

The Evolution of MS 13 in El Salvador and Honduras

BY DOUGLAS FARAH AND KATHRYN BABINEAU

M*ara Salvatrucha* (MS 13) is rapidly evolving into a criminal-economic-military-political power that poses an existential threat to the states of El Salvador and Honduras.¹ In Guatemala, the gang remains a tier two threat—dangerous, but with far less influence and fewer capabilities than in the other two nations of the Northern Triangle. With growing ties to Mexican drug cartels, while assuming an ever-greater role in the transportation of cocaine *transportista* networks across the Isthmus, the gang is acquiring financial resources, advanced weaponry, and the ability and sophistication to wield increasing political power. Factions that once relied exclusively on violence and threats for control are now trying to win the hearts and minds of the communities in which they operate; taking concrete steps to consolidate themselves in the cocaine trade; and becoming credible alternatives to the state. MS 13 in many ways now better resembles a criminal business enterprise rooted in brutal violence than a traditional gang.

This transformation is not uniform across all gang structures nor is it the same from country to country. MS 13 is divided into neighborhood structures called *clicas*, which are grouped into *programas* that respond to the *ranfla*, or national leadership, in each country. Each *clica* has responsibility for its own economic needs, as well as payments to the central leadership, meaning that each *clica* and each *programa* is different. Those that control key cocaine transportation routes or crack/cocaine retail areas are far wealthier than the *clicas* that lack access to lucrative ventures. These disparities make generalizations difficult because few things are universally true across the structures.

Even so, it is evident that MS 13 is operating with clearer strategic goals than in the past, and amassing political and economic power. As a recent Friedrich Ebert Foundation report noted,

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Regarding the use of violence (armed confrontations, homicides, extortions) the behavior pattern of the contemporary gang appears to be guided by a high level of strategic logic. Taken together, the violent acts of the gangs become an instrument to protect the vital interest of the gang and broaden its opportunities. It is a reproductive rationale, which explains the search for new sources of economic, social and political power.

Key Strategies and Trends

Criminal

MS 13's recent success is derived in part from a strategy, begun at least four years ago, of infiltrating members into the police and military, and sending selected cadres to universities to become lawyers, accountants, and MBAs. These members are now in positions to exercise influence on behalf of the gang in multiple spheres, with a far more sophisticated understanding of the world.³

Perhaps the most transformative political step taken by MS 13 in Honduras is the countrywide decision to stop extorting small businesses that operate in the communities that the gang controls. The decision removed an important source of revenue for the gang; however, it also bought the gang significant political goodwill by removing the most hated facet of the gang's presence in those neighborhoods. As described by gang leaders in four different communities in and around San Pedro Sula, the decision to forego the revenue from small-scale extortion was made possible because of increased revenue from MS 13's growing participation in different parts of the regional drug trade. Furthermore, the change was described as a conscious

political decision to build a loyal political base moving forward.

This is not to say that MS 13 has abandoned extortion; the decision in Honduras has not been replicated in El Salvador. Furthermore, payments from larger companies—e.g. those selling LNG tanks, snack food, beverages—that transit MS 13-controlled territory in Honduras remain a major source of income. The impact of such large business extortions has far less of an impact on communities, many of whom now actively support MS 13 efforts to expand their territorial control because of the halt to small business extortions. "People will call the police to tell them who the local leaders of Calle 18 are, and the police and MS 13 coordinate to take over that area," said one resident familiar with MS 13 strategy. "People know now that where the MS 13 is in charge they won't be extorted, they can leave their cars unlocked, there is some security, but only as long as you do exactly as they say."

This shift does not imply that life under MS 13 control is pleasant. One resident who daily has to navigate between MS 13-controlled territory where she lives and numerous disputed territories to get to work described her life as one of tension-filled negotiations, seeking permission from each group in control (the *Terecereños*, *Los Ponce*, *Los Chirisos*, etc.). Control can change on a daily basis, adding to the stress, as does the constant worry that her young teenage daughter will be taken by one of the groups. The woman explained that every day her life is a version of Shakira's hit "Blind, Deaf and Dumb," (*Ciega Sordamuda*) because, in the neighborhoods that is what everyone acts like in the face of the brutality: "We see everything and act just like the song says:

blind, deaf, and dumb. We see everything but say nothing because we know we can't say anything without getting killed."

