
COCAINE
the GLOBAL REACH of the WORLD'S MOST LUCRATIVE ILLICIT DRUG
Edited by Sebastián A. Cutrona and Jonathan D. Rosen

CHAPTER 7

Central America's *Maras*

A Negative Case of DTO Evolution

Michael Ahn Paarlberg

The gangs of the Northern Triangle of Central America—particularly Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13) and Barrio 18 (18th Street)[1]—present a unique negative case in the evolution of drug-trafficking organizations—particularly in El Salvador, historically the country of their greatest presence. Their trajectory contradicts what is generally presumed to be that of transnational organized crime: an evolution toward increasing sophistication, greater profit, diversification of activities, and eventual semi-legitimacy in both the economic and political realms. Since their founding in the United States and spread to Central America, MS-13 and Barrio 18 have indeed grown and transnationalized; they have become entrenched in poor communities and present dire problems for citizen security in multiple countries.

Yet they have not, as might be expected, transformed into more sophisticated cartel-like enterprises. Nor have they developed cross-border contraband operations like Guatemala's and Honduras's *transportistas*—independent, family-run smuggling networks that expanded from livestock and car theft to drug transport.[2] Their activities have remained largely confined to the street level. And regarding the cocaine trade, their involvement has been limited, centering more on microtrafficking than transnational smuggling. While exact trafficking figures are impossible to ascertain, law enforcement records, studies, and news reports paint a picture of the *maras* as minor players in international cocaine markets, playing at best an ancillary role as subcontractors to the larger cartels, primarily in Mexico.

Several anecdotal cases show frustrated attempts by the largest mara, MS-13, to enter the narcotics trade.[3] In the early 2000s, MS-13's US leader, Nelson

Comandari, reportedly approached the Mexican Mafia—an established gang based in the California prison system—through a family connection, to offer MS-13 as a drug distribution network. He was later arrested, turned state's evidence, and went into witness protection.[4] A decade later, an attempt by MS-13 member Luis Gerardo Vega to broker a methamphetamine trafficking arrangement with La Familia Michoacana in Mexico and the Mexican Mafia in the United States also resulted in his arrest and the breakup of this network by federal law enforcement. Yet another attempt, in 2015, by incarcerated MS-13 member Jesus Navarete to partner with existing methamphetamine distributors in Arkansas and Oklahoma also resulted in detection and Navarete's arrest.[5]

While survivorship bias limits any conclusions drawn only from successful law enforcement busts, patterns emerge among foiled attempts by the maras to engage in cocaine or other narcotics trafficking. First, these attempts always place the gang in a supporting role for another gang or cartel already established in the cocaine trade. Second, such connections are always brokered with contacts outside of the maras—through personal relationships with members of said gangs or cartels, rather than being brokered by mara leadership—suggesting that these deals are ad hoc and opportunistic in nature, rather than a deliberate strategy implemented by the maras themselves. Third, these established drug-trafficking organizations (DTOs) regard the maras as unreliable partners due to them being outside the DTOs, their high public profiles, and their reputation for volatility. One analysis thus concludes that "MS13, it appears, is still far from constituting a drug cartel or anything like it."[6]

In Central America, the maras have gained more of a toehold in the cocaine trade by operating in a support capacity for DTOs, whose activities mostly involve cocaine trafficking and money laundering (in El Salvador, the Perrones and Texis cartels) or migrant smuggling (various Mexican coyote networks); the maras provide muscle but do not operate at the center of DTO activities, as they are generally not trusted with drug transport or handling money. Within Central America, the maras do run their own microtrafficking networks, and in some areas such as San Pedro Sula in Honduras, MS-13 has succeeded in dominating the street trade.[7] However, this monopoly relies on the gangs' control of these territories through their mostly autonomous constituent franchises. Even in areas where they control territory outright, they have failed to control the drug

trade above the street level, at best working as intermediaries or distributors for other cartels.

Within the maras' universe of criminal activities, drug trafficking at any level takes a distant second position to extortion, which continues to be their main activity and source of revenue. As a business model, this is far from lucrative; while profits from illicit activity cannot be independently verified and estimates vary, evidence from law enforcement and independent analysts suggests that they are low. Police confiscations of extortion proceeds from the gangs totaled just under US$35,000 over three years in El Salvador. In 2015, the peak year of gang homicides in El Salvador, MS-13's estimated annual revenue was reported to be just over $31 million.[8] It is questionable even how accurately the terms "DTO" and "transnational organized crime" (TOC) should apply to what are essentially neighborhood street gangs running protection rackets, albeit in multiple countries.

Why do we fail to see an evolution of the maras into larger and more profitable cartels? Why do they continue to concentrate their illicit activities in relatively unprofitable areas: extorting informal businesses and individuals, and selling drugs in poor neighborhoods? Central America's maras are as much a social phenomenon as they are criminal enterprises, more akin to a youth subculture than a cartel. As such, their activities cannot be explained by profit motive alone. This chapter addresses this question of their lack of evolution, or, from a DTO perspective, squandered opportunity. It can be explained by three factors: their histories, organizational structures, and memberships. And while their future trajectory may yet lead to either consolidation or fragmentation and "disarticulation"—in the words of reporters for *El Faro*[9]—this future depends on state responses, which will also be examined, both private accommodation and public repression: policies that are often simultaneous.

Gangs and the Taxonomy of DTOs

Questions of taxonomy have important policy implications when it comes to state response to criminal actors. In the context of the US drug war, the tendency of public officials has been to inflate the perceived threat of (what are perceived to be) foreign criminal actors, often in conjunction with broader waves of xenophobia: fears of Chinese triads coinciding with the Chinese Exclusion Act; Irish and Italian gangsters during their respective migration waves; Japanese yakuza during Japan's investment and export boom. This serves both to justify budget outlays to law enforcement and to ignite public safety fears with which to mobilize voters. The perception of all-powerful transnational drug cartels operating in multiple criminal underworlds (e.g., migrant, sex, and drug trafficking) can arouse public backlash to problems closer to home (e.g., opioid abuse and local crime). It can also be reinforced by depictions in popular culture (e.g., films and series such as *Narcos*, *Sicario*, and *Sin Nombre*). It is worth interrogating whether popular perceptions of criminal organizations such as cartels are applicable to all DTOs such as the maras.

