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The Rapid Evolution of the MS 13 in El Salvador and Honduras from Gang to Tier-One Threat to Central America and U.S. Security Interests

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Introduction and General Framework

The Mara Salvatrucha (MS 13) gang is now a tier one criminal, political, military and economic threat in the Northern Triangle.¹ While it employs differing strategies from country to country, the organization nonetheless competes with – and often defeats – the state in important theaters of operation. The evolution was described by one gang expert in El Salvador as moving from “gangsters to political conspirators,” visible in the spikes in gang-driven homicide rates (up to 40 a day when necessary) when the gangs are seeking to pressure the government for concessions on key issues.

This study focuses on the MS 13 in Honduras and El Salvador, where it represents an existential threat to the viability of the state. In both countries, the gang has achieved new levels of power and sophistication, via increased revenues from its control of multiple steps in the cocaine supply chain. Now, the MS 13 is not solely involved in transporting cocaine; it also unloads shipments arriving by air from Venezuela and in Honduras runs laboratories that transform coca paste – mostly from Colombia - to hydrochloric acid (HCl).²

While Mexico, Venezuela, and Colombia absorb the vast majority of the U.S. attention and resources paid to the Western Hemisphere, the evolution of the MS 13 poses a challenge that could greatly weaken the security of the U.S. southern border. The threat is at least as complex and real as those posed by structures in Mexico and the United States, and far harder to overcome due to the lack of political will and functioning institutions in the Northern Triangle. In order to successfully meet this challenge from the next generation MS 13, the United States and its limited number of reliable allies in the region must adopt a new and different strategy that treats the organization as a fully functional transnational organized crime (TOC) group with increasingly strong political components.

¹A tier one, or existential, threat is considered to be among the most serious of all threats to national security, and has been defined as a threat that “would deprive the United States of its sovereignty under the Constitution, would threaten the territorial integrity of the United States or the safety within U.S. borders of large numbers of Americans, or would pose a manifest challenge to U.S. core interests abroad in a way that would compel an undesired and unwelcome change in our freely chosen ways of life at home,” as described by Ted Bromund of the Heritage Foundation in 2015. For the purposes of this article, this definition has been applied to our conception of the MS 13 as a national security threat to the nation-states of Central America, and in particular the Northern Triangle. See Louis Jacobson, “Is ISIS an ‘Existential Threat’ to the United States?” PolitiFact, November 16, 2015. For additional examples of a three-tier classification of national security threats, see also “A Strong Britain in the Age of Uncertainty: The National Security Strategy,” 2010.

²The small laboratories seen by field teams are located in and around San Pedro Sula and are used in the final step of the HCL production cycle, according to U.S., Honduran and Colombian law enforcement officials because of success of Colombian precursor chemical interdiction efforts in South America.



Photo caption: A heavy police presence is visible in many Salvadoran cities because of extreme gang violence. Photo credit: Matt Chandler, Al Jazeera.

“We have our new orders from the new business structure of our organization,” said one midlevel MS 13 leader during a November interview in San Pedro Sula, Honduras. “All we care about is drugs, how to get it, how to move it, how to sell it. We have our territory now, and we make a lot more money. We don’t meet our leaders face to face anymore, we only talk by special telephones, for security. We all get paid now, we work set shifts, we have AK 47s and mini Uzis, we have orders not to let anyone mess with civilians. The last two years have been amazing.”

Other gangs, including Barrio 18, the Olanchos, Los Ponces, and Los Chirizos, also operate in the Northern Triangle, adding to the chaos and destruction of the region’s frayed social fabric. However, the MS 13 is viewed by actors across the region – including Barrio 18 leaders interviewed for this report-as eclipsing the other structures in terms of resources, sophistication, political acumen, territorial control and organizational strength. Considering this regional context, this report deals with the other groups only as they relate to the MS 13.

The consolidation of the MS 13 has meant a permanent state of war with other groups, and the violence is driving tens of thousands of people from their communities; many of these displaced thousands ultimately flee toward the United States. These ongoing turf battles are a significant factor in the 45 percent increase during November 2017 of illegal migrants crossing the U.S. border from Mexico, including a 26 percent increase in Unaccompanied Alien Children.³

³ Nick Miroff, “To curb illegal border crossings, Trump administration weighs new measures targeting families,” *The Washington Post*, December 22, 2017.

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

It is also important to note that very little is permanent in the gang world; as a result, something that is true while drafting this analysis may be rendered obsolete by the time it is printed. In light of this reality, we focus on macro trends over time, using our engagement with the MS 13 over three decades to capture those changes that we believe are generally true across the MS 13 structures.

There are significant rumblings of changes underway inside the MS 13. Even as other gangs have fractured in El Salvador – in the case of the Barrio 18, into the *Sureños* and *Revolucionarios* - the MS 13 alone has evolved politically, militarily and economically to challenge the survival of the state. There is now considerable debate over a possible split in the MS 13 in El Salvador, between the *ranfla histórica* (historic gang leadership, mostly in prison) and the *ranfla libre* (gang leaders on the outside



Photo caption: Victims' bodies on the ground after gang members killed six passengers in Olocuilta, El Salvador because the owner refused to pay extortion. Photo credit: Fred Ramos, El Faro.

who view the historic leaders as corrupt sell outs). It is unclear whether the *ranfla libre*, now calling themselves the MS 13 503 (503 is El Salvador's country code), is a real separatist movement, a fictitious break financed by the Salvadoran government to weaken the gang, or simply a temporary internal schism.

In Guatemala, the only country where the Barrio 18 gang is bigger than the MS 13, the gangs are a tier two threat: they constitute a serious hazard to the peace and wellbeing of the citizenry, but are far from a leading challenge to state sovereignty.

