Central American Gangs and Transnational Criminal Organizations

The Changing Relationships in a Time of Turmoil

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ABSTRACT

A field view of the changing dynamics among transnational criminal organizations and gangs in the Northern Triangle of Central America
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Introduction and General Framework

On October 11, 2012, the U.S. Treasury Department's Office of Foreign Assets Control designated the Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13) a significant transnational criminal organization (TCO). The gang was targeted for its involvement in "serious transnational criminal activities, including drug trafficking, kidnapping, human smuggling, sex trafficking, murder, assassinations, racketeering, blackmail, extortion and immigration offenses."[1]

The designation, which came as a surprise to Central American governments, has caused considerable debate within the U.S. policy and law enforcement communities over whether the step was merited and whether it would, or could, have a significant impact.

This report attempts to offer some insights into those questions at a time when the gangs themselves are in a tremendous state of flux and interacting in new ways amongst themselves and with regional governments. This is particularly true in El Salvador, the spiritual homeland of the MS-13. Relying primarily on original fieldwork, the report examines the relationship of the MS-13 and Calle 18 gangs to the transnational criminal networks that are growing in strength and sophistication across Central America, particularly in the Northern Triangle of Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador.

It is important to understand the context and methodology of the research for this study. The information presented here was gathered from multiple trips to El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras over the second half of 2012. The author has worked in the region for almost three decades and has met repeatedly with members of the MS-13 leadership (in prison and operating on the streets in San Salvador), gang experts from law enforcement, priests, social workers and other representatives from civil society who regularly deal with the gangs and their victims.

The author first dealt with MS-13 gang leaders in 1995, and has developed relationships of trust with several interlocutors who have, at some risk, introduced him to gang members at all levels, facilitated discussions with them, and helped make this field research possible. While outside information is cited in footnotes, the information obtained from interviews and observations with the gangs is not.

Two primary, inter-related questions are addressed:

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[1] U.S. Department of Treasury, "Treasury Sanctions Latin American Criminal Organization," Press Center, October 11, 2012, accessed at: http://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/tg1733.aspx

- What role do Central American gangs play in transnational crime? This includes an assessment of the gangs' involvement in the trafficking of drugs, weapons, humans and bulk cash, as well as their relationship to Mexican DTOs operating in the Northern Triangle, such as *Los Zetas* and the Sinaloa cartel.

- What do the partnerships/alliances between the gangs and other TCOs look like? This includes a discussion of the connectivity the gangs maintain internationally – among themselves and with regional and transnational TCOs -- as well as to local political structures.

There is some debate regarding the level of threat the gangs pose to the national security of the United States; however, there is agreement that the threat is considerable because the gangs are transnational with an extended network in over 300 cities in 40 states across the United States. Moreover, there is no question the gangs pose a clear and present danger to the governments in the Central American region, due to the sheer size of their structures and their extremely violent subculture. This violence has been permeating many aspects of daily life in the region at an accelerating rate.

A December 2011 report by the Salvadoran National Police mapped gang territories down to the neighborhood level across the country and estimated that, in El Salvador alone, the main gangs had 9,000 members in prison and 27,000 members on the streets. As a point of reference, at the height El Salvador's civil war, the rebel *Frente Farabundo Martí Para la Liberación Nacional* (Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front – FMLN) had 9,000 troops under arms. Given the similar levels of gang membership in neighboring Honduras and Guatemala, the gang forces in Central America likely number more than 100,000.

The emergence of the gangs has come at an enormous social cost. By the middle of the twenty-first century's first decade, the northern tier countries of Central America had three of the five highest homicide rates in the world, far higher than during the region's wars in the 1980s. Murder rates in El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras measured consistently among the five highest globally, ranging from 50 to 80 homicides per 100,000 citizens. This compares to about five murders per 100,000 in the United States and 1.7 in Canada. The murder rate for people aged 15 to 24 in El Salvador, was 94 per 100,000 in recent years—the highest in the world.[2]

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[2] There are multiple studies on the number of homicides in the region, which vary slightly in the exact numbers but arrive at the same general number. These studies show the homicide rate in El Salvador almost doubling from about 37 per 100,000 in 2004 to about 71 per 100,000 in 2009. For official National Police statistics see: "Número de Victimas y Tasas de Homicidios Dolosos en El Salvador (1999-2006)," Observatorio Centroamericano Sobre Violencia, 3 September 2010 . Also see: Edith Portillo, "Gestión de Saca Acumula 16 mil homicidios," El Faro, 29 December 2008; and "Crime and Instability: Case Studies of Transnational Threats," United Nations Office of Drugs and Crime, United Nations, February 2010. The figure on homicides among young people was taken from:

Most of the gang members (known as *pandilleros* or *mareros*) interviewed by the author are members of MS-13, which is a much more cohesive and disciplined group than Calle 18. MS-13 also has significantly more contact with TCOs than Calle 18, with the possible exception of some 18 groups in the San Pedro Sula region of Honduras. Calle 18 has not been designated a TCO by the U.S. government.

It is important to understand three underlying realities that make it difficult to generalize about the gangs and their relationships with TCOs, and can lead to flawed assessments. While a more nuanced analysis complicates the task of developing comprehensive policy recommendations and solutions, it helps to explain why most approaches have thus far failed to make any significant progress toward blunting the gang crisis.

The first factor is that while the gangs, particularly the MS-13, have an important hierarchical structure, each *clica* (neighborhood level gang group of a few dozen members) has a great deal of autonomy in the relationships it maintains with other organizations, including TCOs.

The *clicas* are grouped into larger blocs called *programas*, with mid-level leaders known as *palabreros*, who have authority over several dozen *clicas.* Above them is a *ranflero,* who is generally in prison but whose orders are passed on and obeyed. Above the *ranfleros* are the *jefes nacionales*, a small group of national leaders who have the ultimate authority on issues that affect the entire structure. Within this structure, local gang leaders have considerable autonomy in deciding which criminal activities to engage in as a clique or group of cliques, how to distribute criminal proceeds, and which non-gang TCOs to work with.[3] Each *clica* is responsible for its own financial well being, and thus can decide how to

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Canwest News Service, "Latin America Has the Highest Homicide Rate for Young Adults in the World," 26 November 2008.

[3] Author interviews with gang members and Policía Nacional.

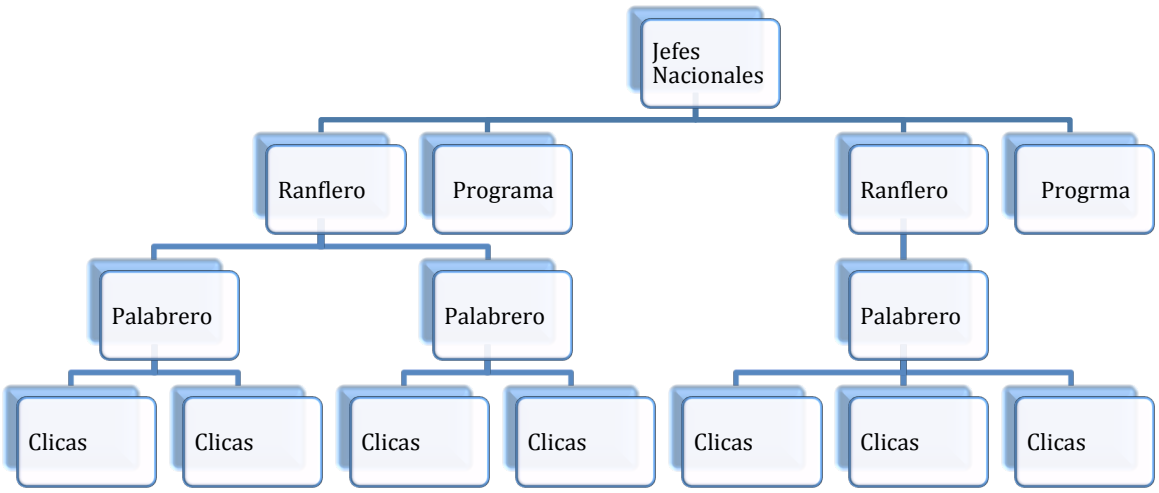

Figure 1: General Breakdown of MS-13 Command and Control Structures

raise that money: through extortions; "taxing" of local businesses and those who transit the neighborhoods they control for commerce (vendors, gas suppliers, beer trucks etc.); *narco menudeo* or the small scale retail of cocaine and crack; and, contract assassinations and other activities.

