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# Central American Gangs as a “Wicked Problem”

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In parts of the impoverished, dusty Choloma neighborhood on the outskirts of San Pedro Sula, Honduras, rag tag children stream down unpaved roads to a bare cinderblock community center where they receive a small bowl of soup and some bread, often the bulk of their daily nutrition.

New businesses are moving to the neighborhood because it is perceived as safer and extortion-free, unlike its more violent environs where businesses are routinely forced to pay a monthly “war tax” to the Calle 18 gang. The businesses, mostly in the informal and illegal sectors, are providing expanding employment opportunities and some employers even make special arrangements for single mothers to be able to work from their homes and care for their children. Petty crime in the neighborhood is not tolerated and the makeshift legal system works quickly to mete out justice.

These are not the works of the long-absent state apparatus seeking to build a better future for its poorest and most vulnerable citizens. Instead the providers of the services are members of the notorious and violent Mara Salvatrucha (MS 13) gang that controls broad swaths of territory across the Northern Triangle of Central America – Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala.

The move by important sectors of the MS 13 to provide social services and generate loyalty by means other than terror is an important, and perhaps defining, evolution of the transnational gangs. It could signal a morphing from one of the primary generators of violence in one of the world’s most violent regions to a more mature political force that directly challenges the state not only for territorial control but also for legitimacy and governance capabilities. The evolution is due in large part to the increased financial resources of the gang generated by the increasingly important role gang members play in cocaine transport through the region, and particularly in Honduras.

This evolution makes dealing with the gangs a truly “wicked problem” for the governments and population of the Northern Triangle, meaning a problem that is multifaceted, cuts across several interdependent issues that must be tackled simultaneously. Wicked problems are seldom solved but can sometimes be managed down from an existential threat to the state to

something less challenging.

Failed approaches of governments to the explosion of gangs and their growing geographic control have ranged from severe repression to mass incarceration to direct military confrontation to negotiation. Each approach had already failed abysmally, helping the three Northern Triangle nations to consistently rank among the top five homicide rates in the world.

Exacerbating the wicked problem set of the gangs is the fact that the region's governments have shown little political will or interest in tackling either the visible symptoms of the gang problem or the underlying structural issues that drive the destructive cycle of violence, impunity and state retreat. The challenges are likely to get much more complex in the near future as the evolution of the MS 13 continues.

Driving the transformation of the MS 13 in San Pedro Sula is not the gang's desire to rein in its members' violent behavior and culture of death or reintegrate into society as productive members. The gang still seizes territory through violence – often in collaboration with the police – and enforces its brand of justice at gunpoint.

What has changed is the gang's level of political awareness and growing desire to become not just a political force in terms of selling its vote as a bloc to the highest bidder, but an actual governing entity, filling the vacuum long left by the absence of the state.

In recent visits to with gang members in their territory in San Pedro Sula and senior gang leaders in San Pedro Sula and San Salvador, El Salvador, the evolution in the political thinking of the gang was visible on multiple fronts, and the political benefits accruing to the group is also tangible.

Over the past three years there has been an important debate over what transnational Central American gangs are, how they fit into regional drug trafficking structures and what political aspirations they have, if any. Because field research is dangerous and access to gang members increasingly limited after the truce in El Salvador between the two main gangs collapsed in 2013, it is clear that no one has a monopoly on the truth or can have a clear view of the entire panorama.

Yet it has been clear for some time that those *clicas* that controlled the physical space needed by cocaine transport groups to move their product profited from the trade. This has traditionally been limited to *clicas* like the Hollywood Locos, the San Cocos, the Fulton Locos and others that through luck and circumstance found themselves in a position to negotiate comparatively large payments from the *transportistas* for safe passage. But what is now clear is that important parts of the MS 13 gang are transforming both in their ties to regional cocaine trafficking structures by actually controlling the cocaine loads, and in political thought and awareness.

It is too early to be able to discern if the transformation of the gang will take root on a broad level, although recent visits to gang controlled neighborhoods and anecdotal evidence suggests that, at least in large parts of San Pedro Sula, the MS 13 has made important strides that would be costly to go back on.

The most important step the MS 13 has taken in San Pedro Sula – setting up a stark contrast with its primary rival, the Calle 18 gang – is to stop the onerous practice of taxing residents and small businesses in neighborhoods under gang control. This extortion, called *vacuna* or

*impuesto de guerra* (war tax) was one of the practices most despised by local residents, meaning gang members were generally reviled among the very population they lived amongst.