This report draws upon findings from field investigations by seven researchers throughout the Northern Triangle over the past year. During that time, we conducted interviews with gang leaders of both the MS 13 and Barrio 18 gangs; residents of gang-controlled territory; law enforcement officials; journalists; and academics.



Photo caption: Members of the Mara Salvatrucha arrested in El Salvador in 2016. Photo credit: El Heraldo, Honduras.

The Next Steps - Honduras

The political awakening of the MS 13 in Honduras is identifiable in two specific, transformative actions identified through indepth field research. The first was the MS 13 decision to stop extorting small businesses that operate in the communities that the gang controls. This decision has not been replicated in El Salvador, where it is under discussion, nor by other gang structures.

The decision removed an important source of revenue for the gang. However, it also bought the gang enormous 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 the MS 13's growing participation in different facets of the regional drug trade. Furthermore, the change was described as a conscious political decision aimed at building a loyal political base moving forward.

The second action came during and after the November 2017 presidential elections in Honduras. During this contest, the MS 13 undertook a number of political maneuvers for the first time, including: engaging in direct political action to support a candidate (Salvador Nasralla of the opposition *Libertad* party and his ally, former president Mel Zelaya); actively mounting a campaign of intimidation and violence against a candidate (Juan Orlando Hernández, incumbent of the *Nacional* party); and allying, at least temporarily, with radical populist movements in Honduras to foment multiday, violent, and disruptive nationwide protests.⁴ Hernández, was eventually declared the winner, but likely committed significant voter fraud to obtain his victory.⁵

The MS 13's decision to intervene in electoral politics not only represents the first time that it has engaged in such activity; the move also constitutes the first signs of the gang's willingness to ally itself with populist movements that are publicly opposed to U.S. interests in the hemisphere. The populist groups in Honduras, which supported Nasralla and are tied to former president Mel Zelaya, have deep ideological, economic and political ties to highly criminalized Bolivarian political structures in El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Venezuela. Thus, the MS 13's engagement in this type of overt political activity is a historic step, and likely marks a new phase in the group's transformation towards a political/mili-

⁴ Juan Orlando Hernández, the pro-U.S. incumbent, sought reelection despite the direct prohibition in the constitution of such a move. While running ahead in most polls, on election day Hernández, whose brother and other close associates have been credibly linked to major drug trafficking, found himself losing badly to Nasralla with more than half the vote counted on election night. At that point the National Electoral Tribunal mysteriously lost power for two days, and when the counting resumed, Hernández was back in the lead and eventually claimed victory in a race that was marred by credible allegations of voter fraud and tampering. For the best summary of the case for fraud, see: "Analyzing Juan Orlando Hernández's disputed election victory in Honduras: Questions about the integrity of the vote count will not go away," *The Economist*, December 5, 2017.

⁵ Throughout the vote counting, the MS 13 actively engaged in blocking main highways, looting banks and setting buses on fire.

tary/ criminal insurgent organization from its origins as a relatively simple, traditional gang.

In light of the shifting power balances in the Northern Triangle, the governments' legitimacy in the eyes of the general population seems to erode in direct correlation with the growing public profile of the gangs. For example, one recent survey in El Salvador showed just how little credibility and legitimacy the government has left. When asked what entity governs or "rules" the country, 42 percent answered that the gangs do, compared to 12 percent who said the state was the governing power, and 6 percent who responded that no one was governing. Overall, two times as many Salvadorans believe that the gangs control the country than believe that the president and government do, combined.⁶ This dramatic decline in perceived government legitimacy, based in the reality that the government cannot or will not tackle the gang expansion, is part of what drives the migration flows of Central Americans to the United States.

"The MS 13 now understands both political and military strategy...when they raise the homicide rate at will as a negotiating tactic, they solidify their control over the population and at the same time humiliate the government and its forces," said one gang expert in El Salvador. "They are showing people 'I can kill you whenever I want and there is no police or government force that can protect you.'" In Honduras, the MS 13 has routed rival gangs over the past year in a series of audacious military moves in order to acquire and consolidate territorial control, formalize their political power, and strengthen their previously haphazard ties to regional cocaine *transportista* networks primarily (but not exclusively) tied to the Sinaloa cartel.⁷ As a result, our field research indicates that the MS 13 now controls cocaine HCL laboratories in and around San Pedro Sula, and has expanded its reach into the coastal areas of Puerto Cortés - a significant point of entry for precursor chemicals for the production of cocaine, heroin and methamphetamines. Combined with its efforts to take over rural, coastal territory, the MS 13 is increasingly using fishing fleets to receive cocaine from Colombia and move it on to Mexico via Belize, a significant increase in the group's engagement in the cocaine transport business.

Furthermore, the gang's advancement in other areas has proved surprisingly aggressive. In partic-

⁶ Parker Asmann, "El Salvador Citizens say Gangs, Not Government 'Rule' the Country," *InSight Crime*, November 8, 2017.

⁷ The assessment of the increased structural coherence and growth of the MS 13 in El Salvador was borne out independently in a new quantitative study of gangs in El Salvador. See: Miguel Cruz et al., "La nueva cara de las pandillas callejeras: El fenómeno de las pandillas en El Salvador," *Florida International University*, March 2017.

ular, the MS 13's ability to establish a toehold in Nicaragua – for decades the one country that had successfully kept the MS 13 at bay – was unexpected and further demonstrates the significant advances the group has made in taking over new territory, navigating new alliances, and surviving in hostile terrain.