These myriad groups can and do take a variety of positions *vis-a-vis* dealings with the transport networks working on behalf of Mexican drug trafficking organizations such as *Los Zetas* and the Sinaloa cartel, protection of cocaine loads moving through Central America, extortion, human smuggling and other criminal activities.

This lack of a common approach or cohesion complicates efforts to assess the role played by gangs in transnational crime. The clearest evidence that there is not yet a robust economic relationship between the gangs and TCOs is the abject poverty in which the vast majority of the gang members live. Having spent time in several of their neighborhoods (both MS-13 and Calle 18) over the past two years, it is clear that the gang members and their families are deriving little beyond subsistence from their criminal activities, and certainly not enough for an opulent lifestyle. Some of the money is used by gang members to feed personal drug habits, purchase weapons for the *clica,* pay lawyers for those in prison and other activities; but, it is not enough to lift most gang members and their families out of poverty. This could be changing already, but is not yet widely visible.

It is also important to understand that the primary TCOs with whom the gangs have relationships are the mid-level local or regional *transportista* (transport) structures

(*Los Perrones* in eastern San Miguel region*, El Cartel de Texis*, based in the eastern town of Texispteque), rather than the larger cartel structures, although there may be a few exceptions**.** This relationship occurs most often when the gangs control territory the *transportistas* need to move their products. Without that compelling need, most transportation and other TCO groups would not choose to deal with the gangs. A relatively small minority of the MS-13 *clicas* and *programas* have any ties to major drug trafficking activities. El Salvador remains a secondary route for cocaine traffic in Central America, which primarily transits through Honduras to Guatemala and on to Mexico. However, given the recent political developments in El Salvador, and the growing articulation of a more coherent political agenda of the gangs there, its role is increasing.

The second factor is that the gangs, particularly the MS-13 in El Salvador, are in a state of significant turmoil. Given the historic March 2012 truce between the two main gangs; the ongoing negotiations with the government over additional benefits for the jailed leadership; discussions of creating up to 18 "peace zones" where the gangs would have substantial political control and no police or military presence; and, the growing working relationship between the gangs and regional TCOs, the gangs give many indications of being in the midst of an historical transformation that would lead to a significant restructuring. [4]

As will be discussed below, due to various developments during this period of upheaval, there is a real possibility the MS-13 in El Salvador could become, or is already becoming, much more integrated into regional TCO structures and substructures. It is also likely that these groups will become increasingly active in the political arena, not as a structured political party, but essentially as "votes for rent," where the gang delivers votes from specific neighborhoods it controls to politicians in exchange for political favors.

A third factor is that the gang structures in El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras and Belize differ from each other in significant ways, particularly in how they relate to TCOs. Almost all engage with human smuggling networks, petty crime and *narco-menudeo*, the street corner retail of cocaine or crack. But, as will be discussed, the MS-13 in El Salvador is solidifying ties to *transportista* networks and reaching out to Mexican TCOs. In Honduras, where the gangs control far less territory of significance to the TCOs, they have generally been pushed to the sidelines of the drug trade by local and regional criminal groups in alliance with the Sinaloa cartel. In Guatemala,

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[4] The purpose of this paper is not to go deeply into the mechanics of the truce, and there is significant public information available on the issue. For example see: Douglas Farah, "The Transformation of El Salvador's Gangs into Political Actors," (report, CSIS, 21 June 2012) http://csis.org/files/publication/120621_Farah_Gangs_HemFocus.pdf ; Rachael Schwartz, "El Salvador's Gang Truce Raises Troubling Questions for the Region," *World Politics Review*, 11 May, 2012, http://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/11941/el-salvador-gang-truce-raises-troubling-questions-for-region; Miriam Wells, "El Salvador's 'Peace Zones' Launched in Second Phase of Gang Truce," InsightCrime, January 13, 2013, accessed at: http://www.insightcrime.org/news-analysis/el-salvador-peace-zone-launched-in-second-phase-of-gang-truce

the gangs have occasional contact with the *Zetas* but do not appear to be developing a robust relationship.

Key Findings

- The gangs, particularly the MS-13, maintain multiple types of relationships with Transnational Criminal Organizations (TCOs) and their regional allies, and are most directly involved in human trafficking and weapons procurement and trafficking. Occasionally, the TCOs will delegate cross border extortions and collection activities to the gangs.

- The MS-13 in El Salvador maintains the most direct ties to the drug trade, almost exclusively working with national or regional cocaine trafficking *transportista* organizations rather than directly with Mexican cartels. While the Sinaloa cartel, *Los Zetas* and other Mexican DTOs also operate in El Salvador, the gang relationship, where there is one, appears primarily to be with *Los Zetas.*

- In Honduras, the gangs are largely marginalized from the wholesale drug trade, particularly in the areas where the Sinaloa cartel is dominant, which is most places. While engaging in significant criminal activity (extortion, kidnapping and human trafficking) the gangs have been actively sidelined from the drug trade. Unlike in El Salvador and Guatemala, where drug shipments move via land routes, the drug trade in Honduras relies on airdrops to remote regions of the country where drug traffickers are buying up significant amounts of property. The MS-13 and Calle 18 gangs have little operational capacity there.

- The MS-13 in El Salvador is significantly enhancing its weapons capacities, transitioning away from a dependence on handguns via the acquisition of automatic rifles such as AK-47s, along with grenades, rocket propelled grenade launchers, and Light Anti-Tank Weapons.

- Most of the weaponry is procured through theft or purchase from the military, or from existing arsenals in Nicaragua. Some of the weapons are passed on to TOCs, particularly the Mexicans, in exchange for cash and/or small quantities of cocaine and crack that are sold in the local markets.

- The gangs have taken advantage of government gun-buy-back programs to turn in old and worthless weapons, using the income to buy higher quality weapons in smaller quantities.

- There are credible reports from multiple sources regarding MS-13 involvement in the protection and movement of SAM 7s from Nicaragua to a

clandestine arms market that operates in the Bajo Lempa region of El Salvador, an area dominated by hardline former combatants of the Communist Party faction of the FMLN during the war.

- There have been important efforts, many of them successful, by *Los Zetas* to recruit the best and most skilled MS-13 killers and gunmen, both in El Salvador and Guatemala. Many of the recruits receive enhanced military training in the Petén region of Guatemala and then operate either in Guatemala or Mexico.