While long publicly promising to seek an alternative to extortion as a way of raising revenues to sustain itself, the MS 13 has only now begun to fulfill the promise. The reason is straightforward: an increasing number of MS 13 *clicas* or neighborhood groups, control geographic space needed to move cocaine from the port through the city and onward to Guatemala. The *clicas* of the MS 13 that control the routes are not the owners of the product but handle the cocaine in an important leg of its transportation to owner, usually the Sinaloa cartel.

As described by MS 13 members, the arrangement is simple: The gang allows the cocaine to move undisturbed through its neighborhoods, situated along key transit routes, for a price. Part of the fee is paid in cocaine, which the gang then retails their areas of control. The fees and the retail of cocaine generate more revenue than extortion and at a much lower cost.

But the creation of an alternative revenue stream with a far lower political cost is not happening in a vacuum, indicating the financial efforts are part of broader, more coherent effort to remake the gang into a political force. The gang's nascent social programs of feeding children and the elderly on a regular basis have been accompanied by several other steps. One is the imposition of a security regimen, where petty thieves are exiled or killed, where spouse abuse brings an investigation and admonitions to the party deemed to be at fault. Another is the gang's promise, so far kept, to protect residents against incursions by other gangs or armed groups. In short, the gangs exercise the state function of a monopoly on use of force.

Given that security consistently ranks as the top citizen concern, these interlocking actions by the MS 13 have brought a rare level of tranquility in some neighborhoods and are viewed as a welcome respite from government incompetence or indifference.

Interestingly, leaders of the MS 13 in El Salvador, traditionally those that set the regional agenda for the gang and pioneered financial ventures, acknowledge they have not been able to make the qualitative leap their counterparts in San Pedro Sula have taken. The primary reason, three senior leaders said in recent interviews, is the internal strife and inter-gang warfare in El Salvador, which have turned much of the country into a free fire zone. The most visible evidence is the rising homicide rate this year, from 330 a month (still a startling 11 a day) to 907 in August, a record 30 murders a day. This makes El Salvador the most violent nation in the world that is not at war.



The violence is driven by multiple factors, chief among them the desire by the MS 13 to take over cocaine transportation routes from the traditional *transportista* networks. This has led to a bloody battle because the traditional structures have deep ties into the political elites as well as the police and military structures. This dynamic, in turn, has triggered a war of assassinations and retaliation between the MS 13 and the public security sector (including officially tolerated *grupos de exterminio* or armed groups to carry out extrajudicial executions of gang members). Finally, the MS 13 has formed an unusual alliance with its rivals of the *Sureño* faction of Calle 18 gang, and both are carrying out a bitter war against the *Revolucionario* faction of the Calle 18 gang. The Calle 18 gang split over tactics in the 2012 gang truce.

This constant crossfire has kept the MS 13 in El Salvador from making the social and economic steps that the San Pedro Sula cohort has taken. But the constant armed confrontation could be leading to a new and dangerous type of military and political transformation. In an October raid on an MS 13 safe house police found a set of printed documents, taken from the Internet, relating to the military tactics of al Qaeda, ISIS and the Colombian FARC. This is not to imply there is a link between the gangs and any of these groups, only that the MS 13 is actively looking to the literature of terrorist groups in order to expand its operational capabilities. Such a search is both new and an indicator of more creative thinking by the gang leadership, which could eventually have political repercussions.

The MS 13 gang is rapidly transforming from group that relied solely on violence, terror and extortion to achieve its goals to a more sophisticated political and military structure, capable of controlling territory and challenging the legitimacy of the state in new ways. For the first time this includes, in neighborhoods where the MS 13 is the governing authority, modest but visible social programs maintaining public order and implementing crude but effective judicial remedies to local problems. This is coupled with a growing military sophistication that has, in both El Salvador and Honduras, successfully created a force that can combat the state and hold territory.

It is not clear how sustainable the gang structures and strategies are. But the Central

American governments' lack of: effective state strategies to combat the MS 13; meaningful efforts to establish its own legitimacy in areas of state absence; real efforts to rein in the gang's financial growth and ties to drug trafficking organizations; and the vision and willingness to provide viable alternatives to the gang's growing vision, it is very likely the gang will continue their remarkable and dangerous ascent.

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