

1-1-2011

# Extreme Barbarism, a Death Cult, and Holy Warriors in Mexico: Societal Warfare South of the Border?

Robert J. Bunker  
*Claremont Graduate University*

John P. Sullivan  
*Center for Advanced Studies on Terrorism*

---

## Recommended Citation

Bunker, Robert J. and Sullivan, John P. "Extreme Barbarism, A Death Cult, and Holy Warriors in Mexico: Societal Warfare South of the Border?" *Small Wars Journal*. smallwarsjournal.com. 22 May 2011: 1-10.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the CGU Faculty Scholarship at Scholarship @ Claremont. It has been accepted for inclusion in CGU Faculty Publications and Research by an authorized administrator of Scholarship @ Claremont. For more information, please contact [scholarship@cuc.claremont.edu](mailto:scholarship@cuc.claremont.edu).



# SMALL WARS JOURNAL

---

[smallwarsjournal.com](http://smallwarsjournal.com)

## **Extreme Barbarism, a Death Cult, and Holy Warriors in Mexico: Societal Warfare South of the Border?**

**Robert J. Bunker and John P. Sullivan**

This short essay is about impression—gut feelings combined with a certain amount of analytical skill—about recent trends taking place in Mexico concerning the ongoing criminal insurgencies being waged by the various warring cartels, gangs, and mercenary organizations that have metastasized though out that nation (and in many other regions as well). The authors spent over eight hours sequestered together about a month ago on a five-hundred mile ‘there and back again road trip’ to attend a training conference as instructors for the Kern County Chiefs of Police. Our talks centered on Mexican Drug Cartels, 3<sup>rd</sup> Generation Gangs, 3<sup>rd</sup> Phase Cartels, Criminal Insurgency Theory, and a host of related topics most folks just don’t normally discuss in polite company. In the car, and at the conference, we were bombarded by Sullivan’s never ending twitter and social networking news feeds—in Spanish and English—linked to the criminal violence in Mexico. If Dante had been our contemporary, we fear, he could just have easily taken a stroll through some of the cities and towns of Mexico using those news feeds and substituting the imagery for the circles of hell he described in his early 14<sup>th</sup> century work the *Divine Comedy*.

The hours of conversation about the conflicts in Mexico, bolstered by the news feeds and even the Q&A from the training time provided to the Kern Chiefs, provided us both with much to reflect upon. Additionally, both authors are currently co-writing three essays for a follow-on project to the earlier *Narcos Over the Border* (Routledge) book, the work that zenpundit.com found as “...one of the more disturbing academic works recently published in the national security field, not excluding even those monographs dealing with Islamist terrorism and Pakistan,” concerning Mexico’s immense problems.<sup>1</sup> If this were not enough, as part of our ongoing collaboration, the authors have been trying to determine what to make of Hazen’s June 2010 *International Review of the Red Cross* paper “Understanding gangs as armed groups.”<sup>2</sup> Her conclusions just don’t correlate with the empirical evidence stemming from the cartel and gang related incidents regularly occurring in Mexico. That work suggests to us that American street gang researchers, whose work Hazen utilized as the basis of her analysis, are totally insulated from the reality of the conflicts in Mexico—just as are many members of the American public and their elected officials. For good or for bad, we are not so well insulated, having tracked what has been taking place in that country for some years now. The ongoing review (for the purposes of identifying cartel tattoos, cult icons, and instances of ritual killing) of the images of the tortured and broken bodies—some no longer recognizable as once ever being human beings—continually haunts us both.

Our impression is that what is now taking place in Mexico has for some time gone way beyond secular and criminal (economic) activities as defined by traditional organized crime studies.<sup>3</sup> In fact, the intensity of change may indeed be increasing. Not only have *de facto political* elements come to the fore—*i.e.*, when a cartel takes over an entire city or town, they have no choice but to take over political functions formerly administered by the local government— but social (*narcocultura*) and religious/spiritual (*narcocultos*) characteristics are now making themselves more pronounced. What we are likely witnessing is Mexican society starting to not only unravel but to go to war with itself. The bonds and relationships that hold that society together are fraying, unraveling, and, in some instances, the polarity is reversing itself with trust being replaced by mistrust and suspicion. Traditional Mexican values and competing criminal value systems are engaged in a brutal contest over the ‘hearts, minds, and souls’ of its citizens in a street-by-street, block-by-block, and city-by-city war over the future social and political organization of Mexico. Environmental modification is taking place in some urban centers and rural outposts as deviant norms replace traditional ones and the younger generation fully accepts a criminal value system as their baseline of behavior because they have known no other. The continuing incidents of ever increasing barbarism—some would call this a manifestation of evil even if secularly motivated—and the growing popularity of a death cult are but two examples of this clash of values. Additionally, the early rise of what appears to be cartel holy warriors may now also be taking place. While extreme barbarism, death cults, and possibly now holy warriors found in the Mexican cartel wars are still somewhat the exception rather than the rule, each of these trends is extremely alarming, and will be touched upon in turn.

