

# Defining Mexico's Zapatista Army of National Liberation

Written by W. Alejandro Sanchez

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W. ALEJANDRO SANCHEZ, OCT 22 2012

A September 24 article published by *e-International Relations* entitled "The End of Ideologically-Motivated Violent Movements in Latin America?" analyzed whether political ideology has ceased to be a factor among the insurgent movements in Latin America. One organization that deserves a special analysis is Mexico's Zapatista Army of National Liberation (*Ejercito Zapatista de Liberacion Nacional* – EZLN).[1]

### A Brief Historical Overview

The EZLN, a barely-armed indigenous guerrilla group, became a household-name in Mexico after their armed uprising in the state of Chiapas in January 1994.[2] Their leader is known as *SubComandante Marcos*, who effectively governs a group of villages in the southern state of Chiapas. Marcos operates under a vaguely defined title that has created questions over whether there is a *commander* – another leader above Marcos – while his mysterious persona has given him a wide range of popularity. In the Declaration of the Lacandon Jungle of 1993, which the EZLN refers to as its declaration of war, the organization included the defeat of the Mexican Federation's army as one of their goals. The EZLN expressed the desire to allow the newly liberated population to elect freely and democratically their own authorities. Furthermore, via the declaration, the EZLN demanded the end of the looting of natural resources found in the areas controlled by the organization. The insurgent group goes on to request the support of the Mexican people in the struggle for work, land, education, justice, democracy, and respect for native rights.

The stated goal of the Marxist-Leninist Zapatistas is to bring autonomous control to the indigenous people of Chiapas, though not necessarily to overthrow the Mexican government, which differentiates it from other Latin American guerrilla groups. In a June 2005 communiqué (the Sixth Declaration of the Lacandon Jungle), the EZLN stated its decision to listen to the Mexican populace, deciding to cease fire and no longer engage in attacks against the Mexican military or other opposing security forces. Despite seeming to choose a pacifistic means towards accomplishing their objectives, the EZLN maintains, in that same statement, its willingness – even obligation – to resume an armed struggle if necessary. It also puts forth their desire for a new national constitution that recognizes the "rights and liberties of the people and defends the weak in front of the mighty." Such declarations in favor of the poor masses are fairly common of insurgent movements. For example, a September declaration by the Colombian guerilla movement FARC, which has waged a decades-old war against the Colombian government, also states its willingness to attain peace in the country, "establish a true democracy," and condemns the "powers that be" for destroying the country's natural resources.

The Mexican government has carried out a sometimes controversial two-pronged approach consisting of crackdown operations and negotiations to deal with Marcos and the EZLN. One of the bloodiest examples was the December 1997 massacre, in which 45 members of the Tzotzil indigenous community were killed. Mexican paramilitaries are accused of having carried out the attack, though accounts differ as to whether the government and/or military knew about or authorized the operation. Meanwhile, operations by the EZLN have been fairly low-key in recent years. In September 2010, EZLN members blocked the Panamerican highway (in the Comitán-San Cristóbal area). An indigenous protester said that the move was to protest the deployment of paramilitary troops to the region and

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accused the troops of torture. Even though the EZLN has lost momentum when it comes to being in the national spotlight, it remains a regional powerhouse within areas in Chiapas. Nevertheless, Zapatista supporters have been frequently harassed by groups associated with the government. For example, in September 2012 Zapatista villagers were expelled from the Zapatista community known as Comandante Abel, by members of a paramilitary group known as *Paz y Justicia*.

## The (Missing) Narco Link

A critical issue in an analysis of the Zapatistas is their link, or lack thereof, to the Mexican drug cartels. Around 2010, Chiapas, where the Zapatistas generally operate, was considered under the control of the Sinaloa Federation. Nowadays, territories within that state has been classified by intelligence analysts at STRATFOR as either under the control of the Zetas cartel or as "disputed territory." The aforementioned STRATFOR map should be taken with a grain of salt, particularly when it comes to fully understanding how vast the Zeta's influence is. Nevertheless, it does provide general idea of their current area of operations, given the vast array of criminal enterprises which they are involved in, from drug trafficking to human trafficking. The possibility of Zetas influence in southern Mexico is not surprising. It is clear that the cartel has been expanding to the southern areas of the country and has even established a presence across the border in neighboring Guatemala. As previously mentioned, it makes sense for the Zetas to be involved in the southern border areas of the country as this cartel has become heavily involved in human trafficking originating in Central America all the way to the Mexican-U.S. border.