Key Strategies and Trends

The evolution of the MS 13 over the past year has developed in multiple ways, making the traditional nomenclature in both English (gang) and Spanish (*mara* or *pandilla*) inadequate to capture the new reality of these groups. The MS 13 itself, particularly in San Pedro Sula, no longer calls itself a *mara*, but rather *La Familia* (The Family). According to our field research, the transformation is driven by the expanding access to financial resources from the cocaine transport trade, and the use of that money to hire both military trainers – often police officers fired for corruption – and political advisers. Many of these advisers are from the former guerrilla movements in the region, prized for their knowledge of urban warfare, military strategy, political outreach and logistics. This dialogue, initiated originally for strategic and tactical advice, has grown to include ideological training and formation, as well as a nascent alliance of criminal structures.

Given that nomenclature is extremely important in social science research, there is considerable debate in the small world of gang researchers over what the new iteration of the gangs should be called. Based on our work, we believe the term *insurgent gangs* captures the new military/political evolution of the groups while recognizing their essential gang/tribal structure.

A measure of how much the MS 13 has changed, particularly in relation to its main rival, the Barrio 18 gang, is demonstrated in how people who live in areas under their control refer to the structure. The MS 13 is now broadly known in Honduras as *la mara buena* (the good gang), particularly since it stopped extortion on the local level of individuals and businesses in the areas they control, as discussed above.

This characterization must be understood in relation to the treatment the communities receive from other gangs or the state. The MS 13 still kills real and perceived enemies, forces families to leave their homes in many communities, controls what products can enter the community (Coca Cola is banned in most communities because the company has not paid the MS 13), decides who can live in the

community, and generally exercises almost total control over people's daily lives. However, according to dozens of interviews across five MS 13 controlled communities, the Barrio 18 and other gangs are more ruthless, less structured, more given to arbitrary abuses, and give nothing back to the communities.

"Now, the MS 13 (in Honduras) doesn't recruit school children, they don't extort our businesses, they greet us respectfully on the street," said one resident of the Soyapa township on the outskirts of San Pedro Sula, whose neighborhood has been under control of both gangs and currently is MS 13 territory. "They have changed. The 18 just kills, they are much more violent. They don't think about anything, they forgive nothing. Most communities now pray the MS 13 comes and takes the territory."

In summary, this new evidence from the field indicates a number of key strategic trends in the MS 13's evolution, including:

- Direct political action for the first time, including involvement in partisan party politics rather than simply selling votes and access to political campaigns. This action is most visible in Honduras, where it is combined with a much more coherent, identifiable political ideology and messaging.
- An aggressive, coordinated, and strategic territorial expansion into rural and coastal areas, as well as infiltration into entirely new territories. In northwestern Nicaragua, for example, the gangs have recently established their first significant presence. These targeted, costly expansions in Honduras, El Salvador and Nicaragua have given the MS 13 control of many strategic border crossings. By extension, the gang is also able to influence flows at the formal border crossings they do not directly control.
- Increased direct ties to Mexican drug cartels, based in large part on the gang's successful territorial expansion efforts. The MS 13 is now a key *transportista* group for Mexican cocaine cartels – something they had not been able to achieve for many years despite concerted efforts to do so. The gang's ability to overcome past failures in territory seizures was inadvertently aided by the relatively successful efforts of the DEA and other law enforcement agencies to dismantle traditional *transportista* structures. The weakening of these operations in Honduras created an opening that the MS 13 was well positioned to fill, which they have done with some

success.

- The allocation of some of the money now available from drug trafficking and other illicit activities to carry out rudimentary social services, create businesses and employment opportunities, and halt oppressive extortion practices that made the MS 13 a hated group in most of the neighborhoods they controlled. This shift in strategy serves dual purposes: it builds a social/political base and tightens control over the communities where the MS 13 dominates.
- A continued reliance on raising or lowering the homicide rate as a key tool of political negotiation. This is most visible in El Salvador, where the gang, in an ultimately successful effort to force the government to grant privileges to imprisoned leaders and open negotiations on multiple issues, raised the number of daily murders from around 11 to 40 over a period of two weeks. When the negotiations were undertaken, daily murder rates dropped to the mid-20s; when they concluded, the numbers dropped back to 11, a rate that is still alarmingly high but considered “normal” in El Salvador.

From Accommodation to Direct Action

Our research and research by other organizations, such as InSight Crime, has previously documented the growing presence of the MS 13 in local and municipal elections and political structures in both El Salvador and Honduras. Since the original publication of these findings, this trend has continued and deepened. So far, this metamorphosis has culminated in the MS 13’s direct involvement in the Honduran presidential elections and subsequent events.

Initial Steps: from Local Control to National Political Players

Although activities during the Honduran elections constitute its most ambitious political project to date, the MS 13 has demonstrated a growing role in local, regional, and national politics throughout Central America over the past few years. In Ilopango, El Salvador, gang members were found on the payroll of the municipality’s mayor, Salvador Ruano (who died in June 2017), in exchange for which the MS 13 provided a number of “favors” to help that mayor and associates win elections.⁸ In Apopa, El Salvador,

⁸Gabriel García, “Llamadas Intervenidas Provocaron Investigación contra Alcaldía de Ilopango.” *La Prensa Gráfica*, November 4, 2017.

the former mayor is on trial for planning multiple assassinations, including of a police officer, in concert with Barrio 18 gang members. The ex-mayor in question, who is a member of the right-wing ARENA party, also proved that the opportunistic willingness to work with gangs for political gain is not particular to one political party. It further demonstrates how the gangs unscrupulously support the party that best serves their interest, without considering traditional ideologies.⁹

One analysis succinctly describes the symbiotic relationship between mayoral offices and gang members:

“The Attorney General’s Office insists that Hernández [the ex-mayor of Apopa, El Salvador] is one of the cases that best illustrates how political power -- in this case, local government-- and the country’s violent gangs formed a mutually beneficial relationship. For the gangs, this relationship brought money, work, free gasoline and even fried chicken. But above all, it brought influence in the municipal government. For Hernández, it brought votes, resources and a stranglehold on power.

