

## Organization Attributes Sheet: Golfo Cartel

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### A. When the organization was formed + brief history

- The Golfo (Gulf) drug trafficking organization was formed in 1984 by Garcia Abrego after he assassinated his smalltime rival, Casimiro Espinosa.<sup>1</sup> After Espinosa's death, Abrego established himself in his rival's territory in the city of Matamoros, Mexico and expanded his operation into drug trafficking. In 1986, Abrego established distribution networks in the U.S. and began working with Colombian groups to move cocaine through the Tamaulipas region of Mexico and into the U.S.<sup>2</sup>
- This began the Gulf DTO's rise as one of the most powerful organizations operating in Mexico. In 1993, a Houston grand jury indicted Abrego on charges of running a multimillion dollar drug operation, and in 1996 Abrego was arrested and extradited to the U.S. where he is currently incarcerated.<sup>3</sup> After the arrest of Abrego, an internal struggle ensued, with Osiel Cardenas Guillen emerging as the new leader of the group. Under Guillen, the Gulf Cartel expanded its trade further and created the now independent Los Zetas organization as the enforcement arm of the organization.
- In 2003 Cardenas Guillen was arrested in Matamoros, Tamaulipas. After his arrest he continued to run operations for the Gulf Cartel from La Palma prison, leading to his extradition to the U.S. in 2004.<sup>4</sup> After Guillen's arrest, the Sinaloa Cartel began making moves on Gulf territory, sparking a war between the two organizations in 2003.
- Furthermore, following Guillen's extradition to the U.S. an internal power struggle ensued with Los Zetas splitting from the organization in 2007, leading to decentralized power structure shared between Jorge Eduardo Costilla Sanchez and Antonio Ezequiel Cardenas Guillen.<sup>5</sup> After the split from Los Zetas, the Gulf Cartel is believed to have entered into an alliance with the Sinaloa and Familia (Caballeros Templarios) organizations.<sup>6</sup>

### B. Types of illegal activities engaged in,

#### a. In general

- Drug Trafficking, Human Trafficking, Extortion, Kidnapping, mass murder

#### b. Specific detail: types of illicit trafficking activities engaged in

- Trafficking cocaine, methamphetamine, heroin, and marijuana through Matamoros and Reynosa in Tamaulipas state Mexico.
- Trafficking cocaine into the United States and major cities in Texas, Georgia, Illinois, and Delaware
- Extortion of *Coyotes* (human traffickers) operating in Reynosa and Tamaulipas
- Extortion of local businesses in Matamoros
- Mass Murder of migrants moving through Tamaulipas<sup>7</sup>

### C. Scope and Size

#### a. Estimated size of network and membership

- At one point, the Gulf Cartel was one of the strongest DTOs operating in Mexico. However, since the extradition of Osiel Cardenas Guillen to the U.S. and the split of Los Zetas from the cartel, the power and size of the Cartel has waned. No clear numbers exist for current membership.

#### b. Countries / regions group is known to have operated in. (i.e. the group's operating area)

- Tamaulipas State, Mexico; Nuevo Leon, Mexico; Italy; Nicaragua
- Texas (Fort Worth, Dallas, El Paso, San Antonio, Houston, Eagle Pass, Laredo, Corpus

Information derived from several sources and searchable databases.

All research conducted according to the project manual.

Christi, Laredo, Roma, Rio Grande City, Edinburg, McAllen, Brownsville)

- Arizona (Nogales)
- Oklahoma (Oklahoma City)
- Louisiana (Lafayette, New Orleans)
- Florida (Jacksonville, Orlando, Lakeland, Tampa, West Palm Beach, Miami)
- Georgia (Atlanta)
- Tennessee (Knoxville, Memphis)
- South Carolina (Greenville)
- North Carolina (Greensboro, Raleigh, Wilson, Wilmington)
- Maryland (Greenbelt)
- Kentucky (Louisville)
- Missouri (St. Louis)
- Illinois (East St. Louis, Chicago)
- Ohio (Cincinnati)
- Nebraska (Omaha)
- South Dakota (Sioux Falls)
- Pennsylvania (Philadelphia)
- New York (Buffalo, New York)
- Massachusetts (Boston)

#### **D. Leader Characteristics**

a. Who is/are the leader(s)

- Juan Garcia Abrego (Incarcerated U.S.), Osiel Cardenas Guillen (AKA: “Mata-Amigos”) (Incarcerated U.S.), Antonio Cardenas Guillen (AKA: “Tony Tormenta”) Logistic/Financial Leader (Deceased 2010), Jorge Eduardo Costilla Sanchez (AKA: “El Coss”) (Current Leader)

b. Leadership timeline

- Abrego 1984-1996; Osiel Cardenas Guillen 1996-2003; Antonio Cardenas Guillen/Costilla Sanchez 2003-2010; Costilla Sanchez 2010-Present

c. Leadership style (autocratic, diffuse, etc.)