- In exchange for an MS-13 member's service, *Los Zetas* will pay the MS-13 *clica* a set amount per month. Through this arrangement, MS-13 upholds one of its central tenets that the gang will not work *for* other groups, but *with* them, as partners and not employees.

- The regional gang presence in Belize is not viewed as significant at this time, due in part to a lack of cultural affinity and to the small number of Belizean gang members that have been deported. Neither the MS-13 nor the Calle 18 is the dominant gang in Belize. Nonetheless, many believe the potential exists for Belize to become significant as an area of expansion, particularly along the Belize-Mexico border.

- The MS-13 maintains a separate and efficient *coyote* structure to move their own people within Central America, and to and from the United States. Within their structure they can move individuals from the Northern Triangle into the United States in less than 72 hours. This structure is now reportedly integrating into the human trafficking structure of *Los Zetas* in a new form of alliance between the two groups.

- While often viewed by TCO leadership as too undisciplined and unreliable to be partners in the cocaine trade, gang members are used most often as foot soldiers to protect the movement of cocaine by land, and of weapons and bulk cash shipments along specific routes controlled by regional *transportista* networks. Gang members are generally viewed as "disposable" agents who are easily replaceable.

- As a result of the political empowerment derived from their ongoing negotiations with the government in El Salvador, and a growing recognition that their territorial control can translate into political bargaining power, the gangs are likely to become significant political actors. This does not imply the formation of a political movement or coherent political agenda, but rather the ability to sell their considerable bloc of votes – members, their families and the inhabitants of neighborhoods they control -- to politicians who will deliver on the gangs' agenda, which is rapidly expanding. While this

phenomenon has occurred in the past on a limited basis, it will likely accelerate dramatically.

- The newly acquired ability of gang leaders in prison in El Salvador to use sophisticated political language and frameworks to articulate the case that they are legitimate political actors who should be treated as a sort of belligerent force could indicate a new level of political awareness and training. It appears this new combination of liberation theology type social and political analysis, and embrace of the Catholic Church's call for forgiveness and reconciliation, while limited to a few of the top leaders who speak to the media, connotes a new type of political training and awareness of the upper echelons of the organization.

- The MS-13 is actively seeking to expand its presence around Latin America and Europe through a variety of methods, including seeking deportation to countries where they do not yet have a presence in order to begin forming new structures. New members no longer have to be Central American or even Latinos. This is part of a deliberate strategy to broaden their recruitment possibilities in new countries and to expand their reach.

- The leadership structure of the MS-13 is undergoing a shift away from its "historic" base in Los Angeles to leadership concentrated in San Salvador, and specifically within the prisons of Ciudad Barrios and Zacatecoluca. While some of the gang leaders in Los Angeles retain leadership positions, most of the leaders now reside in El Salvador, and a portion of the money from illicit gains in the United States is funneled south via Western Union and other money transfer services.

The Changing Role of Gangs in TCOs: A Brief Historical Perspective

The origins of the MS-13 and Calle 18 in Central America date back to 1992, when, following riots in Los Angeles, prosecutors began charging young Latino gang members as adults instead of minors, sending hundreds to prison on felony charges. This was followed in 1996 by a national immigration law legislating that noncitizens sentenced to more than a year in prison would be repatriated to their countries of origin after serving their sentences.[5]

This policy led to the repatriation of tens of thousands of young people, mostly men, from the United States to countries they were unfamiliar with, where many did not even speak the language. In an effort to survive, the deportees sought social acceptance and safety by banding together and replicating the gang structures they

[5] For a good overview of the steps taken, see, Ana Arana, "How Street Gangs Took Central America," *Foreign Affairs* 84, no. 3 (May/June 2005), 98-110.

had come out of in the Los Angeles area. From 2000 to 2004, some 20,000 young Central American criminals were deported from the United States to their homelands.[6] The trend further accelerated from 2008 to 2010, with another 63,000 criminals deported to El Salvador alone.[7] In total, some 300,000 criminals, mostly gang members, have been deported to the Northern Triangle countries over the past decade.

As investigative journalist Ana Arana notes, the consequences have been severe:

> *Fed by an explosive growth in the area's youth population and by a host of social problems such as poverty and unemployment, the gangs are spreading, spilling into Mexico and beyond—even back into the United States itself. With them, the maras are bringing rampant crime, committing thousands of murders and contributing to a flourishing drug trade. Central America's governments, meanwhile, seem utterly unable to meet the challenge, lacking the skills, know-how and money necessary to fight these supergangs.*[8]

From the earliest days the gangs dabbled in informal relationships with regional operatives of TCOs. However, it wasn't until the mid-2000s that Central America became the dominant transit route for cocaine moving northward. In the early days of the 1990s, the gangs engaged in petty crimes such as purse snatchings, as well as the extortion of local business operators (such as bus drivers). They also waged war on rival gangs. Many of those who emerged as early leaders of the gangs, as they were forming, were former Special Forces troops from both sides of the civil war. Due to the experience and backgrounds of the early leadership, the gangs were able to quickly gain control of large swaths of primarily urban territory as well as militarily repel early police efforts to control gang activity.[9]

Given both the common origin of many of the gang members and the boom in computer and cell phone technology, communication among gang members was relatively easy, whether they were based in El Salvador, Honduras, Guatemala or the United States.

Recognizing the historically large number of people seeking to leave the region and enter the United States illegally, MS-13 quickly moved into the human smuggling business. This activity served both as a source of funding, and as a way of

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[6] Ibid., 100.

[7] Author extrapolation of numbers provided by the Congressional Research Service for those years can be found in the following publication: Clare Ribando Seelke, "Gangs in Central America" (report, Congressional Research Service, 3 January, 2011). http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/row/RL34112.pdf

[8] Arana, 99.

[9] As a correspondent at the Washington Post, I was able to document this phenomenon in 1995, where U.S.-trained members of elite military units and Cuban-trained members of elite guerrilla units joined together to run one of the largest MS-13 gangs at the time. See: Douglas Farah and Tod Robberson, "U.S.-Style Gangs in El Salvador Build Free Trade in Crime," *Washington Post*, 28 August 1995.

establishing cross-border corridors of movement for themselves. These corridors afforded mobility to the leadership and protection against detection by authorities, enabling many to elude capture. If a hit were to be carried out in El Salvador, a gang member from Honduras or Guatemala would be brought in to carry out the execution, and then would be slipped back across the border.[10]

As one early study on transnational gangs noted:

> *The capacity to cross national borders creates several advantages for criminal networks. It enables them to supply markets where the profit margins are largest, operate from and in countries where risks are the least, complicate the tasks of law enforcement agencies that are trying to combat them, commit crimes that cross jurisdictions and therefore increase complexity, and adapt their behavior to counter or neutralize law enforcement initiatives.*[11]

Yet there was very little evidence that the Central America-based gangs were integrated into larger drug trafficking structures in the early years. The most common interaction between gangs and TCOs involved small-time, street-level cocaine and crack retail sales by some *clicas* who were paid in fractions of cocaine kilos for guarding loads and arranging logistics. However, the 2006 declaration of war against the Mexican cartels by Mexican president Felipe Calderón fundamentally altered TCO activities in Central America.