According to one police source, however, the dynamic between the gangs and the political parties has evolved even further in recent years. He said the gang’s ‘power’ used to come from the fact that they gave ‘permission to the politicians to enter their communities and campaign.’ However, more recent cases show the gangs are demanding that politicians do favors for them, supply them with food, and even give them money and jobs. This has helped the gangs widen their own social and political power base.”¹⁰

In addition to its forays into local politics, the gang also managed to get its members hired to participate in *Plan El Salvador Seguro* (Operation Secure El Salvador), in which the government was (in theory) focusing resources on 10 high-risk municipalities in order to weaken or break the control of the gangs. Instead, according to documents obtained by the Salvadoran Attorney General, multiple MS 13 leaders, including the well-known leader Marvin Adaly Quintanilla (AKA Piwa), were hired and paid by the government with funds allocated for the security initiative.¹¹

⁹ Ezequiel Barrera, “Juicio a Exalcalde por Vínculos con Pandillas.” *La Prensa Gráfica*, November 4, 2017.

¹⁰ Felipe Puerta, Héctor Silva Ávalos, & Steven Dudley, “Symbiosis: Gangs and Municipal Power in Apopa, El Salvador.” *InSight Crime*, November 2, 2017.

¹¹ Gabriel García, “FGR Investiga si Pandillas Recibieron Dinero de GOES.” *La Prensa Gráfica*, November 20, 2017.

Outside of its infiltration of local and state political machines, other activities indicate the rise of a new level of sophistication and political consciousness within the MS 13. As noted in our earlier research, the MS 13 in both Honduras and El Salvador – but more comprehensibly in Honduras – has moved to fill some of the many governance gaps left by the state. The MS 13’s involvement in these activities helps explain why many residents across both countries often view the MS 13 as a more legitimate authority than the state itself.

In recent years, the gang has moved beyond local political operations. For those *clicas* and *pro gramas* with the most resources (usually derived from a more formal alliance with the regional cocaine transporting networks and dominance of the rapidly expanding internal cocaine/crack retail markets), field researchers have observed the following activities in some of the neighborhoods they control:

- Providing rudimentary but rapid judicial “sentences,” issued at hearings held twice a week to resolve local disputes (charges of domestic violence, property theft, vandalism, violating gang rules).¹²
- Providing protection from outside gangs and local law enforcement groups in order to keep the neighborhood relatively violence free and crime free from groups not under the control of the MS 13.
- Creating rudimentary literacy programs, primarily designed to help their members to be able to communicate 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.¹³
- Providing small employment opportunities in the informal labor market, primarily by helping families run hundreds of small mini *maquilas* that mass produce t-shirts, underwear and other clothing items. According to our research, most of the material for these home operations is

¹² In two neighborhoods where researchers 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.

¹³ For a closer look at the gang social structures see: Douglas Farah, “Central American Gangs are All Grown Up,” *Foreign Policy*, January 19, 2016.

stolen from the large international *maquilas* that operate across San Pedro Sula.

The Honduran Earthquake

Despite the MS 13's growing political awareness and activity, their involvement remained largely transactional rather than ideological. For example, both the MS 13 and Barrio 18 gangs negotiated directly with both the rightist ARENA party and the leftist FMLN in El Salvador's 2014 presidential elections, essentially offering the votes of its members and members' families to the highest bidder. The ideological content of those parties bidding for support was irrelevant as long as the money flowed.¹⁴

The November 2017 elections in Honduras heralded a seismic shift in the MS 13's political involvement. In stark contrast to prior contests, the organization took the unprecedented step of allying itself with a particular ideology, and engaged in overt political violence in concert with some of the region's criminalized populist movements from around the region in an attempt to reshape the country's political order.



Photo caption: A victim of gang violence is taken away in San Pedro de Sula in 2016. Photo credit: ECHO/A. Aragon 2016 and International Crisis Group.

¹⁴ This process, where the gangs secretly taped their negotiations with leaders from ARENA and the FMLN and then posted them to Youtube when both parties denied any discussions had taken place, comes from primary sources as well as media reports at the time.

implement a radical policy that threatened those who voted for Hernández with death or other serious retaliation. Furthermore, the gang's leadership prohibited his campaign from operating or campaigning wherever they could. In many of the small communities in question, where everyone knows everyone and the gang is the absolute arbiter of power, this step sent a powerful and effective message.

The MS 13 Convergence with the Bolivarian Revolution: Tactical or Strategic?

For the first time since its inception, the MS 13's recent maneuvers during the Honduran election demonstrated a strongly anti-U.S. component. Like the active Bolivarian populist groups throughout the region, the gang views the United States as the primary enemy to achieving their shared goal of seeing Salvador Nasralla installed as the next president of Honduras.

As noted above, international experts widely agree that Hernandez engaged in voter fraud to win. It is equally true that the MS 13 engaged in voter intimidation to suppress his voter turnout and favor Nasralla. Violent protests continue in Honduras, a sign of the country's protracted instability, as well as the deep political divisions. Furthermore, both sides (supporters of Nasralla and supporters of Hernández) in the conflict reportedly have deep ties to criminal activity.¹⁵ It is further evident that apart from the political goals at stake, the unrest is also a war between rival transnational organized crime groups, with the MS 13 standing to gain the most regardless of the outcome.

When Hernández declared victory despite the MS 13 efforts, the pro-Nasralla group sought money and logistical support from Mel Zelaya, the former president and Bolivarian representative in Honduras. Zelaya was ejected from office when he tried to engineer his own reelection under circumstances similar to the tactics of Hernández. This money, likely provided from the coffers of the structures of the FMLN's José Luis Merino in El Salvador, the Sandinistas in Nicaragua, and the Venezuelan intelligence services, has given the MS 13 the financial resources to feed, clothe and house thousands of protesters, as the violence has flared. The regional political allies of Zelaya, in turn, likely saw the MS 13 as a useful bloc of armed, organized members, able to mobilize in pursuit of their political ends.