To what extent, if any, do the Zapatistas have relations with drug cartels like the Zetas? According to a plethora of declarations and interviews with Marcos, the EZLN's *raison d'être* since its foundation was to fight for the poor, oppressed indigenous communities of South Mexico. Assuming that this is true, it would make sense that they would oppose the cartels and try to stop the narco-violence that has spread throughout so much of the country. A 2012 report by *Al Jazeera* helps put the situation in perspective. According to the news agency's virtual map from 2007-2010, there were 304 violent deaths in Chiapas. In comparison, the state of Guerrero, experienced 2,727 deaths due to narco-violence. It is important to remember that this data should not be regarded as definitive; disappearances are not often reported, new graves are constantly being found and it is debatable whether a murder should be attributed to a cartel or to some other kind of violence (especially considering the high number of unsolved murders in Mexico). In an interview with the author, an analyst that has done significant work on Mexico explained that "for example, Oaxaca has very high levels of political violence that have nothing to do with the cartels." [3] Hence the *Al Jazeera* map merely provides an analytical starting point.

Is the lack of major violence in Chiapas, as compared to Guerrero, due to the presence of the Zapatistas? Or can it be explained for other reasons, such as a lack of confrontation between two cartels vying for territorial expansion? The state of Guerrero is an important drug plaza. Hence, there is some sense for the high levels of violence there. On the other hand, Chiapas is more isolated due to its geography and closed communities, which may make the state, arguably, less appealing for the cartels. Another theory would be that low levels of violence can simply be due to successful governmental security operations and a presence of Mexico's military and police forces, though that is debatable.

On May 2011, an estimated 20,000 EZLN members in Chiapas took part in a national protest to demand an end to President Felipe Calderon's military solution to the cartels. Around that time, Marcos declared that the war between the cartels and the government would end in thousands of deaths and a destroyed, uninhabited nation. He also stated that the sole winner in this war was the American military industry. From what has been made public, the Zapatista leader has not taken a position regarding the ongoing battle between the drug cartels and Mexican military. Although one could assume, as previously argued, that the Zapatistas should be fighting against the expansion of the cartels while not necessarily working with the Mexican security forces. Unfortunately, the lack of available information prevents us from giving a more complete assessment of the reality in Chiapas.

More recently, according to one analyst, the Zapatistas have largely refrained from illegal activity and, instead, have become more of a grassroots social movement in recent years. An analysis in *InsightCrime* also argues that by turning away from armed struggle, the group has also been afforded a certain amount of political legitimacy. Unlike

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their guerrilla cousins in Colombia and Peru, the Zapatistas have widespread support both from the Mexican left and on the global stage, where they are known as a spearhead of the anti-globalization movement.

Can it be truly said that the Zapatistas, from the lowest-ranking members to *Subcomandante* Marcos himself are not involved in drug trafficking? The aforementioned Mexico specialist interviewed by the author argues that Zapatista communities are better able to withstand the spread of the cartels precisely because they are *communities* that are under less economic strain than other parts of the country. The analyst suspects the cartels steer clear of that region because they have no reason to penetrate those communities and the challenges of doing so are higher.; Leaving aside this speculation, the truth is that greater in-depth research and analysis from the field is needed to better understand the relationship between this movement and the drug cartels.

As both a disclaimer and an acknowledgement of the possible scarcity of information, in preparation for this analysis, this author was unable to find media reports regarding confrontations between EZLN and cartels. This does not necessarily mean that such incidents have not occurred, but rather that they may have gone unreported. Given the territorial overlap between the EZLN and a cartel like the Zetas, which is known for its vicious attacks (such as the Monterrey massacre in which 43 individuals were killed) it is difficult to find credibility in the idea that confrontations between both groups have not occurred at some point.

## Analyzing an Unclear Movement

The aforementioned *InsightCrime* report brings up a critical aspect of how the Zapatistas are regarded by certain analysts. The analysis indirectly compares the EZLN to narco-insurgent movements such as the Colombian FARC, ELN, and Peru's Shining Path, stating that the EZLN is an entity that is "incongruous" with the rest. Arguably, the Zapatistas do not belong in the same category as groups as the FARC. A major reason for this is the nature of these movements' stated objectives. While the FARC or Shining Path had as an ultimate goal of carrying out a regime change and installing themselves as the new governments in Colombia and Peru respectively, the Zapatistas' goal was to promote the rights and protection of the indigenous communities that they represented. In addition, while the EZLN has some Communist traits in its ideology, Shining Path is regarded as having a Maoist tendency.[4] Such ideological differences may not matter so much in the Post-Cold War era, but they are important and should be highlighted in order to properly analyze a violent movement.