As pressure on the Mexican cartels grew inside Mexico, and the groups themselves engaged in fierce intra-cartel warfare, control of the Central American routes became increasingly important to the organizations that had the capacity to project themselves into the region. The two largest organizations, the Sinaloa Cartel and *Los Zetas,* opened new inroads into Central America.

This coincided with a significant geographical shift in the drug trade that had a direct impact on the gangs. Central America's geographic location—between the world's largest cocaine producers in Colombia, Bolivia and Peru, and the world's largest cocaine market in the United States—has made it a strategic transit route for illicit drugs for more than three decades. But during the 1990s, with Colombian cartels controlling the major trafficking structures, the Caribbean was the preferred route. Only about 30 percent of the cocaine from South America destined for the U.S. market transited through Central America at that time. Current estimates indicate that up to 90 percent now moves through the region.[12]

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[10] Author interviews.

[11] Phil Williams, "Transnational Criminal Networks" in *Networks and Netwars: The Future of Terror, Crime and Militancy*, ed. John Arquilla and David Rondfelt (Santa Monica: Rand Corporation, 2001), 78.

[12] Indira A.R. Lakshmanan, "Cocaine's New Route: Traffickers Turn to Guatemala," The Boston Globe, 30 November, 2005. For a broader historic overview see: Peter J. Meyer and Clare Ribando Seelke,

With this shift, TCOs and their regional subgroups had to take into account the strength of the existing gangs in the region. The gangs were simply too big, controlled too much territory, and held too much potential as a labor resource to be ignored.

Until recent years, the primary function of the gangs had been to protect cocaine shipments produced by South American cocaine organizations. The loads were shipped to Central America from Ecuador, Colombia and Venezuela using a variety of methods. Once the loads reached Central America, they usually became the property of the Mexican organizations and had to be moved by land from their point of entry across the Mexican border, through Mexico, and finally, into the United States.

Often the Mexican drug traffickers accepted the handover of cocaine moving by sea in El Salvador, and then moved the product up through Guatemala to Mexico and northward. With its relatively unguarded Pacific coast, which has long been a haven for smugglers – particularly during the civil war of 1980-1992 – and a weak and corruptible police force and political structure, El Salvador offered several advantages. This led to the development of specialized drug transport networks led by *transportistas,* or smuggling specialists, who were often protected or escorted by gang members from MS-13. The Salvadoran *transportista* groups, operating along specific routes in El Salvador and Guatemala, worked with the gang members on specific jobs while becoming increasingly tied to Mexican TCOs. The gang's jobs included providing fuel for trucks and boats, guarding stash houses along the main east-west highways (the *Panamericana* and the *Litoral*), carrying out hits and other low-level assignments.

The gangs often exchanged some of the products they were able to acquire through their own criminal activities -- stolen cars or weapons -- with the *transportista* networks for a small percentage of the cocaine they helped protect.[13]

Beginning about 2006, this payment-in-kind, rather than in cash, became a major factor in the escalating violence in the Northern Triangle countries. Once the gangs received cocaine, they had to create a local market to absorb it in order to earn cash. This *narco menudeo,* or small scale retail of cocaine and crack, set off an ongoing battle between different gangs for control over neighborhoods and street corners where the drugs could be sold, leading to widespread bloodshed.

"Central America Regional Security Initiative: Background and Policy Issues for Congress," Congressional Research Service, 21 February 2012, 7-9.

[13] Farah and Robberson, op cit.; Steven Dudley, "Central America's 'Transportistas,'" InSight: Organized Crime in the Americas, 21 November 2010, http://insightcrime.org/investigations/insight-exclusives/item/255-insight-brief-central-americas-transportistas

The March 2012 gang truce and subsequent orders to cease some of the more lucrative "taxing" operations on local merchants has led to a diminished revenue stream to local gang members at the neighborhood level. As a result, many are searching for ways to engage in the low-level cocaine trade. The numbers of *pozos*, or points of cocaine retail, are growing rapidly. In El Salvador, a major *pozo* visited by the author is located in Majucla, near the Mariona prison facility on the outskirts of the capital.

The Current Regional Situation

The question that emerged in the shifting relationship with the Mexican cartels, according to MS-13 members, was whether the gangs would work directly for the cartels, try to fight off the encroachment of the cartels, or look for another type of arrangement with the Mexicans.

The final outcome is still undefined. One thing gang members both inside and outside of prison stress is that they do not view themselves as employees of other groups, and believe they are in a position of strength should outside groups try to project a strong presence in their areas of control. However, several specific, *ad hoc* agreements have been struck between the MS-13 and TCOs, and that trend is accelerating.

In 2010, a *clica* of the MS-13 group that extorted many illegal immigrants traveling the famous train that runs from southern Mexico to the U.S. border, found *Los Zetas* trying to push them out of business in order to take over the lucrative route. A bloody war ensued for several months, with multiple dead on both sides. In the end, a sort of truce was agreed to, with MS-13 taxing the southern part of the route and the *Zetas* taxing the northern section.

"We can't let ourselves be run off by anyone in our territory," said one gang member with direct knowledge of the events. "We can work with anyone, but we won't work <u>for</u> anyone. That was what the fight was about."[14]

In the past few months, according to gang members and Salvadoran police officials, *Los Zetas* and the MS-13 have reached a more favorable and lucrative arrangement in human trafficking, whereby the Mexicans have greatly expanded their reach. All the middlemen traffickers (*polleros* or *coyotes*) who use the routes controlled by *Los Zetas* are MS-13 members. This could be the first real consolidation of the two human smuggling networks across the region.

Other forms of collaboration are emerging. MS-13 cliques such as *Fulton Locos Salvatruchas* (FLS) and *Hollywood Locos Salvatrucho* (HLS), the most violent of the

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[14] Interview with member of the MS-13 gang involved in the conflict and verified by Central American law enforcement officials.

identified gang cliques, operate in close conjunction with the *Cartel de Texis* in El Salvador, and have reportedly received training from Los Zetas at camps in Petén, Guatemala, near the Mexican border. The reported leader of the FLS, José Misael Cisneros Rodríguez, AKA "*Medio Millon"* (Half Millon), was arrested in May, but also has been arrested in the past and subsequently freed under mysterious circumstances. Salvadoran police officials say he and his gangs are among the most closely linked to the cocaine trade.[15]

The *Texis* organization, controls a significant cocaine and human smuggling route that runs through Honduras to north-central El Salvador (Chalatenango), then northwest through Sonsonate to Guatemala.

The FLS and HLS work directly with and for the *Texis* organization, which in turn constitutes a major transport network of the Sinaloa cartel operatives running their Central American operations from Honduras. *Texis,* and by proxy the FLS and HLS, wield tremendous local political power along the routes where *Texis* operates. The two groups carry out assassinations for hire for *Texis,* guard stash houses for bulk cash deliveries, protect cocaine shipments and move illicit products to wherever they need to go along the trafficking corridor. [16]

Another MS-13 leader linked more directly to the cocaine trade is Moris Alexander Bercián Manchón, AKA *El Barney*, one of the few that gang leaders to control multi-kilo cocaine loads. The son of a Guatemalan colonel who was a commander in the border zone, *El Barney* controls the *Normandie Locos Salvatrucho* clique and is linked by police to more than 50 homicides.[17]

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[15] In May 2011 the online newspaper El Faro published an extensive investigative series for the firs time publicly identifying the little-known Cartel de Texis, its leadership and those leaders' extensive political protection network. The series brought death threats against the authors. See: Sergio Arauz, Óscar Martinez and Efren Lemus, "El Cartel de Texis," El Faro, May 16, 2011.