¹⁵ See for example: Christopher Sherman, Martha Mendoza and Garance Burke, "Secret Report: Honduras' top cop helped cartel move coke," *The Associated Press*, January 26, 2018. In addition international human rights groups have accused Hernández of moving to grant impunity to corrupt legislators and other steps to undermine the rule of law and the president's brother has been accused of drug trafficking. Leaders of the Zelaya's political structure, who is the main political force behind the Nasralla candidacy, have also been tied to criminal activity.

While it is evident that two groups have formed a temporary alliance in service of a mutual, short-term goal of getting rid of Hernández, the long-term viability of the Bolivarian-gang alliance remains unclear. Given the MS 13's ambiguous and changing relationship with the FMLN in El Salvador, where it has both negotiated with the party and been subject to occasional harsh crackdowns, a broader alliance with the gang across the region is highly unlikely. While the FMLN's alliance with Nasralla/Zelaya movement is clear, its relationship to the Honduran MS 13 is not.

In Honduras the union could be a momentary tactical union or, if the two movements will find a broader convergence of political and economic interests, it could lead to a more lasting relationship. Given the lead role the MS 13 has played in the post-election protests and violence, it seems likely that the group has demonstrated its value as a shock troop force for political movements across the region. Thus, regardless of the political outcome, the MS 13 in Honduras has gained experience and established valuable contacts with a transnational political bloc that is deeply involved in a host of illicit activities across the region.

The narrative of regional Bolivarian leaders, which characterizes the United States as the primary enemy of the MS 13 and the Bolivarian Revolution, is undoubtedly attractive to the MS 13 and could be the beginning of an ideological alliance. However, as noted earlier, few things are permanent or entirely predictable in the rapidly evolving world of the MS 13, making certainty in prognostication impossible.

The logic of the alliance, as described by MS 13 leaders in interviews, is that Hernández is a close ally of the United States and has supported U.S.-led efforts to crack down on the MS 13. Furthermore, gang leaders argue that Hernández has engaged in massive corruption and tolerated cocaine trafficking and human rights abuses – claims that are ironic given the gang's own massive human rights abuses and deepening involvement in drug trafficking activities, but a narrative designed to justify its actions. As they did during the 2009 Honduran political turmoil, the FMLN leadership of El Salvador and particularly its Communist Party hardliners, have sent some of their most experienced street fighters to Honduras to organize and direct the street protests now underway. These experts have decades of experience and are directing the looting, burning and anti-U.S. activities there.

The joint efforts by the Bolivarian groups and the gangs, aside from their common political agenda, was clear from the presence of Bolivarian-aligned union leaders at protest checkpoints in Honduras.

These organizers, who enjoy clear relationships with the Bolivarian leaders in El Salvador and Honduras, were seen manning an MS 13 barricade in Honduras and consulting with gang leaders on what cars to let through, who to detain, and how to deploy MS 13 members to attack police and build burning barricades.

Back in El Salvador, the FMLN has been escalating its attacks on the United States, including burning a U.S. flag during a party rally on December 11, 2017 and reviving the “Yankee Go Home” chants of the 1980s. These protests are designed to show regional support for Nasrallah in Honduras, as well as expelling the U.S. diplomats, military and law enforcement from Latin America. While the FMLN leadership later tried to distance itself from the flag burning incident, it has continued to use the “Yankee Go Home” cry at its political rallies.

The MS 13 has never before participated in such a broad, mainstream movement with formal political power. Similarly, the regional Bolivarian movement¹⁶ has never previously enjoyed access to allies with significant territorial control in Honduras. In our assessment, the advantages of a closer alliance between these two entities would provide benefits to both sides while continuing to operate independently in most areas.



Photo caption: Soldiers guard civilians in El Salvador after gangs threatened to kill bus drivers who don't pay extortion.
Photo credit: Fred Ramos, El Faro.

¹⁶For a more comprehensive look at the Bolivarian movement and its ties to transnational organized crime see: Douglas Farah, “Convergence in Criminalized States,” *Beyond Convergence: World Without Order*, National Defense University, Edited by Hilary Matfess and Michael Miklaucic, 2016.

counterparts in Honduras. While willing to engage in direct political action, the gang is less powerful and often resorts to using violence as a negotiating tactic. To that end, and without the tactical alliance the MS 13 has with political power in Honduras, the gang often raises or lowers the number of homicides in order to extort the government for key concessions.

In a further divergence from their Honduran counterparts, the MS 13 in El Salvador has not picked ideological sides in the upcoming 2018 legislative elections and 2019 presidential elections. Rather, the gang is seeking negotiations with all major political parties in a strategy aimed at selling their voting blocs to the highest bidder. These strategies are relatively unchanged since the ill-fated gang “truce” between the major gangs in El Salvador (2012-2014). Although most major actors vehemently denied the facts at the time of the negotiations, our previous reporting that the truce was the result of a secret pact among drug trafficking organizations, then-President Mauricio Funes, his Minister of Defense David Munguía Payes, and the imprisoned leadership of the gangs, has been proven to be true over time.¹⁷ Because it has successfully advanced its agenda by leaving bodies on the street, there has been no reason for the MS 13 in El Salvador to change its tactics. This strategy was evident during the country’s huge spike in violence in September 2017, when the daily homicides rose from 11 to 40, as the MS 13 was demanding that the imprisoned leadership, jailed in a new maximum security prison, be given conjugal visitation and other privileges, including ordering fried chicken and pizza, as well as telephonic communication with the outside world.

