

## Power Struggle Intensifies in Sinaloa Cartel Following Deportation of Chapo Guzmán

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Category/Department: Mexico

Published: 2017-03-01

The deportation of Joaquin “El Chapo” Guzmán to the US in January ([SourceMex, Jan. 25, 2017](#)), appears to have intensified a simmering power struggle in western Mexico among several factions of the Sinaloa cartel, contributing to a spike of violence in Sinaloa and neighboring states. Other criminal organizations, namely the *Cártel Jalisco Nueva Generación* (CJNG) and the Beltrán Leyva organization, also view Guzmán’s departure as an opportunity to move into territory controlled by the Sinaloa cartel.

At least 150 murders have been reported in Sinaloa in the first six weeks of the year, many in the coastal city of Culiacán. “[Authorities] estimate 30 to 60 murders have happened in the last couple of days,” Mike Vigil, former chief of international operations for the US Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), told the US-based publication *Business Insider* on Feb. 10.

According to Vigil, a shootout between members of criminal organizations—perhaps involving factions of the Sinaloa cartel—resulted in 15 deaths within another 72-hour period.

If the number of homicides continues at the current rate, this year could be one of the bloodiest in recent history. “Even though the year is just beginning, 2017 could become the most violent in the state since 2010,” independent security analyst Alejandro Hope wrote in a guest column in the daily newspaper *El Universal*.

### *Three factions vying for control*

According to analysts, three factions are vying to control the Sinaloa cartel, also known as *Cártel del Pacífico*. One is led by Guzmán’s two sons, Jesús Alfredo and Ivan Archivaldo Guzmán Salazar, along with Ismael “Mayo” Zambada, long considered the second in command in the cartel. Dámaso López Núñez, also known as *El Licenciado*, and his son Dámaso López Serrano are leading the second faction. The third group is led by Guzmán’s brother Aureliano Guzmán Loera, also known as *El Guano*.

There are conflicting reports on which of the factions is actually controlling the cartel. In October 2016, when Guzmán was still in a maximum-security prison in Ciudad Juárez, the agency that monitors organized crime (*Subprocuraduría Especializada en Investigación de Delincuencia Organizada*, SEIDO) issued a report indicating that Aureliano Guzmán Loera had unilaterally taken control over at least some of the operations of the cartel.

SEIDO is a unit of the *Fiscalía General de la República* (Attorney General’s Office, FGR), which was formerly known as the *Procuraduría General de la República* (PGR). According to Gen. Alfonso Duarte Múgica, the SEIDO official who put together the report, an early investigation suggested that Aureliano Guzmán Loera was behind the ambush in Sinaloa that left five soldiers dead in September 2016 ([SourceMex, Oct. 5, 2016](#)). Jesús Alfredo and Ivan Archivaldo Guzmán were initially thought to have masterminded the attack, but authorities later ruled them out as suspects.

A later report suggested that Aureliano Guzmán Loera was not behind the attack. Rather, the perpetrator was Juan Francisco Patrón Sánchez, a leader for the Beltrán Leyva organization. Patrón Sánchez, also known as H2, was killed by Mexican military forces along with seven members of his cartel in the city of Tepic in Nayarit state earlier this month. The Beltrán Leyva organization, which broke away from the Sinaloa cartel in 2008, has also been vying for control of western Mexico and might be responsible for the spike in violence.

“While it remains unclear how prominent of a leadership role El Guano now has within the Sinaloa Cartel, there are reasons to believe he has upped his involvement in cartel activity,” said InsightCrime.org, a non-profit journalism and investigative organization specialized in organized crime in Latin America and the Caribbean. “El Chapo’s arrest has left his family vulnerable in ways that were unimaginable when he was at the height of his powers.”

López Núñez, a close confidant of Guzmán, is also flexing his muscles. According to the DEA, he took over some of the major operations of the cartel following Guzmán’s second arrest in February 2014 ([SourceMex, Feb. 26, 2014](#)). López Núñez is widely credited for planning Guzmán’s escape from the Puente Grande maximum-security prison in 2001 ([SourceMex, Jan. 24, 2001](#)) and probably played a role in the planning of the second escape in July 2015 ([SourceMex, July 15, 2015](#)). López Núñez was deputy director for security at Puente Grande when Guzmán was interned in the facility in the 1990s.

Shortly after his arrest in 2014, Guzmán told reporters that López Núñez was his successor. “He will gain the upper hand for a simple reason,” columnist Jorge Fernández Menéndez wrote in the daily newspaper *Excélsior*. “Dámaso has been the one who has controlled the operations of the cartel since Chapo’s extradition.”