### **Extreme Barbarism**

The 8 March 2011 video highlighted under the article “Narco Execution Videos and its Effects on the Population in General” is about as bad as it gets:

This video surfaced today on the narco blogs, its content is extremely violent. It is unknown exactly when it was filmed, nor where it took place.

The film lasts seven minutes, in which a group of masked men in military style clothing have hung a man by his feet. This person was clearly still alive when the assailants castrated him. Music can be heard playing in the background as one of the men step in and strategically peels back the face and skin of the victim before decapitating him. After it is over, the people standing around joke and laugh while they take cell pictures of this gruesome act. The video ends with the body being hacked up into pieces, and put into black plastic trash bags.<sup>4</sup>

Torture-killings have been part and parcel of the drug wars in Mexico but the level of brutality now appears very much to be in a sustained pattern. Since that video has aired, a number of other heinous acts have been chronicled in these additionally selected *Borderland Beat* (<http://www.borderlandbeat.com/>) postings. Just a few examples from early April quickly portray the horrors taking place in Mexico on an increasingly common basis:

- 5 April 2011: Several narco blogs have recently released a video showing a young blond haired woman decapitating a man whose head and hands are bound with what appears to be duct tape. It is unknown where and when the 14-minute video was made. During the video you can hear unidentified men advise the woman on how to perform the beheading, as well as their concerns that the event be documented properly on video. As the woman continues severing the victim's head with a machete, you can hear an unidentified man refer to her as “La Guera Loca” (the crazy blond), while another man says “This is what happens to those who help the Zetas”. After the woman finishes the decapitation and briefly poses with the head as a trophy, others begin to dismember the victim's body and skin the face and skull.

- 7 April 2011: Two men were recently found brutally murdered and posed in front of a shop in the Guadalupe neighborhood of Tepic, Nayarit. According to preliminary reports, the men were both skinned alive before their hearts were removed. At this time, neither man has been identified. *Note: This is somewhat reminiscent of an alleged Los Zetas incident that took place earlier— “...a June 6, 2010, torture/mass murder where six victims were found in a Cancun cave with their hearts cut out and ‘Z’ carved in their abdomens...”*<sup>5</sup>

- 8 April 2011: Wednesday afternoon, 42 year old Roberto Abarca Serna, a Social Science professor at the University Autonomous of Guerrero and the founder of Carrizo Theater Company, was kidnapped outside his home in Acapulco by a group of armed gunmen. The kidnappers called Abarco Serna's wife and demanded a \$40,000 pesos [*US dollar equivalent not specified*] ransom for his release. When his wife, Citlalli Delgado Galdino, took the money to her husband's kidnappers, she too was taken by force. The kidnappers tied Ms Delgado to a chair and forced her to watch as they beheaded her husband.

- 11 April 2011: Army troops found 16 more bodies in the mass graves outside the northern city of San Fernando, raising the total number of bodies discovered to 88, the Mexican Defense Secretariat said. *Note: These mass graves, and others like them in Northern Mexico, are now yielding hundreds of bodies of innocent victims likely killed by Los Zetas enforcers, the majority of which were Central Americans riding buses up North as they attempted to migrate to the US.*

This list could go on and on with dozens of similar incidents chronicled over the last month—the majority of them only reported in the Mexican press and never translated into English—with many times that number never even reported because of the impunity provided to those who commit such heinous acts. It is said that less than 2% of those who engage in criminal acts in Mexico are ever convicted and sentenced for their crimes.<sup>6</sup> The incidents of maiming, torture, and brutality are simply not subsiding in Mexico and anyone who says otherwise is not actually monitoring the violence that is taking place on a daily basis. It is of little wonder that many towns in Northern Mexico have been depopulated, with businesses and residences burned down and others boarded up and abandoned by their owners. While this is getting little traction in the US press, Mexico is starting to see internally displaced populations related to narco and criminal violence now estimated to be in excess of 200,000 individuals.<sup>7</sup>