It is an open question whether this model is applicable even to cartels themselves; Oswaldo Zavala asks whether what are essentially supply chains made up of several autonomous, small-scale, and localized groups operating in specialized areas of illicit activity (production, trafficking, distribution, security, etc.) can reasonably be described as a single unitary criminal organization.[10] To be sure, it is in the interest of those operating such organizations to project a sense of power and control on potential rivals and security forces; it is also in the interest of politicians to project the same for reasons stated above. And it is arguable that the projection of unified control applies to many areas of legitimate business as well; in the words of fictional television character Logan Roy from the series *Succession*, "the Ford Motor Company barely exists"; indeed, any corporate brand is ultimately "a time-saving expression for a collection of financial interests."

Among criminal enterprises typically referred to as cartels, there are differences in level of coordination that vary by leadership, area of business, and generation. The first-generation model of a unitary cartel answering entirely to a dictatorial CEO figure, popularized by Pablo Escobar's Medellín cartel and Miguel Ángel Félix Gallardo's Guadalajara cartel, does not apply today to their more decentralized successors in both Colombia and Mexico. It is due to criminal

learning, in response to various government campaigns including Plan Colombia and the Mérida Initiative, militarized policing, "decapitation" strategies, and threats of US extraditions, that new-generation cartels have evolved away from centralized models dependent on single leaders.

For self-interested reasons, both government and criminal actors are motivated to conflate illicit organizations with different structures, geographies, profit-making activities, and methods. An illustration can be seen in a statement by the US attorney general under the first Donald Trump administration, Jeff Sessions, naming the top criminal threats to the United States to be MS-13, the Sinaloa cartel, and Hezbollah.[11] However, this tendency is not unique to the United States: although the Trump administration considered naming Mexican cartels terrorist organizations but ultimately did not—due to the likely side effect of strengthening the cases of asylum seekers from Mexico—the Supreme Court of El Salvador has designated maras as terrorists, facilitating suspensions of civil liberties amid antigang crackdowns.

Taxonomy presents challenges within the context of broader civil conflict. In Colombia, the fluidity of the drug trade between organizations with different origins and ostensible political aims, but often with the same involvement in illicit activities, has led to shifting and dubious official designations. As the cocaine trade shifted from "classic" personalist cartels in Medellín and Cali to guerrilla and paramilitary armies to fractured criminal organizations descended from those armies, and as the government has pursued varying policies of counterinsurgency, secret cooperation, negotiation, and amnesty, those organizations' reactions to the carrots and sticks of successive Colombian administrations has informed their designations. The term BACRIM—*bandas criminales*, or criminal gangs—is the official term for DTOs that descended from the Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia (AUC; United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia) umbrella group of paramilitaries. As the AUC was given amnesty in exchange for demobilization and was subsequently banned, those AUC constituent paramilitaries that refused to demobilize were subsequently deemed BACRIM—a semantic sleight of hand to allow the government to declare that the AUC, and the much older phenomenon of paramilitarism, no longer exist in Colombia. In Central America, histories of civil war and the legacy of governments designating their guerrilla enemies as terrorists inform the present-day designation of gangs as such, while both

justifying and legally facilitating measures (*mano dura* policing and vigilante death squads) with clear wartime origins.

The common background in civil conflict for Colombia and Central America raises an additional question of comparison. Perhaps, rather than asking why the maras did not become cartels, we should ask why they did not become BACRIM-style narco-paramilitaries. The distinction is partly semantic—both cartels and BACRIM engage in a variety of criminal activities, operate transnational trafficking networks, and maintain large standing armies, sometimes with military training. But given the legacy of decades-long civil wars in El Salvador and Guatemala and postwar societies marked by weak institutions, political corruption, economic underdevelopment, social immobility, and availability of small arms, to some degree it is remarkable that a greater number of former combatants did not put their training to use for higher-level organized crime. Indeed, the makeup of the maras has consistently skewed young: teenagers with no personal experience in the civil conflict. This profile, as will be discussed below, has had a detrimental effect on the professionalization and institutionalization of Central America's maras.

In the following sections of this chapter, I will elaborate on the factors that limit the maras' activity in the international cocaine supply chain: their unique transnational origins, their decentralized and localized structure, and their juvenile membership. I will then discuss policing responses by the government of El Salvador over different periods of time and assess the government's success, including with regard to (as of 2023) the ongoing "State of Exception" of the Nayib Bukele administration.

Origins, Evolution, and Transnationalization

The origins of Central America's maras are shrouded in street folklore and self-mythologization, as detailed by several journalistic accounts, ethnographies, and memoirs.[12] Key to the type of transnational criminal organization the maras became are the related facts that they began not in Central America but in the United States, and that they transnationalized through the actions of the US government, specifically through the deportation system. As I have theorized elsewhere, assessing transnational organized crime requires locating the actor with agency in the process of their evolution, both within and across borders.[13] Popular conceptions of mafias and cartels imagine TOC enterprises to be in control and deliberate in their spread from one country to others, as part of a strategic business model. In contrast, MS-13 and Barrio 18 have been subject to processes directed by government authorities at every stage of their evolution. The maras were exported to Central America by the United States and have been continually shaped by law enforcement policies in both regions. As such, they adapted their activities to new environments—California to Central America, streets to prisons, urban to rural—on a more ad hoc basis.