López Núñez can operate freely in Mexico partly because President Enrique Peña Nieto’s government does not have any arrest orders pending for him. However, the cartel leader is in the crosshairs of US authorities. In 2013, the US Treasury identified López Núñez as a principal lieutenant of the Sinaloa cartel because of his alleged role in the organization’s drug trafficking and money laundering activities.

There are also reports that Zambada remains an important figure in the cartel’s operations. “El Mayo remains the principal leader of the [Sinaloa] federation and is the most important drug trafficker in Mexico, but right now it’s not clear what his position is [within the cartel],” Hope said in an interview with the Spain-based newspaper *El País*.

### *Limited role for Guzmán’s sons*

Meanwhile, there are conflicting reports on the role that Jesús Alfredo and Ivan Archivaldo Guzmán Salazar are playing in the cartel. One observer suggests that their role is insignificant when compared to the involvement of their uncle and of López Núñez in cartel operations. “The sons of Guzmán Loera have demonstrated that their sphere is more on Instagram than on the criminal operation,” said Fernández Menéndez.

The two brothers were kidnapped at a restaurant in Puerto Vallarta in Jalisco state in August 2016, but they were released after five days. “It would be inconceivable that El Chapo or his lieutenants, Ismael ‘El Mayo’ Zambada or Dámaso López, would allow themselves to be kidnapped in this manner and without a large contingent to protect them,” Fernández Menéndez wrote in an earlier column.

Some reports suggest the rival CJNG carried out the abduction, since Puerto Vallarta is part of the group's territory. According to a DEA report, the two brothers were released after "intense negotiations" between important leaders in the cartels.

There are reports that López Núñez might have colluded with the CJNG in the abduction. A report put together by security officials in the Peña Nieto government suggests that Guzmán's sons were betrayed by a member of their own organization who assisted the CJNG in the abduction.

Lacking direct involvement, Guzmán's sons appear to be leaving operational decisions to Zambada and perhaps to their uncle, according to some observers. There are conflicting reports on whether Aureliano Guzmán Loera is working with or against his two nephews, although his major power struggle appears to be with the faction led by López Núñez.

An incident on Feb. 4 demonstrated the conflict. According to a letter purportedly handwritten by Jesús Alfredo Guzmán Salazar, he, his brother, and Zambada were attacked as they arrived at a meeting in Badiraguato, the municipality in the Sinaloa mountains where Guzmán was born. López Núñez had supposedly called the meeting to offer evidence that the CJNG was involved in the Puerto Vallarta kidnapping. When the three men arrived at the meeting site, they were ambushed. Guzmán's sons and Zambada escaped with minor injuries, but some of their bodyguards were killed instantly, according to the letter, published by journalist *Ciro Gómez Leyva*.

"Apparently, [the gunmen] didn't wait for these guys to get out of the vehicle when they started shooting," said Vigil, the ex-DEA official who is author of the book *Metal Coffins: The Blood Alliance Cartel*. "Had they waited until they got out of the vehicle, they would've probably killed them."

### *Other groups seek power*

Experts believe the CJNG and the Beltrán Leyva organization are also directly involved in the power struggle in Sonora and nearby states. "The CJNG has become a rival of the Sinaloa cartel," Hope said. "For more than a year, the two criminal organizations have been engaged in a savage war in Colima. In recent months, they have converted Tijuana into a battleground. Ciudad Juárez could well become then next location for their war."

The Beltrán Leyva organization was also involved in the power struggle, but the killing in Nayarit of Patrón Sánchez and other cartel leaders like Daniel Isaac Silva Gárate, known as H9, might have disabled the cartel, at least temporarily. Observers believe the Sinaloa cartel might have provided the intelligence that led to the military attack on the building where the Beltrán Leyva leaders were housed. "It's not clear if the death of H2 is an outgrowth of this battle [between the rival organizations], but the Sinaloa Cartel—and in particular El Chapo—has long been known for its ability to provide timely information about their rivals to the authorities."

Some experts believe that the CJNG, led by its ruthless leader Nemesio Oseguera, could benefit the most from the divisions in the Sinaloa cartel, particularly since the organization is already strong in parts of the west ([SourceMex, May 13, 2015](#)). "The Jalisco cartel could become the successor of what was once the 'great' Sinaloa cartel in the aftermath of its internal weakness," said Antonio Mazzitelli, regional representative for the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC).

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