## A Death Cult

Increasingly, stories and reports are being written on *Santa Muerte*—the Death Saint—indigenous to Mexico though also now found in the United States and in Central America. This unsanctioned quasi-Catholic saint has in the past been worshiped as a ‘grim reaper’ type figure by marginal elements—peasants, the urban poor, and criminals—in Mexican society. Offerings of flowers, fruits, corn, beer, and other commodities, along with petitions for good health, luck with love, and even coming into wealth have been made at *Santa Muerte* altars. Often, the images of Jesus, the Virgin, and the saints of last resort (such as Judas Tadeo) would be found together with images of the death saint. Rainbow colors and lighter candle shades (representative of more benign candle magic spells) had dominated in the past though a harsher gray area element had always existed that focused on cursing others, defending against spells, and protecting oneself from being arrested or being sentenced to prison. Many times the images of other unsanctioned saints, such as *Jesus Malverde* and *Juan Soldado*, are also found in tandem with that of *Santa Muerte* in the possession of the harsher gray area worshipers who engage in criminal activities.

While this saint has been around for over five decades, a narco-criminal variant has since emerged that has elevated *Santa Muerte* into a dark and vengeful deity in her own right. This variant of *Santa Muerte* has nothing even remotely to do with Catholicism and is rapidly gaining adherents. The total number of *Santa Muerte* worshipers is somewhere in the low millions with the actual breakdown along the continuum of belief—traditional, gray area, and the darker narco-criminal variant—unknown. An educated guess would be that the traditional and gray area believers still dominate but as *narcocultura* spreads, especially amongst the young in Mexico, more worshipers will continue to gravitate to the harsher aspects of the faith.

What is known is that the darker variant of *Santa Muerte* is by no means benign and that simple commodities are unacceptable as offerings. Dark altars laden with weapons, money, narcotics, and sometimes stained with blood have been identified. The stakes have been raised now that petitions to cause agonizing death to one’s enemies and bless cartel operatives before battle are being made, in essence providing them spiritual armor against other criminal forces and Mexican authorities. Human body parts and bowls of blood left at *Santa Muerte* altars, both public and private, are becoming more common as are actual human sacrifices and the ritualized dismemberment of the dead. Examples of what appear to be death cult sacrifices, rituals, and activities include:

- The stacking of headless bodies and the staged placement of body parts. One grisly incident photo shows a skinned skull resting on severed arms with the victim’s male genitalia held in the palm of one of their hands.
- Decapitated heads left at the tombs of deceased drug lords—implicated as *Santa Muerte* worshipers—as sacrificial offerings.
- Decapitated heads offered directly to *Santa Muerte* by her worshipers.
- Victims killed at *Santa Muerte* altars/shrines.
- The ritual burning of decapitated heads as offerings.
- The removal of the hearts of victims.
- The skinning of victims while alive.

- The likely desecration of shrines belonging to more benign Saints.
- The use of black candle magic to request that the deity kill one's enemies.
- The threatening of a kidnap victim at a *Santa Muerte* altar with divine wrath if they failed to cooperate with their captors.
- The alleged smoking of a victim's ashes mixed with cocaine in a 'smoking death' ritual.<sup>8</sup>

The authors are well aware of the old 'Satanic panic' scare of much of the 1980s and how, for a time, Satanists and their covens were thought to be lurking near practically every preschool in the US so our intent is not to overplay the threat posed by the narco-criminal variant of *Santa Muerte*.<sup>9</sup> On the other hand, organized cartel groups, such as *Los Zetas*, and members of independent kidnap/kill teams, such as the one that engaged in the Chandler, Arizona beheading in late 2010, have increasingly become followers of this dark and vengeful deity. Tattoos of *Santa Muerte* have been found on their operatives, altars and other icons have been found in their possession, and their members have been tied to death cult sacrifices and rituals. Even *Santa Muerte* high priest David Romo has been linked to a *Los Zetas* kidnapping cell and related criminal activities.<sup>10</sup> Additionally, quite a few incidents are known only to Mexican and US law enforcement and have not been widely reported in the press or have been filed as news stories that have been quickly forgotten. Example of the latter are the April 2011 *Santa Muerte* worshipers linked to killings in Chicago—some of the victims had their throats cut while bound— and the January 2010 human sacrifice that took place in Ciudad Juarez.<sup>11</sup>