Rivals MS-13 and Barrio 18—the latter now since split into two rival factions itself—share their origins in Los Angeles within the Salvadoran diaspora community. This diaspora was itself the product of violence from El Salvador's 1980–1992 civil war, which pushed thousands to flee for safety to the United States, with the community augmented by later periods of economic instability and natural disaster, as well as family-based migration. The first-generation US *mareros* initially settled in the largely Chicano neighborhoods of Los Angeles and, according to the folklore, faced the challenge of standing out as newcomers and as a minority in terms of national identity in contrast to their more established Mexican American neighbors.[14] They faced an additional challenge of navigating an environment where micro street gangs controlled territory demarcated by neighborhood and street; the name in English for Barrio 18, 18th Street, derives from a street in the Pico-Union district of Los Angeles. Barrio 18 had existed long before the arrival of Salvadoran migrants, tracing back to the 1960s, but was unique among the Chicano gangs in accepting the new migrants as members. The gang that came to be its rival, and known eventually as MS-13, was at the time called the Mara Salvatrucha Stoners. Made up more exclusively of Salvadoran

teenagers, they distinguished themselves from Chicano gangs by their appearance (long hair and tight, dark clothing) and musical preference (metal bands such as Judas Priest), which reflected other groupings of juvenile gangs in 1980s southern California around favorite bands.

Both gangs were, in effect, social groupings providing a sense of belonging to recently arrived adolescents navigating a new and hostile environment by getting high and getting in fights with other adolescents.[15] As threats to public safety, they were seen as a minor risk and one of dozens of similar groupings of teenagers defined by neighborhood, attracted to petty vandalism and punk and metal concerts. Even after the point at which MSS evolved into MS-13, in 1989, the Los Angeles Police Department estimated its membership to be fewer than five hundred.[16] It was in fact the LAPD that catalyzed this evolution in 1984, through mass arrests of alleged gang members as part of a citywide clean-up-the-streets campaign ahead of the Los Angeles Summer Olympics.

These arrests heralded the first transformation of the maras from juvenile street gangs to prison gangs, as the first generation of Barrio 18 and MSS members were socialized into the California penal system and its attendant prison gang culture, which included affiliating with and paying tribute to other, more established gangs. It was in this period that MS dropped the "Stoners" moniker and added the "13," as a tribute to the Mexican Mafia,[17] a largely Chicano gang dating back to 1957.

The second transformation of the maras, their transnationalization, came about in 1996 through two pieces of legislation at the federal level signed by President Bill Clinton: the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act and the Antiterrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act. The new laws, meant to address then-peaking levels of violence from both street crime and domestic terrorism,[18] facilitated deportations by expanding the list of crimes for which an undocumented immigrant would be prioritized for deportation.[19] These laws thus inaugurated the current era of mass deportations; from 1994 to 2014, deportations from the United States to the Northern Triangle of Central America went from five thousand to one hundred thousand annually.[20] Such deportations continued unabated under subsequent Republican and Democratic administrations, peaking during the Barack Obama administration. The Trump administration made MS-13 in particular a public bogeyman, with Trump and his cabinet members citing the supposed threat posed by the gang—including in one State of the Union address—as a justification for their envisioned border

wall and harsh anti-immigration measures more broadly. The fact that the gang did not come from Central America but originated in the United States was an inconvenient detail left unmentioned.

For El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, the result of the twentyfold surge of deportations from the United States created a sudden and sustained dilemma. The receiving countries did not have the resources to absorb tens of thousands of jobless return migrants arriving each year. Some had gang ties, others did not, but the rhetoric from the United States of expelling "gangbangers" stoked fears among the general public of an inundation of hardened criminals. Social stigmas and assumptions of criminality were attached to them, correctly or not. Many were poorly socialized, having lived for most of their lives in the United States; many did not speak Spanish well. Facing few job prospects in the face of such suspicions, those with gang connections reconstituted the maras in El Salvador first, and their membership soon multiplied with subsequent planeloads of deportees, spreading to other parts of the country and the Northern Triangle a whole.

The response by the governments to this new, if exaggerated, threat to public safety was a zero-tolerance policing policy called *mano dura*. As discussed in greater detail below, the effect of mano dura policing only further expanded the gang's reach by chasing them first from the city of San Salvador to the countryside, then from El Salvador to neighboring countries, and eventually to the prison system, over which the gangs came to exert hegemonic control. The evolution of the maras in Central America thus mirrored their evolution in the United States, from street gangs to prison gangs, but with greater ties from prisons to the streets, with neighborhood-level cliques ostensibly answering to incarcerated gang leaders who controlled the prisons where street members expect to end up one day.

In short, the different stages of evolution of the maras have always been subject to state policy: whether policing policy or deportation policy, whether in the United States or Central America. This unintentional geographic spread, including transnationalization, stands in contrast to the cartel model of transnationalization, a proactive process of setting up supply chains, trafficking routes, and distribution networks with a profit motive in mind. Although these evolutions have expanded the maras' membership and geographic reach, the reactive and nearly accidental nature of this spread has inhibited longer-term strategic planning and involvement in more lucrative transnational criminal enterprises, including cocaine trafficking much beyond the street level.[21]

Localized Structures

The second factor limiting the maras' activities is their decentralized and localized structure. Far from a single unitary criminal organization, the maras exist as a loose network of *clicas*, or cliques, operating at the neighborhood level. These cliques are founded on a franchise model, paying tribute to the gang—and its incarcerated leadership—for the right to use its name, a tributary system reflective of both gangs' historical relationship with the Mexican Mafia in California. Although they have a common organizational form with defined roles, rituals, and lines of promotion, cliques are largely self-directed: those who lead them, the *palabreros* or shot callers, are afforded more autonomy than most middle management. Shot callers will direct their cliques' activities on the ground, within the defined boundaries they claim as their territory. Their activities are hyperlocal in scope, involving whatever profits can be made from the populations in the neighborhoods they control. These are primarily protection rackets, imposed on local businesses and residents who are forced to pay what is euphemistically called *renta*, or rent. The significance of this term situates the clique as the de facto landlord of the neighborhood, as well as the local governing authority. Gangs justify extortion payments as effective taxes for security they allegedly provide, not only from themselves but from rival gangs in neighboring territory. Such invisible boundaries have historically severely restricted the movement of people within these territories, with a gang demanding they not cross into other gangs' territory—even to visit family or go to work—for fear that they will cooperate with that gang's rivals. Entire communities are thus effectively conscripted into the cliques' activities, and members can treat civilians in neighboring areas as valid targets for violence simply based on where they live.[22]