[16] Author interviews with MS-13 members and Salvadoran National Police experts. Also, see: Elyssa Pachico, "Salvador Drug Cartel Targeted in Rare Arrest," InSightCrime, 28 May, 2012, accessed at: http://www.insightcrime.org/news-briefs/secretive-el-savador-drug-cartel-targeted-in-rare-arrest

[17] For an excellent open source overview of these groups, see: Alejandra S. Inzunza and José Luis Pardo, "El Salvador Busca su Redención," El Universal (Mexico), Oct. 7, 2012, accessed at: http://www.domingoeluniversal.mx/historias/detalle/El+Salvador+busca+su+redenci%C3%B3n-971

Figure 2: Map of El Salvador Showing Cartel de Texis Operating area And Bajo Lempa Region

There is anecdotal evidence that the relationship between MS-13 and the drug trade is becoming more direct. In early November 2012 the Salvadoran National Police intercepted a launch on the Pacific coast near the town of Metalío, Sonsonate province, and seized 113 kilos of cocaine. It was the largest cocaine seizure to date in El Salvador. About half the load was on a separate launch that evaded capture.[18]

Police source said the most unusual thing about the bust was the people running the launch, as well as those waiting on the beach to unload the product were all members of the MS-13 under the control of El Barney, rather than just having the MS-13 present as security. Prior to the November seizure, the largest load wholly controlled by the MS-13 was about 14 kilos, meaning the load was several orders of magnitude larger than had been seen previously.

The bust came shortly after sources of the MS-13 said they had opened direct negotiations in Mexico with members of the Sinaloa cartel in order to negotiate a substantive role moving cocaine across the region. It is not clear if the failure to deliver the load would disrupt any potential deal, or if the lost load one of many loads sent through the MS-13, signaling a fundamental shift in the relationship.

MS-13 members report that *Los Zetas* have set up mobile training camps in the Guazapa Volcano region outside San Salvador, in hard to reach areas where the FMLN once had strongholds. According to these sources, some of those trained have been hired by the Mexicans to work in Mexico for a basic monthly salary of $400 for their services. In some cases, the money is paid to the MS-13 member's clique, rather than to the member himself. Those interviewed were reluctant to quantify the number of people who have been trained or hired by *Los Zetas,* saying only "it has not been so many."[19]

There are also current reports of new training camps run by *Los Zetas* near Laguna del Tigre, Guatemala, where a group of MS-13 members are receiving specialized military training.

These growing links to TCO structures coincide with the gangs' increasing access to sophisticated weapons and more direct participation in the regional arms trade. MS-13 members and police sources independently cite the two main sources of the weapons as Nicaragua and the militaries of El Salvador and Honduras. The acquisition of weapons, both for the gangs' own use, and to barter and sell to

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[18] "Decomisan 113 kilos de cocaine en Sonsonate," La Prensa Gráfica, November 8, 2012, accessed at: http://www.laprensagrafica.com/Decomisan-113-kilos-de-cocaina-en-Sonsonate

[19] Interview with MS-13 gang members in San Salvador, May 2012.

Mexican TCOs, appears to now be one of the primary activities of the MS-13 in El Salvador and perhaps beyond.

Few of the weapons are new, and most come from the weapons stashes accumulated during the wars of the 1980s. Nicaragua is consistently reported to be the point of origin for many of the weapons, which are sold on a piecemeal basis from Sandinista weapons stocks that were not registered when the war ended. Many of these stocks were not part of the official Sandinista army arsenal but rather had been stored by Sandinistas for their allies in the region, including the FMLN, the MRTA of Peru, the Guatemalan insurgencies, and other erstwhile Marxist groups the international revolutionary movement was supporting.

Of significant concern is the growing number of documented instances of regional militaries selling weapons either directly to Mexican TCOs or to the gangs, who then pass them on to DTOs. The MS-13's transnational nature and ability to cross borders with relative impunity makes their organization ideal for the movement of guns.

There are multiple reports of higher quality weapons, including SAM-7s, LAWs and RPGs, being moved with MS-13 protection to regional arms bazars. One described in detail to the author, by three separate sources, operates in Bajo Lempa region of Usulután province in El Salvador. (See map page 17.) The sources said the SAM-7s were eventually sold to the FARC for use in Colombia. It is worth noting that the Colombian military, for the first time ever, captured a SAM-7 from the FARC in Cauca province in late November 2012.[20]

Usulután is a region where some of the most militant members of the Communist Party (CP) faction of the FMLN settled after the war. It is worth noting that the current leadership of the CP, which wields great political influence, has been convincingly implicated in the illicit flow of weapons in the region, including the supply of weapons to the FARC in Colombia.[21] The weapons are moved by CP members in conjunction with current and former Sandinista operatives, and are often brought by sea from Nicaragua to the Salvadoran coast. It is at this point, when

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[20] "Colombian army reportedly seizes surface-to-air missile from the FARC," Fox News Latino, December 1, 2012, accessed at: http://latino.foxnews.com/latino/news/2012/12/01/colombian-army-reportedly-seizes-surface-to-air-missile-from-farc/

[21] Of all the five groups of the FMLN, the CP was most resistant to demobilizing its forces, and retained a clandestine military structure that has been implicated in numerous criminal activities, including high profile kidnappings in El Salvador. For details see: Douglas Farah, "Organized Crime in El Salvador: The Homegrown and Transnational Dimensions," Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, November 2011. The clearest evidence of the CP's ties came from the computers of Raúl Reyes, the FARC's second-in-command, killed by Colombian troops on March 1, 2008. The files link "Ramiro," later identified as CP leader José Luis Merino, as an important weapons supplier to the FARC via Australia. Merino continues to exercise considerable political power within the current government. For a look at documented Merino dealings see: "The FARC Files: Venezuela, Ecuador and the Secret Archives of 'Raúl Reyes,'" An IISS Strategic Dossier, International Institute for Strategic Studies, May 2011, London, Great Britain.

the weapons are offloaded and transported to safe houses in Bajo Lempa, that the gangs play a role in providing security.

As with the cocaine trade, the gangs have long dabbled in the weapons trade, but this increasingly appears to be one of the "value added" capabilities the MS-13 can offer to other TCOs in the region.

Growing involvement in TCO activities and access to profits may also explain the shift in relative power from the U.S.-based MS-13 leadership to the Salvador-based leadership. In an incident that now forms part of Salvadoran gang lore, two Los Angeles-based MS-13 senior leaders were sent to El Salvador in 2010 to try to discuss and work out the gang's international leadership structure. When they began making demands on the Salvadoran *clicas,* they were brutally executed, with more than 30 rounds pumped into each body. What is most striking, aside from the hit itself, is that it appears there was no successful retaliatory hit by the U.S.-based gang leaders.

"That was a real turning point internally for the groups in El Salvador, where they declared their independence," said one priest who has worked with the gangs for two decades. "It was the end of the old structures."

Moving Forward

One of the themes consistently mentioned by the MS-13 leadership and members is expansion into new and uncharted territory, including Chile, Peru and Argentina in South America, as well as Spain and other European countries. One of the primary ways of doing this is for a member to falsely declare one of those countries as his country of origin when arrested and facing deportation from the United States or elsewhere. Since gang members seldom have travel documents, authorities cannot prove an individual is not from the country he declares as his point of origin. Some of the deportations are reported to be deliberately planned as a way for a selected MS-13 member to obtain a 'free ride' to a specific country.