To suggest that at least a thousand heavily armed and increasingly fanatical *Santa Muerte* followers of the narco-criminal variant, with blood on their hands, and at times on their altars, now exist simply cannot be disputed. That would mean that only 1-in-13 to 1-in-15 of the estimated 13,000 to 15,000 *Los Zetas* hard-core operatives—less than 10% of them—have become death cult followers; a ridiculously low estimate given what we know of *Los Zetas* training and indoctrination profiles.<sup>12</sup>

## Holy Warriors

*La Familia Michoacana* (LFM), one of the dominant cartels in Mexico with thousands of members, is an evangelical-criminal organization based on a bizarre fusion of Christian teachings, the writings of John Eldredge (*Wild at Heart* et al.), and the teachings of the original *La Familia* leadership. Catechisms and doctrine have been produced by "El Más Loco" (The Craziest One) and others. They help to facilitate the indoctrination of new recruits and guide them through the stages of spiritual passage as they advance within the ranks of the cartel. Symbolism and icons utilized by cartel members include crucifixes, rosaries, the LFM tattoo, and related *narcocultra* adornments. Many of the brothers and sisters who belong to the cartel are considered 'saved souls' salvaged from the streets and from drug and alcohol rehabilitation centers and, once indoctrinated as true believers, can be considered adherents of a militarized form of pseudo-Christianity. Past allegations of cartel ties to the New Jerusalem Movement in Mexico and related apocalyptic beliefs have been made concerning LFM.<sup>13</sup>

*La Familia* has thus always been a cult based organization and steeped in notions of 'Divine Justice'. In September 2006, LFM threw five severed heads onto the *Sol y Sombra* nightclub

floor with the accompanying narcobanner (*narcomanta*) “The family doesn’t kill for money. It doesn’t kill for women. It doesn’t kill innocent people, only those who deserve to die. Know that this is divine justice.”<sup>14</sup> In January 2010, the group was accused of sewing a victim’s face onto a soccer ball though it just as likely could have been the work of an allied cartel with a pronounced sense of sick humor.<sup>15</sup> Still, the ritualized violence which forms the basis of control through fear exercised by this cartel even runs through basic aspects of its enforcer training:

In mid-2010 Miguel “El Tyson” Ortiz Miranda, a captured La Familia activist, described the training of the organization’s potential hitmen. He said that a group of 40 are taken to Jesús del Monte, a mountainous zone, and are directed to pursue, shoot, and cook 15 victims. This exercise tests whether recruits can conquer their fear and overcome the sight of their quarry’s blood.<sup>16</sup>

Additionally, dismembered bodies with LFM carved into them and dumped onto the streets is a not-uncommon occurrence in Michoacana and other cartel controlled territories. The beating of sinners with barbed wire wrapped boards and whips—their backs flayed and bloodied—has also been reported. In fact, LFM has imposed its own criminal-spiritual based law in its territories—essentially a pseudo-Christian equivalent to Sharia Law found in Islamist lands that has meted out harsh punishments to teenagers wearing sagging pants, hairnets, and who have engaged in other undesirable activities. Furthermore, Catholic priests who challenge LFM dictates have been subjected to death threats.

*La Familia Michoacana* has been taking a pounding of late with much of its senior leadership now killed or captured. The targeting of this cartel has become a Mexican Government priority since it is considered every bit as dangerous as *Los Zetas* cartel. Many media commentators, and even some researchers, have suggested that the cartel is on the verge of disintegration. Indeed, LFM called for a truce with the Mexican Government and finally disbanded were in January 2011 by means of their own pronouncement via numerous *narcomantas*. Still, at the legacy middle management and lower levels, the former LFM cadre remain relatively unscathed and still exert much control over Michoacana and the other former territories.