These trends will likely continue to serve as drivers of high-levels of violence, which will in turn drive high levels of immigration toward the United States. In conversations with gang leaders, they stated that it is easier now than at any time in recent memory to move migrants through Mexico because Mexican officials are much less rigorous in trying to halt them, because of the tension with the U.S. Government over the proposed border wall. This has served to greatly facilitate the movement of gang members back and forth to the United States.

At the same time, according to both gang leaders and law enforcement officials across the region, the gangs are already beefing up their ranks due to the recent influx of gang members being deported from the United States. These members are immediately incorporated into the existing gang structures. The gangs, particularly MS 13, are also offering immediate employment opportunities to other criminals with special skills, particularly in the financial and military fields.

Economic

The increasing gang capabilities are directly reflected in the gang's growing, visible financial fortune. Recent judicial investigations into the activities of MS 13 in El Salvador uncovered a multi-million dollar structure of legitimate businesses owned by the gang. The 157 businesses uncovered in Operation Check (*Operación Jaque*) in mid-2016 included bus and taxi companies, luxury car lots, brothels, motels, restaurants, and crack houses. According to the Attorney

General, the gang had also set up a special financial committee known as The Federation (*La Federación*) to manage its financial assets.⁴

Ironically, much of the seed money for the gang's legitimate investments came from their negotiations with the government of Mauricio Funes (2009–14) and their ill-fated gang "truce," in which the government paid up to \$25 million to the gang in an effort to reduce the nation's homicide rate. This included putting some notorious gang members on the government payroll in some municipalities.⁵ These payments are at the root of many of the ongoing internal struggles within MS 13 in El Salvador.

"The government asks us what we want, and we tell them—and then they give it to us," said one gang leader with a laugh, in an interview as the truce negotiations were underway. "We have found that if they say no, we just have to dump enough bodies on the street, then they say yes."

The truce was the result of a secret pact among drug trafficking organizations, then President Mauricio Funes, his Defense Minister, David Munguía Payes, and the imprisoned leadership of the gangs. In negotiating the truce directly with the government, the gang leadership discovered for the first time that they had real political power. "The government asks us what we want, and we tell them—and then they give it to us," said one gang leader with a laugh, in an interview as the truce negotiations were underway. "We have found that if they say no, we just have to dump enough bodies on the street, then they say yes."⁶

While the fact that the gang leaders had directly negotiated with leaders of El Salvador’s two main political parties was previously well-established, the magnitude of what was negotiated has only recently come to light. During the past year, MS 13 has posted a series of YouTube videos and audio recordings of their leadership directly negotiating with leaders of the two main political parties, the right-wing Republican Nationalist Alliance (*Alianza Republicana Nacionalista*—ARENA) and the former guerrillas of the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN), for monetary gain and political power. The recordings show that in 2014, the FMLN’s former Public Security Minister, Benito Lara, and the current Interior Minister, Aristides Valencia,

met with gang leaders. During these meetings, Valencia offered MS 13 an estimated \$10 million in micro-credit, with the acknowledgement that the gangs would control the funds for their own needs, making it essentially a payoff. These revelations came a few months after another released audio recording, in which Valencia could be heard negotiating with gang leaders to obtain their support during the second round of the 2014 presidential elections. Earlier recordings showed ARENA leaders offering to provide identity cards and financial rewards in exchange for the gang-controlled votes.⁷



Map of Central America

Military

Another major strategic shift by MS 13 has been to wage a series of bloody battles with traditional cocaine transportistas in an effort to expand their territorial control beyond the traditional urban center to surrounding rural areas. The strategic objective of this rural territorial expansion is to control vital nodes of the regional illicit trafficking routes, primarily for cocaine, but also weapons, cash, and human beings, including illegal migrants, sex slaves, and others.

Newly controlled MS 13 areas, when plotted on a map, show that San Pedro Sula to the east and northeast is almost encircled by gang-controlled rural areas. This territory is key to the control of the crossroads that lead to *puntos ciegos*, or informal border crossings, vital to the flow of cocaine and precursor chemicals northward from Puerto Cortes on the Atlantic coast of Honduras to Puerto Barrios and Izabal in Guatemala.