In some cases, cliques can be grouped together as *programas*, programs (in MS-13) or *tribus*, tribes (in Barrio 18), an organizational reform initiated by the incarcerated leadership in the early 2000s, overseen by *corredores*, or runners. Some of these programs/tribes are themselves transnational, such as the Sailors program, a collection of MS cliques based in both El Salvador and the Washington, DC, area; and the Los Angeles program, anchored to the Normandie Locos, one of the oldest MS cliques, since expanding to El Salvador and the East Coast of the United States. Nevertheless, members assert that their primary loyalty

remains with the clique, thus frustrating efforts to coordinate criminal activities transnationally through programs.[23]

Cliques and programs that have attempted such higher-level coordination have faced swift responses by law enforcement. An early case in Los Angeles in 2005 tested the application of the Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations (RICO) Act—a prosecutorial tool used mostly against the Italian American Mafia—by bringing conspiracy charges against twenty-four MS-13 members.[24] In 2016, a Los Angeles MS-13 clique leader seeking to establish a "National Program" for drug trafficking in conjunction with the Mexican Mafia was arrested. In a later case, a meeting of various cliques in Richmond, Virginia, that had been monitored resulted in another successful RICO case by the US Justice Department and multiple arrests, breaking up what might have been a trafficking network operating throughout the East Coast of the United States.[25] The vulnerability of programs to federal investigation and prosecution, particularly through RICO given their interstate nature, underscores the relative safety of concentrating activity at the local level, primarily extortion.

Ambitions for greater sophistication have been thwarted in Central America as well. In 2007, El Salvador's National Civil Police (Policía Nacional Civil) intercepted an MS-13 strategy plan dubbed "Plan 503" to expand the group's criminal operations. According to alleged conversations among incarcerated MS leaders, the gang's leadership, collectively known as the *ranfla*, proposed to shift activities away from the extortion business and develop into a true drug-trafficking organization. Changes proposed included calling a truce with Barrio 18, acquiring military-grade weapons and training, developing elite units to directly confront government security forces, and building greater ties to political parties.[26] Some of these changes were implemented to a limited degree: the maras consolidated ties to politicians and elected officials of all parties at all levels of government through both bribery and displays of violence. And at certain moments they have directly targeted security personnel, notably MS-13's Plan Bitter Tears and Plan Orphan Children during the Salvador Sánchez Cerén administration, in response to that administration's targeting of gang members and their families with paramilitary units (the now-disbanded Fuerza Especializada de Reacción [FES]) in an undeclared "dirty war." Nevertheless, such reforms were never fully realized, nor was the ranfla's expressed dreams to, according to the National Civil Police, "unify MS-13 across

the globe to carry out large-scale operations," "cease the war with Barrio 18 to carry out joint operations against the state," gain "formal recognition" by political parties, or fully "develop and consolidate relationships with Mexican cartels."[27]

While it is impossible to independently verify such reporting by US and Salvadoran law enforcement, and both have self-interested reasons to report grand plans by gang leadership, should such plans be true, the continued concentration of criminal activities in extortion rackets at the neighborhood level is evidence of the maras' inability to expand from the street to national or international levels. The apparent ease by which such plans have been intercepted and foiled by law enforcement points to coordination challenges among the cliques and programs/tribes, and more generally to collective action problems inherent in decentralized systems of semiautonomous local chapters.

Localized organizational structures are not a mark of weakness, however. As Sarah Zukerman Daly shows in the case of Colombia, localized criminal groups are more likely to maintain their networks and capacity over time than nonlocalized groups.[28] The challenge for a growing DTO is to maintain those localized networks while coordinating activity at the national and transnational level. Lack of coordination does not speak to lack of public threat: the maras succeeded in driving homicide rates in the Northern Triangle of Central America to the highest in the world in the mid-2010s. But the spectacular—and often performative—acts of violence have betrayed problems for the gangs in projecting their power. In contrast to the archetypal cartels conducting their business efficiently in the shadows, with the cooperation of authorities, the maras' reliance on public violence indicates their inability to force official cooperation through other means. In some cases, they have extracted concessions: a 2010 transportation strike by gang-controlled bus systems led eventually to the first gang truce brokered secretly by the government of Mauricio Funes. But violent means are not entirely effective, often sparking crackdowns—such as the Bukele government's State of Exception, which was imposed following a spate of gang killings in March 2022.

Membership Profile

A third factor limiting the maras' establishment in higher-level activity is the age profile of their membership. Since their founding in the United States, the identity of both maras has continued to be as juvenile street (and later prison) gangs.

Made members are called *homeboys* or *homies*, reflecting their roots in California gang culture, those who have been formally initiated into the gang through a 13- (for MS-13) or 18- (for Barrio 18) second beating called a *brinco*. Beneath the made members are probationary members: *paros*, later *observaciones*, and eventually *chequeos*. Those who advance from probationary to full status are understood to be in the gang for life, with their understood final destination to be death or prison. Teen and preteen boys make up the bulk of gang membership, particularly in the cliques; while imprisoned members can be much older, they are not the members engaging in the gang's profit-making enterprises on the street.

While no comprehensive transnational membership survey exists, estimates of the average age of members range from thirteen to sixteen in the United States. New members have, over time, grown younger still, as the gangs have shifted recruitment targets from high school to middle school or even elementary school age. In El Salvador, the National Civil Police has reported the traditional age for new recruits to be between ages seven and twelve.[29] Maras have various motives for recruiting ever younger prospects: children's impressionability and vulnerability to peer pressure, their ability to avoid detection, and the fact that they cannot be tried as adults, thus avoiding harsher penalties.

The maras' cohesion thus revolves less around the maximization of profit than around the social benefit of belonging that the cliques promise to prospective members. Adolescents do not join the maras expecting to get rich. Journalistic accounts of their activities in El Salvador estimate that members earn on average US$16 per week, just half of the minimum wage.[30] Members and leaders live in the same poor neighborhoods that they extort, in modest homes, without flashy possessions such as luxury cars. Many are still in school, or have dropped out and work day jobs, with gang activity supplementing their incomes.