This crisis of leadership in LFM, however, has recently resulted in a new cartel appearing in Michoacana. The new cartel—*Los Caballeros Templarios* (Knights Templars)—appeared in March 2011 and proclaimed itself the successor to LFM by means of over thirty *narcomantas*.<sup>17</sup> In truth, it is unknown if the entire cadre of the cartel itself has morphed into *Los Caballeros Templarios* or if only a large splinter faction of *La Familia* has decided to establish this new organization. What is clear is the name and iconitry behind this new cartel directly invokes Christian Medieval symbolism pertaining to God’s holy warriors. This is highly significant and elevates the central cartel tenet of ‘Divine Justice’ to an even more pronounced level than that initially promoted by LFM. The Knights Templars (aka Knighthood of the Temple of Solomon) a military-religious order, were the Papacy’s mid-12<sup>th</sup> to late-13<sup>th</sup> century shock troops in the Holy Land and were known not only for their piety but for their bloodlust in battle against the infidel.

*Los Caballeros Templarios*, so the rhetoric goes, would thus represent a 21<sup>st</sup> century criminal-military-religious order that views itself as the protectors of the people of Michoacana. While many consider such rhetoric nothing more than a sham, enough true believers have already been

indoctrinated to require that we take the rise of such a cult-like order as a very serious development. The English translation of the narcobanners proclaiming the rise of this cartel is as follows:

To the society of Michoacan we inform you that from today we will be working here on the altruistic activities that were previously performed by the Familia Michoacana, we will be at the service of Michoacan society to attend to any situation which threatens the safety of the Michoacanos.

Our commitment to society will be: to safeguard order; avoid robberies, kidnappings, extortion; and to shield the state from possible rival intrusions.

Sincerely, The Knights Templar<sup>18</sup>

Numerous text only based *narcomantas* tied to and set next to victims murdered by this cartel— hanging from bridges and trees, placed in chairs, and dumped on the street— have already turned up over the last few months. Iconitry is also already appearing for this new cartel that includes the *Templarios* name with a shield with a red cross, a white battle flag with a white cross, and an armored knight holding a sword. To date, no *Templarios* tattoos specifically relating to cartel members have been identified on corpses or on former LFM members that have been captured in news or in blog photos, however, that too will come if this new cartel survives into the future.

## Conclusions

Whether we are now catching glimpses of societal warfare actually breaking out south of the US-Mexican border, *i.e.*, between traditional Mexican society and that of criminal insurgents, we will leave the reader to consider. What we wish to do here is identify three major concerns, derived from very dark forms of spirituality, that pertain to the incidents of extreme barbarism, the rise of a death cult, and the emergence of holy warriors in Mexico that are deeply troubling to us:

- The continuing forms of extreme barbarism evident in the torture and killings of cartel and gang victims in Mexico is creating a growing cadre of hardened killers; some of whom are still in their childhoods. While most of these killings are secular in nature, the very participation in such acts of barbarism will forever change a person. This goes beyond ‘the dark stain left on the soul’ religious arguments which may have their own merits to focus on the fact that a growing number of cartel and gang enforcers in Mexico are actively engaging in, and becoming accustomed to, sociopathic behaviors reminiscent of serial killers. Skinning people, cutting out their hearts, castrating them or cutting off their breasts, throwing them in a vat of acid, or setting them on fire *while they are alive* is incrementally becoming more accepted in *narcocultura* as a means of settling scores and doing away with ones’ enemies. What this will eventually mean for Mexican society is unknown but the value system of these hardened killers, and what spirituality they may eventually gravitate to, will directly be in conflict with anything resembling Mexican civil society.



- There are documented incidents of ritual killing, human sacrifice, and petitions for divine intervention (such as death magic) in Mexico tied to the narco-criminal version of *Santa Muerte*. The removal of hearts, the offering of a human heads, the leaving of the dead as offerings at public shrines, the ritual burning of heads, and altars found with bowls of blood in them suggest *Santa Muerte* has indeed become an increasingly powerful deity in her own right to those that worship her. The call for Holy War by *Santa Muerte* high priest David Romo, linked to *Los Zetas*, as a result of the wholesale destruction of *Santa Muerte* temples by the Mexican government in Northern Mexico is also alarming as is *Los Zetas* cartel's increasing embrace of the death saint as their spiritual patron and divine benefactor. What the future holds for this death cult is unknown, but it is not good for Mexico, and the massive growth of its narco-criminal variant suggests many new worshippers are now praying at her dark altars.