This expansion and control of rural areas is also reportedly taking place along the Honduras–Nicaragua border, reflecting the strategic decision by the gang leadership to seek control of important international nodes of the regional cocaine trafficking trade, a move that both increases their financial revenues and puts them in almost permanent conflict with other transportista groups who have operated in the regions for many years. Given MS 13's willingness to expend significant personnel and economic resources in the rural deployments, along with the willingness of their members to employ lethal force and their existing reputation for brutality, they appear to be winning most of those battles.

The capacity of MS 13 in San Pedro Sula to carry out new military action is owed in part to the increased military training they are receiving and the improved weaponry they can now routinely access, including Uzi submachine guns, C4 explosives, RPGs, and new AK–47 and AR–15 assault rifles. This capacity has in turn strengthened the gang's ties to Mexican cartels seeking to move their cocaine through the region. According to regional law enforcement officials and gang leaders interviewed by the authors, this successful expansion is because of the unintended consequences of two actions by the U.S. and Honduran governments that are widely viewed as successes.

In an effort to build a credible police force, the Honduran government, with U.S. support, has dismissed more than 1,000 policemen suspected of corruption and/or human rights violations. A core of more rigorously vetted and trained policemen are to fill the void in new police structures. However, the massive firings have been a boon to MS 13 because the gang now has money to hire many of them as security and trainers for gang activities. According to a policeman who has been offered work by MS 13 and has several friends who have accepted the offer, MS 13 pays roughly 2.5 times what the policemen were making inside the police force.

With the guidance of former security officers, many who have trained in the United States and elsewhere, MS 13 has reportedly set up military training camps in the Honduran province of Olancho. In the camps, to which the authors were denied access, training is provided by former policemen and former special forces combatants from the wars in El Salvador, Guatemala,

and Nicaragua. The widespread availability of unemployed policemen has not only benefited MS 13; many dismissed policemen have branched out into their own freelance criminal activity (kidnapping, extortion), or joined some of the rapidly-growing groups that offer specialized criminal services, like the *Olanchos*, who specialize in murder for hire, or *Los Ponce* and *Los Tercereños*, who now compete with MS 13 for control of drug transport routes.

These specialized criminal groups, often referred to as gangs although they do not adhere to traditional gang culture, have added significant new elements and crosscurrents to the violence in the region. These smaller groups are reportedly refining cocaine base in San Pedros, Honduras that arrives from Colombia and Venezuela into refined cocaine known as HCL. This is partly the result of the difficulty in acquiring precursor chemicals in Colombia, and the viability of flying cocaine base directly to Honduras.

Political

MS 13 in the Northern Triangle—El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras—has not yet coalesced around a coherent political ideology; however, since 2014 the gang has been exercising real political power, utilizing a three-pronged strategy that leverages the gang’s unity as a voting bloc. Rather than presenting a specific political platform beyond seeking direct benefits for the gang, MS 13 uses the sheer numbers of its members (more than 35,000 in El Salvador—a country geographically the size of Massachusetts—and an equal or greater number in Honduras, according to police intelligence estimates) and its vast territorial

control as both carrots and sticks to subvert the electoral process in new and dangerous ways:

- MS 13 charges individual candidates from all parties several hundred dollars to several thousand dollars to be able set up a party organization and campaign in a neighborhood the gang controls.
- The gang also bans certain politicians or political parties they view as enemies from campaigning in those areas. Most notably in 2017, MS 13 banned supporters of Honduras President Juan Orlando Hernández from campaigning for his party’s nomination in some sectors of San Pedro Sula—the country’s main transport hub. Although Hernández won the primary, the gang in areas they control on the outskirts of the city also forced campaign workers to quit, refused to allow propaganda to be displayed, and threatened to kill anyone found voting for the President. MS 13 has threatened to employ similar tactics against the governing FMLN in El Salvador in upcoming elections.
- MS 13 has yet to participate financially in national campaigns but has directly financed mayors and local legislatures. This has allowed the gang to move some of their own (or those willing to do their bidding) into municipal strongholds, and in some documented cases the mayors have hired gang members as municipal employees.

In growing areas in both Honduras and El Salvador, the more powerful clicas and programas of MS 13 have filled the void of an absent national government by carrying

out significant state functions. This is not universally true; other clicas, especially those that are not on routes needed by networks to move cocaine or other illicit products, continue to operate at the more rudimentary level traditionally associated with the gangs.

