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# Central America's Gangs Are All Grown Up

And more dangerous than ever.

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The possible arrival of a few thousand Syrian refugees in the United States has caused a political firestorm, but there is a much more serious humanitarian crisis brewing on America's southern border. The growing wave of unaccompanied children flowing from the northern tier of Central America across the U.S.-Mexico border could very well turn into a long-lasting tsunami due to the horrific violence and gang warfare wracking the region.

Despite the announcement by Secretary of State John Kerry last week that the United States will **increase** the number of Central American refugees admitted and work with the United Nations to help those at risk, the number of unaccompanied minors fleeing the Northern Triangle of El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala will likely soon surpass the 2014 surge. Nor are recent efforts by the Obama administration to **round up and deport** those already in the United States illegally likely to blunt the dynamics driving people to leave.

The spreading wave of savagery — including beheadings, dismemberment, and systematic rape — is the result of the growing involvement of the Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13) and Barrio 18 gangs in the global cocaine trade. The increasing revenues of these transnational gangs have pushed the groups toward greater sophistication and political awareness. The result is a lethal combination of political messaging that is part liberation theology and part Pablo Escobar — the outcome being that these gangs now boast vast territorial control, growing military power, and rapidly expanding criminal enterprises.

With soaring revenues from transporting and selling cocaine and crack, the inter-gang violence and bloody territorial disputes have spread and grown more brutal. The gangs are not only fighting each other, but muscling in on territories of the well-entrenched drug trafficking transport networks tied to Mexico's Sinaloa cartel.

As a result, El Salvador's homicide rate in 2015 was 105 per 100,000 inhabitants, the **highest in the world**. Guatemala and Honduras ranked among the world's top five. This level of violence makes daily living in much of the Northern Triangle a potentially fatal gamble. Boys are corralled into gangs; those who refuse are killed. Girls as young as 11 years old are taken as *jainas*, or sex slaves. This inescapable threat is why parents and relatives send their children on the treacherous and costly trip to the United States.

"We are living through the worst war in our history, but no one wants to acknowledge it as a war," said Dagoberto Gutiérrez, a former commander of the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN), a onetime Marxist-led guerrilla army that fought the U.S.-backed military in El Salvador's bloody 12-year civil war. Sitting in his small office at Salvadoran Lutheran University, Gutiérrez said that in the civil war, at least, the battle lines were clear. "Now we have multiple wars underway at the same time and a government that has no capacity or will to save its people," he said.

The FMLN, the most formidable rebel force in the region in the 1980s, became a legal political party in 1992 as part of a peace agreement. It won the presidential elections in 2009 and 2014, and has so far proved incapable of stemming the worst spate of violence since death squads hunted down suspected communists decades ago.

While gang violence was an important driver in the 2014 immigration crisis, that influx was also fed by deceptive reports in Central America that the children could receive U.S. citizenship. In response, the governments of the Northern Triangle countries, in conjunction with the United States, launched a campaign to correct the misinformation. More importantly, Mexico agreed to dramatically step up its southern border enforcement efforts to halt the immigrants before they reached the United States. The flow slowed to a trickle for most of 2015, before accelerating again in the past four months. Now the convergence of gang violence and growing territorial control — coupled with rampant corruption and lack of any faith in the existing political structures — is overwhelming those fragile firewalls.

While the budget Congress passed in December surprisingly gave the Obama administration \$750 million of the \$1 billion requested in aid for Central America, 75 percent of aid was conditioned on the regional governments reining in corruption, strengthening the rule of law and judicial structures, and ending rampant impunity. Given the complexities of the possible disbursements and the unlikelihood of the conditions being met, money will likely not begin to flow for at least a year and then only in trickles.

Meanwhile, the gangs — each with tens of thousands of members — have become vicious occupying forces in much of the Northern Triangle, replacing the hollowed-out state structures with deliberate trappings of their own authority. MS-13 is now an important link in the chain that moves cocaine to Mexico and the United States — more a political military force than a street gang. The scruffy, rag-tag teens of years past were violent, brutal, and often stoned, but could only afford homemade pistols and the rare AK-47 or hand grenades left over from the 1980s. Now many of the *clicas*, or neighborhood gang organizations, have assault rifles, vehicles, safe houses, and encrypted satellite phones. Some factions are even able to deploy drones to monitor the movements of the police or rival gangs.

With absolute impunity, the gangs extract payments from neighborhood businesses, enforce curfews, man roadblocks to control access to their neighborhoods, and decide who can sell or move drugs and where. MS-13 also has installed a rudimentary judicial system where gang-imposed punishments — from harsh beatings to public executions — are meted out for offenses such as stealing, informing the police of gang activities, or abusing one's spouse. Some *clicas* in Honduras also fund school lunch programs for poor children in their territory — usually just a bowl of soup and bread, but far more than the state has offered. Programs such as these have enhanced the gang's legitimacy and political support, and allowed MS-13 to dramatically expand the areas under its control.

How did the gang war get this bad? Blame peace.