- A self-sacrifice component of the holy warrior archetype may be emerging as the ideology of the new *Los Caballeros Templarios* cartel evolves. While we never thought we would consider this as a potential in Mexico, the possibility of future *Templarios* suicide (martyrdom) operations—likely based on active-aggressor assaults to kill high value targets such as Mexican governmental officials responsible for targeting this cartel—has to now be at least contemplated. Human sacrifice to God in this instance, unlike that of the emerging death cult in Mexico, is derived from ones' own spilling of blood as a martyr and not the spilling of your victim's blood. Since car bomb use in Mexico has been relatively restrained to date, no expectation currently exists that *Templarios* martyrdom operations will employ VBIEDs in the near term, but such operations could conceivably at some point come to pass.

The Thirty Years' War in Europe (1618-1648) was known for its sheer brutality and in many ways represented a conflict between the old Medieval order and something entirely new. Heinous and barbaric acts and mass depopulation ensued due to a conflict that took on religious overtones. We now wonder what historians will someday say about the Narco-Criminal Wars in Mexico (2006-?) and those social and political forms that emerge from the ashes of a broadening conflict now taking place south of our border. While that which is taking place in Mexico is nowhere near the horrors of the Thirty Years' War, a death toll of 40,000 is fast approaching and new forms of dark spirituality are now being injected into what heretofore has been considered only criminal, hence secular, insurgencies taking place. Mexico's new '*narcocultura*' as embodied in *narcocorridos* (songs glorifying narcotraffickers) and the saints of the new cults or 'narco-religions' have profound potentials for the soul and social fabric of a nation.<sup>19</sup>

*Dr. Robert J. Bunker and John P. Sullivan are frequent contributors to Small Wars Journal.*

## Notes

1. "Book Review: *Narcos Over the Border* by Robert J. Bunker (Ed.)" *zenpundit.com*. 5 April 2011. <http://zenpundit.com/?p=3870>.

2. Her conclusions are that "Some gangs – the institutionalized and very violent – may in fact share characteristics with insurgencies, and thus the conflict lens and armed group framework might apply. But very few gangs reach this level, suggesting that such an approach is neither appropriate nor useful for understanding the thousands of gangs that exist in communities across the globe" (p. 386). Jennifer M. Hazen, "Understanding gangs as armed groups." *International Review of the Red Cross*. Vol. 92, No. 878. June 2010: 369-386. While these conclusions are indicative of the basic 'American street gang' derived from studies conducted by Thrasher, Klein, Maxson, and

others they have nothing to do with the reality of armed gangs that operate in Mexico, Central America, Colombia, Brazil, Sierra Leone, and increasingly in many other regions of the Globe.

3. Both authors have numerous *Small Wars Journal* publications on what is taking place in Mexico. These include; “The Mexican Cartel Debate: As Viewed Through Five Divergent Fields of Security Studies,” “Criminal Insurgencies in Mexico:

Web and Social Media Resources” and “Criminal Insurgency in the Americas.”

4. See <http://www.borderlandbeat.com/2011/03/narco-execution-videos-and-its-effects.html>.

5. John P. Sullivan and Samuel Logan, “Los Zetas: Massacres, Assassinations and Infantry Tactics”. *Homeland1.com*. 24 November 2010. <http://www.homeland1.com/domestic-international-terrorism/articles/913612-Los-Zetas-Massacres-Assassinations-and-Infantry-Tactics/>.

6. The original report is in Spanish and was published in *Milenio*. See *Borderland Beat*, “Study: 98.5% of Crimes Go Unpunished in Mexico.” Saturday, 13 November 2010. <http://www.borderlandbeat.com/2010/11/study-985-of-crimes-go-unpunished-in.html>.

7. Associated Press, “Mexico Drug War Displaces 230,000 and Half Find Refuge in the U.S., Says Report.” *Fox News*. 25 March 2011. <http://latino.foxnews.com/latino/news/2011/03/25/report-mexico-drug-war-displaces-230000-half-refuge/>.