The Fragmentation of the State and Gang Governance

Several recent publications have described the gangs as having created a parallel state, where they are politically and economically empowered and have replaced the formal state.⁸ However, the reality is that across the Northern Triangle, gangs have created a confederation of semi-autonomous mini-states within each country that coordinate more closely than the national governments.

For those clicas and programas with the most resources in and around San Pedro Sula

(usually derived from a more formal alliance with the regional cocaine transporting networks), the activities in their neighborhoods include:

- Providing rudimentary but rapid judicial “sentences,” issued at hearings held twice a week to resolve local disputes (charges of domestic violence, property theft, vandalism, and violating gang rules).⁹
- Providing perimeter security and protection from outside gangs and local law enforcement groups to keep the neighborhood relatively free of violence and crime from groups not under the control of MS 13.
- Creating rudimentary literacy programs, primarily designed to help their members to be able to communicate



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Rudimentary cocaine laboratory found by Honduran police this May in territory controlled by MS 13 near San Pedro Sula.

with each other with cellular telephones, but open to some others in the community.

- Funding small-scale social programs, such as bowls of soup and a slice of bread as lunch for school children and the elderly in the community, because of the gang's increased income from transporting cocaine and dominating the rapidly-expanding internal cocaine/crack retail market.¹⁰
- Providing small employment opportunities in the informal labor market, primarily by helping families run hundreds of small mini *maquilas* that mass-produce tee shirts, underwear, and other clothing items. Most of the material for these home operations of a few sewing machines per shop is stolen from the large international *maquilas* that operate across San Pedro Sula.

These clear efforts to change the perception of MS 13 among the communities in which they live also includes rebranding themselves a *La Familia* rather than gang members, or *mareros*. In many parts of San Pedro Sula, the governing clicas have painted over their old gang graffiti on the walls in an effort to present themselves as a more responsible and mature group.

The transformation is also visible in other ways. One recent report on the gang's control of a market in downtown San Salvador, written by a merchant who has had a stall there for 13 years, described how MS 13 leaders:

Decide everything. They are the maximum authority. They extort, kill and walk around armed through the market with

total impunity...The gang member who comes by to collect the extortion every Saturday morning comes well-dressed. It is surprising to see now the boys are wearing dress shirts, dress pants and nice shoes. They even wear glasses to look like intellectuals.

They carry a backpack and a notebook, and the accounting for what is owed by each stall (inside the market) is accurate. They know how much each stall should pay because the quotas are different depending on what the owner is selling and the size of the business. For example, a fruit vendor will be charged less than those selling clothes and shoes. They know who owes how much from the previous week; they know how much a person's accumulated debt is. We are never late with our payments. It would cost us our lives.¹¹

In Honduras, MS 13 leadership has made the strategic decision—and enforced it at the street level—to exchange the immediate financial gain of local extortion for political standing and a formalization of their political and economic authority. This decision was made possible by the gang's increasing revenues from growing ties to drug trafficking structures. In these relationships, gang members primarily operate as hired transporters for multi-ton loads of cocaine (*transportistas*), and control the retail markets of crack and cocaine (*narcomenudeo*).

Because of these new cash influxes, the gang had the financial flexibility to fundamentally shift the gang's calculation of power and sustainability away from immediate gain, toward building a political power base.

This shift in behavior and thinking has not occurred in other gangs or MS 13 in El Salvador. Although leaders of MS 13 in El Salvador are aware of how their counterparts in Honduras are working, they say that the gang in El Salvador has not yet found a replacement revenue stream to make up for what would be lost by dropping extortion as a primary financial source.

According to interviews with MS 13 leaders in Choloma, the sector of San Pedro Sula that led the move to stop local extortions, the decision had four components:

- Provide relief to small business in areas under their control—often family members and community members known to gang members and their families—by eliminating the gang policy that people most hated.
- Leverage the relief into active political support for the gang by channeling some of the new drug wealth into rudimentary social programs, as described above, creating for the first time a more formal political face to the gangs.
- Provide security for the communities by aggressively attacking other gangs and law enforcement units on the perimeter of the neighborhood, turning MS territory into a relative safe haven in the sea of surrounding violence. This, in turn, could induce nearby neighborhoods to support MS 13's territorial expansion efforts and withdraw support from rival gangs.
- Use the safe havens to securely warehouse cocaine, weapons, and humans being trafficked through their territory, increasing the gang's control of these routes and increasing the revenues

derived from providing security to other criminal groups.