"We have orders that some of us, if caught, declare our citizenship to be from other countries," said one upper level gang member. "I am ordered to ask to return to Chile. Why? Because that is an area where we want to expand. Others are to go to other countries."

Once on the ground, the "homie" (as the gang members call each other) receives a monthly stipend from his *clica* (sent on behalf of the national leadership) to live on while he begins to link up with other members already on the ground, or to establish a preliminary infrastructure. U.S. law enforcement officials recently

confirmed they have received requests for help related to new MS-13 gang structures in Chile, Peru, Spain and elsewhere.

This form of expansion is feasible because in recent years (no one could give an exact date during interviews) the MS-13 has changed its internal structure and vision of itself, including who can claim the gang's identity. Previously, one had to be from El Salvador to join the gang. Later, this was expanded to include individuals from anywhere in Central America. Now, anyone who is accepted by the gang, even non-Spanish speakers, can join. This has broadened the ability to recruit far beyond the relatively small pool of potential Salvadoran and Central American members.

Both MS-13 and Calle 18 have taken recent steps to disrupt the interception of their telephone conversations. Almost all of the prison leadership communicates with those on the outside via cell phone. The same is true for gang leaders on the outside when communicating with one another, or with their "homies" in other countries, including the United States.

As interception efforts have become more effective, the MS-13 is working rapidly to develop a code that will be unintelligible to the listener. The gang is sending members to study Nahuatl and other almost extinct regional indigenous languages, most with fewer than one hundred native speakers. The purpose is not to achieve fluency in these languages, but to learn enough of the vocabulary to develop an indecipherable code for use in internal communications.

Given that only a handful of people in a few indigenous communities and universities speak these languages, the chances of being able to decipher such a code are slim.

As will be discussed below in more detail, the current truce among the gangs in El Salvador, the subsequent drop in homicide rate, and ongoing negotiations among the gangs and the government, are creating enormous pressures within the gangs. The primary tension is between those on the outside, who were not consulted on the negotiations or the truce, and the leaders inside the prison structure who traditionally hold the reins of leadership.

While so far the membership has remained largely obedient to the gangs' prison leadership in maintaining the truce, a number of inter-gang killings have occurred. In addition, gang revenue has plummeted. There is the widespread perception among those on the outside that the prison leadership is receiving significant financial benefits from the government for their participation in the truce. The evidence, according to those outside, can be seen in the purchases being made by family members of those in prison (e.g., large screen televisions, vehicles and even houses).

The author was unable to verify these claims, but this perception could lead to the formal breaking of the truce, the assassination of certain prison leaders, or other

consequences which would have significant implications for the gangs and the government.

These perceptions are coupled with the reality that the Salvadoran government, regardless of its actual role in helping to negotiate the truce, has failed to fulfill any of its promises to address the social conditions that have contributed to the emergence and strength of the gangs.

While the gang leaders publicly represent their truce as an agreement with civil society and not the government, the response by the private sector has also been negligible. They maintain this despite pledges to begin training programs to "rehabilitate" gang members and to offer them gainful employment. As naïve as gang members' belief that change was imminent may seem, almost a year into the truce, the failure by the government and private sector to make good on any such promises is deeply disillusioning to the gang members, who have received, in their view, nothing in exchange for the sharp drop in violence.

The gangs' current position, according to the prison leaders, is to continue the truce in the hope that the government and civil society will begin to address the underlying issues that have given rise to gang violence. They say they are not asking to be pardoned or paroled, and understand that most of them will spend many more years behind bars. They even express an understanding of ongoing efforts to round up gang members and sentence them to long periods in prison.

In exchange, they say, they are hoping for greater compliance with Salvadoran law on the part of the government, specifically regarding improved prison conditions that conform to international standards. They seek relief from massive overcrowding, job training in prison, "reinsertion" and rehabilitation programs for gang members on the street and those leaving prison, as well as job opportunities. They also seek a modification of current anti-gang laws that could lead to a reduction in their sentences and significantly improved access to the outside world.

They make equally clear that the desired end result is not the dissolution of the gangs, but rather a transformed gang structure that no longer engages in criminal activity while retaining its internal cohesion and primary loyalty to the gang.

However, leaders both on the street and in prison say that their primary source of income – extortion of local business, individuals and commercial activities – will not cease in the near future, even while acknowledging the deep resentment it provokes. The reason, they say, is simple: They must live off of something as they are no longer engaged in murder for hire and other revenue-generating illicit activities, and cannot find legitimate jobs. As a result, extortion remains the bread and butter income that allows the gangs to buy food and pay for shelter.

The Truce and the Current Situation in El Salvador

Any discussion of the controversial truce between the gangs in El Salvador and the opaque role played by the government and other forces in bringing about that truce must first acknowledged that none of the past policies and strategies designed to curb gang violence, some with significant financial and political support of the United States, had any success at all. The policies of *mano dura* (iron fist) and *super mano dura* (super iron fist) against the gangs only exacerbated the violence and help the gangs expand their territory.[22]

Yet the truce, despite the drop in homicides, remains problematic, largely unexplained by the main government actors and subject to multiple interpretations as to its overall contribution to a lessening of violence and the role, or lack thereof, of the state as a positive actor.

In March 2012, *El Faro,* a respected online newspaper, broke the story that the government had secretly sponsored talks between jailed leaders of the MS-13 and Calle 18 and that the talks had led to a truce. The Salvadoran government's minister for public security, who played a significant role in facilitating the dialogue, first publicly attacked the reports and denounced the journalists, but then admitted the reports were true. While maintaining that the government had no direct role in the talks, he also said the truce was part of an overall government plan and peace process and made several other contradictory statements.[23]

As Jeanette Aguilar, director of research at the University of Central America (*Universidad Centroamericana José Simeón Cañas* – UCA) who has studied gangs and transnational organized crime for years noted

> *The truce has been handled so far with enormous opacity; the multiple contradictions that are present in the rhetoric of the Minister of Justice and Security—who is constantly offering different versions of the issue while being assured of a monopoly on the truth—have undermined the credibility of the process. The government went from offering the strength to eliminate this great security threat to discussing the religious conversion of the gangs. The government has gone from denying privileges to various leaders and refusing to relax prison controls to making it a media circus by opening the doors of the*

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[22] For an overview of U.S. support and past Salvadoran government policies see: Clare Ribando Silke, "Gangs in Central America," Congressional Research Service, January 28, 2013.

[23] The purpose of this paper is not to go deeply into the mechanics of the truce, and there is significant public information available on the issue. For example see: Douglas Farah, "The Transformation of El Salvador's Gangs into Political Actors," (report, CSIS, 21 June 2012) http://csis.org/files/publication/120621_Farah_Gangs_HemFocus.pdf ; Rachael Schwartz, "El Salvador's Gang Truce Raises Troubling Questions for the Region," *World Politics Review*, 11 May, 2012, http://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/11941/el-salvador-gang-truce-raises-troubling-questions-for-region

prisons to the media; however, this has yet to lead to a sustainable institutional response.[24]

The true origins of the truce remain murky. For a period of several months before the truce, a series of high-level negotiations were underway with an entirely different set of interlocutors. This effort sought to achieve a more comprehensive set of solutions aimed at bringing about a significant drop in gang violence while allocating government and private sector resources to deal with the social issues driving gang violence in a sequenced and holistic way. President Mauricio Funes was directly involved in the talks,

This process came to an abrupt halt at the end of 2011, and was quickly replaced by a much less official and loose set of negotiations driven by Raúl Mijango, a former FMLN combatant and parliamentarian who was a chief adviser to Gen. David Munguía Payes, then minister of defense. In a controversial move, Munguía Payes then became the first military minister of public security in the post-war era.