- Autocratic initially, more diffuse since Osiel Cardenas Guillen’s arrest.

#### **E. Organizational Structure**

a. Topology (cellular, hierarchical, etc.)

- Hierarchical in Mexico/ Operates in Cells in the U.S.

b. Membership – is there formal or informal membership in the organization or network? What role do informal or nonmembers play in trafficking and other criminal activities?

- Formal and informal. Formal members are limited to control and command operations and are rarely involved directly in criminal activities. Group affiliates are more likely to be the actual perpetrators of trafficking.<sup>8</sup>

c. Command and Control (decentralized or centralized)

- Decentralized since the death of Antonio Cardenas Guillen’s death.

#### **F. Resources**

a. Financial

- In 1993, Prosecutors at a Grand Jury Hearing in Houston estimated that the Gulf Cartel was operating a U.S. \$4 Billion per year business.<sup>9</sup> However, since that time the Gulf’s power has waxed and waned, so they could be worth more or less.

b. Human

- At one point, the Gulf was in control of the Zetas, a paramilitary enforcer group. The Information derived from several sources and searchable databases.

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Zetas have since split from the group and are operating on their own, severely weakening the military power of the cartel.

c. Logistical

i. Forgery, safe-houses, etc.

- The Gulf Cartel operates out of a number of municipalities in the states of Tamaulipas and Nuevo Leon, often operating out of safe houses where large amounts of munitions, radio equipment, and vehicles are stored.<sup>10</sup> More recently DTOs including the Gulf Cartel have been using fake-law enforcement vehicles to conceal their movements.<sup>11</sup>

ii. Key routes

- The transit route for the Gulf Cartel is Highway 57 which runs through the state of Nuevo Leon and then up through to the major border crossing at Nuevo Laredo.<sup>12</sup> Some of the current conflict between the Zetas and the Gulf is over access to this shipping route.

d. Transportation

i. Land

- Highways 57 and 197

ii. Sea

- Receive shipments of cocaine through fiberglass submersibles from Colombia<sup>13</sup>

iii. Air

- N/A

iv. Intermodal container

- Transit shipments on the ground are largely done through intermodal containers run through the border crossing at Nuevo Laredo.

**G. Trafficking Methods and Modalities**

a. Corruption

- Law Enforcement officials on both sides of the border, teachers, and politicians.<sup>14</sup>

b. Concealment

- Fake law enforcement vehicles. Mexican/U.S. military uniforms and IDs<sup>15</sup>

c. Deception

- See Above

d. Circumvention (avoiding border entry points)

- Operates brazenly at border crossings, as of yet no tunnels or other methods identified

**H. Prior / Existing Relationships**

a. Other criminal organizations (cooperative and conflictual)

- Allies: Sinaloa Federation, La Familia Michoacan (Caballeros Templarios). Enemies: Los Zetas, Juarez Cartel, Beltran Leyva Organization

b. Corrupt politicians, law enforcement, political parties and other state entities, etc.

- In the 1980s and 1990s the Cartel enjoyed political protection from top members of the Mexican Government.<sup>16</sup> As of late the Gulf has been more concerned with directly challenging the legitimacy and power of the state through assassinations and intimidation of key political figures in Tamaulipas and Nuevo Leon.<sup>17</sup> However, the group has been incredibly successful in co-opting local law enforcement on both sides of the border in order to aid their shipments across the border.<sup>18</sup>

c. *Specific detail: Any alliances / past dealings with terrorist groups.*

- No specific accounts report contact with or dealings with terrorist groups have been

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found.