Leadership Divisions

While MS 13 remains a formidable regional and transregional force with the ability to coordinate strategy, personnel movements and actions across national borders, leadership of the group in both Honduras and El Salvador said that the leaders are often now going their separate ways. While the Salvadoran branch of MS 13 has been riven by internal strife as several of the most powerful subgroups threaten to fracture, the Honduran MS 13 is pioneering new and innovative political and social strategies that are expanding its reach.

One of the biggest differences between MS 13 in El Salvador and its counterpart in Honduras is the nature of the leadership. MS 13 in Honduras has maintained a unified gang leadership, largely in prison, which has proved capable of strategic thinking, including: initiating important changes, such as halting the extortion of businesses in their neighborhoods; expanding territorial control aimed at dominating urban and rural cocaine transport routes; enhancing military capacities and capabilities; and developing a more coherent political presence.

By contrast, MS 13 leadership in El Salvador is deeply divided. Ongoing, bloody internal conflicts between the historic leadership (*ranfla histórica*), mostly in prison, and the leadership outside of prison (*ranfla libre*) are wreaking havoc within the gang structure. The infighting centers on the amount of money the *ranfla histórica* took from the government during the truce but reportedly did not share with the rest of the gang. This breach of gang protocol was

viewed by many of the leaders and rank and file on the street as a betrayal worthy of death. There have been bloody purges and counter-purges in the gang as a result of the feeling on the street that the prison leadership betrayed the gang for personal profits. This assessment from the street is accurate, and members outside of prison have been furious for years as they watched the wives and family members of the ranfla histórica purchase new houses, large screen televisions, and luxury vehicles.

There is little doubt that the fundamental tipping point in the growth of the gangs in Central America, particularly that of MS 13, was the ill-fated truce between the major gangs in El Salvador.

The most visible leader of the internal revolt was Walter Antonio Carrillo Alfaro— a.k.a. El Chory (from Shorty)—who believed the ranfla histórica had forfeited its legitimacy by stealing the government money and thereby “disrespecting” the gang members on the street.¹² El Chory was a member of the powerful Fulton Locos clica and was well-respected among MS 13 leaders. He was popular enough to inspire an unprecedented rebellion against the prison leadership, including a refusal to endorse new attempts at a truce, and other acts of defiance. On January 16, 2016, the ranfla histórica had El Chory murdered in prison. A series of retaliatory murders took place, and the division reportedly still festers within the ranks of MS 13.¹³

The primary architect of the ranfla histórica’s financial strategy, according to

interviews and published reports, is Marvin Adalay Ramos Quintanilla, a.k.a. El Piwa, who was a chief negotiator of the truce and known for his close relationship with Salvadoran Defense Minister David Munguía Payes. El Piwa was released from prison under unclear circumstances in 2013, in the middle of the truce, and was then employed by the municipality of Ilopango. Munguía Payes issued a gun permit for the gang leader, who legally acquired numerous weapons. El Piwa claimed to have left MS 13 altogether to become an evangelical pastor and occasionally appeared on TV as a preacher. Using this cover, he orchestrated MS 13’s financial growth, primarily through the sale of cocaine and crack from secret pozos controlled by the ranfla histórica.¹⁴ El Piwa was arrested during Operation Check in 2016 and remains in custody, but Salvadoran intelligence officials monitoring the gang’s activities said the economic power he helped to establish is far from broken. “We are only now discovering how big they have grown economically,” the official said. “They have truly entered the ranks of the business elite.”

The Law of Unintended Consequences

There is little doubt that the fundamental tipping point in the growth of the gangs in Central America, particularly that of MS 13, was the ill-fated truce between the major gangs in El Salvador. The relatively successful law enforcement actions during the past three years by the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration, the U.S. Treasury Department, and agencies in Honduras also have been a major factor in allowing MS 13 to expand, particularly into rural areas traditionally controlled by long-standing transportista groups. These actions include:

the arresting of members of the Valle Valle clan; the dismantling of the Cachirros structure; and the shuttering of the financial operations of the Rosenthal family. These actions effectively weakened or decapitated the most powerful Honduran transportista structures in the movement of cocaine, allowing MS 13 to greatly strengthen its role in the regional trafficking structures.