There is not enough information available to make a proper assessment of the relationship between the EZLN and Mexican cartels, particularly the Zetas, which have influence in territories close to where the EZLN operates. If all EZLN members are truly committed to the Zapatistas' goals, the group would be a cohesive unit that fights to keep the influence and violence of the cartels out of their regions. Realistically, however, this is wishful thinking at best. Individuals are susceptible to corruption and the ongoing cartel vs. government war in Mexico has provided plenty of examples of corruption cases at all levels of the Mexican government and civil society. Without more transparency from the Zapatistas, it is difficult to assess whether its members, particularly its leaders, have been immune to the cartels, whether via bribes or coercion.

Finally, given the Zapatistas' objectives, *modus operandi* and tactics, is it correct to label such a group as a violent extremist movement like the Colombian FARC or Peru's Shining Path? Terms such as terrorists, guerrillas, and insurgents tend to be used interchangeably when it comes to labeling organized violent criminal movements. With such general, uniform terminology, it is easy to miss what differences do exist between them.[5] Without going into a discussion of what a terrorist is, we can tentatively utilize a U.S. definition, which defines a terrorist as an entity that resorts to "premeditated, politically motivated violence perpetrated against noncombatant targets by sub-national groups or clandestine agents." Unlike the Shining Path, for example, the EZLN did not systematically kill innocent civilians via massacres, nor did they resort to tactics such as car bombs to accomplish objectives in the war against the government. For example, the Shining Path's first known operation was the mass murder of 69 civilians in 1983 – an action which defined them to the Peruvian public. A critical reason why the Zapatistas became popular both within Mexico and abroad was precisely because they did not resort to such wanton brutality. Nevertheless, whether justified or not, the EZLN is a movement that has risen against the Mexican government and has, at times, resorted to violence.[6]

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## Conclusions

The EZLN remains a fascinating case of a violent movement that appeared in the post-Cold War era Latin America, with some leftist aspects to its ideology and with goals that do not include regime change. Furthermore, from what is known, they have neither engaged in an all-out war against Mexican security forces nor have they carried out attacks against civilian non-combatants. The fact that some Zapatista communities have been harassed for paramilitary groups calls into question their level of organization and whether they possess any weapons with which to defend themselves. Nevertheless, positive characterizations of a "peaceful" Zapatista movement as the one issued by the aforementioned *InsightCrime* analysis demand greater research regarding the reasons why this movement has not been violent in recent years. In spite of any changes or drawdowns, more research and transparency is necessary to understand the group's current status, and its ties, or lack thereof, with the country's drug cartels, particularly the Zetas.

A critical issue worthy of further debate and analysis is whether the Zapatistas should be regarded as some kind of blueprint for future violent movements in Latin America. Will violent groups appear that may have some general political ideology, most likely with leftist tendencies, but with specific demands around a specific population but does not include regime change? In other words, will we see the rise of *localist* violent movements in the future as compared to *grandiose* ones that strive for regime change? The Zapatistas are arguably the first group that has emerged with such a pattern, and it is debatable whether the same types of conditions that fomented their apparition and durability can be duplicated in other regional states. Nevertheless, Latin America is known for being a region home to historical grievances, and, unfortunately, home to a cycle of violence that tends to perpetuate itself.

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[1] For a good summary of the EZLN's history, see: Arsenault, Chris. "Zapatistas: The War with no Breath?" Al Jazeera. Features. January 1, 2011. Available: <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2011/01/20111183946608868.html>

[2] For a good analysis of the 1994 uprising when it occurred, see: Wager, Stephen J. and Schulz, Donald E. "The Awakening: The Zapatista Revolt and Its Implication for the Civil-Military Relations in Mexico." Strategic Studies Institute. United States Army War College. December 30, 1994. Available: <http://1.usa.gov/RZle9Z>

[3] Email interview with the author. September 27, 2012.

[4] For a good analysis of Shining Path's political ideology, see: Starn, Orin. "Maoism in the Andes: The Communist Party of Peru-Shining Path and the Refusal of History." *J. of Latin American Studies*. 27. P. 399-421. Available: <http://www.latinamericanstudies.org/peru/shining-path.pdf>

[5] Some academic articles that discuss the definition of terrorism and other terms include: Bosco, David. *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*. Jan/Feb 2006, Vol. 62 Issue 1, p44-51. Also see:

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[6] For a good analysis regarding Zapatismo ideology vs. Mexican politics see: Stephen, Lynn. "Pro-Zapatista and Pro-Pri: Resolving the Contradictions of Zapatismo in Rural Oaxaca." *Latin American Research Review*. 32.2. 1997.

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