According to Munguía Payes and Mijango, the current truce began almost spontaneously. With Mijango's encouragement, leaders of the two gangs, confined to separate parts of the same prison in Zacatecoluca, agreed to meet and ended up embracing each other and recognizing that the violence they had perpetrated against each other was wrong and harmful. Mijango then sought permission from Munguía Payes to have "operating space" in the prisons to push the process forward. There would be no *quid pro quo,* but rather a series of unilateral goodwill gestures by each side.

Munguía Payes wanted a partner from the Catholic Church, an institution that carries tremendous moral and symbolic weight in the country, to work with him. Mijango and Munguía Payes now confirm reports they initially denied: that the three senior prelates of the Church all declined to participate in the process because they did not believe it could work and did not feel it was a transparent process. The fourth choice, Bishop Fabio Colindres, whose diocese includes the armed forces, agreed to represent the Church.

Within two weeks the gangs had agreed to truce and the government had agreed to move the leaders from their maximum security facilities to less secure facilities where they could again have regular cell phone contact with the *homies* on the street, improved family visiting conditions and conjugal visits, and other privileges that would allow them to move toward a more permanent truce.

While Munguía Payes initially justified this transfer as part of an attempt to avert a deadly attack on the prisons, he has now acknowledged that the movements were part of his efforts to support the truce. As justification for allowing the

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[24] Presentation of Jeanette Aguilar during the Conference on National Reality on Militarization, Organized Crime and Gangs at the Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA), November 13, 2012.

reestablishment of cell phone communication, Mijango and Munguía Payes point to the need for the leadership to pass instructions down to the street level, something that would otherwise be impossible. If the street level leaders did not get the word to carry out the truce, it could not be executed on a broad scale. The gang leaders then held a mass, presided over by Colindres and broadcast on television, where the leaders recognized they had gravely damaged Salvadoran society, asked for forgiveness and took communion together.

Almost immediately after the truce was announced, the average number of daily homicides dropped from about 14 to four. For the first time in years there were days with no homicides reported. The truce has been staunchly defended publicly by Munguía Payes, Mijango and the gang leadership in prison, based on the drop in homicide rates and the stated willingness of the gangs to maintain the truce, despite the total lack of resources allocated by the government to deal with the roots of the crime and violence.

Perhaps the biggest challenge with the truce over the long term is that it has increased the power of the gangs rather than that of the state. The reduction in the homicide rate has been created solely at the discretion of the gangs and their allies outside of government. When one of the top gang members says that if the process of pacification doesn't go forward, the murder rate will return to the levels it was before March, there is little reason to doubt that it will.

Unlike programs in which the state achieves a reduction in homicides through targeted enforcement efforts and mitigation policies, this truce relies on the gangs' interests in maintaining it. While the gangs may be sincere when they discuss their concern for their families and the increasing levels of violence in the country, the many years during which they have committed the most violent crimes and exercised an extreme form of authoritarian control over poor and working class neighborhoods, coupled with the potential for using a reduction in violence to move into more lucrative criminal business models, evinces some level of skepticism.

There has been significant debate in El Salvador over the homicide statistics, particularly the sharp drop in the number of murders. Gang members say that while the number has dropped sharply it is not as dramatic as the official figures suggest because the gangs now bury their dead in clandestine cemeteries rather than leaving them on the street. "What truce?" said one leader of a large *programa* in San Salvador. "We have orders not to leave bodies, but the killings continue. If we want something, we threaten to put bodies on the street. Then we get what we want."

Gang leaders in prison have ordered the assassinations of those who do not follow the inter-gang truce, seemingly unaware of the irony of using executions to halt killings. The *Instituto de Medicina Legal*, the forensic investigative unit of the Supreme Court, has noted a sharp rise in the number of people who have disappeared since the truce went into effect. Hard data is not available, but it seems clear that some portion of the violence has simply been driven underground, with

the bodies being disposed of out of public view. However, there remains a broad consensus that the homicide rate is far below pre-truce levels.

Aguilar and others who have studied patterns of violence in El Salvador for decades also point out that research has consistently shown that gang-on-gang violence has usually represented only about 25-30 percent of the overall homicide rate in El Salvador. A slightly higher percentage was attributed to criminal networks, and the remainder to traditional types of violence. Thus, if the gangs called a truce, homicide rates would drop by that amount, not the current steep drop, leading to the conclusion that other groups, such as organized criminal bands, were also involved in brokering and benefitting from the truce. As Aguilar noted,

> *The violence that we have in the country goes beyond gangs. It is a network of illegal actors that congregate in the nation and in the region. We are talking about a strong presence of local and transnational organized crime, which maintains extensive territorial control through its ties to other legal and illegal actors. It is also about gangs that are more and more organized, but also illegal armed groups that serve certain sectors, not to mention traditional common crime, which has always operated in the country.*
>
> *In this context. . . the gangs are one of the many actors that participate in the violence that we have in El Salvador. Nevertheless, it is striking that the discourse attributing the great majority of crimes to the gangs appeared forcefully once again prior to the truce. At the same time, there is a rhetoric coming from the security authorities meant to minimize the presence and impact of organized crime in the country that is truly suspicious, especially in light of a regional context characterized by the strong presence of transnational organized crime networks*.
>
> *Taking all this into account, attributing to the gang truce the nearly 54 percent reduction in homicides that the authorities report lacks an empirical basis. It is true that the statistics show reductions, but the cause of this reduction has not been scientifically verified. Police reports show that previous truces declared between the gangs had only managed to reduce a small percentage of homicides. This begs the question of whether in addition to this truce, have there been truces with or between other violent actors?*[25]

There are indicators to support this alternative version of a broader truce not solely driven by the gangs, drawn from interviews with gang members, associates of gang members who have worked with them, and former law enforcement officials who claim direct knowledge of events and were in such positions at the time of the events.

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[25] Aguilar, op cit.

According to the alternative narrative, the cost of the violence and gang warfare in El Salvador had grown to the point where it was significantly affecting the business operations of the Mexican TCOs and their local *transportista* affiliates. As with most business, those in the leadership of the illicit trade wanted a safe and stable operating environment. In exchange for the drop in homicides, this version holds, TCOs and their local affiliates would pay parts of the Salvadoran law enforcement and judicial branches to allow loads of cocaine to pass through certain parts of Salvadoran territory unimpeded.

There would be numerous benefits to all sides: the government would see a sharp drop in homicides, reaping political benefit and pleasing international donors; the gangs would be able to break the cycle of violence and reap economic benefits; and the TCOs would be able operate at low risk in a stable environment with a high degree of impunity.