The traditional transportista network viewed the gangs as their main competition and fought long, hard, and successfully for a long time to marginalize the gangs from the cocaine transport business, although the gangs have long controlled local retail business. The gangs had been unable to penetrate the drug transport trade in large part because the traditional groups could and would kill the gang members when they tried to take over key routes.¹⁵ Key areas along the Honduran–Guatemalan border had no gang presence at all in 2014–15, nor did the transportista groups interviewed then seem concerned that MS 13 could become a major problem.

However, with the leadership of the main competition summarily taken off the playing field, MS 13 was well-positioned to step into the void. Mexican organizations, desperate to keep their product moving safely through Honduras, opened the door for the alliances that have since blossomed. MS 13 currently has control of all of the major crossroads along the strategic La Acéquia–Copan–El Paraíso corridor, to include traditionally hostile, narco-controlled areas far from their traditional urban stronghold. Decapitated bodies with severed limbs—the hallmark of MS 13 assassinations—mark the gang presence there.

The Growing Cost of the New Gangs

It is almost impossible to overstate the damage to the fabric of society that gang-driven violence has caused, and the push factor this violence creates for illegal immigration to the United States. With the almost complete absence of the state, gang beheadings and dismemberment of victims are now routine; lynching and burning victims alive are commonplace; and the recruitment of children as young as 11 is an everyday occurrence.

Those who cannot afford to send their children out of the country are forced to seek safety in the shrinking areas of the national territory where the gangs are not fully in control. Tens of thousands of people have fled their homes due to gang expansion, violence and threats, primarily against minors who do not want to join. While many move to other neighborhoods or areas of the country to find shelter with families, an increasing number are now living in de facto displacement camps around the major cities, a reality the government has consistently refused to acknowledge.¹⁶

The reasons for the fear for the youth in these areas are clear. Males, who represent more than 90 percent of the gang members, usually start as *banderines*, or lookouts, for the gang, and then move up the ladder to *postes* who provide local security, or *paisas* who protect and dispense cocaine and crack rocks at the *pozos*, or cocaine storage centers, then to full membership as *jommies* (homies). Each step entails carrying out specific, usually violent acts, including murders, to prove loyalty to the gang.¹⁷ Young females who enter the gang, either by choice or force (and there is very little choice) are known as

jainas who are by and large relegated to the role of sex slaves. While the homicide rates in the Northern Triangle have been well-documented and remain among the highest in the world, the economic and social costs of the violence, largely now driven by gangs, are also among the highest in the world.

A recent study by the Inter-American Development Bank found that Honduras and El Salvador rank as the two countries that lose the largest percentage of their GDPs to violence. According to the study, Honduras lost 6.5 percent of its GDP in 2016, or \$1.3 billion, while El Salvador suffered a 5.94 percent loss of GDP, or \$1.5 billion.¹⁸ The losses far exceed the \$750 million U.S.-funded three year “Plan for Prosperity” for the region, in which each of these countries is to receive less than \$100 million a year to address the root causes of illegal immigration. These losses represent not only the harsh economic cost of the gangs, but also the roadblocks to creating employment and opportunities for the huge population of young people who make up the gangs and are the prime targets of gang recruiting.

The social crises are growing in the Northern Triangle in part because the gangs, particularly MS 13, have shown the state in both El Salvador and Honduras to be easily corruptible, inefficient, and incapable in every sense of confronting the gangs or taking back the territory that the gangs have taken from what one academic called the “evaporating state.” In Honduras, it is widely known that MS 13 expansion is aided by the gang’s alliance with sectors of the local police forces against Calle 18 and other rival groups. As part of the partnership, police often provide weapons and clear out of specific areas when MS 13 carries out attacks

on other groups. There are documented cases of the police renting out their uniforms, guns, and badges to the gang so MS 13 could carry out kidnapping and assassinations with impunity.

Outlook

Rival gang members, law enforcement officials, journalists, and academics all indicate that MS 13 has surged to an unprecedented, preeminent role in the region. From this privileged position, MS 13 in El Salvador has even formed short-term tactical alliances with sectors of Calle 18, traditionally its mortal enemy, to carry out attacks on policemen. This willingness to cooperate for economic and political gain has never before been exhibited by gangs in the Northern Triangle.