Their demand for communication access was particularly important because the imprisoned MS 13 leadership orders executions and other actions by cell phone from the prisons. By extension, once the concessions are given, the MS 13 immediately orders the homicides to cease.

This strategy of calculated violence arises in large part from the experience the MS 13 gained during the much touted truce. By negotiating the truce directly with the government in 2012, the gang leadership discovered for the first time that they had real political power. Furthermore, the truce proved to be a fundamental tipping point in the growth the gangs. Given the proven ability of the gangs to deliver votes to whichever party will pay the most for them, such negotiations – often taking place in fits

¹⁷ Douglas Farah and Pamela Philips Lum, “Central American Gangs and Transnational Criminal Organizations,” International Assessment and Strategy Center, October 2013.

and starts – are now a regular feature of the political landscape.

While it has been long established that the gang leaders had directly negotiated with leaders of El Salvador’s two main political parties, the magnitude of what was negotiated has recently come to light. Over the past year, the 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 Marti National Liberation Front (*Frente Farabundo Marti Para la Liberación Nacional – FMLN*), for monetary gain and political power.



Photo caption: Family members gather at the funeral for a bus driver murdered by the Maras in Aguilares, El Salvador in September 2016. Photo credit: Fred Ramos, El Faro.

Understanding the Violence: Other Intervening Factors

In addition to the gang’s desire for key concessions and political power, the current extraordinary levels of violence in El Salvador are also the result of the ongoing “dirty war” between the MS 13 and the police and military. The MS 13 ratcheted up its attacks on state officials during the September 2017 violence, when a gang leader known as Killer announced that “we are opening the valve to clean the perimeters of our territory, whether they be traitors (*pesetas*), other groups (*bandas chavalas*), or rats (meaning the Barrio 18). Also from the 20th of this month until the 20th of next month (October 2017) the valve is open to play soccer with green and blue balls.” The green and blue balls refer to military and

police targets for assassination.¹⁸

The state has responded to these assassinations, in which more than 40 policemen and soldiers have been killed, with a wave of extra judicial murders of gang members and their families. The justification for this method is that there is no chance gang members will be prosecuted for or convicted of the killings. Some of the groups took names that were used by the notorious right-wing death squads of the 1980s, such as *La Mano Blanca*, further reviving the trauma of the civil war and fears that El Salvador is heading to a new “dirty war.”

Another intervening factor affecting the levels of violence is the inter- and intra-gang violence that flares up constantly, including the reported split between the historic MS 13 leadership (*ranfla histórica*) in prison and the new leadership outside prison (*ranfla libre*), now calling itself the MS 13 503 (503 is El Salvador’s country code).

While the government of El Salvador has gone out of its way to portray the split as something manufactured to misdirect law enforcement, and some analysts believe the split was manufactured by the government to weaken the gang, the MS 13 503 has offered a different, more compelling explanation for the split. In a series of Youtube videos, the 503 explained that the *ranfla histórica*, in negotiating the 2012 truce, had taken millions of dollars from the government and spent it on themselves rather than on the general well-being of the MS 13.

This betrayal of strict MS 13 code had been described as a breach of ethics so serious that it required the death of those who carried out the negotiations. These reports have been supported by the emergence of the MS 13 503 in key drug trafficking areas, as well as the spike in killings between the *históricos* and the *libres*. In tandem, these developments indicate that the split between the two factions is likely real.¹⁹

Considered holistically, the behavior of the MS 13 in El Salvador suggests that that, unlike its counterpart in Honduras, the structure has not yet moved into the drug transportation business in a significant way, nor has it evolved politically to be a direct, partisan actor. While the strategy of throwing

¹⁸ “Pandilla MS Lanza Ataques Contra Policías y Soldados, Además Quiere ‘Limpiar su Territorio.’” *El Diario de Hoy*, September 29, 2017.

¹⁹For a history of the division and the initial consequences see Douglas Farah and Kathryn Babineau, “The Evolution of the MS 13 in El Salvador and Honduras.” *Prism*, 7:1. September 14, 2017..

bodies on the street until specific demands are met has been successful, it has made the MS 13 even more hated and feared than before rather than building a political base that a broader, more sophisticated strategy has helped to create for the organization in Honduras.

The Rural Strategy and the Move to Nicaragua

The Rural Expansion

Another major strategic shift by the MS 13 in Honduras has been to wage a series of bloody battles with traditional cocaine *transportistas*, in order to expand their territorial control beyond traditional areas of operation in urban centers to surrounding rural areas.

The strategic objective of this expansion is to control vital nodes of the regional illicit trafficking routes. These pathways primarily move cocaine, but also facilitate the movement of weapons, cash and human beings, including illegal migrants, sex slaves and others. The “ruralization” strategy, discussed in multiple interviews with MS 13 leaders in and around San Pedro Sula, Honduras, is a major component of the MS 13’s ability to move into a much closer and more direct relationship with the Mexican drug cartels.

This trend, underway in recent years, has accelerated. In Honduras, the MS 13 has not only taken over drug trafficking routes on the vital Puerto Cortés corridor, but has also most of the *paso ciegos* (informal border crossings) on the Honduran-Guatemalan border. The MS 13 in El Salvador has established a small but significant presence in western Nicaragua for the specific purpose of gaining control of new cocaine trafficking routes.