Father Antonio Rodriguez, a priest who has who has dealt with the gangs in a pastoral capacity in neighborhoods under their control for two decades, publicly called the truce part of a "*paz mafiosa"* or Mafia peace. In a public letter to the leaders of the MS-13 and Calle 18 who negotiated the truce, Rodriguez sarcastically congratulated them on having become the true governors of El Salvador with the status of cabinet ministers for the departments of Justice and Public Security, adding that

> *You have shown the country a great truth: that you are the one who are in command in the areas of security and insecurity, in areas of death and in schools, in terms of extorting or not extorting. You are capable of raising or lowering the violence, and have shown how totally incompetent your predecessors have been. . . you have given us the evidence that we live in a failed state*.[26]

The three public architects of the truce deny there is anything other than goodwill of the gangs behind the truce and that people like Rodriguez and other critics are simply jealous because they were not part of the process. Private foundations have been set up to channel international donations to gang controlled areas, despite the lack of government interest in, or resources for, the process it helped give birth to.

One final observation is worth making. Over the author's years of discussions with MS-13 leaders, what is most striking in recent conversations is the remarkable change in the sophistication and use of political language in which they couch their grievances, as well as the increasingly overt political ambitions of the groups. During a November visit to the Ciudad Barrios prison, MS-13 leaders, using a vocabulary taken from liberation theology and other sociological and theological texts addressing social inequality and exploitation, made the case to the author for

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[26] Antonio Rodriguez, "Carta del Padre Antonio Rodriguez a los Nuevos Ministros de Justicia y Seguridad Pública," May 3, 2012.

the right of gangs to be treated as a viable political force that could be negotiated with. It was not the customary language of gang leaders in years past.

An interesting example of the new language can be found in the gangs' public rejection of a U.S. State Department travel warning for U.S. citizens going to El Salvador. The communiqué expressed the anger of the gangs at the warning, but in sophisticated and complex language radically different from the crude threats traditionally used by gangs:

> *We understand the reasons for which the United States has maintained an indifferent attitude toward the truce and peace process, which has been underway in our country since March 9, 2012, and of which the Salvadoran gangs are the protagonists, as an integral part of Salvadoran society as a whole. We respect the position of the United States to express doubt as to its sustainability; nevertheless, it cannot be ignored that this process is already ten months underway and, instead of losing strength, it is gaining strength every day and it is spreading into more territories, making the involvement of many local actors a possibility.*
>
> *We accept that the decision to support the truce and peace process or not is the sovereign decision of the Government of the United States, although from our point of view, it is obligated to do so, since it has co-responsibility as the gang phenomenon was imported from the United States to the region and is fed monthly by the enormous quantity of deportations. If the [United States] supports the process, that help would be welcomed and appreciated by all Salvadorans; and, if not, we ask that it at least not obstruct it, because we as Salvadorans have the right to make our best effort to restore peace, as self-determination of the people is also a human right.*[27]

The most visible manifestation of the political ambitions is the push for 18 "peace zones." In these towns gang members would hand in their weapons, and the police would cease large scale or nighttime operations, while the government would put into place schemes to give work to gang members. The first such zone has been established in Suchitoto, and a total of 14 towns have been designated as possible havens.[28]

This is striking similar in some ways to the large demobilized areas ceded to the FARC in Colombia during peace talks in 2000-2001. The FARC, a Marxist insurgency designated a terrorist entity by the United States and European Union, is heavily

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[27] "Salvadoran gangs condemn U.S. State Department's travel alert," Just the Facts, January 31,2013, accessed at: http://www.justf.org/blog/2013/01/31/salvadoran-gangs-condemn-us-state-departments-travel-alert

[28] Hannah Stone, "Next Phase of Salvador Gang Truce: Peace Zones," InSight Crime, November 23, 2012, accessed at: http://www.insightcrime.org/news-briefs/next-phase-salvador-gang-truce-peace-zones

involved in cocaine trade and, despite promises not to do so, used the demobilized area to rearm itself, install large cocaine laboratories, receive training from other terrorist organizations, and reorganize into a more efficient insurgency.

While U.S. officials have been publicly non-committal on the truce, this historical precedent, where the state cedes large parts of its territory to a violent non-state actor, clearly is a lens through which many of them view the current process. This concern is harder to dismiss when gang members say that they will use these sanctuaries to begin exercising their political control and that they will be safe havens for gang members that commit crimes in other countries and need safe harbor until the heat dies down.

This push for these towns where the gangs will be able to exercise overt political control, in addition to the gangs' ability to deliver large blocs of votes across the country to whichever politician or political party makes them the best offer, indicates a heightened political awareness and political ambition in the gangs. While the gangs have yet to articulate their own political agenda, they are becoming more aware of the full political power both their numbers and their territorial control could yield.

As Aguilar noted:

> *The other great risk—and perhaps the main one if indeed organized crime has also taken part in this process and the truce between the gangs is just a distraction to facilitate the creation of a logistical corridor for drug trafficking—in the short term, is that the violence institutionalizes and organized crime infiltrates the state. Experiences in countries such as Italy, Mexico, and Colombia have shown that violence is reduced when the gangs institutionalize, such as in the case of Medellin, where in the context of a deal between some of the main paramilitary leaders, homicides fell but other criminal activities such as drug trafficking and extortion expanded. . . In this sense, the question we must ask is how much could these agreements be mortgaging the future of our children, the future security of our country? These are questions that all of us should be asking.*

Conclusions

- The gang structures in El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras all have different relationships with the TCOs, making generalizations difficult. El Salvador's MS-13 gang is the largest, most coherent structure, and is the gang most engaged in transnational criminal activities. The gangs in Belize are in a nascent stage. Honduran gangs are largely marginalized from the bulk drug

trade because they are largely absent from the geographic transshipment zones and are widely viewed as undisciplined and unreliable partners. Guatemala gangs play a role in the transport of cocaine, humans, and weapons, and Guatemalan territory is important for training and recruitment.

- The MS-13 and Calle 18 gangs have few direct ties to Mexican TCOs trafficking cocaine through Central America, but play an important role as facilitators and protectors for local and regional transportation networks. Nonetheless, the MS-13 in particular, has shown that some of its more violent and better-organized sub-groups can take over transportation networks and develop more direct linkages to Mexican TCOs. However, in many cases the gangs are viewed as too undisciplined, too unpredictable and too independent to be truly reliable partners.

- The MS-13 and *Los Zetas* have recently shown an ability to work together in human trafficking, a possible sign of the ability to work out mutually beneficial relationships in the future.

- The gangs and TCOs (particularly the MS-13 and *Los Zetas)* have engaged in training and other activities that indicate a growing relationship in both the cocaine trafficking and paramilitary cooperation. This has potentially serious implications for regional drug trafficking patterns.

- The gangs are playing an increasingly important role as facilitators of weapons for Mexican TCOs as well as for regional organizations and for their own use. The MS-13 plays an increasingly important role in moving and protecting sophisticated weapons that are sold in local clandestine weapons fairs. Many of the weapons originate in Nicaragua, and others are bought from the militaries of El Salvador and Honduras.

- The truce between the main gangs in El Salvador, in which the role of the government remains murky, remains tenuous and could be part of an effort by TCOs to raise the profitability and lower the risk of their activities while providing the gangs with significant new revenue streams.

- The gangs are increasingly becoming aware of their potential political power, based on territorial control and the ability to deliver large amounts of votes to a preferred candidate. The creation of cities where the gangs essentially gain de facto political power to co-govern, as in Ilopango as will further enhance their political power and stature. This is a dangerous road, where the gangs hold almost all the power as they negotiate with the state.