There is now abundant evidence that important elements of MS 13 have evolved at the very least to third generation gangs, as anticipated by Manwaring:¹⁹

Rather than trying to depose of a government with a major stroke (golpe or coup) or in a prolonged revolutionary war, as some insurgents have done, gangs and their allies more subtly take control of territory and people one street or neighborhood at a time (coup d’sreet) or one individual, business or government office at a time...Its putative objective is to neutralize, control or depose governments to ensure self-determined (non-democratic) ends. The objective defines insurgency, a serious political agenda, and a clash regarding the authoritative allocation of values in a society.²⁰

It is an open question to the authors whether the gang can now be classified as a

criminal insurgency, but it is clear that MS 13, despite its divisions and internal differences, is now a markedly different and more dangerous organization than it was a year ago and a wholly transformed organization since the end of the truce in 2014. The gang violence is a primary driver of the social disintegration of the Northern Triangle, and as such, a primary driver of the illegal immigration of thousands of people from that region—often unaccompanied minors—toward the United States in journeys fraught with danger.

This dynamic is unlikely to change in the near future, and is more likely to accelerate, given the lack of political will within the governments of El Salvador and Honduras to combat the root causes of the gang's growth, including its growing presence within the state itself. The ongoing transformation of MS 13 presents a real threat to democracy and the rule of law in multiple countries that comprise a key corridor of access to the southern border of the United States.

The evolution of the gang's power and structure remains uneven, depending on the sub-group's geographic location and leadership. In El Salvador, the MS 13 leadership structure is in danger of undergoing a permanent fracturing, while in Honduras the leadership structure remains solid and disciplined. These differences indicate that the growth of the gang into a fully functional political-economic force is not inevitable, and multiple vulnerabilities exist that could be exploited with creative new strategies and a more realistic understanding of the gang structures.

While the governments of the Northern Triangle have repeatedly asked for increased aid from the United States and the

international community to combat the gangs and the violence they engender, they have lacked the political will to undertake meaningful steps on their own. Recent studies show that the region's countries could recoup many times the foreign aid that they receive by curtailing the massive corruption and taking basic steps to halt the violence and end the culture of impunity that pervades the region.

At the same time, MS 13 has shown an ability to learn lessons from its own past experiences, and is actively studying the methodologies of other groups such as the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), Hezbollah, and al-Qaeda. This does not imply an ideological or religious affinity toward those groups, but rather a willingness to look to those groups, via the internet, for successful military, economic and political strategies to further their own ends.

While Mexico and Colombia absorb the vast majority of the U.S. attention paid to the Western Hemisphere, the evolution of MS 13 poses a challenge that could greatly weaken the security of the southern border. The threat is at least as complex and real as those posed in Mexico and the United States, and far harder to overcome because of the lack of political will and functioning institutions in the Northern Triangle. [PRISM](#)

Notes

¹ Because of this, this report focuses on MS 13 rather than other gangs.

² Friedrich Ebert Stiftung Foundation, “La Violencia Pandilleril y su impacto en la economía, la cultura y la política,” available at <<http://www.fesamericacentral.org/el-salvador/seguridad/details/La+violencia+pandilleril+y+su+impacto+en+la+econom%C3%ADa%2C+la+cultura+y+la+pol%C3%ADtica.759.html>>.

³ The presence of MS 13 members in the Attorney General’s office, the National Police, and the military has been in place since the gang “truce,” at least, and is also used by Calel 1.

⁴ For a good recap of the government’s first move against the financial structure of the MS 13 see: Ángela Medina, “Seguridad: Por primera vez se ha tocado el patrimonio y finanzas de las MS,” *La Prensa Gráfica* (El Salvador), July 27, 2016, available at <<http://www.laprensagrafica.com/2016/07/28/landaverde-por-primera-vez-se-ha-tocado-el-patrimonio-y-finanzas-de-la-ms>>.