Instead, the maras seek to provide their members with a surrogate family, often substituting for the lack of parental or sibling support within their members' own homes. Multiple ethnographies emphasize the social appeal of the maras over the monetary. Much of this motivation to join is related to the gang's protection

rackets: boys in poor neighborhoods feel victimized and alienated growing up in a threatening environment; seeking protection, they join the very gangs that contribute to that environment. Members who have provided testimonies report finding "courage" and "self-respect" in joining.[31] Other reports point to members' desire for social status as well as sex, most perniciously encapsulated in the "gang girlfriend" phenomenon of sexual slavery of girls and women who attract the attention of mareros.

Given gangs' memberships, conflicts have often revolved around interpersonal rather than business disputes, including the original break between MS-13 and Barrio 18, which gang folklore attributes to a shooting at a Los Angeles house party in 1988 and, according to one account, arising from a wife cheating on her partner with a rival gang member.[32] The territorial delineations of the maras' protection rackets inevitably precipitate disputes over turf—who has the right to extort which bus lines or to sell marijuana on which block—which mirror the teenage neighborhood rivalries from which the maras originated. These disputes are no less deadly than disputes with greater monetary value. Bus line extortion fights have resulted in some of the most gruesome acts of violence directed at civilians: shootings and burnings of buses killing dozens of passengers, in both El Salvador and Honduras.[33]

The degree of violence of such acts, it should be noted, is disproportionate to the money that can be earned from these rackets: from estimates and police raids, in the tens of thousands, not multi-millions, of dollars. As noted above, the maras have long relied on spectacular acts of violence to intimidate their sometimes more powerful rivals, in ways that are not the most strategic, symbolized by their early adoption of machetes as weapons of choice—which are less effective than guns but intended to strike fear into their enemies. It can be surmised that such practices—emphasizing confrontation, shock tactics, and violence for its own sake, deemphasizing profit and cooperation—stem in part from being carried out by mostly teenage boys, not adult career criminals.

This lack of a profit motive also inhibits the maras' ability to partner with other DTOs. Mara leaders view members who are motivated by money with suspicion, considering them to be self-interested and liable to betray the gang if they do not buy into the "family" aspect of the clique. However, larger cartels that are profit minded can similarly view the maras' lack of interest or experience in profitable enterprises as a liability.

State Responses: *Mano Dura* and the State of Exception

The combination of decentralized structure, juvenile membership, and an extortion-based business model make the maras at once vulnerable to and a challenge for state enforcement. Successive governments in Central America have attempted, without success, to eliminate the gangs with overwhelming force, in law enforcement strategies dubbed mano dura, hardhanded or ironfisted policing. These policies have failed—and when they fail, have been rebranded as super mano dura, territorial control plans, and Régimen de Excepción or State of Exception—because what they seek to combat is not a single criminal organization but a social phenomenon more akin to a youth subculture.

At the same time, the maras themselves are too disorganized to effectively confront the state. The maras do wield power, but only in recent years have they learned to deploy it politically. Although at certain moments the maras have announced plans to directly target police officers, assassinations have been limited and precipitated harsh crackdowns, in comparison to attacks on other gang members or even civilians. Gangs have learned to use violence to pressure governments indirectly, with more successful results: as homicide rates have become highly politically salient for politicians in Central America, maras have threatened to drop bodies to pressure governments for concessions, threats demonstrated to be real by periodic murder sprees during negotiations with government officials. In the past, these concessions were entirely motivated by self-interest on the part of imprisoned gang leaders and have included prison perks, visitation privileges for ranfleros, and control over entire prisons historically segregated by gang. Under the Bukele administration, all evidence suggests that the maras have grown more sophisticated in their demands, insofar as El Salvador's government has blocked the extradition of several MS-13 leaders wanted by the United States. In one notorious incident, a member of the Bukele cabinet personally escorted a gang leader out of El Salvador so as to avoid extradition.[34] The unacknowledged no-extradition concession—which has held throughout the Bukele government's much-heralded antigang crackdown—indicates that gang leaders have come to understand a vulnerability of the government and have tested their ability to make significant demands, the importance of which is

evident in the government's willingness to jeopardize diplomatic relations with the United States in order to maintain compliance.

Such Faustian bargains are politically risky and thus vociferously denied by governments, even in the face of overwhelming evidence, reporting, and testimony of gang members, and in the case of the Bukele government, police document leaks. The earlier administration of Mauricio Funes negotiated a truce between MS-13 and Barrio 18, brokered by the Catholic Church in 2012, which the government long denied even while celebrating the drop in homicides, which paved the way for the election of Funes's vice president, Salvador Sánchez Cerén, as his successor. Yet revelations of the negotiations made the truce unpopular and politically infeasible to maintain, precipitating another mano dura crackdown and rise in homicide rates, reaching their historical zenith in 2015. The subsequent drop in homicides under President Bukele—who as mayor of San Salvador had previously negotiated with Barrio 18 to facilitate the rehabilitation of a downtown shopping area—coincided with another secret pact, later revealed through reporting, video evidence, and leaked documents. More alarmingly, the drop in homicides coincided as well with a rise in disappearances and the discovery of multiple mass graves, suggesting an agreement between the two parties to hide bodies and not to investigate them.[35]

However, these deals only reflect the "carrot" side of the government's approach to the maras, which has historically leaned heavily on the stick in the form of mano dura. Breakdowns in negotiations precipitate harsh measures, mass incarcerations, and in the present situation (in 2024), the deployment of the military and suspension of civil liberties. The maras have always survived these crackdowns, but they have never been in control of the circumstances. Previous mano dura campaigns have precipitated the jailing of thousands of alleged gang members in overcrowded prisons at between 200 and 400 percent capacity, thus effectively relocating and concentrating the maras within the prison system, which they have taken over. This development, prior to the 2012 truce, empowered the ranflas by giving them control over a larger population, a base of operations, and the ability to direct violent acts on the streets, giving them bargaining leverage in future government negotiations.