8. Our analysis is based on Pamela L. Bunker, Lisa J. Campbell, and Robert J. Bunker, “Torture, beheadings, and narcocultos.” *Small Wars & Insurgencies*. Vol. 21., No.1. March 2010: 165-169; *Noticieros Televisa*, “Identifican cabeza ‘ofrendada’ en tumba de ‘El Barbas’.” 18 January 2010. <http://www2.esmas.com/noticierostelevisa/mexico/estados/130952/identifican-cabeza-abandonada-tumba-el-barbas>; and on other English and Spanish sources including some incident photos and altar images. Useful background resources were Tony M. Kail, *Magico-Religious Groups and Ritualistic Activities: A Guide for First Responders*. Boca Raton, FL: CRC Press, 2008 and Tony Kail, *Santa Muerte: Mexico’s Mysterious Saint of Death*. La Vergne, TN: Fringe Research Press, 2010.

9. For information on the ‘Satanic panic’ scare see some of the works highlighted in Robert J. Bunker and Pamela L. Bunker, *Subject Bibliography: Beheadings & Ritualized Murders*. FBI Academy Library, Quantico, VA: August 2007. <http://fbilibrary.fbiacademy.edu/bibliographies/beheadings&ritualmurders.htm>.

10. Claudia Bolaños, “Detienen a líder de Iglesia de la Santa Muerte.” *El Universal*. 4 Martes 2011. <http://www.eluniversal.com.mx/notas/734953.html>.

11. Frank Main and Kim Janssen, “Sources: Two charged in double murder suspected in 10 other killings.” *Chicago Sun-Times*. 2 April 2011. <http://www.suntimes.com/4054640-417/sources-two-charged-in-double-murder-suspected-in-10-other-killings.html>; and *El Diaro*, “Atribuyen crimen de menor a promesas hechas a Santa Muerte.” 10 January 2011.

<http://www.diario.com.mx/notas.php?f=2011/01/10&id=1cc7002c4dd7445755dcfbe8662e081a>.

12. Alfredo Corchado, “Drug cartels taking over government roles in parts of Mexico.” *The Dallas Morning News*. 30 April 2011. <http://www.dallasnews.com/news/state/headlines/20110430-drug-cartels-taking-over-government-roles-in-parts-of-mexico.ece>.

13. George W. Grayson, “E-Notes: La Familia: Another Mexican Deadly Syndicate.” Foreign Policy Research Institute. February 2009. <http://www.fpri.org/enotes/200901.grayson.lafamilia.html>.

14. Samuel Logan and John P. Sullivan, “Mexican Crime ‘Family’ is Cloaked in ‘Divine Justice’.” *Mexidata.info*. Monday, August 24, 2009. <http://mexidata.info/id2378.html>.

15. Associated Press, “Drug cartel stitches victim’s face on soccer ball.” *Msnbc.com*. 8 January 2010. [http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/34774234/ns/world\\_news-americas/t/drug-cartel-stitches-victims-face-soccer-ball/](http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/34774234/ns/world_news-americas/t/drug-cartel-stitches-victims-face-soccer-ball/).

16. George W. Grayson, *La Familia Drug Cartel*. Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, US Army War College, December 2010: 47.

17. Hannah Stone, “New Cartel Announces Takeover from Familia Michoacana.” *In Sight*. Monday, 14 March 2011. <http://www.insightcrime.org/insight-latest-news/item/671-new-cartel-announces-take-over-from-familia-michoacana>.

18. Ibid.

19. We are not the only concerned observers. See Alma Guillermoprieto, “Days of the Dead: The new narcocultura,” *The New Yorker*, 10 November 2008 for an excellent analysis by an eminent Mexican journalist of these potentials at [http://newyorker.com/reporting/2008/11/10/081111fact\\_guillermoprieto](http://newyorker.com/reporting/2008/11/10/081111fact_guillermoprieto).

This is a single article excerpt of material published in Small Wars Journal.

Published by and COPYRIGHT © 2010, Small Wars Foundation.

Permission is granted to print single copies for personal, non-commercial use. Select non-commercial use is licensed via a Creative Commons BY-NC-SA 3.0 license and per our Terms of Use. We are in this together.



No FACTUAL STATEMENT should be relied upon without further investigation on your part sufficient to satisfy you in your independent judgment that it is true.

Contact: [comment@smallwarsjournal.com](mailto:comment@smallwarsjournal.com)

Visit [www.smallwarsjournal.com](http://www.smallwarsjournal.com)

**Cover Price:** Your call. [Support SWJ here.](#)