⁵ The truce was the product of a three-part negotiation among Funes, multiple drug trafficking organizations, and the gangs. The drug transport organizations wanted free passage through gang areas, the government wanted to lower homicide rates and the gangs wanted money. The truce fell apart when the opaqueness of the agreement became public. For a look at how the gangs were paid see: Héctor Silva and Bryan Avelar, “Case Against El Salvador’s MS13 Reveals State Role in Gang’s Growth,” *InSight Crime*, August 3, 2016, available at <<http://www.insight-crime.org/component/content/article?id=7988:case-against-el-salvador-s-ms13-reveals-state-role-in-gang-s-growth>>.

⁶ Author interview with MS 13 gang leaders in Zacatecolua Prison, February 2013.

⁷ Clavel, *op. cit.*

⁸ Tristan Clavel, “Report Says El Salvador Gangs Have Created a Parallel State,” *InSight Crime*, December 22, 2016, available at <<http://www.insightcrime.org/news-analysis/el-salvador-gangs-achieve-criminal-governance-parallel-economy-report>>. This report was based in large part on the October 2016 report by the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung Foundation.

⁹ In those neighborhoods where the courts were able to briefly observe the “courts” in action, sentencing usually took only a matter of minutes after

each side in the dispute was heard. Sentences ranged from beatings by gang members to exile from the community. Death sentences for repeat offenders or traitors to the gang are also possible.

¹⁰ For a closer look at the gang social structures see: Douglas Farah, “Central American Gangs are All Grown Up,” *Foreign Policy*, January 19, 2016, available at <http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/01/19/central-american-gangs-are-all-grown-up/?wp_login_redirect=0>.

¹¹ “Vendo en el Búnker de la MS en San Salvador.” *La Prensa Gráfica*, December 14, 2016.

¹² Disrespect is considered a capital crime, and the gang leadership had historically shared the wealth of the gang by paying for lawyers for the jailed members, taking care of the families of jailed members, and generally not allowing individual leaders to acquire visible wealth.

¹³ *InSight Crime* independently verified this account of El Chory’s rebellion and death. See: Steven Dudley and Juan José Martínez, “El Salvador’s Prisons and the Battle for the MS 13’s Soul,” *InSight Crime*, February 16, 2017, available at <<http://www.insightcrime.org/investigations/el-salvador-prisons-battle-ms13-soul>>.

¹⁴ For a fuller overview of El Piwa and the internal splits see: “Purgas en la cúpula del la MS 13 por dinero,” *El Faro* (El Salvador), August 9, 2016, available at <http://www.elfaro.net/es/201608/salanegra/19066/Purgas-en-la-c%C3%BApula-de-la-MS-13-por-dinero.htm?st-full_text=all&tpl=11>.

¹⁵ For a more complete look at this dynamic see: Douglas Farah and Carl Meacham, “Alternative Governance in the Northern Triangle and Implications for U.S. Foreign Policy: Finding Logic Within Chaos,” *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, September 2015,

¹⁶ Author interview with Celia Medrano, director of Cristosal, a Catholic NGO that monitors internal displacement. See also: Gloria Marisela Morán, “Desplazamientos internos, una realidad innegable,” *ContraPunto*, August 9, 2016, available at <<http://www.contrapunto.com.sv/sociedad/ddhh/desplazamientos-internos-una-realidad-innegable/1399>>.

¹⁷ full-fledged gang members were required to kill at least one person. Now they are required to kill at least one person to move up the gang’s organizational structure, meaning at least three murders before becoming a hommie. See José Miguel Cruz et al, “The New Face of Street Gangs: The Gang Phenomenon in El Salvador,” *Florida International*

University and Fundación Nacional para el Desarrollo, March 2017, available at <https://lacc.fiu.edu/research/the-new-face-of-street-gangs-in-central-america/the-new-face-of-street-gangs_final-report_eng.pdf>.

¹⁸ "The Costs of Crime and Violence: New Evidence and Insights in Latin America and the Caribbean," Laura Jaitman, editor, Inter-American Development Bank, January 2017.

¹⁹ Max Manwaring, "A Contemporary Challenge to State Sovereignty: Gangs and Other Illicit Transnational Criminal Organizations in Central America, El Salvador, Mexico, Jamaica and Brazil," Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, Carlisle, December 2007, available at <<http://strategicstudiesinstitute.army.mil/pubs/display.cfm?pubID=837>>.

²⁰ Manwaring, *op cit.*, p. vii.