

The Battle of Culiacán and the Evolution of the Sinaloa Cartel

Over the past decade, the cartels of South America – particularly the Sinaloa Cartel in Mexico – have become increasingly violent. So much so, that some scholars and practitioners have labelled them “Narco-Terrorists.” This evolution was demonstrated on October 17, 2019 when the Mexican National Guard attempted to arrest Ovidio Guzmán López, the son of Joaquín ‘El Chapo’ Guzmán, and clashed with members of the cartel. Acts of mass violence such as the Battle of Culiacán have demonstrated that the cartels of South America are evolving to resemble terrorist groups more than a criminal gang. Therefore, when examining the Sinaloa Cartel’s motivations, governance structures, and strategic decisions in relation to the Battle of Culiacán it becomes clear that they have evolved into an insurgent force.

After the United States’ Department of Justice indicted Ovidio Guzmán López, the Mexican National Guard attempted to arrest Guzmán and was met by nearly 700 armed cartel gunmen. Once the outnumbered Mexican forces took Guzmán, the cartel began a violent campaign against both civilian and government targets throughout the city of Culiacán. The Sinaloa Cartel openly walked the streets with their weapons, terrorizing citizens and shutting down roads, airports, and public transportation systems. This went on for hours until the Mexican Government released Ovidio Guzmán López. During the press conference announcing Guzmán’s release, the Mexican President, Andrés Manuel López Obrador, told the country that he did not want war, but instead he wanted an end to the violence. In total, 13 people were killed in the violence. This level of violence can, and should, be described as terrorism. Terrorism is a strategy that can be used by groups in order to change or maintain the status quo. In the case of the Battle of Culiacán, the Sinaloa choose to utilize violence against civilians and the government in order to have Guzmán returned to them and the status quo maintained.

In order to further explain how the Sinaloa Cartel, and other drug trafficking organizations, are evolving into terrorist organizations it is important to examine the motivations that are behind the groups' actions. The Sinaloa Cartel has a largely economic, or greed driven, motivation of maintaining their drug operation and level of influence in the region. Therefore, the cartel weighed both the costs and the benefits of implementing a campaign of increased violence against government and civilian targets and decided that the benefits of terrorism outweighed the costs (Collier and Hoeffler 2000). More specifically, in relation to the Battle of Culiacán, it was more beneficial to the organization to ensure that Ovidio Guzmán López was not extradited to the United States. The cartel maintained their legitimacy as violent force that was able to manipulate the state by defeating the Mexican National Guard and forcing the Mexican Government to release Ovidio Guzmán López. Had Ovidio Guzmán López been extradited, it would have harmed the groups ability to create fear amongst the population they exist within.

The evolution of the Sinaloa Cartel can also be seen and explained by their insurgent structure and their ability to provide some governance structure. Jones (2016) stated that the goal of an insurgent force is to disrupt the functioning of a state and their access to resources. The Sinaloa Cartel successfully disrupted the law enforcement function of the Mexican Government when they forced the hand of President López Obrador and he order the release of Ovidio Guzmán López. Furthermore, insurgents are most successful in a country or region when they provide an alternative source of governance (Jones 2016). While the Sinaloa Cartel is violent and deadly towards those who try to stop them or aid in stopping them, they provide valuable and necessary resources to their membership. Therefore, to those who have accepted the goals of the organization, the Sinaloa Cartel acts as an alternative system of government that can

provide a steady (although dangerous) source of income and protection, whereas the Mexican Government is unable to accomplish either of those tasks.

Terrorism is a strategic and rational tactic that a group will turn to when they are weak but still want to disrupt the function of a state. There is no one answer to why terrorism is utilized; the cause can depend upon the economic, social, or political environment that a group exist within. Furthermore, there are group and individual psychological variables that influence an organization's decision to participate in terrorism (Crenshaw 1981). Therefore, the fact that the Sinaloa Cartel is motivated by profit does not mean that they will avoid terrorism. As previously explained, it could provide an explanation for why the cartel does turn to terrorism. If the Sinaloa Cartel felt their organizational goals and regional power were being threaten, they can use or threaten to use violence against civilian or government targets in order to maintain their current standing. Similarly, if the group wanted to expand their power within a population or wanted to expand their drug trafficking operation, they can utilize terrorism to challenge the Mexican Government (Crenshaw 1981). Therefore, the Battle of Culiacán demonstrates that the Sinaloa Cartel has already incorporated terrorism into their strategy.

When examining the Sinaloa Cartel motivations, governing ability, and strategy it becomes clear that they have evolved to be something more than just a criminal organization: they are an insurgent force. As crucial as profit-making is to the Sinaloa Cartel, the lengths they went to in order to ensure that Ovidio Guzmán López was not extradited to the United States proves they are determined to have a level of legitimacy in the eyes of the Mexican people and government. If an individual pledges and proves loyalty to the cartel, the group has the ability to provide basic resources such as income and protection. Therefore, the Sinaloa Cartel has been able to be an alternative form of government in some parts of Mexico, similar to an insurgent

group. Finally, in order to influence the decision of the Mexican Government the cartel has begun to threaten to use and to use violence against both civilian and government targets. The best example of this behavior was the Battle of Culiacán. The Sinaloa Cartel turned the city into a war zone until the Mexican Government released Ovidio Guzmán López. Therefore, not only are they using terrorism, they are using terrorism successfully.

Admitting that the South American cartels, most importantly the Sinaloa Cartel, have evolved into insurgent groups that are much more dangerous than a criminal gang will aid in countering them. For example, the Mexican Government (with the support of the United States Government) has been using a leadership decapitation strategy in order to weaken the Sinaloa Cartels. Unsurprisingly, this strategy has not been working. The Sinaloa Cartel is a well-established organization so a leadership decapitation will not halt their operation (Jordan 2009). Furthermore, the removal of a leader will (and has been) leading to increased violence since factions are fighting for control of the operation. Therefore, it is crucial that governments begin to realize that the cartels have transformed to resemble terrorist groups so that they can craft strategy that will effectively eliminate the groups.

Links to Information on the Battle of Culiacán and the Sinaloa Cartel:

<https://time.com/5705358/sinaloa-cartel-mexico-culiacan/>

<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/23/opinion/el-chapo-son-mexico.html>

<https://www.cfr.org/backgrounders/mexicos-drug-war>