The latest gang crackdown by the Bukele government, and subsequent suspension of civil liberties under an ongoing State of Exception, was precipitated

by a breakdown in the last negotiated truce, which lasted from the start of the Bukele administration in June 2019 until March 2022. The breakdown was reportedly over nonpayment of an agreed sum by the government to MS-13, which sparked a murder spree in which eighty-seven people were killed from March 25 to 27, 2022. In response, the government broke off talks, deployed the army to occupy gang neighborhoods, and initiated mass arrests on a scale not seen before in El Salvador: as of this writing (November 2024), more than seventy thousand have been arrested, swelling the prison population to 2 percent of the country's adult population and giving El Salvador the highest incarceration rate in the world. Many detainees have not been told of their charges or allowed to see their lawyers or families, and many have suffered harsh treatment. A very large number likely have no gang ties at all, according to an assessment by a former inspector general of the national police, who estimated that 70 percent of those arrested under the State of Exception are non-gang-affiliated civilians.[36] More than two hundred people are confirmed to have died in custody since the beginning of the State of Exception, although human rights advocates believe the number to be much higher. A report by El Salvador's Cristosal, based on interviews with released detainees, cites widespread use of torture and the deaths of detainees by beatings and strangulation.[37] The Bukele government has paraded prisoners before cameras to demonstrate their success; these prisoners, mostly middle aged, are clearly not the (mostly adolescent) recently arrested, but given their tattooed visages—a practice that has been largely phased out by the gangs and not seen on the streets for at least a decade—they have provided shock value propaganda for a government presenting itself as the toughest on crime in history.

Yet such harsh measures are targeted on a specific population: the lowest level of gang membership, or those suspected of such. At the highest level, the ranfla leaders have maintained their privileges, have remained protected from extradition, and have even been released from prison and allowed to leave the country. Public officials corrupted by the maras have similarly been left untouched. As the maras soon learned, far more effective than direct confrontation with security officials is co-optation, whether through bribes or intimidation. Thus, entire police forces and municipal governments have come to be in the pay of MS-13 or Barrio 18; this degree of cooperation reached a peak in Honduras under

the administration of Juan Orlando Hernández, which directed its antigang measures exclusively at Barrio 18 at the behest of MS-13. In both countries, the phenomenon of "narco mayors" has underscored the degree to which organized crime—gangs and cartels alike—has infiltrated local government. At the national level in El Salvador, the Bukele government includes cabinet ministers who have worked for the maras and the Texis cartel,[38] or have been linked to coyote rings.[39] One top diplomat—the consul general of El Salvador in Long Island, New York—is an admitted "former" member of MS-13. Several Salvadoran government officials have been named and sanctioned by the US government for criminal ties, including the social fabric minister, who escorted an MS-13 leader out of the country, and the director of prisons, who brokered negotiations with the maras and embezzled prison funds. None have faced prosecution under the State of Exception.

Despite human rights abuses, ongoing protection of both criminals and corrupt officials, and misrepresentation of fact, the latest mano dura campaign in the form of the State of Exception has been successful in suppressing violence and gang activity. Certainly, as a political measure, it has been very successful for the Bukele government in driving up approval ratings. Although presented to the public as a repression-only measure, it employs the same carrot-and-stick approach of previous governments, with each directed at different levels of the maras, both leadership and rank-and-file. The impact for the maras has been transformative if not quite decimating: reporting suggests that in many (but not all) parts of El Salvador, protection rackets have been dormant, and members who have not been arrested have largely gone into hiding.[40]

A Future Gang State?

It is unlikely that the maras have been eliminated, as the government alleges. Instead, they are likely lying low, assessing the latest crackdown, and reorganizing. This is in line with reactions by maras to previous mano dura campaigns, which precipitated their relocations and entrenchments in new areas. At each stage, the maras adapted to new environments and found new ways to carry out their criminal activities and put pressure on the government. It is more likely that they will reemerge, possibly with new names under a new structure, or possibly fractured into many mini-gangs.

A likelier scenario is a co-optation of the gangs by the government. The Bukele government's divide-and-conquer approach has reportedly found success in alienating gang membership from the leadership. The Bukele government, for its part, has built ties to illicit business elsewhere, notably money laundering—including the Texis cartel and Venezuela's state oil company, Petróleos de Venezuela (PDVSA).[41] It has also, to much fanfare but with little economic success, introduced Bitcoin as legal tender and sought to use the cryptocurrency to attract investment and financing in the face of falling bond ratings and stalled negotiations over a billion-dollar loan from the International Monetary Fund. The Bukele administration has also built closer ties to the Chinese government as US relations have soured, with Bukele's brother Karim—who has business interests with China—acting as an unofficial foreign minister. These developments together point to deepening criminal ties and activities by the Bukele government itself, specifically around money laundering. Bukele's high popularity, purging of the judiciary and Supreme Court, supermajority in the legislature, personal control of the military,[42] lack of transparency in public budgets, and unofficial delegation of power to his family together make him unaccountable to any checks or balances. These factors make possible the development in El Salvador of what has been described in Honduras as a narco-state,[43] albeit one that is even more unified under a single figure. As the largest criminal networks in the country, the maras have a useful role to offer such a government. But it would be one that would be subordinate to the interests of the state—and in its current form, the interests of Bukele and his family. These interests do not currently align: it is far more probable that any illicit state activity will revolve around money

laundering rather than neighborhood-level extortion. For the maras to survive, they will have to adapt to the business model set by the state.

Yet this gang-state scenario is perilous and requires coordination between both gang and state; as José Miguel Cruz and Angélica Durán-Martínez note, the success of any such negotiation depends on internal cohesion and is complicated by the fragmentation and multiplicity of veto players—a significant risk under the decentralized franchise model.[44] Despite their numbers, fearsome reputation, and capacity for violence, Central America's maras have never been in control of the circumstances that have shaped their forms and activities. They have been pushed from the United States to Central America, and within Central America, by government efforts to expel or eliminate them. These efforts were never successful, but they have compelled the gangs to spread, decentralize, and concentrate their activities at the neighborhood level. As juvenile street gangs, they have been sustained more by social than by financial capital. They have learned from the crucibles of gangland LA, the prison system, and mano dura. In some ways they have grown more sophisticated, particularly in dealing with the government. They have managed to co-opt officials and also to be co-opted by them. Insofar as they present to politicians a threat through their capacity for violence, and an opportunity through their large membership, they will remain relevant political actors.

