

Mexico captures drug cartel head

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On February 22 Mexican Marines captured the longtime head of the Mexican Sinaloa drug cartel, Joaquín “El Chapo” (Shorty) Guzmán Loera, in the Pacific Coast resort town of Mazatlán. His arrest dominated the news for weeks in Mexico and received extensive coverage as well in major media in the US and Europe.

Sinaloa is an agricultural state that runs for more than 350 miles along the eastern shore of the Gulf of California. The Sinaloa cartel had its origin in exporting heroin and marijuana in the 1960’s from its capital city Culiacán to the US. By the 1980’s, the cartel was also smuggling huge quantities of cocaine to the US, and later methamphetamines.

In the 1980’s, the US Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) considered the Sinaloa cartel to be the largest drug organization in Mexico. Washington ranks the cartel as “the most powerful drug trafficking organization in the world.” It is estimated that it supplied almost a quarter of the drugs imported into the US and has a virtual monopoly on sales in some areas. For example, the organization controls 80 percent of drug sales in Chicago, which in 2013 declared Guzmán “Public Enemy No. 1.”

Guzmán was reputed to have a fortune in excess of a billion dollars, and he regularly appeared in the Forbes list of billionaires until 2013.

Credible testimony shows that over the years the Sinaloa cartel corrupted a number of Mexican state police forces, as well as elements of the Mexican federal government and military, who protected it. Some have even alleged that the US government has favored the cartel over its rivals, but such allegations remain unproven. A DEA tip based on tracking the cell phone of a Guzmán associate purportedly led to his location and capture.

The previous decade witnessed an extremely violent war between the major Mexican drug cartels, as they

jockeyed for drug turf and smuggling routes. In 2010, the major cartels aligned into two factions. One was made up of the Juárez cartel, the Tijuana cartel, the Zetas (a particularly violent gang headed by former army special forces personnel), and the Beltrán-Leyva cartel, formed by brothers who had split with Guzmán and the Sinaloa cartel. The other faction consisted of the Sinaloa cartel, the Gulf (of Mexico) cartel, and the Familia Michoacana, which later evolved into the Knights Templar. (See “Battles between drug cartels and vigilante groups destabilize Mexico”).

Former Mexican President Felipe Calderón launched a war by the military against the cartels that led to led to 80,000 deaths and widespread human rights abuses. The Mexican populace turned strongly against the war.

Current Present Enrique Peña Nieto has dialed down and deemphasized the drug war, while pursuing his program of “modernizing” the Mexican economy by opening it up to unbridled penetration by international capital.

The older cartels limited their activities to drug importation, manufacture and exporting. The Zetas and the Familia Michoacana/Knights Templar have also engaged in widespread extortion and kidnapping for ransom, as have smaller gang groups and cliques. More recently Knights Templar have also conducted illegal iron ore mining operations, generating revenues estimated to be in excess of \$1 billion.

Reliable estimates are that major Mexican drug trafficking has generated profits between \$3-10 billion a year, a very substantial sum for the Mexican economy overall, especially given that most of this amounts to hard American dollars. Other studies have come up with much higher figures—even up to \$80 billion annually—leading to the conclusion that the drug trafficking industry is so large that were it to stop the Mexican economy would likely experience a severe destabilization.

In contrast, a 2008 Harvard University Department of Government study concluded that, due to the monetary costs of violence and corruption, the estimated losses in foreign investment, and the costs of local drug abuse, the illegal drug industry instead generated economic losses of about \$4.3 billion annually.

Popular views of the drug cartels have been contradictory and confused. Some drug lords, such as Chapo Guzmán, have garnered a measure of popular support for their occasional largesse in their home turf. In the weeks after Guzman's arrest, marches occurred in Culiacán demanding his release.

Cartel activity can in fact bring vast sums of money to local economies, alleviating grinding poverty and underdevelopment, particularly in rural communities.

Ballads or “corridos” have been written and performed by popular music groups romanticizing the exploits of the narco lords, as well as of the low-level “mules” who smuggle drugs across the border.

In Chicago's “Little Village” Mexican neighborhood, Rev. Jose Landaverde, an “activist” priest, was even quoted in the *New York Times* after Guzman's arrest as saying that Guzmán was a major influence amongst neighborhood youth, and “already stopped being a drug trafficker and became someone compared with Osama bin Laden, a political figure, an ideological one.”

Such sentiments conveniently ignore that entire civilian areas were swept into a maelstrom of violence when Guzmán's organization went to war against its rivals. Because of such violence, drug gangs are also widely reviled in Mexico.

The focus of the debate in Mexico's political circles and major media in the wake of Guzman's capture was whether it would create a vacuum that would unleash violence in Mexico and cities in the US such as Chicago, as opposed to his main lieutenant Ismael “El Mayo” Zambada seamlessly taking over the cartel's leadership.

Andrés Manuel López Obrador, the two-time presidential candidate of the center-“left” Party of the Democratic Revolution, called the whole Guzmán affair nothing but “a circus” to divert attention from Peña Nieto and the Mexican Congresses' opening up of Mexico's oil industry to foreign capital. He added: “There is a mafia in power that has hurt Mexico a lot; it's a white-collar criminality. When it comes to ill-

gotten riches, ‘El Chapo’ is nothing but a lactating child compared to those who plunder Mexico.”

This is more of Lopez Obrador's usual toothless populist demagoguery. But it is certainly true that the business and political elite in Mexico have acquired vast wealth at the expense of the Mexican masses over the last two decades—much of it unexplained. It is also the case that the ruling class now largely sees the war on drug trafficking as a diversion from its plan to continue that plunder on an even larger scale.

In the final analysis, only a revolutionary socialist program that ends the system of capitalist production for profit, and the exploitation and misery it generates, can sweep aside the basis for large scale narcotics trafficking and its resulting violence.



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