The misnamed gang truce in El Salvador in 2012, brokered by the government at the behest of local drug traffickers and supported by the Organization of American States, proved to be a tipping point in the gangs' political and criminal evolution. The rising strength of the gangs, particularly MS-13, is directly tied to the truce itself: They used the cease-fire to rearm, reorganize, and build closer ties to regional cocaine transport networks. The leadership had almost two years to develop a political and economic strategy, bring in advisors, and begin a profound metamorphosis from street gangs to criminal organizations with territorial and political control.

Empowered by their ability to negotiate as equals with the government, the gangs for the first time came to understand their true political strength. When they found that even their most preposterous demands (prostitutes in prison, unfettered cell-phone communications, police withdrawal from the interiors of jails) could be met if they dumped enough dead bodies on the streets, the gangs rediscovered their primary negotiating tool: murder. In a 2013 interview with gang leaders in El Salvador, they laughed when asked about how negotiations were conducted with the government. It was very simple, one replied: "We dump bodies on the street until they say yes. And they always say yes."

By the time the truce formally fell apart in early 2014, the strategy was laid bare. The government and the Organization of American States had trumpeted the official drop in homicides by more than 40 percent. But the Institute of Legal Medicine, the forensic body under the Salvadoran Supreme Court, found that while there were more than 800 fewer homicides reported, the number of “disappeared” — a term with deep psychological impact in the wake of the nation’s civil war — had risen by an almost identical amount. Many of the “disappeared” had been buried in clandestine cemeteries. The excavation of those graveyards simply overwhelmed the system, and efforts to identify the bodies were largely abandoned.

MS-13, to a much larger degree than Barrio 18, seems intent on rebranding and remaking itself, based on the lessons it learned during the truce and after several years of sending members to enroll in police, army, law school, and accounting programs. In the first nine months of 2015, the army expelled 223 suspected gang members, according to published reports. But many more are inside, quietly rising through the ranks.

The new discipline is evident in several ways. Tattoos, once de rigueur, are now banned — not because of potential police harassment but because the gang leaders now feel that they are a relic of the past. On the soccer field, in parts of Honduras’s second-largest city, San Pedro Sula, violent play or threats to the referee are no longer tolerated, and MS-13 players have been taken off the field and beaten for breaking the new rules. The reason: If one cannot be disciplined on the soccer field, one cannot be disciplined in the gang.

Current leaders are seeking to project a more corporate image and have largely marginalized many in the historic leadership, who remain in prison. The *ranfla libre*, or leaders on the street, have moved MS-13 decisively in a new direction. Law enforcement and intelligence officials say the gangs are opening semi-legitimate businesses, both to generate income and to launder funds. Among the favorites are public transport buses, bakeries, gas stations, and other retail businesses that generate large amounts of cash.

The desire to go corporate is visible. My recent meetings with senior MS-13 leaders of the *ranfla libre* in El Salvador were unlike previous ones. We met in the restaurants of luxury hotels, not the dusty streets of the slums. They wore dress shirts and carried briefcases, rather than tattered jeans and homemade pistols, and the discussions were largely free of the gang argot that peppers most such talks.

The discussions centered on the gang's growing territorial control, U.S. policy toward MS-13, and a feeling of betrayal by the FMLN — which, the leaders said, had failed to fully deliver on promises of large amounts of money in exchange for the blocs of votes the gangs delivered from their neighborhoods in the 2014 presidential election. Because the FMLN government then refused to negotiate a new truce as promised, the gang leaders said, MS-13 in El Salvador took to assassinating policemen, soldiers, and prosecutors — leading to retaliation by the state.

With the disintegration of the truce, there are indications that MS-13 is actively seeking to expand its operational capacity by emulating other armed actors on the world stage. In El Salvador, police showed me evidence from a raid on an MS-13 safe house: printed documents taken from the Internet relating to the military tactics of al Qaeda, the Islamic State, and Colombia's FARC guerrillas. This is not to imply there is a link between the Northern Triangle gangs and any of these groups — only that MS-13 is actively looking to the literature of terrorist groups to learn.

There are some striking similarities between the behavior of some of MS-13 and the Islamic State. Like the Islamic State, the gangs primarily recruit young, unemployed males with few economic opportunities, both in person and through extensive social media outreach. The recruiters promise a life of purpose and a chance to be part of something larger than oneself. The gangs radicalize recruits with videos of savage violence and a quasi-religious call to arms against other gangs and "civilians," as non-gang members are called. Beheadings, dismemberments by chainsaw and machetes, and savage tortures are posted to YouTube as a multipronged tool to recruit new members and show how powerless the state is to stop them. This brazen violence has shredded the fabrics of these societies in ways far deeper than the civil wars of the 1980s.

Meanwhile, endemic police and governmental corruption only feeds the cycle of despair. It is no wonder so many thousands of families have been pushed to desperately entrust their children and their life's savings to strangers in the hopes that at least these innocents can defy the long odds stacked against them and find a better life in the United States. Neither the Obama administration nor the Northern Triangle governments will likely be able to stem the exodus of those fleeing this new power configuration. We may well see an entire generation of Central Americans soon attempt to leave the countries of their birth.

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