Yet unlike cartels, the opportunity they offer state officials is not proceeds from lucrative businesses they control. As of now, it has been their membership itself, and the territory they control: successive ruling parties have negotiated with them for exclusive access to their neighborhoods for political campaigns, or for their members to campaign for the ruling party directly. The Bukele government arranged for gang members to impose COVID pandemic quarantines and helped the director of prisons steal and resell pandemic food relief packages.[45] As corrupt practices, these are relatively minor. But they speak to ongoing interest by multiple governments in the maras as useful tools, despite officially branding them as terrorists. Should the maras continue to thrive, it will not be as consolidated cartels trafficking cocaine but as junior partners to other criminal actors, including those in government.

Notes

1. Barrio 18 has split into two factions, the Revolucionarios (Revolutionaries) and the Sureños (Southerners), which act as rival gangs.

2. Steven Dudley, "Central America's 'Transportistas,'" InSight Crime, November 22, 2010, https://insightcrime.org/investigations/insight-brief-central-americas-transportistas/.

3. Drawn from Douglas Farah and Kathryn Babineau, "The Evolution of MS 13 in El Salvador and Honduras," *PRISM* 7, no. 1 (2017): 58–73; Tom Diaz, *No Boundaries: Transnational Latino Gangs and American Law Enforcement* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2009); and Steven Dudley and Héctor Silva Ávalos, "MS13 in the Americas: Major Findings," InSight Crime, February 16, 2018, https://insightcrime.org/investigations/ms13_major_findings/.

4. Diaz, *No Boundaries*.

5. Dudley and Silva Ávalos, "MS13 in the Americas."

6. Dudley and Silva Ávalos, "MS13 in the Americas," 66.

7. Farah and Babineau, "The Evolution of MS 13."

8. Óscar Martínez, Efren Lemus, Carlos Martínez, and Deborah Sontag, "Killers on a Shoestring: Inside the Gangs of El Salvador," *New York Times*, November 20, 2016, https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/21/world/americas/el-salvador-drugs-gang-ms-13.html.

9. Carlos Martínez, Efren Lemus, and Óscar Martínez, "Régimen de Bukele desarticula a las pandillas en El Salvador," *El Faro*, February 3, 2023, https://elfaro.net/es/202302/el_salvador/26691/R%C3%A9gimen-de-Bukele-desarticula-a-las-pandillas-en-El-Salvador.htm.

10. Oswaldo Zavala, *Drug Cartels Do Not Exist: Narcotrafficking in US and Mexican Culture*, trans. William Savinar (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2022).

11. Michael Balsamo, "Sessions Creates Task Force Targeting MS-13 Gangs, Drug Cartels," Associated Press, October 15, 2018, https://www.pbs.org/newshour/politics/sessions-creates-task-force-targeting-ms-13-gangs-drug-cartels.

12. See José Manuel Valenzuela Arce, Alfredo Nateras Domínguez, and Rossana Reguillo Cruz, eds., *Las maras: Identidades juveniles al límite* (Tijuana, Mexico: El Colegio de la Frontera Norte, 2007); Samuel Logan, *This Is for the Mara Salvatrucha: Inside the MS-13, America's Most Violent Gang* (New York: Hachette Books, 2009); Thomas W. Ward, *Gangsters Without Borders: An Ethnography of a Salvadoran Street Gang* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013); Óscar Martínez, *A History of Violence: Living and Dying in Central America*, trans. John B. Washington and Daniela Ugaz (London: Verso, 2016); Sonja Wolf, *Mano Dura: The Politics of Gang Control in El Salvador* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2017); Juan

José Martínez D'Aubuisson, *A Year Inside MS-13: See, Hear, and Shut Up*, trans. Natascha Elena Uhlmann (New York: OR Books, 2019); William Wheeler, *State of War: MS-13 and El Salvador's World of Violence* (New York: Columbia Global Reports, 2020); Steven Dudley, *MS-13: The Making of America's Most Notorious Gang* (New York: Hanover Square Press, 2020); and Roberto Lovato, *Unforgetting: A Memoir of Family, Migration, Gangs, and Revolution in the Americas* (New York: HarperCollins, 2020).

13. Michael Ahn Paarlberg, "Transnational Gangs and Criminal Remittances: A Conceptual Framework," *Comparative Migration Studies* 10, no. 1 (December 2022): 24.

14. Ward, *Gangsters Without Borders*.

15. Valenzuela Arce, Nateras Domínguez, and Reguillo Cruz, *Las maras: Identidades juveniles al límite*.

16. Diaz, *No Boundaries*, 35.

17. The letter *M* being the thirteenth letter of the alphabet, gangs thus paying tribute to the Mexican Mafia were and are affiliated with the broad umbrella group of Sureños, or Southerners, referring to southern California. Some gangs within this grouping add "13" to their names. Both MS-13 and Barrio 18 are affiliated with this larger umbrella group within the California prison system, but they are rivals. As mentioned earlier, Barrio 18's two factions are the Revolucionarios and the Sureños, the latter also reflecting the early ties to the Mexican Mafia.

18. The latter law was passed in response to the Oklahoma City bombing, the perpetrators of which were US-born citizens.

19. Undocumented immigrants can be detained for deportation proceedings at any time, but in practice they are not a priority for immigration enforcement unless they have committed a crime. Prior to 1996, such crimes were more often serious felonies. After, they could include petty crimes such as DUI, public intoxication, and drug possession.

20. Rodrigo Dominguez-Villegas and Victoria Rietig, "Migrants Deported from the United States and Mexico to the Northern Triangle," Migration Policy Institute, September 2015, https://www.migrationpolicy.org/research/migrants-deported-united-states-and-mexico-northern-triangle-statistical-and-socioeconomic.