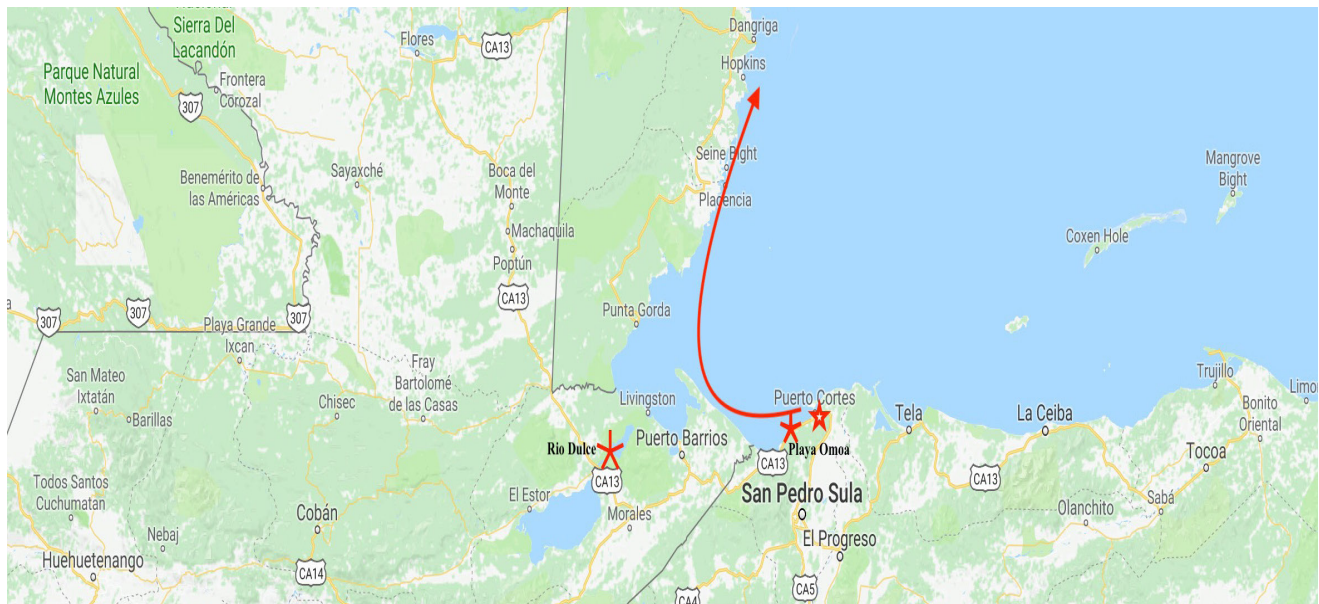
In Honduras, field research during multiple field visits to Puerto Cortés over the course of several months found the group has made significant strides in taking over key nodes along the north Caribbean route which is crucial to moving cocaine to Belize through Guatemala and then onward to Mexico.

The MS 13 also infiltrated a significant number of members into the port structure in Puerto Cortés, in order to facilitate the importation of precursor chemicals for the manufacture of cocaine, heroin and methamphetamines. Taken together, these moves show the MS 13 in Honduras is now a major cocaine *transportista* structure, growing more tightly linked to Mexican drug syndicates at multiple levels.

Two successful U.S. law enforcement operations unintentionally created the opening for the MS 13 to engage with the Sinaloa cartel. The first operation was the successful Drug Enforcement Administration actions against the traditional, family-based *transportista* groups such as the Valle Valle clan, the Cachiros, the Rosenthals, and others, thereby clearing the DTO playing field of MS 13 competitors. The second was the successful pressure brought by the United States and European Union on the Honduran government, which purged almost 2,000 corrupt policemen from the Honduran police force. While helping to cleanse the police force, the action meant that hundreds of well-trained, corrupt former policemen were unemployed and able to be hired by whoever could pay them. The MS 13 has made a concerted effort to hire the best of this group as military trainers, paying them 2.5 times what they made inside the force and greatly enhancing the MS 13's military capacity.²⁰

The Move to the Coast and Border Regions

After successfully gaining control of dozens of important *pasos ciegos* (informal border crossings) on the Honduras-Guatemala border, the MS 13 has now progressed to control of key posts along the Atlantic coast, centered around Puerto Cortés to Rio Dulce in Guatemala.



MS 13 cocaine transportation routes between Honduras, Guatemala and Belize.

²⁰ For a full discussion of these developments see Farah and Babineau, 2017, op cit.

In interviews with MS 13 members and local residents across the area from Puerto Cortés to southern Belize, our field research found the MS 13 is now handling the movement of cocaine by sea off the coast of Puerto Cortés, using small fishing boats to move the product to Belize. The cocaine is reportedly delivered to the beach area between Puerto Cortés and Playa Omoa, slightly to the west, then loaded onto MS 13-controlled boats and moved north, keeping relatively close to the Guatemalan coast until making landfall in Belize.

These activities mark the first time researchers have found credible reports of the MS 13 actually transporting large quantities (multi-hundred kilo loads) of cocaine independently. In recent years, there have been public cases where the gang provided protection and transportation for cocaine loads, but under the control of either a *transportista* network or a Mexican syndicate. The ability to receive loads in territory under MS 13 control, reload the product onto boats controlled by the group, and make a delivery a significant distance away, is an important development.

Several sources interviewed said the MS 13 forces local fishermen to make the journey northward and that those delivering the cocaine in Honduran territory are Brazilian and Colombian, distinguishable by language and accent. The organization uses several hotels/motels in and around Omoa to warehouse the cocaine as it arrives.

A mapping of the routes shows that MS 13 controls key coastal nodes, from Raya and La Manta on the Atlantic Mosquito Coast, to Omoa on the Guatemalan border. They also command land crossings on both the eastern and western Honduran borders with Nicaragua (the middle appears to still be a no man's land), as well as those across the Copán-Santa Barbara corridor with Guatemala.

Our research indicates that the coastal traffic is likely a secondary route for cocaine trafficking at this time. However, if the MS 13 can establish itself as a viable and reliable transport group, the route would likely become more lucrative and used more frequently, as the group's territorial control and access to ports and small airports in the region are important assets. During field investigations, we received numerous reports of Brazilian, Colombian and Venezuelan traffickers frequenting the coastal regions in order to deal directly with the MS 13. Although we have not yet been able to verify this information, the persistence of the reports indicates that such a presence is likely.