<b>I. Ideological / Ethnic / Familial Orientation (if any)</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• N/A</li></ul>
<b>J. Technical Sophistication</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• The Gulf is incredibly sophisticated and advanced. According some accounts, so advanced that they can alter routes immediately if compromised and use satellite imagery and telecoms to avoid law enforcement.<sup>19</sup></li></ul>
<b>K. Penchant for Innovation</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• In order to survive the Gulf has had to be incredibly innovative. It was the Gulf that first employed former military members in their bid to control territory. Moreover, as the cartel has evolved, its methods of avoidance have become increasingly more sophisticated including the use of satellite imagery, radio communications, forgery, money laundering etc.</li></ul>
<b>L. Activities in United States</b>
a. Includes both criminal and non-criminal activities
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Mostly trafficking related activities; murder related to trafficking activities and rivalries in Mexico; safehouses; weapons trafficking; weapons stashes; extortion.</li></ul>
b. <i>Specific detail: trafficking activities ; logistical activities</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• The Gulf relies on Houston to serve as a key distribution hub for its product which it then feeds to other major U.S. cities in which it operates: Atlanta, Chicago, New York, etc.<sup>20</sup></li></ul>
c. Linkages with US groups
i. Market/transaction links
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• The Gulf has been tied to a number of smaller Latin American gangs operating in the U.S. including: Hermanos de Pistoleros Latinos, Latin Kings, Mara-Salvatrucha, Mexicanemi, Tango Blast, and Texas Syndicate.<sup>21</sup></li></ul>
ii. Stable supplier
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Up until recently, the group has been a steady supplier for its operations in the U.S. but the current contest with the Zetas have significantly decreased its ability to move drugs</li></ul>
iii. Franchise arrangement
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Information not found</li></ul>
iv. HQ and Branch office
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• HQ is mostly around Houston, TX area</li></ul>
<b>M. Evaluations</b>
a. Strengths
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• The Gulf Cartel is one of the most durable DTOs operating in Mexico. It has survived multiple transitions of power and its leaders have employed business, technological, structural, and military innovations in order to survive.</li></ul>
b. Weaknesses and vulnerabilities
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Currently the Gulf is in a protracted conflict with the Zetas over territory in Tamaulipas and Nuevo Leon. This has severely drained the group of influence, power, and resources as it has had to contend with both the Mexican State and the Zetas. With the death of Antonio Cardenas Guillen, the organization lacks clear leadership at the top and is facing internal and external turmoil.</li></ul>
c. Additional insights
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• The hierarchical structure of the Gulf Cartel make it an easier target for Mexican State police and military forces to attack, as clear lines of power can be drawn from the top</li></ul>

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down.

#### Other Notes

- In terms of cooperation with terrorist organizations, there is no indication that the Gulf has ever worked with or will work with terrorist organizations. What is more, the group has been increasingly retracted into its own sphere of influence and has been fighting for its survival with other groups in Mexico and against the Mexican State itself. At the same time, the Gulf operates a multi-million, if not billion, dollar criminal enterprise. It is unlikely it they would have any incentive to cooperate with a terrorist organization in trafficking CBRN materials across the border.

<sup>1</sup> "Gulf Cartel", *Insight: Organized Crime in the Americas*. <http://www.insightcrime.org/criminal-groups/mexico/gulf-cartel/>, (May 2, 2011).

<sup>2</sup> Ibid <http://www.insightcrime.org/criminal-groups/mexico/gulf-cartel/> (May 2, 2011).

<sup>3</sup> "Gulf Cartel History," *Google Timelines*. [http://www.google.com/search?sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8&q=gulf+cartel+history#q=gulf+cartel+history&hl=en&prmd=ivns&tbs=tl:1&tbo=u&ei=Atm-TbesMIOGtwf9k6jNBQ&sa=X&oi=timeline\\_result&ct=title&resnum=11&ved=0CGwQ5wIwCg&fp=4fb0f0f8f5e6150c](http://www.google.com/search?sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8&q=gulf+cartel+history#q=gulf+cartel+history&hl=en&prmd=ivns&tbs=tl:1&tbo=u&ei=Atm-TbesMIOGtwf9k6jNBQ&sa=X&oi=timeline_result&ct=title&resnum=11&ved=0CGwQ5wIwCg&fp=4fb0f0f8f5e6150c) (May 2, 2011).

