained troops.

While the findings of the study could serve a further purpose, future research on the topic should take into consideration potential limitations to it. As previously stated, time constraints along with the limited resources available to open-source data collection make gathering sufficient samples for a quantitative analysis a rather daunting task. Future investigation on the matter should also take into account the availability of data. This would entail how certain datasets or online sources are made unavailable to the wider population. Unfortunately, this study has suffered mostly from having many of its sources be rendered useless due to the domains being seized by government agencies. A way to deal with this issue would be to go directly on site and collect primary sources such interviews to survivors or locals in the vicinity.

As previously discussed, the difficulty to distinguish whether a non-governmental fatality belongs to one cartel or the other, or is simply an innocent bystander, makes researching from a distance very difficult. Therefore, being on site or having a reliable source in the vicinity would solve these issues, however it would be dangerous. Certain areas such as the CJNG's stronghold of Jalisco are some of the most dangerous places in the world, especially for journalists and academics that investigate their business. It is therefore recommended to take all necessary precautions if one is to ever develop this study any further by going on site.

In conclusion, this study has faced several complications surrounding data collection but there are some solutions for future research. In fact, future developments should focus on expanding their sampling pool by using additional primary sources. However, in spite of the difficulties faced, the findings of this study have practical uses for the Mexican government and its Armed Forces. To better combat cartel violence, it is imperative to accept the fact that powerful organisations like the CJNG are constantly improving their military capabilities and so the Mexican Armed Forces should respond in turn. All in all, the Mexican war on drugs is similar to a game of chess, with the cartels making moves and the government doing countermoves.

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