Expansion in Nicaragua

One of the MS 13's most notable achievements detected over the past year has been to establish a presence in Nicaragua, the sole country in Central America where it has not yet built a beachhead. The successful movement into the country, spearheaded by the Salvadoran branch of the MS 13, involved investments of time and resources to establish a strong presence in the Gulf of Fonseca region, the closest point in El Salvador's San Miguel province to Nicaragua's Chinandega province. Transportation across the Gulf is relatively easy, safe and fast, making it ideal for smuggling both illicit commodities and people.

Indeed, Salvadoran Minister of Defense David Munguía Payes noted last year that, "whoever controls the Gulf of Fonseca controls the flow of drugs in the region," and confirmed the MS 13 had established a strong presence in the area.²¹

Following the brutal July 2017 murder of a peanut farmer named Noél Gaitán in the rural hamlet of El Viejo in Chinandega province, a police investigation found that the farmer was also reportedly part of a local drug trafficking structure. The trafficking structure was run by a Salvadoran identified as José de la Cruz Amaya, a former Salvadoran policeman who was expecting a 500-kilo load of cocaine from Colombia and was preparing to pick it up off the coast.

However, another Salvadoran identified as Sergio Umaña, whose gang name is "Pitbull," heard the load was being delivered and decided to steal it, a common occurrence in the Central American corridor. In the process of stealing the load, Gaitán, the peanut farmer, was executed via multiple shots in the head and left in his car on an isolated rural road.

Police investigators then identified Umaña as the head of an MS 13 structure called *La Clica*, operating in Chinandega with both Salvadoran and Nicaraguan members. This is the first known time that Nicaraguan police have identified an MS 13 group operating in Nicaragua. Umaña was arrested in July 2017, along with two alleged Nicaraguan accomplices, and charged with murder.

According to court documents and police reports, upon arrival in Nicaragua Umaña paid corrupt officials to obtain a Nicaraguan identity card. He paid \$25,000 to a judge to certify that witnesses knew he was born in Nicaragua, and requested a new birth certificate. He used his new birth certificate, issued

²¹ Amalia Morales and Elizabeth Romero, "Nicaragua: Se Instalaron maras en el Golfo de Fonseca," *La Prensa*, June 6, 2012.

in 2011, to obtain a Nicaraguan identity card number.

Umaña reportedly arrived in Nicaragua by sea, via a route that is common for fishermen and drug traffickers and is little monitored by any of the three countries that share responsibility for governing the Gulf of Fonseca (El Salvador, Honduras, and Nicaragua).

A visit to the remote region of Chinandega province in Nicaragua revealed at least five communities with a discernable MS 13 presence: Padre Ramos, Mechapa, Potosí, Rancherías, El Viejo, and the city of Chinandega. The first three communities are cocaine trafficking centers, where launches carrying cocaine leave every night at dusk on their journey northward.

The presence of drug traffickers is becoming more visible in the Mechapa area, in particular, as new luxury houses are being built beside the small huts and houses of long-time residents. The trafficking activity appears to involve a mixture of stealing loads that move close to the coast and moving larger loads for paying customers. While it is clear the MS 13 has a visible and robust presence in the area, it is not yet clear exactly what their role in the cocaine trade is. It appears most likely that this Nicaraguan group is specifically linked to MS 13 drug trafficking operations in El Salvador.



The ability of the MS 13 to begin to fulfill its long-time wish to expand to Nicaragua is both an indication of how the organization continues to spread with a missionary zeal, and a very bad omen for Nicaragua. Utilizing its strong community policing and internal surveillance structure built during the 1980s civil war, the Nicaraguan police had been able to keep the organization from establishing a

permanent structure within their territory for more than two decades.

History has shown that once the MS 13 is in place, it spreads to nearby communities like a cancer. Nevertheless, the MS 13's expansionary vision into Nicaragua is likely circumscribed by several factors. Such factors include cultural differences and a lack of an indigenous Nicaraguan gang population, meaning that most members will have to be imported from El Salvador to create the new *clicas*. Given the group's other demands, this kind of mass movement may be hard to execute. Our research also indicates that the gang's growth is further limited by the rapid expansion of Russian military and civilian enterprises on the Pacific coasts of both Nicaragua and El Salvador.

Conclusions

The MS 13 is a tier-one existential threat to the governments of El Salvador and Honduras, and no longer fits the historic definition of a gang. The ability to move into the various aspects of the cocaine trade, coupled with a new political awareness and dramatic increases in territorial control, places the MS 13 closer to an insurgency than to what a gang is commonly understood to be.

The MS 13's new willingness to work with the radical Bolivarian alliance to achieve a specific political outcome in Honduras is a dangerous and historic precedent that likely signals the group's rapid evolution will continue. Furthermore, indications from our research of a new alliance with the Venezuela/Nicaragua/El Salvador drug trafficking axis that runs through the Northern Triangle will likely yield mutual benefits to all the main actors, and the territorial control of the MS 13 grants the organization an important seat at the table of any transnational criminal enterprise.

The territorial expansion by the MS 13, which aims to control key trafficking nodes in Nicaragua and other new territories, positions the MS 13 to be a major player in multiple illicit economies, from cocaine to human trafficking to weapons trafficking. This in turn moves the MS 13 closer to classification as a major transnational criminal organization rather than as a gang.

As the control and legitimacy of the government is challenged and the impunity of the MS 13 and other criminal structures becomes increasingly evident, the wave of illegal immigrants seeking refuge in the United States is likely to rise. As has been the case in the past three years, the swelling number of children making the dangerous trek to escape the gang and related violence will present a significant policy conundrum for the U.S. government.



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