

## Mexican Drug Lord Captured—So What?

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U.S. and Mexican officials are in full celebratory mode following the capture of Miguel Angel Treviño Morales, the head of Mexico's infamous, extraordinarily violent Zetas drug cartel. It's certainly a good development that such a sadistic sociopath is no longer walking free. Treviño Morales was fond of ordering his henchmen to perform especially gruesome tortures on enemies as a prelude to their executions. Since he is the third high-level Zetas leader to be killed or captured in the past 10 months, Mexican authorities are optimistic that they now have the cartel on the ropes.

The celebrations are at a minimum premature and in all likelihood unwarranted. This development does nothing to change the fundamental economics of the illegal drug trade. It is still a global enterprise conservatively estimated at \$350 billion a year, and Mexico's portion of that trade is at least \$35 billion and probably closer to \$50 billion. Since U.S. consumers provide the biggest retail market for those illicit substances, the Mexican cartels are perfectly positioned geographically and have a massive financial incentive to dominate that trade. Indeed, as I show in my latest book *The Fire Next Door: Mexico's Drug Violence and the Danger to America* [3], most of the fighting among the various cartels has been over control of the highly profitable trafficking routes into the United States. That struggle has led to more than seventy thousand deaths in Mexico in the past six-and-a-half years.

The arrest of Treviño Morales is not likely to dampen the violence. Indeed, it is more likely to have the opposite effect, since it may lead to a power struggle between factions of the Zetas for control of the organization. That is what has typically occurred whenever Mexican authorities captured or killed other kingpins over the decades. The killing of Ramón Arellano Félix in early 2002 and the apprehension of his brother Benjamin later that year destabilized the powerful Tijuana cartel and led to an extremely bloody succession struggle lasting several years. Likewise, when soldiers killed Arturo Beltrán-Leyva in December 2009, the aftermath was an internal cartel conflict that caused a surge of bloodletting in Monterey and several other cities.

Removing Treviño Morales from the picture also creates expansion opportunities for outside competitors, in this case primarily the Sinaloa and Gulf cartels. The fortunes of those organizations have been on very different trajectories in recent years. The Sinaloa cartel successfully fended off challenges from the Beltrán-Leyva organization as well as La Familia, a quasi-religious trafficking outfit that has since splintered. Sinaloa cartel leaders also exploited the divisions in the Tijuana cartel to gain dominance in that city and gradually displaced the once-powerful Juárez traffickers to now dominate the trade in Ciudad Juárez and its environs. The Gulf cartel, on the other hand, has had to fight for survival after its former enforcement arm, the Zetas, broke away and formed an independent—and more effective—trafficking operation. The weakening of the Zetas may be a lifesaver for the Gulf cartel and perhaps even enable it to regain its status as one of Mexico's leading trafficking organizations, although that can happen only after a major struggle with the Sinaloa cartel and other rivals.

Such turf fights have been the typical pattern in similar settings since the early 1980s, and a lot of innocent people become collateral damage in such conflicts. The decapitation of the Zetas may well create a spike in Mexico's drug-related violence over the next year or so. That would be an especially unhappy development, since the carnage in that country has actually leveled off over the past year, and some cautious hope has emerged that the worst excesses of the drug wars might be over.

Those who believe that the elimination of Treviño Morales or any other kingpin will produce a lasting victory in the war on drugs need to heed the sarcastic comments of another drug lord, Ismael "El Mayo" Zambada, during a media interview in 2010. "One day I will decide to turn myself in to the government so they can shoot me," he joked. "They will shoot me and euphoria will break out. But at the end of [a few] days we'll all know that nothing has changed." Zambada pointed out the reason why. "Millions of people are wrapped up in the narco problem. How can they be overcome? For all the bosses jailed, dead or extradited, their replacements are already here."

Zambada highlights the fallacy of believing that the demise of a cartel leader will make any real difference. The strategy of drug prohibition creates an enormous black-market premium and makes the drug trade far more profitable than it would be otherwise. It also guarantees that whenever a major trafficker falls, other equally ruthless types will be ready and eager to take his place, thereby gaining control over those enormous potential profits. The cast of characters may change, but the nature of the trade and the underlying folly of drug prohibition remain depressingly the same.