<sup>4</sup> Garzon, Juan Carlos *Mafia & CO. The Criminal Networks in Mexico, Brazil, and Colombia* trans. Kathy Ogle (D.C. Washington: Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, 2008) p.82.

<sup>5</sup> Roebuck, Jeremy, "Violence the result of fractured arrangement between Zetas and Gulf Cartel, authorities say" *The Brownsville Herald* March 9, 2010. <http://www.brownsvilleherald.com/news/say-109525-arrangement-violence.html>, (May 2, 2011).

<sup>6</sup> Ibid <http://www.brownsvilleherald.com/news/say-109525-arrangement-violence.html> (May 2, 2011).

<sup>7</sup> "59 Bodies found buried in series of pits in northern Mexico state of Tamaulipas" *Associated Press* April 7, 2011. [http://www.nydailynews.com/news/world/2011/04/07/2011-04-07\\_59\\_bodies\\_found\\_buried\\_in\\_series\\_of\\_pits\\_in\\_northern\\_mexico\\_state\\_of\\_tamaulipas.html](http://www.nydailynews.com/news/world/2011/04/07/2011-04-07_59_bodies_found_buried_in_series_of_pits_in_northern_mexico_state_of_tamaulipas.html) (May 2, 2011)

<sup>8</sup> "Jury Convicts Cartel Associate of Conspiracy to Kidnap and Kidnapping," *Department of Justice*. <http://sanantonio.fbi.gov/dojpressrel/pressrel10/sa012210.htm> (May 2, 2011).

<sup>9</sup> "Gulf Cartel" <http://www.insightcrime.org/criminal-groups/mexico/gulf-cartel/> (May 2, 2011).

<sup>10</sup> "15 Cartel Members Arrested in Nuevo Leon," *Neglected War*, February 2, 2011. <http://neglectedwar.com/blog/archives/2305> (May 3, 2011).

<sup>11</sup> "STRATCOM Foreign Print Media Summary for NORTHCOM 13-19 Apr 11," *Stratcom* (Internet Version-WWW) April 13-19, 2011, OSC: FBS20110427552883.

<sup>12</sup> *Under the Volcano: Notes on Mexican Politics, Periodic notes on key developments in Mexican politics, June 29, 2010*. <http://mexicopolitics.wordpress.com/tag/gulf-cartel/> (May 3, 2011).

<sup>13</sup> "Drug traffickers uses submersibles to ferry narcotics" *Los Angeles Times*, November 6, 2007. <http://www.latimes.com/news/nationworld/world/la-fg-narcosub6nov06,0,6804696.story> (May 3, 2011).

<sup>14</sup> Brezoscky, Lynn, "Ex Sherriff gets 5 years for helping drug cartel" *Houston Chronicle*, April 27, 2009. <http://www.chron.com/disp/story.mpl/metropolitan/6589753.html> (May 3, 2011).

<sup>15</sup> Webster, Michael, "Sargent in the U.S. Air Force pleads guilty to bribery, extortion and conspiracy" *Article Base* February 11, 2009 (May 3, 2011).

<sup>16</sup> "Gulf Cartel", <http://www.insightcrime.org/criminal-groups/mexico/gulf-cartel/> (May 5, 2011).

<sup>17</sup> *Under the Volcano*, <http://mexicopolitics.wordpress.com/tag/gulf-cartel/> (May 5, 2011).

<sup>18</sup> Brezoscky, Lynn, "Ex Sherriff gets 5 years for helping drug cartel" *Houston Chronicle*, April 27, 2009. <http://www.chron.com/disp/story.mpl/metropolitan/6589753.html> (May 3, 2011).

<sup>19</sup> Brophy, Stephanie, "Mexico: Cartels, corruption and cocaine: A profile on the Gulf Cartel" in *Global Crime*, 9:3, 2008, 255.

<sup>20</sup> Schiller, Dane, "Insidious rise of the Gulf Cartel: Interviews, files and court records trace syndicate's growth from small-time pot smuggling to mega empire with a hub in Houston" *Houston Chronicle* January 4, 2010. <http://www.chron.com/disp/story.mpl/metropolitan/6796067.html> (May 5, 2011).

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<sup>21</sup>“National Drug Threat Assessment 2010,” *U.S. Department of Justice National Drug Intelligence Center* February 2010, p.64-65.