21. This is particularly true in El Salvador. As the maras have spread to Guatemala, Honduras, and southern Mexico, they have come to be involved with transnational trafficking networks, but more in a support role. And this is more human trafficking of migrants than drug trafficking, which remains concentrated in more established Mexican cartels. Within Central America, the gangs' primary business remains extortion at the neighborhood level.

22. Michael Ahn Paarlberg, "Gang Membership in Central America: More Complex than Meets the Eye," Migration Policy Institute, August 26, 2021, https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/complexities-gang-membership-central-america.

23. José Miguel Cruz, Jonathan D. Rosen, Luis Enrique Amaya, and Yulia Vorobyeva, *The New Face of Street Gangs: The Gang Phenomenon in El Salvador*, Florida International University and Fundación Nacional para el Desarrollo, 2017, https://lacc.fiu.edu/research/the-street-gangs-in-central-america-research-initiative-scrain/the-new-face-of-street-gangs-the-gang-phenomenon-in-el-salvador-eng.pdf.

24. Dudley, *MS-13: The Making of America's Most Notorious Gang*, 149–59.

25. Parker Asmann, "MS13 East Coast Violence Fails to Consolidate Gang's US Presence," InSight Crime, August 27, 2020, https://insightcrime.org/news/analysis/ms13-violence-east-coast-presence/.

26. David E. Spencer, Herard von Santos, and Juan Carlos Morales, *Adversarial System Analysis of the Salvadoran Gangs* (Washington, DC: William J. Perry Center for Hemispheric Defense Studies, National Defense University, 2022), https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/GOVPUB-D5_400-PURL-gpo185675/pdf/GOVPUB-D5_400-PURL-gpo185675.pdf.

27. Spencer, Von Santos, and Morales, *Adversarial System Analysis of the Salvadoran Gangs*, 31–32.

28. Sarah Zukerman Daly, *Organized Violence After Civil War: The Geography of Recruitment in Latin America* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

29. Federal Bureau of Investigation, "Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13): An International Perspective," National Gang Center, 2005, 12, https://nationalgangcenter.ojp.gov/library/publications/mara-salvatrucha-ms-13-international-perspective.

30. Ó. Martínez et al., "Killers on a Shoestring."

31. Ward, *Gangsters Without Borders*, 98.

32. Martínez D'Aubuisson, *A Year Inside MS-13*, 6.

33. In 2004, MS-13 members in San Pedro Sula, Honduras, raked a city bus with automatic gunfire, killing twenty-eight passengers. In 2010, Barrio 18 members shot at a bus in Mejicanos, El Salvador, doused it in gasoline, and set it on fire with passengers inside, killing seventeen. Governments in Honduras and El Salvador have at different times reported between thirty and fifty bus burnings per year in wars between MS-13 and Barrio 18 over control of the bus lines.

34. Michael Ahn Paarlberg, "The Emerging Gang State in El Salvador," Global Americans, February 15, 2022, https://theglobalamericans.org/2022/02/the-emerging-gang-state-in-el-salvador/.

35. Paarlberg, "The Emerging Gang State in El Salvador."

36. Gabriel Labrador and Óscar Martínez, "One Year Under a Police State in El Salvador," *El Faro*, March 31, 2023, https://elfaro.net/en/202303/el_salvador/26793/one-year-under-a-police-state-in-el-salvador.

37. "Un año bajo el régimen de excepción: Una medida permanente de represión y de violaciones a los derechos humanos," Cristosal, May 29, 2023, https://cristosal.org/ES/informe-un-ano-bajo-el-regimen-de-excepcion-una-medida-permanente-de-represion-y-de-violaciones-a-los-derechos-humanos/.

38. The Texis cartel is the name of a constellation of illicit businesses controlled by Herbert Saca, cousin of former president Antonio Saca, who was jailed for corruption but is a close ally of Bukele. Many top Bukele officials have backgrounds in the Saca administration. The current attorney general and minister of security worked for Herbert Saca and have ties to the cartel.

39. "PNC vinculó a Michelle Sol con red de coyotes," *La Prensa Gráfica* (San Salvador), February 8, 2015, https://www.laprensagrafica.com/elsalvador/PNC-vinculo-a-Michelle-Sol-con--red-de-coyotes-20150208-0047.html.

40. C. Martínez, Lemus, and Ó. Martínez, "Régimen de Bukele desarticula a las pandillas en El Salvador."

41. Alba, a conglomerate of retail businesses financed by Venezuela's PDVSA, has served as an offshore money laundering network for the Venezuelan government, which is beset by sanctions by the United States. Proceeds from this operation have profited previous Salvadoran governments of the Left, those of Funes and Sánchez Cerén. Although Bukele has sought to prosecute both former presidents for their own gang negotiations, he has inherited the ties to Alba through its chief intermediary in El Salvador, José Luis Merino, a former communist guerrilla who has since allied with Bukele.

42. Like many authoritarian leaders, Bukele has used the military for political and nonmilitary roles, including sending soldiers to occupy the Legislative Assembly to intimidate lawmakers to pass a bill, and deploying the army to neighborhoods to carry out policing functions under the State of Exception. In return, the Bukele government has protected top military officials from investigation, including by blocking the opening of military archives for ongoing trials about the massacre at El Mozote by an army battalion during the 1980–1992 civil war.

43. Dana Frank, *The Long Honduran Night: Resistance, Terror, and the United States in the Aftermath of the Coup* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2018).

44. José Miguel Cruz and Angélica Durán-Martínez, "Hiding Violence to Deal with the State: Criminal Pacts in El Salvador and Medellin," *Journal of Peace Research* 53, no. 2 (March 2016): 197–210.

45. Seth Robbins, "US Blacklists El Salvador Officials, Bolstering Accusations of Gang Pacts," InSight Crime, December 9, 2021, https://insightcrime.org/news/us-blacklists-el-salvador-officials-bolstering-accusations-gang-pacts/.